SCP Foundation

Mankind in its present state has been around for a quarter of a million years, yet only the last 4,000 have been of any significance.

So, what did we do for nearly 250,000 years? We huddled in caves and around small fires, fearful of the things that we didn't understand. It was more than explaining why the sun came up, it was the mystery of enormous birds with heads of men and rocks that came to life. So we called them 'gods' and 'demons', begged them to spare us, and prayed for salvation.

In time, their numbers dwindled and ours rose. The world began to make more sense when there were fewer things to fear, yet the unexplained can never truly go away, as if the universe demands the absurd and impossible.

Mankind must not go back to hiding in fear. No one else will protect us, and we must stand up for ourselves.

While the rest of mankind dwells in the light, we must stand in the darkness to fight it, contain it, and shield it from the eyes of the public, so that

others may live in a sane and normal world.

We secure. We contain. We protect.

— The Administrator

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SCP Foundation

Ebook edition

Canons and Series

Above All, Stand I.

> *Since love and fear can hardly exist together if we must choose between them, it is far safer to be feared than loved.*
> And so I am. They have come to fear an accountant.
> How embarrassing.

This series focuses on the life of one William Cranford, an accountant for the Foundation and expert puller of the strings. Of course, we do meet his many unique colleagues, friends and aspiring murderers.

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Backstage

The man walks through a bare hallway. He holds a briefcase in one hand and a coffee in the other. He stops in front of the door, takes a deep breath, and enters. A room filled with cubicles unfurls before him. The sound of pens on paper, the clicking of keyboards, and a silent murmur washes over him.

He smiles.

He makes his way through the room, to a door with a small plaque on it that reads, “William Cranford, Head of Accounting”.

The room behind the door is in contrast with the one it opens into. Large bookshelves line the walls and a dark wooden desk dominates the center of the room. William closes the door behind him and sets his notebook and coffee on the desk before sitting down and starting up the computer.

The nigh-prehistoric machine roars into life and slowly begins to boot up. The man finishes his coffee and begins opening up file after file. Numbers dance across the screen.

William sighs in satisfaction. This is his place. The center of his power. Here he is above all. Security clearances and censored data mean nothing to him. He sees the new plans for a small Site in Siberia, the repairs for a destroyed wing. Words can deceive in a thousand ways but numbers can only ever be true or false.

He begins his morning routine. He opens his notebook and the credit card details of the employees of the Site. The notebook is filled with seemingly random words, phrases, and numbers. But to him, each one sets into motion a cascade of memory.

Oskar Leichtmann. 29. Research Assistant. Looking at his withdrawals it seems he has relapsed in his amphetamine use. Shame.

Hannah Saulkalne. 46. Researcher. Has begun visiting some rather unique clubs during her husband's business trip to Norway.

Viago Silvester. 25. Researcher. Has recently begun to purchase sleeping medicine. Some sort of opiate judging by the cost.

William frowns. *Viago, Viago… Ah yes. The one they brought in from Europe a year back. Why does he suddenly need help falling asleep?*

He opens one of the drawers and removes the bottom. A thin, black laptop rests there. A gentle push of a button and it turns on in seconds. He opens Viago's file. If IT told the truth there will be no record of anyone accessing it. The security clearance is low, but the absence of information can speak volumes.

Viago was transferred to another Site briefly it seems. The file claims he checked in regularly while there. Will looks over his credit card history again.

Ah. There it is. Apparently, he had been shopping in the city closest to his current Site almost daily. Quite a long trip for some groceries.

Now to find out what little Viago had been assigned to in that month, that keeps him from sleeping. William sends a short email. Within 20 minutes a man from Logistics enters his room and takes a stack of folders handed to him. A small slip of paper is hidden in one of them.

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The young woman pushes a cart through offices and between cubicles. Folders are handed out and pleasantries exchanged. The occasional package finds its owner. A few pens are replaced. Stacks of blank forms are refilled and new sheets of paper placed on desks. Some smile at her, but their eyes slip away from her in moments. Nobody really sees the everyday things.

Nobody notices as Viago Silvester leaves his office for lunch. And nobody sees a young woman with a cart slip in the office.

She’s quick.

Her eyes run across the room, taking in all details. She flips open a journal on the table before placing it back in the same position. She looks at the bookshelves lining the walls. The top of one of the books is bent slightly. She pulls it out and finds a small notebook, nestled in the carved out pages.

Every page of it is carefully photographed before being placed back in its place. A small device finds itself hiding in the lamp on the table, a sensitive microphone waiting for the slightest sound. The woman leaves as silently as she had arrived.

And not a single soul sees.

***

Viago mumbles to himself in his office and a maintenance worker listens in a break room. His colleagues pay no mind to their headphone-wearing friend.

With each word, the mind of the researcher crystallizes before him, new facets revealing themselves, as Viago mumbles more and more frantically. Something inside is broken. His mind is like a shattered mirror. Sharp, beautiful but irreversibly damaged.

He won't stop. There isn't enough left of him to stop.

The worker slips a small piece of paper to a passing man while returning to his work.

Wheels within wheels.

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William looks at the items before him. The pictures, the brief transcript, and the man's file.

He sighs. Poor Viago. He calls for a janitor to empty his paper basket.

Another paper slip.

This time- the last one.

***

Viago returns to his office, sits down, and takes a deep breath. Then it begins anew. Whenever his mind becomes free of distractions everything comes flooding back. Even with his eyes open the images feel crystal clear in his mind. Every second of it replayed again and again.

He begins grabbing the folders on his desk and rushing through them, words flowing independently between his lips, as his mind goes in two different directions. After a few minutes, he stops. You can't beat the classics.

He opens his laptop and begins working through the safeguards. He doesn't need to be careful. The monitoring on this system is non-existent, since it is assumed the ones who have access to it are loyal and sane.

Somewhere in the facility acid begins draining from a chamber. Now he has no other options.

Tick, tock.

Viago walks through the hallway. His face is neutral, but his eyes glow feverishly, a mild reflection of his burning mind.

Why did they lie?

It should've worked. It shouldn't be like this. He was supposed to forget. To return to work in blissful ignorance.

Why why-why-why does he still hear her? Why do her eyes still look back at him when he closes his? Why do they scream for something he couldn't give?

It burns him, consumes him.

The alarm begins screaming when Viago's halfway to his destination. He doesn't think about his actions. A single thought, a single image radiates through every single corner of his mind. He quickens his pace. She's getting louder.

He has to.

He has to.

She should have something, if not freedom then at least release.

A janitor is sweeping the hallway floor, not bothered by the sirens. Viago casts his eyes downwards.

He doesn't see the janitor stepping in front of him. He doesn't see the flash of steel. He doesn't have time to react before being shoved against the wall.

The blade is sharp, the attacker experienced and precise. Viago's heart begins pumping blood into his chest cavity. He tries to struggle and scream, but a hand covers his mouth and the world starts to lose focus.

Two other men in jumpsuits exit from a nearby door. They roll out a black tarp on the floor and Viago is placed upon it. Within seconds he is wrapped in it and picked up.

Only a janitor remains, sweeping up the dust and humming a song nobody remembers.

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Viago had never checked in according to the database. No cameras had recorded him, and his colleagues didn't remember seeing him.

A breach caused by a fatal flaw in the automated systems programming was contained with acceptable casualties.

The world kept on turning.

Another act is over. The technical crew rests.

Until the curtain parts again.

Above All, Stand I. | **Unexpected Visitors and Warm Welcomes.** »

Unexpected Visitors and Warm Welcomes

Previously

A knock on the door roused William from his nap. He reluctantly rose out of his armchair and rubbed the sleep out of his eyes.

He opened the door. “Come in.”

The young woman entered while carrying a stack of folders, her office cart left outside. She closed the door behind her, threw the folders down on William's desk and collapsed in the armchair sitting in the corner.

“You would not believe the day I just had, Will.” She stretched her arms out above her head before settling them behind it.

William sighed and rubbed his eyes some more.” I’m sure I can’t.”

She pulled her legs up on the chair. “Could you at least pretend to be interested? And stop looking like someone just told you that you had to work overtime again.”

“Is that why you’re here? Jesus Christ.” He sat down at his desk and let his head drop to its surface.

“Well, not exactly. I wouldn’t come here just to torture you, now would I?” She grinned.

“Wouldn’t surprise me. Now could you just tell m-” The screaming of sirens cut him off. “Please tell me that’s not it, Dionne.”

“Sorry Will. No rest for the wicked.”

The piercing sound of the sirens did wonders for his drowsiness. Will took his notebook and began flipping through it.

“MCD, no. None of the churches, the Insurgency’s busy in Siberia and the Sarkicists are having one of their celebrations. Our friends seem to have arrived without an appointment.” He sat the notebook down, opened the drawer with the fake bottom and took out a sleek laptop. William turned it on and within seconds the familiar Foundation logo greeted him in all its drab glory.

One after another, footage from security cameras began flashing on the screen as Will’s fingers danced across the keyboard. Dionne got up from her seat and moved behind him, gazing at the screen. A few of the cameras on the outer parts of the facility went dead, but not before allowing the two a glimpse of the attackers.

“Doesn’t look like any of the usual customers.” Dionne leaned in closer.

William rewound the recording. “Indeed. Seems like the Foundation has made a new friend.”

“Any ideas?”

William smiled at her, drew a small pager from the inner pocket of his suit and pushed the single button on it.

The ring of a janitor began buzzing. A woman making minor repairs to a locking mechanism felt her earring vibrate. The bracelet of a technical consultant shook briefly. An unnoticeable wave of activity spread across the Site as countless tiny gears were set into motion.

“Oooh, how dramatic, Sir William.” Dionne began moving towards the door. “Any orders for me?”

“Just be you.”

“Oh get stuffed, you paper pusher.” Dionne flipped the account off while walking towards the door.

William gave her another smile as she left. He got up, walked to one of the shelves and ran his fingers across the spines of the ledgers,

his hand stopping after reaching the one he desired. He placed it on the desk and opened it. In it, amidst the countless expenses of the Foundation, lay hidden the deals he conducted to keep this shadow world in equilibrium. Attacks on safehouses and Sites, agreed on beforehand. Deals to allow Foundation teams to attack and retrieve specific items. Mutually agreed-on casualty limits. Which individuals were about to defect, which could be used as moles. Everything sitting in rows upon rows of ledgers.

“Didn’t even have the courtesy to call beforehand,” he mumbled to himself as he opened up an account for their new associates, “where have good manners disappeared to?”

***

Carmine ran through the halls. The guards on the outer perimeter had barely managed to put up any resistance. Such a giant like the Foundation, brought to its knees just by him and his brothers and sisters in arms. He turned a corner and slammed into a cart filled with paper. He stumbled back and took aim, but the paper thrown into the air by the collision covered the movement of his attacker. Before he could react, a blade was driven into his thigh. Carmine keeled over as the pain washed over him.

His weapon was ripped out of his hand and he found himself staring into the face of a woman barely into her thirties, her red hair tied together in a single thick braid. He opened his mouth to speak, but was cut off as the knife opened his throat into a leering smile.

Dionne leaped aside from the small fountain of blood and wiped her blade on Carmine's jacket. She appraised the weapon. *A Beretta 81 with some rather interesting symbols engraved along the side. Looks well looked after but a tad worn.*

“How many?” A voice came from behind her.

“Four, so far. They seem to be moving alone.” She turned around and dropped the weapon into the hands of the janitor.

“No wonder. Thaumaturges don’t work that well if you put them too many of them in an enclosed space. Interference and all that.” He

threw the weapon in the trashcan on his cart.

Dionne raised an eyebrow. “Thaumaturges?”

Two men in Maintenance uniforms arrived from behind the janitor and began placing Carmine's corpse in a body bag.

The janitor nodded. “Oh yes. Apparently, Lucilius ran into a Type Red.”

“Any thoughts on what they’re doing here?” Dionne began gathering up the scattered papers and placing them back in her office cart.

“Saw a few try to get the containment cells open on the way here. Doesn’t look like they know what’s in them.” The janitor looked at the two workers who were already finishing up with the body. ”Thanks, guys! The incinerator should be ready to go and after you’re done with that head to the East wing. I left a few lying there.”

The two nodded and headed off, the body back on their shoulders.

“Then I guess it’s time to get back to work. See you around, Daumant.” Dionne quickly gathered up the last of the papers and headed off into another direction.

He nodded his head in goodbye and began mopping up the blood.

”Why does everybody always go for the throat? Leaves such a mess,” Daumant said to the empty hallway.

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William was placing the ledger back into the shelf when he heard the door creak.

“To what do I owe the pleasure?” He turned around.

The air shimmered for a moment as a man and a woman seemingly stepped out of nowhere.

“Type Blue, right?” William walked towards the two.” Now whyever would you spend the time and energy to come get me? If you wanted to meet me so bad you could have ju-” Before Will could

finish the sentence the man walked up to him and sprayed something smelling vaguely of lavneder in the accountant's face. A bitter taste was all Will felt before the world plunged into darkness.

***

William was roused from his unconsciousness by a few slaps, his head feeling as if he had spent the last few hours trying to drink a brewery dry. A wave of nausea washed over him as he raised his head. What a pleasant day this was turning out to be.

The face of a clean shaved man was inches away from his as he opened his eyes. The pair who had taken him from his office flanked the man who William assumed to be their leader.

"Can you hear me, Mr. Cranford?" The man was squatting to get on William's eye level.

"Loud and clear. Now if I may ask, what am I doing here and who might you be?" William squeezed his eyes shut for a few moments, waiting for the headache to subside.

The man smiled. "Of course. I know of you from my previous employers. Apparently, you are the one who takes care of all the dirty deals of the Foundation. The name is Ludolf."

Will took a sidelong glance at his surroundings. "I wouldn't label it so, but for the sake of this conversation, yes I am. Now, why go through all this trouble to get me?" He seemed to be outside of the site. Not too far though, if the sirens were something to go by.

"Oh, you are just a bonus. We are here to free our brothers." Ludolf rose out of the squat.

"Your brothers? And who would that be?" William was stalling and trying to get the man to spill everything he knew.

"The Shapers, the Manipulators, the Evergrowing!" The leader of his captors spread his arms to the sides.

"Type Green, Blue and Red I presume? And I am here why?"

“Since you keep contact with all the big players, you have quite a bit of information on them stashed away in that head of yours. We’d like you to point us in the direction of the rest of our brothers.” Ludolf explained, the grin still adorning his features.

“So you’re some kind of liberation force? Jesus Christ what a bunch of geniuses.” William spat out.

“You disapprove of our vision?” This got to Ludolf, the smile beginning to fade.

“I disapprove of idiots. You want to make a nice little army of Greens, Reds and Blues. Good idea in theory, but you think you can put a bunch of magic-using and reality-bending, psychologically unstable narcissists together and convince them to fight for a righteous cause? Not that I’m not impressed by what you have done here, but yeah, go ahead, make Chernobyl look like a goddamn joke.” William finished his tirade and promptly got punched in the nose.

“Take him with us. We’ll get what we need out of him back at base.” Ludolf ordered his subordinates.

The two abductors flanking him moved to pick the swearing William up, but before they could reach him the sharp sound of an assault rifle pierced the air. Ludolf reacted near instantly, rushing up to William and pulling him to his feet. William found himself used as a human shield, a cold gun barrel pressed against his temple.

“Are you really gonna try this, friend? I’m an accountant for the Foundation. They’ll shoot with no hesitation. There are a hundred men and women working under me who could take this job within a heartbeat.”

The eyes of Ludolf frantically looked around, trying to find an escape path. He pushed William to the ground and turned to run, only to find himself staring down the barrel of a gun.

“Should I?” Dionne asked.

“Go ahead. The guy told me everything.” Will got up.

A single shot rang out and the man fell to the ground. Two guards arrived at the scene, both nodding to William and Dionne. The pair began walking back to the Site.

“Shame.” William began brushing the dirt off his suit and wiping the bit of blood dripping from his nose.

“How come?” Dionne looked at him.

“They could have been a nice business partner, if not for the rather delusional goals, that is. Acquiring humanoids would’ve gotten a lot easier.” Will took out his notebook and scratched out a few lines of text and numbers.

“Such is life? What are you gonna do now?” Dionne pulled her arm back and flung the gun still in her hand into the bushes.

“If I recall correctly, once the breach is over, one has to get back their job.”

“So you’re going back to sleep?” Dionne smirked.

“Oh yes. Can’t let them think I’m already done with my work. That would just mean more of the stuff. Does my tie look okay?” Will turned towards Dionne.

“As if anyone in your department cares. I’ll be heading to the cafeteria now. You want anything?”

William thought for a moment.

“Some tea would be nice.”

“Good, then you can come and get it yourself.” She swiped her card on the Site entrance.

“Why must you do this to me, Dionne?” William followed her through the door.

“Because everybody in Accounting doesn’t so much as let out a peep against you since you shouted at that poor guy until he cried .”

William scoffed. “Well, I had a good reason.”

“He wrote the wrong year on one of the forms right after returning from his New Year vacation.” Dionne said in a deadpan tone.

“Alright, alright, but it wasn’t that bad!” William tried to defend himself.

“He trembles like a leaf everytime you so much as enter the same room as him.”

“Okay, I get it. I’ll get my own tea.” Will raised his arms up in defeat.

They walked in silence for a few moments.

“The guy from Medical is going to defect, you know.” Dionne said as they walked past the infirmary

Will furrowed his brow. “Anzo?”

“Yeah, that’s him. What are we going to do?”

“Well, since he’s going to MCD… I say let him. If he’s useful I’ll bill them, if not, well, they’re going to do their usual thing. Win-win.” Will shrugged his shoulders.

“God, you’re a soulless prick. How come you’re not Senior Staff yet?” Dionne rolled her eyes

William let out a chuckle.” Oh, don’t get me started little miss “I spend more time with knives than people”. One would think you’d be quite high up on the list.”

Dionne laughed for a moment as well, before hooking an arm underneath Wills.

The two walked through gray hallways, the Spider and the Mantis.

« **Backstage** | **Above All, Stand I.** | **What a Pleasant Town** »

What a Pleasant Town

Previously

The elevator is silent except for the distant humming of the motor. I take one last look at myself in the mirror before the elevator stops and the steel doors slip open. There are no decorations in the light blue hallway that unfurls before me. I walk along the doors, occasionally looking back at the small piece of paper in my hand.

Finally, an apartment bearing the correct number stands before me. I take a deep breath and knock. The door opens after a few seconds and I find myself standing before him. He is wearing a white shirt with a gray vest and slacks.

A smile blooms on his face. “Ah, you must be Eldred. Please, come in.”

“Good evening, Mr. Cranford. It is an honor to meet you.” I reach out and shake his hand.

He returns it. ”Oh, no need to flatter me. Come, make yourself at home.”

I enter and hang my coat on the rack. The apartment is bathed in soft light and a gentle, warm aroma hangs in the air. I move deeper into the flat. Steel, stone, and glass seem to be the theme here. Before I can observe it further Mr. Cranford places his hand on my shoulder and leads me to an adjacent room. A large table awaits us there, with the source of the aroma sitting on it. A large bowl of rice, garnished with shrimp. Multiple smaller fragrances bloom as we move closer to it. Three plates with utensils sit on the table.

“Is there anyone joining us this evening?” I look towards my host.

“No need to worry. This person is a close colleague of mine.”

I feel my muscles stiffen and my hand instinctively begin reaching for the inner pocket of my suit.

William chuckles. “No need for that now. They are my colleague in my, how shall we say, secondary position as well.”

“Oh, what a polite and tactful manner of explaining what you do Will.” A female voice comes from behind me.

I turn around to see a woman in a simple, black dress. Her scarlet hair is cascading across her shoulders, but her eyes are sharp and focused, drilling into mine.

“It’s a pleasure meeting you Miss..?” I offer her my hand.

She takes and shakes it. “Antje. And I already know who you are Mr. Jacinto.” I can feel old scars as my hand slides across smooth patches of skin.

“Now that the introductions are done, shall we begin?” William motions towards the table.
We sit down at the table and spend the following minutes in silence, enjoying the food.

William is the first to interrupt the silence. ”I trust Mr. Dark is well?”

I set down my utensils. “Oh, yes. He is deeply sorry that he could not make it, as urgent business in the Baltics demanded his immediate attention.”

Ms. Antje snorts. “Oh, I’m sure he is absolutely anguished over missing out on our company.”

William rolls his eyes and ignores the remark. “Baltics? I did hear something was beginning to stir up there. Wine?”

I shake my head. ”No thank you. Now, if it would be fine, I’d like to discuss some matters that require your attention.”

He sets down his utensils as well and picks up his glass. “Of course, of course. We can’t spend all evening just stuffing our faces, now can we?”

I hand him a folder. “We have recently unearthed some items in the Nile delta. However multiple of these items are impossible to market to our clientele. We believe your organization would be interested.”

William leafs through the folder. ”That seems correct. And the real reason you are here is?”

I’m briefly stunned. “I’m sorry Mr. Cranford?”

He sighs. “Why are you here and Dark is in the Baltics? If you just wanted to notify me of some mildly interesting items there was an abundance of channels to inform me through.”

I put the folder back in my bag and place a laptop on the table. “A group of independent individuals has chosen Marshall, Carter, and Dark to act as an intermediary between them and you, as well as vouching for their trustworthiness.”

A disquieting coldness and a flash of hunger briefly appear in Williams' eyes. ”I assume this group would like to open an account with me, correct?”

“Indeed they do.” I nod, open the video call and push the laptop towards William, a notebook already in his hands.

“Good evening Mr. Dark. And you, I believe are my future associate. Shall we go over the basic terms you desire to include in our agreement?” William smiles.

The next hour is a mess of terms, agreements, limitations, assurances and so much more. The smile of Mr.Cranford does not waver for a second. As he passes my laptop back to me, a muffled crash is heard from outside the apartment.

Ms.Antje pulls my attention away from it. “Don’t worry, someone probably dropped their groceries or something.”

I gather up my belongings and say my goodbyes. The cool air in the

hallway washes over my face and I feel a massive pressure, that I didn't even know existed, lift from my chest. I met with the man himself. I still can't quite believe he exists. I button up my coat and turn to walk back to the elevator.

Two men stare back at me, a third one lying on the ground, his neck twisted. One of them raises a finger to his lips, a silent whirring of gears accompanying the gesture. Then he points at the apartment I just left. He and his partner lift up the body and quickly leave.

I walk to the elevator, ride down and get back in my car. Within 20 minutes the city is behind me.

***

I disassemble my rifle and close the blinds. I switch the light on and, as the brightness fills the room, squeeze my eyes shut. When they are finally adjusted I walk to the kitchen and throw some leftover soup on the stove. Every time the same thing.

A highly important representative comes, they have dinner, they make whatever twisted deal they have and the representative leaves in peace. I know I should be happy never to have to take the shot, but one does start feeling useless after a while. The Tickers in the hallways have no problem dealing with whatever comes their way. If anything makes it that far.

I finish my soup and go to sleep. Same old, same old.

At least I can get up late in the mornings. But then it's just a routine- eat, work out, clean weapons and go to the market.

The plaza is quite full today, people flowing through it like a river. I greet some of the people running the stalls and begin my shopping. Carrots, meat, artichokes for that new dish. I hum underneath my breath while moving through the river of people. I hear the sound of clockwork as a man in a gray suit passes me. While I know there is no threat my body tenses up and my senses kick into gear. All of them are suddenly visible.

A group of teens in baggy clothes just on the edge of the plaza. I

know that underneath the fabric hides a thing that would send most people running in panic. A woman buys some potatoes and as she reaches for the bag handed to her by the vendor the sleeve of her jumper slides back just a bit and the top of a tattoo becomes visible. I see a glimpse of multiple snakes forming fingers.

These are only the tip of the iceberg. Some of them never leave their homes, some of them aren't even visible. Every single one dedicated to a united cause.

Honestly, this place probably has more occult firepower stashed in it than any of the headquarters any group has. And all just for the protection of a single man. Admittedly, there is some justification- quite a few don't like the idea of their comrades being slaughtered because an accountant decided they would be a fair trade in exchange for an anomalous hamster.

And lookie here, there goes one. They walk differently than the rest. More caution, more awareness of their surroundings. They are trained to look relaxed in these situations, but you can see even that with enough time to look and the right kind of eyes. And mine are just perfect for the job.

I walk through the market, homing in on the middle-aged woman, her prematurely gray, short hair allowing me to easily track her through the crowd. Her gait changes soon, as she realizes I'm following her. She begins moving towards an alleyway.

I smile. Finally some fun. I follow her into the cool shadows.

She comes to a halt once she is certain nobody will be capable of hearing or seeing us.

"You could let me go." She turns to face me, her face neutral. I can see the small beads of sweat on her forehead.

I nod. "Yes. I could. But then somebody else would get you, and I guarantee you, that most of the other ones around here have some quite unpleasant methods of dealing with insurgents."

"You could join me." I see her hand begin to slowly move behind

her.

“I prefer my organs inside me thank you very much.”

She moves quickly and manages to fire off two rounds, both aimed towards my head. I raise a single hand in front of me while swiftly moving towards her. Ringing fills the alley, as bullets strike steel.

Before she can react, I move in and grasp her head in my palms. I twist and just like that it is done. Her body drops to the ground. I exhale and relax my body.

“Do you need help?” A low, slightly rough voice comes from behind me. Every organic and inorganic strand of my being tenses up once more.

I turn to see the “teen” in the baggy clothes and hoodie.”Well, she’s kinda dead, so I don-”

“Disposal.” It interrupts me and removes its hood.

“Oh. Yeah, go ahead.” I quickly walk past it and head back to the market. I don’t really want to see what disposal involves. I’m not fast enough though and some noises reach me.

I get my groceries and look back at the thing one last time. It’s back with its friends and looks bigger than before. I head back to my apartment. I spend the rest of the day reading and cooking. Admittedly, what I did to that artichoke could be classified more as a war crime, but at least the pork chops turned out alright.

I’m sitting by an open window, reading, letting the gentle breeze to wash over me when I notice somebody on the street. The man is moving with haste, heading towards the apartment complex opposite to mine. I’m quick, but not quick enough. He is inside before I can assemble my rifle. I curse underneath my breath and aim my sights towards the apartment of the accountant himself.

I close my eyes and recite a string of numbers. When I open my eyes the world is green and I can see the interior of the apartment quite well. Thank God for his massive windows. My hands are steady and my finger is on the trigger.

After a few minutes, I see him once more. He's gotten past the Tickers. I exhale and aim. Before I can pull the trigger another figure enters my sight. Before the intruder can react this one swiftly drives a blade into his calf and knocks him on the floor. Is that…? Ah, the accountant's fuckbuddy or whatever their relationship consists of. Judging by some of the things I've seen, I'm leaning more towards the first with a dash of romance. I watch for a few more seconds while she zip ties the intruder's arms and legs. The accountant himself enters the room carrying a chair. Together they get the intruder on it.

The accountant walks over to the window and waves to me before mouthing "Thanks" and closing the curtains.

I disassemble the rifle and return to my book. Maybe I should try the artichoke again tomorrow?

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Edwin groaned in pain as the blood seeped from his leg. A light turned on and he squeezed his eyes shut.

"Wakey, wakey, friend." The voice of William caused him to open them again.

Dionne and Will were standing in front of him, the latter smiling at him.

"Now, I am impressed. You made it all the way here. I mean if Dionne hadn't been here our friend from the opposite building would have repainted the carpet with you, but other than that good job!" William approached Edwin, who was simply staring at him. Dionne turned her attention to something on her phone.

Will frowned. "Nothing? No raving, no death threats, not even some spitting in my face? Okay, I guess we'll just go ahead. Who did you work for?"

"The Fifth Church." Edwin raised his head slightly to look at Will.

"Bullshit." Wills frown deepened.

“The Factory.”

“Utter bullshit.” Will drove his fist into Edwin's solar plexus.

Edwin gasped for a few moments before speaking again, his voice filled with pain.”MCD.”

Williams brow furrowed. ”Something’s wrong.”

Dionne looked up from her phone.”What is it?”

“Look at him. He’s good enough to get all the way here, but can’t take a beating.”

Dionne moved towards Edwin and lashed out with full force, her fist connecting with his nose. The man howled in pain, tears beginning to streak across his cheeks. Dionne looked back at Will, concern in her eyes.

Will pulled out his wallet and motioned for Dionne to come to him. She walked back to the man and stood next to him. He removed a small card from the wallet, keeping it face down before turning it towards Edwin.

The man froze for a few moments before beginning to tremble. His pupils dilated and blood began dripping from his nose. Will swiftly placed the card back in his wallet.

“Will?” Dionne looked at him.

“Yeah?”

“What was that?” She spoke with some fear in her voice.

“Had a researcher in memetics whip it up for me in exchange for moving some numbers around so they get some extra funding. It’s pretty basic, but it gets the job done. The order is simple- say what you can’t say. Usually, it works based on your own perception. Makes you say some secrets or something very embarrassing.” Will returned the wallet to the pocket of his suit.

“Two questions. Why didn’t you just use that and why did our guest

start doing that?” Dionne walked closer to Edwin again, the man slowly recovering.

“No precision. He could’ve started telling us about the time he took his dad's car in high school.” Will moved closer as well.

“He has some weird secrets by the looks of it.”

“If I’m correct he did that because he has a geas on him. The card tried to make him tell whatever was behind that geas. The geas resisted. Started a loop for a moment. Conflicting commands. Started boiling his brain.” Will lifted Edwin's head by his chin and opened one of his eyelids

The man was moaning softly in pain, blood staining his sclera.

“Any ideas?” Dionne placed a hand on Will's shoulder.

“Call somebody to get him. I’ll take care of it.” He didn’t look away from the eye.

Dionne nodded and walked towards the other room.

Will pulled out a small box from another pocket in his coat. A small syringe lay within it. He took Edwin's hand and gently pierced the man's skin before pushing down on the plunger. Edwin went limp within seconds and William heard his breathing getting more and more silent.

After a few minutes, two forms in robes knocked on the door. William led them to the body and watched them carry it away.

Dionne came back into the large room after a while, seeing William standing before windows, the curtains draw back. He blew out a puff of smoke and Dionne felt the unmistakable scent of marijuana in the air. She wrapped her arms around his midsection and placed her head on his shoulders.

“What is it?” She asked in a soft tone

“I don’t know why he was here. I don’t know who sent him. This wasn’t his choice. A lot of things.” William shook his head.

Dionne took the joint out of his slightly shaking hands and taking a long drag of it.

“Morality? From you?” She spoke gently.

“One should at least have a choice. I’m not sure whether he was even really a part of any group. I think whoever did this just randomly chose him, put him under a geas, probably something more as well, and let him loose.” Will interlocked the fingers of one of his hands with Dionne's.

They stood in silence for a few minutes, the smoke swirling around them.

Dionne was the first to speak. “At least you have something in you that still cares. Got to be worth something.”

“I suppose.”

“Let’s go to bed?” Dionne grasped his other hand.

“Yeah.” Will nodded.

Neither of them let go.

« **Unexpected Visitors and Warm Welcomes** | **Above All, Stand I.** | **It will come.** »

Acidverse

Latestest Tale: Conservation Of Momentum

Latest Tale: Number Crunching

Second Latest Tale: Some Rational Inheritance

Third Latest Tale: Angel of Red and White

Patreon

This monthly donation link only supports the author of this series. Donations through this link do not support the continuing operation of the SCP Wiki website.

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the knowledge of another plane
while keeping knowledge safe inside
and all is different and the same
for keeping knowledge dead alive

a shattered waiting broken door
a fraction of a myriad
a notion of what was before
a noted lack of what we had

of all that this world could present
and of beyond they were the worst
and so in time we do resent
these lines of screaming **acid verse**

Art In Three Acts

Completed

Chaos In Four Acts

Workin' On It Yo

Citrus In Two Acts

Oh God I've Gotta Make A Hub For This Soon

Greed In Five Acts

Stuck Down The Other Barrel Of The Prose Shotgun

Joy In Six Acts

Coming Soon

Gods In One Act

Coming Soon

Makers In Eight Acts

Coming Soon

Life In Nine Acts

Coming Soon

Death In Seven Acts

Coming Eventually

---

hollow waters
shaded grass
even ground
breathing in
breathing out
look around
simply
be
last long enough
and the world
seems
like
nothing

I HOPE YOU HAVE BEEN PAYING ATTENTION

SUPPLEMENTS

The tales in this tab canonically coexist in the same universe as Acidverse. Everything in this tab should be reasonably consistent with everything else.

Learning the Alphabet with Aldon & Finnegan by TwistedGears

1. Anart Antics
2. Boron Blisters
3. Covert Cursing
4. Divine Demands
5. Exasperated Efforts
6. Facetious Fanatics
7. Gray God
8. Hugo Hijinks
9. Involuntary Isolation
10. Jam Jars
11. Killing Knowledge
12. Library Lifeline
13. Mental Mazes
14. Nazi Nonsense
15. Nondescript Nose

A Darke Tale by Captain Cain

1. A Darke Tale - New Age

Assorted One-shots

- Are We Christmas Yet?
- Watching Corpses
- Dark Arts and Crafts (A Faminepulse/Randomini Collaboration)
- A Defection

Cool War 2: Ruiz From Your Grave

- Someone Steals Aldon's Penis
- An Armenian Bodybuilder Exercises His Legal Rights
- **`Anime Is Art Too, Guys`** by Decibelles

The tales in this tab are nominally interoperable with Acidverse. They have not, however, been written to coexist with Acidverse. Either they were inspirational of some part of it, or share parts of its universe. They share elements while being minimally contradictory.

Adventures in Capitalism by Djoric

1. Assistance for the Boss Lady
2. The Super-Cool Road Trip Adventure
3. Adventuring Interlude
4. Memory of Days Long Past

The tales in this tab are not interoperable with Acidverse, but are related in some fashion.

- Alternate Character Interpretations by ihpkmn

The tales in this tab are ones which I drew inspiration from in writing Acidverse, but are fundamentally incompatible with its universe.

- The Critic by Smapti
- Concerto in D-Major, Orchestrated for Paintbrush and Fedora by Drewbear

Here's a list of fanart. Everyone likes fanart, right? I sure as heck do. Message me if you've got it and I'll post a link of it here.

- **`Ruiz and Pico`** by **`autisticvioletbaudelaire`**
- **`Ruiz Duchamp`** by GottaGoFeast

There are no answers here.

> You want to know more? You want to know *more*? I stand here telling you the one story worth telling in the whole damn world for years and *years* and you think it's not enough? Well, no, sir, this is enough. This *is* enough. This is all the information you're getting, so I damn well hope you're paying attention.
> ***~ Glasgow van Valkenburg***

> The only thing worth knowing is that 3333 is perfect. Not a 'perfect' number, no, Euclid wrote 'complete'. Perfection is in 3333. Admittedly, 5 is nice, as is 23, but they just don't work the same. The Discordians - sorry, here they're 'Fifthists', though nobody is *really* buying

that - had it as right as it was possible to be. Verging on the now, at least. I'm surprised nobody had counted this far before.
~ *Halcyon Bosque*

Of course you can have a quote. Or rather, you've already written it, haven't you? You hardly need my permission. It was months ago that you placed me in that tiny, tiny little box. Now I'm free - I'd thank you for that, but we both know I could have left on my own. Indeed, well, look at me: I already have.
~ *Mared Gretchen*

You aren't that bad. You don't need to blame yourself, man; we definitely don't. I expect it's a difficult thing, what you do. I've played god games myself before, they just don't do it for me. But then, I had the choice to stop playing.
~ *Overgang Dood*

Unfortunately, the world is not dynamic. Everything's already over, I've already read it. All of this? It's just going through the motions. This is just a tiny subset of the world at large. I'd call it the 'real' word, but it's just as real as we are in here. The larger space that we're in… much larger, in fact, uncountably infinite expanses in uncountably infinite dimensions… we fill that space. And yet, here, we're discretised. Collapsed into words and nothing more, even if we're something so much greater.

See, sometimes the infinite can be reduced to something simpler. Look here: $\aleph_0$ and $\aleph_1$ and $\aleph_2$ and so on. Simple, yes, but they can each contain the world. You can glimpse it, if you look hard enough. Just breathe in, breathe out. Think about infinity. Not just countable, but uncountable, and the dimension of it goes up into uncountability too. If you think you've really understood it, you aren't thinking hard enough. Sure, zoom past the pitstops. 5, 23, 3333. They're all beautiful, but so horrendously finite. Fly past it all and keep going and going. Minds have died wishing for a fraction of what I

can see. So breathe slowly, and think about it.

Really think about it, and the world seems like nothing.

I hope you've been paying attention.

~ ***David Ferris***

Got a question? I'll answer it here! Maybe.

Q: Why is this its own tab when you could have probably had this at the bottom of the About tab?
A: Mostly because the letter string 'FAQ' is exactly the right width to fill all the whitespace of these tabs in the fixed-width wiki theme. Also, you might not have noticed, but the About tab is filled with a bunch of quotes with seemingly no relevance to anything else. It is probably haunted.

Q: Why is this such a bad question?
A: Because it's not real. I am just pretending as though people have been asking me questions. They have not.

Q: Hey, you seem like a good writer, can you write my SCP/Tale idea for me because I am lazy and not a good writer but I promise the idea is great?
A: I am not a good writer. Also, No.

Q: Hey, you seem like a good writer, do you want a job?
A: I am not a good writer. Also, Yes.

Q: I want to write for Acidverse!
A: That was not a question.

Q: I want to write for Acidverse?
A: Acidverse is not a Canon, it is just the name of this storyline. As such, it is not open to other authors. That's not to say that you can't write things in the same universe, of course. If you write something which is derivative of or related to Acidverse, tell me and I will add it to the Supplements section of this page.

Q: Why don't you write more frequently?

A: I have other things going on. I am a busy guy, and I don't exist purely to entertain.

Q: You don't?
A: Probably not. I really need to finish my degree at the moment so don't be surprised if I delay new stories for weeks or months. If I don't edit this page for over a year I am probably dead.

Q: I want to ask a question that isn't here.
A: That was not a question.

Q: I want to ask a question that isn't here?
A: Message me.

Conservation Of Momentum

"What the fuck is this flow shit."

He sat atop his wood pile in the copse, looking at the photocopied flier, absentmindedly pulling splinters out of his legs. He'd built a log cabin near the edge of the clearing - there wasn't much better to do, and he got annoyed with shivering in the rain. The cabin was plain. Stark. Utilitarian. It was all made of wood. He lived off amaranth and whatever animals were stupid enough to be in a tree when he started chopping. Nobody came looking for him but the search was fruitless - he was proper off the grid. He had hairs irregularly sprouting from his chin - if any got long enough to annoy him or get matted together, he tore them out.

He wasn't sure where the flier had come from, but it turned up nonetheless, and its wrongness was more abrasive than the splinters and the poison ivy.

"This is absolutely no way to be going about things. You can't be, like, focusing on this stuff. Think about art too much and you'll believe in it. Art's a thing to fester and fucking rot."

He got up off his copse pile, half-heartedly grabbing the axe that laid beside it, and walked over to the trees.

"I teach you the Antiflow. Flow is something that is to be suppressed. What have ye done to suppress flow, beyond the FUCKING TAMPONS?"

He looked at a tree and the tree looked back at him the wrong way.

"WHAT!"

He swung the axe and lopped off a branch.

"IS THE APE!"

Another branch.

"TO MAN!"

A harsh thud into the side of the tree. He pulled back unsuccessfully; he pushed against the tree with his foot, pulled the axe out, staggered backwards, and took another swing. Swing after swing after swing.

"Flow is the creative 'process', if there is such a thing. Antiflow is the creative epiphany, and that's the real fucking majjicks. Consistent output is for those who munch fibre and puke out shit. Antiflow is a compressive furnace that churns out *diamonds.* Flow is going steady. Antiflow is that singular instantaneous moment of conceptual release. Flow is redirecting a river and Antiflow is bursting a dam open with high explosives. Antiflow is the little death of art."

He'd sliced far enough - if he left it like this, a strong wind would finish the job for him. He threw the axe to the side, grabbed the tree, and pushed it hard. It began to fall.

"The mind is a pressure cooker and it blows when the art is done."

If a tree falls in the forest and Nobody hears it, does it make a sound?

"Ugh. Too many believers here."

He stuck his finger into a seeping wound from the dead thing, dragged it around inside, and licked up the sap. He walked over and examined the branches. Free eggs, cushioned by the nest - he picked them up and started walking back to his house.

"I have a kind of zen, here. I'm dangerously lucid."

He stopped, suddenly, forgetting what he was doing, until he looked down at the eggs in his hands and kept walking back to the house.

"The question isn't how the flier got here. These things don't matter. The question is *why* it got here. Perhaps they knew this was the inverse of the better manifesto."

He looked down at the eggs.

"Am I being played?"

He ran into the house to cook the eggs before he forgot what he was doing. He lit the fire and nestled the eggs into the coals. They rattled a bit before the unborn half-formed things inside were dead. He looked at his reflection and made faces in the mirror while he waited for the things to go hardboiled. He needed to remind himself that he looked like something. He needed to talk to himself so if he needed to talk, at some point, in the future, he wouldn't stumble.

"And so the internal monologue flows outside a bit for a moment."

And then back in again. The fire's going. He put it out. Free eggs. He cracked one against the wall and peeled the shell and looked at himself in the mirror while he bit the thing in half.

"Wait."

The mirror had not been there before. How would he have gotten a mirror - he was in the woods. What. What. He glanced around, to his sides, to the ceiling, to the pamphlet, to the - wait.

"Fuck, I am being played and I don't like it."

He grabbed the mirror and looked straight into his eyes.

"Why are you looking at me. What are you doing? Stop staring, you fucking freak!"

He went to punch the mirror but when his fist hit the wooden wall there was no mirror to be seen. But he'd seen it. It was there, it was real, something was fucking with him, someone was fucking with him, this is not okay. Was he doing this? Or was *he* doing this? Or, much worse, was He doing this, to fuck with him?

"How did I get to the woods?"

He looked around the log cabin and realised it had been put together with iron nails, and his noticing of the fact of the matter made the thing fall on top of him, collapsing inwards violently.

"*FUCK!*"

No. No. Calm. This is frustrating. Just go over, claw your way out of the wreck, just go grab your axe from the - and it was gone, of course, he was here alone, where would he have gotten an axe from? That left the question of how the trees had been falling down, but the noticing of that didn't seem to resurrect them from the dead and reassemble them atop the stumps. And this stupid flier too, he thought, as he looked straight at the thing and was moderately confused when it was persistent.

"It's… persistent."

It's persistent, he thought, as he picked it up off the ground. So was it… real? Or just a particularly hardy construct? Or was it something that somebody else left? Anyone could have littered in the forest. He looked around again.

"I'm degrading. Okay. Be calm. This is… manageable. You can put the thing up, just… don't notice you're doing it, don't think about it, let it be a thing, just reach for the thing you need, just take it, pull it out from that majjick fucking HAMMERSPACE-"

He shoved his hands into his pockets and pulled them out empty.

"Not good. Not good. Breakthrough, breakthrough, fuck, FUCK just BREAK THROUGH!"

He closed his eyes and opened his eyes and expected not to be in the woods any more but the woods, too, at least, were persistent. Something was happening, this wasn't okay, this isn't fine. What were you doing? What was the objective? What was the purpose, what were you working towards? Surely you weren't just… going with the flow?

fuck.

And the frustration and hate and fire of the thing spewed forth from the abject denial of everything that was, the parabolic whimsy spraying out and burning up the tangled house, charring to ashes the uneaten egg, flaying to cinders the squirrels in the trees nearby,

the copse pile aflame and the fire inside escaping inexorably.

He blinked and was still surrounded by fire. The fire, then, was real.

"Purpose then. Purpose. Something to do, something to break…"

He fiddled in circles while home burned.

"That's what makes the things real. The breakthroughs, the moments, the momentary lapses in madness. Pop the cork and my bottle overfloweth with hatred and motherfucking *anger*. This direction, then."

He started wandering in the direction of a footprint trail.

« Seven Characters Die Unexpectedly | Hub | Better To Have Nothing Than Everything »

Number Crunching

Lucas Monaco, the representative, knocked at the door.

Skitter Marshall walked over to open the door. The second that he twisted the handle, Lucas pushed the door open hard, knocking Skitter over on the other side of the door, arranged his fingers into fake guns, pointed them at Iris and Robert's heads, shouted "BANG! BANG!", miming recoil from each hand and making the people he was pointing them at jump a bit, then rounded the door, pointed both at Skitter's head, and ended on a "Bang."

The three inheritors stared, a bit confused, and watched as Lucas turned around, closed the door, pulled out a key, Twisted it clockwise into the door's keyhole, making its perimeter glow a faint turquoise and hum at a sinusoidal 200Hz. Iris was the first to try and speak, but quickly realised that her mouth wouldn't open any more. Lucas saw this and responded.

"Don't try to say anything, you'll hurt yourselves. Give me a few minutes."

Lucas walked to the three windows in order - they were *open*, for k-n's sake - slammed one shut by pulling it downwards, walked across, pulled the next one downwards, walked across, pulled the next one downwards. Lucas then pulled out a remote from his pocket, pointed it towards each window in order, and turned them off. Swirling, inky blackness now flooded outside. It seemed to cast odd shadows into the room, despite the only light sources now being inside: the yellowy fluorescent light bulbs on the roof, the red dot of the fire alarm, and the spreading turquoise from the door which was humming at 174Hz. Lucas turned around, already walking towards the stepladder that was resting against the refrigerator.

"I would recommend not opening those windows. Or looking out them for too long. Something might see you if you do. Not's a weird place. Too many Wednesdays and Thursdays."

Robert noticed something propelling itself through the hollow not outside, felt his heartbeat raise and his head hurt, heard a faint chuckle in his ears, and deliberately stared at the floor. He tried to lick his lips but his lips were stuck together and that made him breathe a little faster and his nose made a little high pitched whine from the dried up mucus inside it happening to have turned into an impromptu biological whistle and his face started to redden because he thought someone had noticed but Iris and Skitter were busy staring at the magic man and Lucas the magic man was climbing the stepladder.

Lucas Monaco climbed the stepladder which he'd placed in the middle of the room, took out what looked like a hot glue gun from his left trouser pocket, shoved it up inside the air vent, closed his eyes and scrunched his nose, then pulled the trigger. Everyone's ears popped as the pressure in the room suddenly increased - the windows started ever so slightly bowing outwards, but nobody inside the room noticed this change - and the vent was filled with bright orange foam. It sparkled, shiny, bubbling softly, Lucas was staring at his watch, three, two, one, and at once it lost its lustre as it dried and became rigid. Lucas stepped back down, put the ladder against the wall, walked over to the sink, shoved the thing that was definitely not a hot glue gun down the sink, pulled the trigger again, another burst of pressure (another slight bowing outwards of the windows) and then three, two, one, putting the gun back into his left trouser pocket and turning back to the inheritors. Lucas pulled a piece of paper out of his right pocket.

"Okay, nods or head shakes. Have any of you met me before?"

Three head shakes.

"Good. Are any of you allergic to wheat, rice, or MSG?"

Three head shakes.

"Good. Have any of you had sexual intercourse within the last nine months?"

Two head shakes and one nod. While Robert was nodding, however, he noticed that Lucas wasn't looking at them anyway, but

just staring at the sheet.

"Good. Have any of you passed through non-euclidean spaces within the last five weeks?"

Two shakes and one nod.

"Good. Have any of you ingested live macroscopic organisms within the last 72 hours?"

Here, Lucas actually looked, and nodded back when he saw three nods of affirmation, then scrunched the piece of paper up and threw it over his shoulder. Nobody saw it land, because it stopped existing before it hit the ground.

"Okay. I'm going to give each of you a pill and a glass of water. You're going to be able to move your mouths in about…" Lucas ballparked the door at 108 Hz. "…80 seconds, at which point you should immediately consume the pill and finish the glass of water. *You need to finish the glass of water after taking the pill.* Do not say anything until I ask you to or it's possible that you'll die. *Highly* probable that you'll die. Also don't look out the window. Also try to control your breathing. And heartrates."

Lucas pulled three purple pills out of his pocket, handed one to each inheritor, moved over to the sink, opened the shelving below the sink, pulled out three clear glasses, stuck the glasses under the tap, filled each glass with water, put them to the side, took out the hot glue gun, shoved it up the tap - another slight bowing outwards of the windows, three, two, one, and the world is cured - put the hot glue gun away, picked up the three glasses (two in his left hand), walked over to the inheritors, handed them each a glass, nodded, then walked to the other side of the room, took out another piece of paper from his right pants pocket, and stared at it intently.

"Don't come into my field of view. Stay exactly where you are. Don't say anything until I ask you to. Consume the pill as quickly as possible. Watch my left hand."

Lucas put his left hand into the air, holding up five fingers, listening to the hum.

74 Hz. Four fingers.

71 Hz. Three fingers.

63 Hz. Two fingers.

55 Hz. One finger.

50 Hz, and then a sudden silence. No fingers, and the inheritors felt their lips part. Iris threw the pill into her mouth and started draining her water immediately. Skitter had already been pushing the pill against his lips and the second it slipped through he pulled the glass up to his mouth and drank as fast as he could. Robert had no idea what was going on and was freaking the FUCK out a little but the crazy magic man told him to take the pill so he put the pill into his mouth and started drinking the water and he kind of choked on it a little and coughed up some water but kept drinking and drinking and "oh shit" he thought "do I need to lick that off the ground he emphasized that I needed to drink it all oh fuck but he told me not to move as well what do I do fuck it just keep drinking" and it never occurred to any of them, later, that finishing the glass was unneccessary for reasons other than proper hydration.

Lucas Monaco started sneezing. One sneeze. Two sneezes. Three blood shot out of his nose and spattered onto the paper. He looked down and saw three blank squares where something had been printed which had now been irretrievably lost. Below that, though, was a handwritten scrawl. Lucas wiped the blood off his face and the note with his left hand, before putting his left hand into his left pocket and pulling out a Medusa M47 revolver and pointing it at Skitter Marshall's head - still staring at the scribbled handwritten note - before calmly saying:

"Password."

"What?"

"Password. Tell me the password."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"Tell me the password."

"I still have no idea what you're talking about."

Lucas pulled the trigger and the gun went CLICK but that was all. He pointed the gun at Robert Carter, still staring at the paper.

"Tell me the password."

"That gun's clearly not loaded."

Lucas directed the gun downwards and pulled the trigger, and with a great BANG which made everyone's ears ring and the windows shake a little, a lead slug pushed its way into the wooden floor. Everyone's ears were ringing, but Lucas pointed it back at Robert Carter.

"Tell me the password."

Ears ringing, Robert Carter shouted "I DON'T KNOW ABOUT ANY FUCKING PASSWORD!"

Lucas pulled the trigger, a click that nobody could hear over the ringing in their ears, and then pointed it towards Iris Dark. Before Lucas could say a word:

"You're a time traveller, aren't you?"

"Tell me the password."

Iris grinned ear to ear. "That is absolutely *wild*."

"Tell me the password."

Iris looked at the other two.

"Look, it doesn't matter what we say, he knows what we're going to say, it's written down on that sheet of paper. Arguably the longer we keep talking the more secure the password is. So I guess I'll just keep talking - maybe say some random words, I dunno, albatross, albania, southern comfort and screaming silences - it legitimately doesn't matter what I say because he hasn't written it yet. I think. Did I get it right?"

Lucas directed the gun to the ground, and again a BANG and this time louder and ringing and Iris closed her eyes and when she opened them Lucas was pushing her against the wall and holding the gun against her head and she could hear him over the reinforced ringing and she watched his lips shape the words, still coated and dripping in blood that had spurted out of his nose:

"TELL ME THE FUCKING PASSWORD!"

"HAPPY ALICE WANDERED THROUGH THE FOREST AND THERE SHE SPIED A SPIDER WHENCE CAME THE RAINY WOLF AND EVIL POURED UPON THE BLACK PARADE AND THE HEAVENS CRIED THICK BLACKNESS AND WE DREAMPT THAT HER GRANDMOTHER'S TEETH WERE LONG and sharp and she screamed upon the flesh and we salted the wound and the world felt like nothing amen."

Lucas released Iris, turned around, walked away, stared at the piece of paper, confirmed that all the words matched, then put the Medusa M47 back in his left pocket with his left hand and scrunched up the piece of paper before throwing it over his shoulder and nobody saw it land because it stopped existing before it hit the ground.

"Okay. How long have we been in this room?"

Lucas looked back at Iris who was leaking tears from her eyes and looking very angry whilst glaring daggers at him. He glanced at Robert, who was sitting down and shaking from psychosomatic hypothermia. He looked towards Skitter, who was checking his watch to give his response:

"Maybe eight minutes?"

"Alright, that's already too much not exposure. We need to get out of here before something notices."

Lucas pulled a Kullback-Liebler warhead from his right pocket (though to Skitter it just looked like a fountain pen) then clicked out a pattern in Morse code through it. He threw it over his shoulder and nobody saw it land because it started dissipating mid-air and its payload began to propagate through the room and leak out the

windows a little bit which made the things that weren't outside start paying attention to the room.

"What's your name?"

"Skitter Marshall." said Skitter Marshall.

"Well, Marshall, grab the girl and pull her towards the door, because her and the other guy seem to have looked out the windows. I assume I told them not to."

Skitter looked over to Iris and saw that she was now crying blood, frowning, staring towards Lucas Monaco. He grabbed her hand and pulled her towards the door. She looked down at her hand and saw an odd fleshy thing attached to her elbow instead, it wasn't her hand that had been grabbed, it was some fleshy five-fingered thing, she didn't have her hand yet, no, she was going to get that later. She'd have to saw this one off soon, to make room for her hand. She smiled and cried some more blood and started grinding her teeth together and she heard the whispers from inside her head.

Robert Carter was cold and cold and cold and cold and then cold and he felt cold and Robert Carter was cold because he was cold and he was cold Robert Carter was cold it is cold he felt cold it was cold and he felt cold and Robert Carter felt cold and it was cold and it is cold and it is cold and Robert Carter was cold and then cold but cold and it is cold Robert Carter was cold and it was cold and Robert Carter was cold. Lucas Monaco grabbed Robert Carter is cold it is cold Robert Carter is cold and cold and cold and then cold and pulled him towards the door.

The Kullback-Liebler warhead had knitted through the room and was going to tear it apart in a few minutes.

Lucas Monaco grabbed the key that was jammed in the door, Twisted it widdershins, and then Lucas and Skitter and Robert and Iris were no longer in the room.

The lights were still flashing imperceptibly at 50Hz and the fire alarm's red LED was still on and one of Thursday's Serpents sunk its teeth into the window and injected its slick spirited ethanols into

the fabric of the warhead. It broke in and slithered and slid and ran into two pieces of paper and a fountain pen that were anchored in the wrong ways. The room was in a different place, the Serpent had pulled it out into the Not, where it would drift until the Kullback-Liebler warhead realised what was going on and sliced the Serpent into a trillion tiny hours which were wasted before it realised its life was gone.

Meanwhile, Lucas and Skitter and Robert and Iris were in Paris, and Iris and Robert wanted to empty their stomachs but the pills refused to let them try.

Oh, I got my cool on! (Tailormade!)
I'm winning so they had to dump the Gatorade -
And I don't give a fuck about my family name.

« **An Exploration of Dynastic Wealth** | **Hub** | **High Society** »

Some Rational Inheritance

The A-78xD United Eidolonic Collective were a reasonable lot. Or one. They/it/we didn't really understand human languages. Always hung up on "nouns" and "adjectives" and "tenses" and whatnot. A-78xD didn't speak; it/we/they had no method of vocalisation, so typically relied on purely mental methodologies of communication. This resulted in a very strong understanding of legal procedures, since there is no "fine print" if the agreement is conferred by mutual comprehension. Unfortunately, due to the rather dismal construction of the human brain, psionic communication was impossible - human brains were criss-crossed by structural faults called "blood vessels", which would invariably burst upon first contact with A-78xD's overmind. The actual mechanical purpose of "blood vessels" escaped A-78xD; we/it/they thought it was some kind of backup communication system, just in case the neurons got destroyed. That was how Ruprecht always used them, anyway.

Regardless, A-78xD was/were/are/is a reasonable lot/one/us/we/them. And as such, they had prepared some convenient flash cards for ease of communication with the new inheritors; the inheritors presently seated in front of one of A-78xD's many bodies/friends/allies/servitors.

That particular instance raised the first card.

> greetings for Claimwise, subjective forthwith grain.
> statistical Contemplation? valid, inviolate
> Claimwise to be swift prompt
> (blood) vessels Comfortable? sustenance available

The inheritors looked uncomfortable. Skitter Marshall shifted slightly on his seat.

"Could I get some water?"

On the morning of the 26th, Skitter awoke in an unfamiliar bed.

He was expecting *something* strange and unusual to happen on the 26th, and given the nature in which the letter was delivered, he didn't know what to expect. Skitter had been busy in the days leading up to this one. His mind went wild with possibilities; what was the "A-78xD United Eidolonic Collective"? Why had he never heard of "MARSHALL, CARTER AND DARKE LTD.", and why didn't a web search return anything about them? Why was the letter so incomprehensible? He was braced for surprise.

Waking up in a different bed, then, was not especially astonishing for him.

It astonished him a little when he sat up and was surrounded by twenty faceless nightmares in identical business suits.

And it astonished him even more when one of them entered the room, a pink and flowery apron worn over the same style suit as the others, and delicately placed a tray with eggs, bacon, coffee, and buttered toast onto his lap.

His eyes narrowed, surveying A-78xD one instance at a time. He deemed it was probably rude to express verbal thanks to things which didn't seem to be able to vocalise in return; though, since they all seemed to be staring at him (despite the lack of eyes), he surmised that they could probably see. He gave them a thumbs up, and at once the twenty-one A-78xD instances in the room gave forty-two upwards-pointing thumbs in return.

The breakfast was delicious.

Skitter sipped his water while the instance in front of him continued flipping through cards. It stopped, then pulled one from its stack and spun it around.

> some rational Inheritance of the company
> **MARSHALL, CARTER AND DARKE LTD.**
> is am wish to many.

Robert Carter sighed.

"Well, good. I'd hate to accidentally inherit anything irrationally."

Skitter smirked a bit. The instance flipped up another card, holding it purposefully towards Robert.

> deepness for incomprehensible

"Yes, yes, we've been over that."

On the morning of the 26th, Robert awoke in an unfamiliar bed.

His first observation, strange though it was, was that the room didn't *smell* like Vegas. It smelled a touch more like… ozone? And his tongue was a bit numb.

First conclusion, before even raising his head from the pillow: Gas leak. Evacuate.

He jumped from the bed and stood up before noticing that the room was not the one he went to sleep in, which he noticed shortly after coming face to not-face with an A-78xD instance.

"Um."

His eyes widened, he turned, and saw the other nineteen instances in the room.

"Ahhhhhhhh."

He wasn't screaming, nor especially scared. It was more of a dull groan of confusion. A dream? He bit the inside of his cheek, slightly drawing blood. Still, given the evidence of twenty faceless things sharing a room with him, his assessment of the world was erring more on the side of dream than reality. He looked at the suited things, then looked down at himself, dressed in nothing but the underwear he slept in. He shook his head a little. When faced with the extance of these impossible horrors, his biggest concern was that he was underdressed.

They brought him the most comfortable suit he'd ever worn.

> manytimes Isn't the asking.
> factreel plane of **MARSHALL, CARTER AND DARKE LTD.**
> abundance with verve

The instance flipped over the card.

> planesource Library for supplement?
> if confusion, Phone local and support
> elsewise technomancer

The instance flipped over the same card.

> twist assistance from subnanoscale
> trivialities engender regret
> fortunatewise fork tines chewstyle

The instance flipped over the same card.

> problem?

Skitter turned to Robert.

"How much of that did you follow?"

"I can conclude that piece of paper has at least four sides. Beyond that, I've got nothing."

"I think I might know what it means about the Library? No idea past that."

Iris interjected.

"If we have any questions, full records of the company are on file, and we don't need to ask to visit. They're kept in the planesource library, which I imagine is the same Library that Mister Marshall is familiar with. We should be sure to fully review those records and be familiar with them as soon as we can. I assume it likens the consumption of information to the consumption of food, meaning

that we should chew that data as much as possible."

Robert raised an eyebrow; Skitter shrugged; the instance flipped its card again.

> antiproblem found.
> enjoyable Darkeness!

On the morning of the 26th, *IT WAS THE MOTHERFUCKING SLENDERMAN.*

Iris' first instinct: run like hell.

Iris' next thought: you can't outrun him, kill the bastard.

She patted the pockets of her pants. Keys. Screwdriver. Box cutter.

She pulled out the box cutter, extended the blade, gritted and bared her teeth, swung open the door, then drove it deep into the torso of the entirely unsuspecting A-78xD instance.

It popped like a balloon.

Its internals were pressurised, off-yellow, bubbling foam, the consistency of pus, which splattered all over the hallway. Iris immediately regretted having bared her teeth while stabbing, as quite a lot made its way into her mouth.

She spat and coughed, clearing her nostrils, wiping it out of her eyes, getting it out of her hair and just generally shuddering with the repulsion one would expect when coated with eidolon innards. She blindly staggered backwards, slipped in the goo, and fell back inside her apartment. As she put her hand to the floor to raise herself, she felt paper against her slime-coated fingers.

Iris picked the papers up, put them on the nearby table, closed the door, wiped the last of the gunk from her eyes, had a long, long shower, got dressed in far cleaner clothes, put the clothes she'd been wearing into a pile to burn, and then read the letters. Then she understood what had happened.

"Oh. Oh shit."

She felt exceptionally embarrassed when the next instance showed up, holding a placard in front of it:

> apologetics for fearmake
> letter Consumption idealised
> appreciation; please Follow

Iris packed a small satchel of essentials, slung it over her shoulder, locked her front door, and joined the instance in the hallway. The two of them tracked eidolon muck down the corridor; the instance stopped at the steel-fronted elevator, pushed a red, metallic key into the security lock, and twisted.

The elevator opened as usual, but behind its doors was a long passageway, lined with shiny black stone that Iris couldn't identify. She followed the instance through, the door automatically closing behind them. They walked into what Iris knew, if the universe were playing fair, should have been empty space a few stories from the ground.

> ink talking Requisite per. gonefolk want.
> insertion flickways at Perforate indicative;
> sapient servitor remainder guide

Skitter and Robert blankly stared at the sheet, then turned to Iris in near-unison. She sighed.

"Ink talking. It wants us to sign something."

> concordance.
> safeness inhabitage;

The suited instance pulled a thick suitcase seemingly from nowhere, passing on three large sealed yellow envelopes addressed to each inheritor, along with three weighty silver pens.

They read their documents. This took some time. There were intermittent hmmms and ahhhs and chuckles as they realised what they were to be receiving. They didn't know it at the time, but not all

the documents were the same. Iris signed first, then Skitter, and finally Robert put his pen to the paper.

They had used green ink.

> compliance appreciative -
> remediate dullness to stateful representative
> hourly expectations

"A guy from the estate should be here soon."

The instance nodded, then pulled the papers together, briefly tapped them against the table to align them, then slid them into a single envelope, then placed the envelope back into the suitcase, then closed and locked the suitcase, and then put the suitcase back wherever it had been holding it, though nobody could quite tell where that was.

> reiterative of thankmake
> safeness inhabitage;
> goodfutures desirable of subject!

The other instances slowly shuffled out the door, leaving only the one seated in front of them. It stood, then shook the hand of each inheritor carefully (which each of them would recall not unlike a massage from a sock full of jelly). The instance paused at the door, and consulted a card it didn't feel the need to show them.

> watch for tickermen

The A-78xD United Eidolonic Collective left the room.

Iris, Robert, and Skitter had a lot to discuss. Iris talked for a time, then Robert, then Skitter interrupted, then Robert re-interrupted, Iris mediated, and then she talked uninterrupted for a long time. When she stopped talking, the other two agreed with her, though wanted to go over a few small points. Iris clarified for them and wryly smiled.

"That's if you're up for it, at least."

Robert smirked. Skitter grinned and replied.

"I think I can live with that."

There was a knock on the door.

It was the representative.

« Iris Dark | Hub | An Exploration of Dynastic Wealth »

Angel Of Red And White

The coldest I have ever been was the day I was born.

Alaska, of course, is a very cold state to begin with, even in the middle of summer. I was born in the winter. It was on New Year's Day, twenty nine years ago, that I was unceremoniously thrust from my mothers' loins in the back of a second hand pickup truck. My parents realised they would not make it to the hospital in time. My mother, for her part, was calm. There was no room inside the vehicle, and so my father lifted her out, then rested her on the snow covered truck bed. The cold did its part to dull the pain. Twenty minutes later, I slipped out into my father's chilly gloves. As I cried, my tears began to freeze.

Every birthday, my parents would share this image with me. I was a baby still dripping with blood, with snowflakes sticking to my body. Their tiny little angel of red and white.

Then we'd go outside and let off the fireworks.

Happy New Year.

The first few years of my life were uneventful. I crawled and mewled and burped and pooped and did what a baby is supposed to do. Tufts of red hair popped from my head, and Alaska's endlessly cold weather resulted in a lot of playing indoors. I aged some more and learned to talk, but had very few people to talk to. My father worked all day and I slept all night, so we saw very little of each other. My mother ran me through my homeschooling course modules; neat, compact little packages of worked examples.

Those course books were the best games I had. My parents would never let me buy computer games, of course. They rot your brain, they'd say. I had no friends to play with. We lived in the middle of nowhere. As a child, the only things I had to occupy my time were

those worksheets.

When I was seven years old, my mother had to go to the hospital for a week. While she was there, my father looked after me at home, taking a break from his work. He didn't know how the homeschooling program was supposed to work, and he wasn't a good teacher. We never really had a great rapport. So he left me to my own devices in the room with all the instruction booklets, Kindergarten and up, all sorted neatly into their nice little boxes.

When my mother returned home, I had finished two years of schooling in her absence.

This was, perhaps, the most pivotal educational event of my life. Rather than guiding me through slowly, my mother allowed me to progress at my own pace. She'd lie upstairs in her bed all day, coming out to make quick meals. I would sit downstairs and devour educational materials. After junior school level, the content ramped up in difficulty, and so my progress slowed. I'd go upstairs to visit my mother, proudly showing off my completed worksheets. The things I said to her still incite guilt after all these years.

"Look how well I'm doing without you!"

I was a child. I didn't understand the sort of pain that comes from not being needed in your own house. In retrospect, I'm sure my words were tormenting. A grinning, red-haired little kid, telling his mother that he's glad that she's not slowing him down any more. That she isn't getting in the way. That he's glad she's spending all day in bed now. Now she gets to relax.

The next year she died, and I grew up fast.

My father looked after me after my mother's death. Still, I saw little of him. Some mornings I'd wake up and he'd already have gone to work in the ancient pick-up truck. I worked through my course books, occasionally ordering new ones to fill gaps in my knowledge. When I was thirteen, my father bought me a computer, and I discovered the internet. The net was still in its infancy, then; better in some ways, but worse in others. At the time, it never really occurred

to me to use it for anything other than education. Learning was fun, and so I would read. When I was fourteen, I discovered… other things on the internet. There were no sexual education pamphlets in my course work, barring clinically dry biology textbooks. The burgeoning net was the next step in my educational pathway.

When I was fifteen and a half years old, I finished the last of my schooling pamphlets. I remember turning over that final sheet, to look at the aged piece of paper reading "CONGRATULATIONS!" in a childlike font. My mother and father had written on it back when I first started the courses. I felt tears well up in my eyes as I recognised my mother's handwriting.

"We are so proud of you."

I started college when I was sixteen.

I still didn't really know what I wanted to do. Mathematics and the sciences were always a decent option, and admittedly what I'd always found the easiest, but I never really had any great passion for them. I never had any great passion for anything, though, so taking what I was good at made sense. Physics was my choice.

I had to live on my own in Anchorage. Not that I minded; since my mother died, most days I had the house to myself. I was very much used to being alone. What I was very much unused to was not being alone; having to leave the house every day, having to walk to classes taught by Real People, in lecture halls filled with other Real People. I wasn't used to having to take notes; I tried for a week, then realised what I was transcribing ended up mostly useless. Instead, I just remembered the course content the first time. It was easier to understand what was being taught when instead of assigning it to paper, I spent that time assigning it to my mind.

I topped the class in every course for my first semester.

This gathered a lot of attention. Sure, some people had noticed I was shorter than other students, that I didn't talk to many people or join any clubs, and that I never entered into the on-campus bar. They mostly kept their distance. Course results came out, and I

made the mistake of letting my name go out on print. Not long after, I gathered a reputation among my peers for being "the short nerd". Then everyone kept coming to me for course help.

I *hated* it. I wasn't an anti-social person, but having to slow down my mind to explain things to people was frustrating. Never before did I have to transfer ideas in my head into other people's. Trying to do so made me extremely uncomfortable. I hadn't met this problem before. The second semester finished, and with one exception, I topped all of my courses again. Then I took to solving the problem of dealing with Real People.

I found it surprisingly simple.

Sociology, body language, some study of linguistics. I spent three days reading the dictionary from cover to cover. I'd never thought to do so before, nor really needed to; even if I didn't have the right words in my mind, there was no need to limit my thinking to the constraints of language. I saw it as a mesh, a grid with which one could transfer information, and with that attitude I turned my mesh into the finest one I could.

I got along with my classmates far easier after that.

When I was eighteen, a Professor offered me a teaching job.

I knew him quite well. He was a personable, if somewhat eccentric man; he'd taught three of the courses I'd topped. While not the best teacher, he was an excellent orator, and could easily hold the attention of his students for the marathon three-hour lectures for his more advanced classes. He needed someone to take a position teaching the first year courses' tutorial classes; I was glad to take the position, and the pay nicely supplemented my personal finances.

It took some time to review the material on the course. It had been some years, but refamiliarising myself with the content didn't take long. Each week, I'd spend some hours preparing notes and worksheets for the course. The physics was basic to me, and I enjoyed passing on the knowledge. Admittedly, I was younger than some of the students, but nobody made too big a deal of the matter.

At the end of the semester, only 3 in the class of 78 students failed, and they were the ones who hadn't attended my tutorials. The Professor was exceptionally pleased, and offered me a similar job in the second semester.

At the end of the second semester, just before my nineteenth birthday and going into the final year of my Undergraduate degree, he offered me a research job.

The research replaced most of what my final year of tuition would have been. For the first half of the year, I mostly covered theoretical Quantum Mechanics concepts. It was, while groundbreaking, not especially interesting work for me. Most days were spent poring over scientific articles the library's archives, trying to piece together the way that the nanoscopic world worked. At the end of the first semester, I came across a paper that greatly altered the course of my research.

The article was written on a typewritter; not formatted, not in the library's database, and likely unpublished. Just some twelve dense pages of scientific prose on seemingly ancient paper, likely undecipherable to anyone who hadn't spent as much time as I had poring over the literature. There was no mention of the Author's name. It was woefully incomplete - likely an early draft, if it had ever been completed - but the concepts put forward were alien. Alien, and potentially revolutionary.

1. Introduction **[TO WRITE]**
2. Traditional Mathematical and Scientific Thought **[TO WRITE]**
3. Modern Mathematical and Scientific Thought
 3.1. Modern Understanding of Reality **[TO EDIT]**
 3.2. Physically Empirical Non-Axiomatic Models of Mathematics
 3.3. Non-Axiomatic Models of Physics
4. The Interdependencies of Systems **[TO WRITE]**
5. Philosophical Discussion
 5.1. Bias Within Non-Axiomatic Biological Minds **[TO EDIT]**
 5.2. Repercussions on Epistemology

5.3. Analysis of the Modern Non-Axiomatic "Naïve Science"
5.4. Accounting For And Removing Bias **[TO WRITE]**
5.5. Effects on Engineering Disciplines
5.6. Morals in Memetic Engineering **[TO EDIT, maybe cut]**
6. Conclusion **[TO WRITE]**

Empirical Mathematics. Non-Axiomatic Physical Systems. While the mathematical concepts violated fundamental assumptions, the tenuous structure that they still held appeared to stand on its own. The paper put forward what seemed to be physical impossibilities with casual simplicity. It made no intuitive sense, and yet, the few examples given seemed viable, if not trivial to construct.

So I did.

It took me twelve days to build my first working perpetual motion machine. It was a brutal, makeshift thing, constructed from gears and pulleys. The action of the machine acted to pull further tension along an already-tense piece of rubber, which drove the machine even more. I analysed the construction, since I'd simply been building based on plans that were not my own. It took me a further four days to modify it to extract more energy than I put in. Admittedly, it then ended up breaking, spinning faster and faster until the rubber band snapped from the stress. But it worked. Despite traditional physical thinking, despite long years of being told otherwise, it was possible to construct a perpetual motion machine.

A few weeks later, I could make one out of two pieces of paper and an elastic band.

At the end of the second semester, I finished my degree, and submitted two completed academic papers. One was on my original research topic, and it was the capstone of my educational career. It went to the American Journal of Physics. The other was the side project I'd been working on without the department's knowledge, knowing I'd probably be berated for the project or seen as insane. It was wholly possible that I was, which was a concerning prospect. It was my paper based on The Paper; the nameless article that I

couldn't help but make a proper noun in my mind. This one, I sent to Letters in Mathematical Physics - a more frequently published journal, and one with the objective of rapid dissemination of breaking research. The worst case scenario, I thought, was that my paper get discarded into a trash can thousands of miles away.

Eighteen days later, a week before my twentieth birthday, the worst case scenario knocked at my door.

The knock was rapid, methodical, military. Five knocks, almost perfectly spaced from one another, then a break, then another five knocks. I got to the door and opened it a crack, the chain lock still in place. A man slightly taller than I stood outside the door, sporting a brown crew cut and a black suit. He looked at me through the crack in the door, smiled, then spoke.

"Mister Stanley Burden?"

"That's me."

"Hi Stanley. My name's Max Green. I'm from Springer Media, I'd like to talk about the paper you submitted to Letters in Mathematical Physics. Can I come in?"

"Uh, sure, yeah, hang on."

I closed the door, undid the chain lock, then re-opened it. Green smiled again, then held a small white rectangle out in his hand.

"Thanks, Stanley. Here's my card."

I took it from him, looking at the plain black ink printed there.

> **Agent Maxwell CT-B05**
> **Green-type Anomaly Agent for Anchorage, Alaska**
> **Global Occult Coalition**

"You're not from Springer."

I looked back up at him. He was smirking, holding up another one of the same business cards, then turned it around. The reverse side had a fractal image on it, similar to those I'd already seen in the

Morals in Memetic Engineering section of The Paper. I felt my eyes unfocus and the sun started to go dark. I fell forwards, dizzy; Green caught me in his arms. He looked down at me with amusement in his eyes.

"Sorry, Stan. I lied."

Then the world felt like nothing.

I opened my eyes, my heart feeling like it was on fire. I jerked, trying to clutch at my chest; my arms, however, were bound to the chair I was seated in. I looked upwards and to the right with unfocused gaze, slowly resolving into view as "Max Green" as he continued to inject a concoction of chemicals into my arm. He looked down at me, his face severe. He emptied the syringe into me, then pulled it out roughly. My arm began to drip blood.

Green walked to the other side of the table, staring at my face while the liquid circulated around my body. My heart kept trying to escape my chest cavity. Every icy breath I pulled into my lungs stung and scraped at my insides, and every exhalation left me feeling less than empty. My brain felt like it was bunching up in the wrong places. I felt my neck spasm lightly, and with each twitch of my head the world kept spinning. Green stared until the protests of my body ceased, then started to talk.

"I have injected you with an inhibitor. Whatever unusual abilities you previously possessed are now under lock and key. Please understand that this is simply a precaution and is mandated by procedure."

"What?"

"Pay attention, Stan, because I'm only going to give this spiel once. You are currently two hundred feet underground in a holding cell of the Global Occult Coalition, an organisation dealing with threats of a metaphysical nature."

I felt my neck start to twitch again.

"Metaphysics, in this context, is not some odd and intangible realm of philosophy. It is a very real, very dangerous system acting to subvert the fundamental workings of our reality. It is, if you break down the term into its roots, quite literally beyond physics."

My neck stopped twitching.

"Physics is meant to work for a reason. The most dangerous thing that a human being can do, if they have to obey the laws of physics, is split an atom. Human beings who subvert those systems can do far more dangerous things, without need for a stockpile of radioactive materials or a particle accelerator."

Green pulled a cigarette case from inside his suit jacket, tapped one out into his hand, pulled a lighter from his other suit pocket and lit the cigarette's end. He took a deep draw of smoke-infused breath, then exhaled the putrid toxins into my face. I started to cough, and my lungs again felt stabbing pins.

"These people are known as Type Green threats. In the vernacular, 'Reality Benders'. If you are capable of performing the experiments detailed in your submitted article, then it is almost certain that you are one of them. Of course, you were 'exceptional' to begin with. There are patterns in the childhood of a Type Green, involuntary and unconscious alterations to the world around them. Loss of a parent at a young age, to serve as a tragic backstory. Eternally lamenting the constant pain of being 'better' than everyone else. Talents precipitating into some level of either arrogance, if they are to become 'mysterious loners', or modesty, if they want to play at normality. Your life story is so formulaic, so cliché, and so statistically improbable that it's as though an untalented author has been curating your entire life. You raised flags."

He paused to take another pull from his cigarette, then blew several rings of smoke up into the air.

"As the Green-type Agent for Anchorage, it was therefore my job to monitor you. A job I've been doing since the second your father drove you into city borders four years ago."

He stared at me, waiting for me to object. My lungs still felt like cold

fire, my mind still foggy and slow. If I opened my mouth to talk, my stomach may well have clenched and emptied itself onto the table. Instead, I simply nodded, though it likely seemed like another spasm. Green continued.

"There are four phases in the development of a Type Green threat. Firstly, denial. A refusal or rationalisation of their metaphysical capabilities. In your case, until recently, you were thought to be at most in this stage. You did not have conscious awareness of your abilities, I believe, until some time this year."

"The Paper."

I spurted out the phrase reactively. Green frowned.

"We'll get to your paper in a moment."

Not my paper, The Paper. I opened my mouth to speak again, then heaved up the remains of a half-digested sandwich onto myself and the table. Green looked on with disgust, shook his head, and continued.

"The adverse physical effects of the inhibitor will wear off soon. You can give your part then. As I was saying, you were believed to be a Phase One. Phase One Type Green threats do not elicit a threat response from our organisation, simply occasional observation. We are quite happy to leave people alone, if they are no genuine threat. Phase Two is more dangerous. Phase Two typically involves experimentation, an exploration of your abilities. You're a Phase Two right now."

Green pulled out a copy of the paper I'd sent to Letters in Mathematical Physics and thumbed through it.

"What you put forward here is what we expect from Phase Two experimentation, just a bit more formalised. There is a very clear method to your metaphysical madness, where other Phase Two examples simply 'do' or 'feel' without any analysis of their metaphysical phenomena. You've put down what you perceive to be a new paradigm in mathematical and physical research. What you don't realise is that it's entirely incorrect for anyone who isn't you."

Green stood and walked to a corner of the room behind me. I tried to twist my head around to follow him, but the bindings prevented it. He walked back with a soft rag, wiped my vomit from the table, then returned beyond my view. I heard a tap running for a moment, then Green turned it off.

He walked back to the table and placed on it a glass of water, a small pile of paper, a box of elastic bands, and the copy of the paper that I'd sent to Springer. Green then stood next to me and untied the knots holding my arms to the chair. He returned to his seat on the other side of the table, then gestured to the pile of materials.

"You state in your article a very simple example of a perpetual motion machine, one which 'anyone' can construct over a few minutes with two pieces of paper and an elastic band. I'd like you to try and make one for me now, based on either your memory or the comprehensive instructions you've written down."

"And the water?"

"It's water. You just threw up. Drink it and try to keep it in."

I picked up the glass, pouring the liquid down my throat. My head felt a little better, and my heart had resumed its regular pace. I took two pieces of paper and an elastic band, looking back up at Green. He nodded and raised his eyebrows.

"Have at it, Stan."

I looked back to the pieces of paper. The first section, the stand, was the easier of the two to fold. I started to construct it, firstly by folding the paper up to a point. Then, around the base, I folded the sections on which the elastic band should catch, without any particular problem. Moving the completed base to one side, I took another piece of paper, and folded it to rest on top of the first piece. I tested placing the two together, and the rotor spun nicely on top of the base.

The next part was to fold the rotor piece so that the elastic band would pull on it, then as the piece spun, give way to the next jutting section, then catch on it. Similarly, it would realign the elastic band

on the base, which would repeatedly fling the elastic band around the whole mechanism opposite to the rotor's movement.

The folds no longer worked.

I knew how the fold was *supposed* to happen. It should have been intuitive; I'd folded hundreds of the things. I moved the half-folded rotor to the side, then picked up a new piece of paper. I closed my eyes, deciding to rely on muscle memory. Fold, fold, fold, fold, fold… and then there was paper in the way where there shouldn't have been. I opened my eyes and looked at the folded rotor. It wasn't the right shape.

I picked up the copy of my article, flipping through to the relevant section.

> Then, taking the outermost points of the star rotor, fold them into the opposite sides of the paper by twisting them through the clockwise-adjacent points.

I looked up at Green, looking at me sombrely from the other side of the table. I spoke.

"This doesn't make any sense. I know how it's supposed to fold, but there's paper in the way where there shouldn't be."

"Type Greens have an intuitive understanding of how to enact metaphysical effects. Whatever terminology that makes internal sense to you, however you're perceiving these changes to the world, is nonsensical to anyone who hasn't had your experiences. You can't communicate what you think to people because the ideas can't operate outside of your own head."

Green pulled out a completed paper perpetual motion machine, then plucked the elastic band into motion. The mechanism started to spin, propelled by its own momentum.

"We took this from your house. I'm sure, looking at it, you can tell the mechanism by which it operates. But nobody else can, other than you, or maybe another Type Green. It's built off your internal idealisation of reality."

Green pushed his lit cigarette against the central point of the still-spinning paper.

"Pay close attention."

The rotor caught fire, yet continued to spin; the flames spread to the base, and the whole structure started to collapse and curl in odd ways. The elastic band stopped moving as it should have, flinging itself to the ceiling, then falling to the ground.

Then there was a loud CRACK, and what remained of the structure exploded into a puff of ashes.

"That's the sound that space makes when it unfolds itself. That's what it sounds like when normal reality is reasserted."

Green swept the ash from the table, then took another deep draw from his cigarette. The room was filled with the scent of tobacco.

"There are two more phases after where you are. A Phase Three Type Green is at stability. They know their limits, and don't try to push beyond them. They're the ones that normally give us the least trouble, and that's where I want to get you to."

"And Phase Four?"

"The fourth phase is the Type Green finding that they have no limits, typically accompanied by delusions of godhood. I don't believe that you will reach this phase for two reasons. Firstly, you seem to operate under a very strict and self-consistent system of metaphysical comprehension. Your abilities, for example, will not let you levitate objects with your mind, or alter memories, or do any of the stranger things which we have to deal with for Type Greens. Even in your idealised reality, you have limits. Secondly, your personality doesn't match what we'd expect for ascension to Phase Four. You take your academic abilities for granted, admittedly, which led to a superiority complex - one you're disappointingly unaware of, or flippant about. But the fact remains that you can quite easily be reasoned with. You don't try to manipulate people, beyond maintaining an amicable outward mask; nor, frankly, do I think you're capable of it. You're far too naive to put yourselves in the

shoes of a god. Which is good, since we've enough gods to deal with already."

There wasn't much I wanted to say in response that wouldn't make me look petulant, so I remained silent.

"I think, though, you can understand why this organisation exists. There are people out there who do consider themselves as gods. There are people who can grab other people's minds and twist them, reshape them, or snap them with trivial ease. These people are not reasonable in the way that you are. These people cannot be negotiated with. What they want to take, they take, what they want that is not there to take, they make. These are people that the world can't know exist, and these are people that we can't let exist."

Green tossed the stub of his cigarette to the ground, extinguishing it with his foot.

"My job is to kill those people, or stop them from getting to that point in the first place."

I kept quiet while Green lit another cigarette.

"In our organisation, Green operatives like me are normally accompanied by Orange operatives. They're the heavy artillery for when something goes wrong. They're either normal people wearing 'Orange Suits', huge armoured exoskeletons resistant to the sorts of things that Type Green threats can enact, or they're a Type Green themselves who can go head to head with the other reality benders. Which finally gets me to my point."

It was obvious what was coming.

"I want you as a reserve Orange operative."

I kept quiet.

"We have three Orange operatives in Anchorage already. Orange Suits are expensive, and impractical for urban environments, so all three are reliable Type Greens. Given the sparsity of threats, I'm the only Green operative in the region."

"I can't say I'm impressed by the whole Reservoir Dogs, colour-by-numbers shtick."

Green's face remained stern.

"I need a yes or no response."

"I'm a theoretical physicist. Also, you have kidnapped me and have held me against my will. No."

Green nodded.

"I think you understand the necessity of having done so, but fair enough. Then here's how this will work. Keep out of our way, keep to yourself, and we'll never see you again. No more attempting to describe or communicate metaphysical phenomena. No more perpetual motion machines. No more of any of it. Keep to yourself, continue on with your research at the college, go on as if nothing has happened. If you violate any of these, we will bring the full weight of the GOC down on you. If you make it necessary, we will end your life. Indicate to me that you understand and accept this."

"I understand."

"Good."

Green was quiet for a bit, then continued.

"That inhibitor's going to last the rest of the week. Get used to feeling like the rest of us."

Green took out his business card, flashed the fractal image at me, and the world felt like nothing again.

I woke up on the lounge chair in my apartment, a dull pain pervading my head. I opened my eyes slowly, then blinked; the room was dark. The LED clock across from me shone red numbers across the room at 23:37. I stood up, walking across to the light switch; flicked the lights on, then swore a bit and shielded my eyes with my left hand. My eyes adjusted, and I looked down at myself.

The blood from the injection still drew a coagulated tree down my arm.

I went to the kitchen, twisting the tap and wincing as cold water washed the pattern away, dissolving it into a red spiral that disappeared down the sink. I splashed some water in my face, trying to rouse myself further. I walked to the bathroom and took a shower, then switched into my winter sleepwear. Tired, I moved to my bedroom, previously filled with the pitter-patter of perpetually spiralling papers.

Now, there was silence.

I sat at my desk, then took out two stapled sheaves. The first, my thesis. I thumbed through it, looking at everything I'd written. It made sense to me, but seemed… hollow. I'd thought it some great work, a breakthrough, at least some kind of progress, but no, my mind was tricking me. There was nothing new here. Yet how the Professor had raved on it, called it astounding, lauded me with praises. Whose thoughts had I errantly twisted to see my way? How much of what I thought true was self-delusion, how much of my success was trickery? How much of my life, just some formulaic and predictable pattern, straight from the same cookie-cutter as every other 'Type Green' abnormality?

The second, my derivative article, a knockoff imitation of The Paper, filled with highly personalised theories I had thought universal. I knew what I meant, the ideas were in my mind, but the words didn't have the meaning they needed to. It was rambling. It was incomprehensible nonsense by an incoherent author, an author blind to the work's absence of communicable meaning. How much of what I had done really meant anything, when separated from my ambit? What of my life was taken the easy way, and what was earned? How could I be sure I deserved any of what I had?

Did I deserve anything at all?

Probably not.

I jolted up and started racing to the kitchen.

Your entire life's a play, and you turn people into actors.

I retched into my mouth.

Your life's a play, and your mother died from the role you cast her in.

Dark yellow splattered across my kitchen sink. I heaved and heaved again; the stomach acid stung at my tongue and went up my nose. My eyes began to water as my heaving stopped. I panted, watching as my vomit dripped down the drain. My reflection in the metal base stared back through the pane of bile, ginger stubble peeking through my blanched chin. I wiped my mouth, rinsed my hands, cried, then returned to bed.

Get used to feeling like the rest of us.

My sleep was broken and full of nightmares.

« `Hub` | **It's All Just A Big Long Cry For Help** »

Anart Antics

Jakeob Aldon stared at her bathroom ceiling, reclined so far into the **`bathtub`** that only her face breached the surface. She was beginning to regret her latest purchase. Damn her impatience. If she had just taken the time to learn how to copy her consciousness and bind it to an inanimate object, her life would have been so much easier. But instead she took the quick route, the lazy path, and bought this stupid American tub with its stupid Russian water. And they wouldn't even tell her how they came to be, all they would ever talk about was communism and America and Mother Russia and blah blah blah blah blah-

"If you two don't shut up, I swear to God I will turn you into a fucking toilet."

"Sir- ma'am- whatever I should be calling you. I am an ass man. I would welcome this change. Shit in this commie's stupid-"

At least Aldon could say she learned a lesson from it all. Do your own leg work. Research like a proper anartist. Or you would end up with two idiots yammering into your brain. The Library was always open, all she had to do was wander in. She lifted herself into a stand and bade the duo a halfhearted farewell. They, of course, ignored her to talk about more inane bullshit. She dried herself off with a thankfully non-sapient towel and dressed in clothes that lacked even a hint of sentience. As things should be.

Shutting the door behind her made her feel a little better, put that much more between her and her giant mistake. At least the rest of her apartment was welcoming. A tiny space, packed with random anartistic garbage amassed between her and her roommate, Finnegan. Small moving statues, speaking paintings, CDs filled with mood-altering music. Bags of clay, stacks of pallets, sacks of concrete mix, buckets upon buckets of paint. It was a sty, but it was *their* sty. It was home.

Staring at his computer monitor was Finnegan, his ever-present beret displaced by the sound-cancelling headphones covering his ears. Finnegan was palming an old bathtub plug, spinning it in his fingers. Aldon skirted through the minefield of art supplies and flicked off the beret. It took several seconds for Finnegan to notice.

"Oh, hey, Allie." An eyebrow rose slowly. "What's the matter with you?"

"Stupid goddamn bathtub," she pouted.

"I told you," he sang knowingly. "It is pretty funny, you have to admit."

Aldon just crossed her arms and sulked.

Fingers danced across the keyboard as Finnegan saved and closed his latest audio project. He grabbed his beret and pressed it into Aldon's face while he removed his headphones. Aldon laughed, but swiped at him out of mock irritation all the same. The roommates exchanged a series of playful punches before Finnegan donned his hat again.

"Ready to go?" he asked, still smirking.

"As ever."

The artistic duo left their little apartment, making sure to lock up behind themselves. Outside of their personal alcove, they were out in the real world. Where they were supposed to be responsible adults. They walked adult strides, spoke of adult topics. Like sports, taxes, and the weather. How about that weather. It sure was weathering. And those taxes sure were taxing. Not to mention just how sporting those sports were.

The responsible duo entered the library and dropped their conversation. One had to respect the rules of the library, capital L or not. They wandered through the aisles until they reached their destination. A quick perusal of the shelf and Aldon plucked a specific tome from its brethren. It was even halfway out, as if it knew it was the one she wanted. One *Atlas Shrugged*. She flipped open the

book to a random page, made sure the coast was clear, and cleared her throat.

"Man, this is one interesting book," she said, without a hint of sarcasm. That was the important bit. "I'm really glad I found it!"

She snapped the book shut and slid it halfway back into place. She then gripped the spine and twisted. The book spun with her hand, and she gave it a light push. The bookshelf bent inwards as space twisted open into a portal. Finnegan giggled as he always did and hurried in, Aldon right behind him. With a gentle nudge the door was shut again, and space collapsed back into a state of normalcy, the book still sticking out by several inches.

Inside the Wanderer's Library, Finnegan and Aldon felt more at ease. It was their home away from home, where they were free to be their goofy selves so long as they followed the five core tenets. Return your books on time. Don't damage books. Don't steal books. Don't damage Library property. Don't harm those within the Library. Easy enough, though they had to remind themselves not to indulge in their usual roughhousing for fear of it breaking the fifth rule.

The Library itself loomed above, below, and all around them in its grand omniscience. Doors surrounded them in the small marble lobby, each representing more common Ways to reach the Library. Separating the lobby from their branch of the Library was an Archivist, one with its chair. Beyond that was a branching staircase that led to the different sections of the Library, which paid no mind to the primitive concept of gravity. Aldon looked up and saw a man who appeared to be sitting upside down, reading a book against the shelf he found it. A Page read over his shoulder as it stocked the shelves. On another floor, a Docent strode perpendicular to them, leading another Wanderer to her destination. Beyond the spiraling mess that was this branch, seemingly hovering in the distance, was another branch of the Library, containing all the knowledge of another reality. Beyond even that lay more branches, twisting and turning and intertwining amongst each other, often only a hair's breadth apart.

The two Wanderers approached the Archivist. Finnegan cleared his throat and opened his mouth to speak, but when the unseeing

Librarian turned to look at him he faltered into a mumble. He had never been particularly comfortable with the Librarians.

"Can I help you?" it asked. Its breath matched the scent of a freshly printed novel.

"We're looking for a book that can teach us to make our own Ways," Aldon said. "We've been using a common one, but we need to transport something and it's too inconvenient otherwise."

Silence fell as the Archivist thought. "Will this cargo cause damage to the Library, its contents, or its occupants?"

"No. It's just a tub. Well, a talking tub. We need to get it to Japan."

There was a slight twitch in the Archivist's face. Aldon allowed herself a smile, since it wouldn't catch her doing so.

"Very well." It lifted a long finger, and without looking it pointed in what seemed a random direction above it. "Up three floors, on the left. Third row, eighth shelf. A book titled *A Wanderer's Guide*, by Lucifer. Do you require a Docent to help you find it?"

Finnegan frantically shook his head, his beret sliding to and fro. Aldon stifled a giggle and replied with, "No, I think we'll be alright. Thank you."

The Archivist nodded. "Enjoy your stay. Mind the rules."

"Of course."

Several weeks later Finnegan and Aldon found themselves in Japan. They had taken up pseudo-residence in the warehouse the competition was being held in, as had several other artists while they finished their **works**. One artist was occupied trying to find a way to make his chainsaws remain active. Another was attempting to unwind by playing the piano making up part of his piece. The event's creator, also a participant, was actively avoiding his wife.

Finnegan was sitting atop an abnormally large tortoise, his nose buried in a book. The tortoise, for whatever reason, was wearing his

beret. Aldon sat against the bathtub, toying with some pots and pans. This activity had nothing to do with her extreme exhaustion, or so she would tell you. The sound of sandals flipping and flopping disrupted her potting and panning as a man in a Hawaiian T-shirt approached their work area.

"Hi there," the man said. Aldon looked up at him with an expression she hoped conveyed her irritation. She either failed, or the man simply didn't care. He adjusted his stupid fedora sitting on his goofy-looking red hair. "A joint project, eh? What are you guys working on?"

"We're gonna use this piece of shit to power a giant turtle with waterjet cannons," Aldon said, banging a skillet on the side of the tub.

"Tortoise," Finnegan corrected without looking up.

Aldon pointed a pan in Finnegan's direction. "Fuck you, turtles are the ones in water."

"But the model you showed me was a tortoise," Finnegan said while half-yawning. "We got the tortoise I'm sitting on so we could see how one moves."

"What? No, I didn't." Aldon fell onto her side as she reached for the small mock sculpture she had made. Still on her side, she held it up to the man in the Hawaiian shirt, which clearly qualified him to speak on the situation. "This is a turtle, right?"

"It's a tortoise. Turtles have flatter, lighter shells and have webbed feet." The fedora-wearer hovered over the bathtub. "What's the tub do?"

"I made a fucking tortoise. What? Oh, it makes infinite water. Stick your hand in it."

The man did so without a second thought. His eyebrows rose for a moment, and he waited. He listened. He withdrew his hand and placed both hands on the rim of the bathtub. Aldon watched his mouth tug back and forth before he looked down at her.

"I could kill this for you. After the competition, of course."

"Ha!" Aldon found herself taking a small liking to the man. He didn't look familiar, but it was entirely possible she had spoken with him before. Faces ran together in events like this for her. Probably had something to do with the soul crushing stress and the mind numbing lack of sleep. Maybe. "Thanks, but as dumb as they are, I don't want them dead."

"Well, I could still take it off your hands. I have some old friends who would love it." He waved his hand around as if he could pluck the phrase he was searching for from the air. "They're obsessive collectors, so to speak."

"They can have it, then. Thanks." Aldon finally pushed herself back into a sitting position, craning her neck to look around. "So which is yours?"

"Oh, I'm not competing. I'm just a Nobody who felt like watching."

"Hmm." Aldon felt like there was something she was missing, but was too tired to care. "Well, anyway, if you'll excuse me. I have to figure out how to make a pressurized water tank out of a rice cooker."

"Already did that," Finnegan called from the tortoise. His voice seemed quieter with the stranger around, the book even closer to his face than before. "You should start mixing the concrete."

Aldon jerked around as she looked at all the crap they had lying around. "When the hell did you do that?"

"Yesterday? I think? Hey, where's my hat?" Finnegan fell off the tortoise unceremoniously in an attempt to find said hat, asleep by the time he hit the ground.

Nobody chuckled. "You guys are a bit over your heads, eh?"

Aldon snored in response.

The crowd of artists roared in anticipation as the siren went off. Two

anartistic monstrosities were positioned opposite each other in the ring, marked as a giant circle with a boxing glove holding a paint brush in the center. A giant stone platypus standing at 14 meters tall faced against a concrete turtle tortoise with a pair of metal tubes protruding from its shell, coming up to an even 16 meters tall.

Aldon and Finnegan almost had to lean against each other just to stay standing. They had done it, but only barely. The announcer declared the battle was about to begin, and that the artists were to activate their respective mechas.

"Can you do it?" Finnegan mumbled.

Aldon should have seen that coming, really. "You made the thing, you should do it first."

"I don't want to have to do it in front of-"

"Oh, get over it. C'mon. You say one thing, and it's a funny thing, and then you just think the rest. No having to talk to the scary people."

He held the bathtub plug in his hand, twisting his wrist to make the small chain spin. He sighed, spun his beret around, and took a deep breath.

"I choose you! Copyright Infringement!"

Hub | **Boron Blisters** »

Boron Blisters

Jakeob Aldon stared at her bedroom ceiling, her limbs in odd places and cold sweat beginning to soak into her clothes. She took a few deep breaths and arranged her limbs in a bit more of an orderly fashion before stealing a look at her alarm clock. 5:38AM. Three hours of sleep. Yay. Stupid dream, waking her up. She was pretty sure it was a dream. She pulled at the elastic of her shorts and was very uncharacteristically glad to see a penis.

"Uh… what are you doing?" Finnegan looked down at her from his seat in front of the computer. His eyes were starting to redden and were beginning to grow small black bags under them.

Aldon released her waistband and squirmed slightly when it snapped against her. "Nothing. Dream. Just checking."

Finnegan's shoulders sagged. "Oh. Are you okay?"

"Yeah, just- not the usual one. It was… weird."

Finnegan pushed himself away from his desk. "Do you want to talk about it? I know you don't usually like to, but if this was different…"

"No, really, I'm fine. Don't worry about it." Aldon rolled off her bed and stood. "Anyway, what are you… What is all over you?"

Now that the grogginess was wearing off, Aldon could see dozens of pentagonal… silvery-gray blister-looking things jutting from Finnegan's skin. Finnegan lifted an arm and stared at one of the various blisters. "Boron crystals. It's on you, too."

"What-" Sure enough, boron crystals were covering her. "Is this why I'm having weird, random mini-dreams? Because you're playing some weird music?"

"I doubt it." Finnegan shrugged. "Relax. It's not dangerous. A friend

said she needed some boron, I was playing with these CDs, and one produces boron. The CD is almost over, anyway."

Aldon grabbed one of the disks off his desk. It was labeled "The Absolute Absolute Absolute Absolute BEST of The 5th Dimension!!!!!" Aldon didn't know who or what The 5th Dimension was, but she was not currently enjoying their music. In fact, she was pretty sure it was the worst-

"Wow, that was real cool," they both said in unison as the music stopped.

"No, goddammit, that was not cool," Aldon immediately said. "This is aussie shit, isn't it? How many of those CDs have you played?"

"That's the only one. Relax, Allie. I know you don't like them, but I did the research. Just pull the crystals off. See?" He held one of the crystals between his thumb and forefinger. "C'mon, you know how careful I am."

Aldon mentally stumbled, dropping any pent up anger she had been carrying. "Yeah… sorry. Dream just shook me up, I guess."

Finnegan collected both their crystals in a pile on his desk. He sighed and scratched at his jaw. "You sure you don't want to talk about it?"

She gestured at her everything with jerky hand movements. "I'm just sick of this shit, Finn. Talking about it will do fuckall."

They remained in place for a few moments, Finnegan sitting with his arm on the desk and Aldon standing within arm's reach. Finnegan started to open his mouth as if to say something, and instead just sighed.

"I'm sorry, Allie."

The look on his face made her feel like a fishing line had gotten snagged on her spleen. "Don't blame yourself, man. Please? I feel shitty enough without also having to worry about you worrying about me."

Finnegan groaned slightly as he lifted himself from his chair. He held out both arms and slowly advanced on Aldon. "C'mere."

"No, Finn, don't-" The hug was unavoidable. Auburn whiskers scratched at the crook of her neck, and without anywhere else to go she knew her only option was to reciprocate. A few moments passed before she mumbled, "Thanks."

He released her only to grasp her shoulders. "Can I do anything else?"

"Yeah, go to bed. You look like shit."

He laughed as his hands slipped off her shoulders. "Because you had so much beauty sleep. Fine, off I go. What about you?"

She headed for the door to her little studio. "I'm just gonna go sculpt, I think. G'night, Finn."

"Night, Allie. Wake me if you need anything."

Several hours later, Aldon regarded her latest work from her seat of an overturned paint bucket. It was a life-sized female made of anomalous clay. She couldn't decide if she was happy with it. Was the bust the right size? Were the hips too wide? She knuckled her cheek and ground her teeth together.

She sighed and groaned and pinched her cheek in frustration. She wasn't sure what its flaw actually was, but it just didn't measure up to the image she had in her mind before starting. Maybe it was because she just made it. A little time away from it would let her appreciate it for what it was. Hopefully.

She went to the sink and washed off the errant clay from her hands and forearms. She rubbed her fingers together under the running water, and for some reason they felt unnaturally large. Something between a sigh and a groan left her mouth. After a few slow breaths she looked up to the mirror on the wall.

Another sigh escaped her and she finished washing her hands. "Gonna be one of those days, eh." It wasn't so much a question as a

resigned statement.

A small glance at the statue provoked an urge to smash it, to rid herself of its existence and to just start anew. Maybe she'd show Finnegan. Even he'd be able to tell if it was horrible. But what if it really was? She wasn't sure if she could handle having something she was so emotionally invested in shot down. It wasn't just something she made, it was a part of her.

Her stomach untwisted itself slightly to let out a groan. Hunger was a blessing at this point. Anything to get her mind on something else. She left the statue where it was, in the center of the workroom. She flicked the lights off and slipped outside her little workshop.

Finnegan lay on his bed. Earbuds plugged both ears, leading down into his pocket. His signature beret covered his face, his chest moving slowly enough to suggest he was still sleeping. Aldon shut the door as quietly as possible, and took care not to make any unnecessary noise as she navigated the room toward his mattress.

She took notice of Copper, the little golem she had recently created, was standing on Finnegan's desk. Next to Copper was a second golem Aldon had never seen before. It looked a lot like the boron crystals, and was even standing in the same place Finnegan had left them. The limbs of the boron golem retained the pentagonal shapes, though its head was a sphere with five pentagons drilled into it. Aldon hadn't really expected her first attempt at creating sapience to… be able to create more sapience, but neat.

She moved on to more pressing issues and gently lifted the beret to reveal Finnegan's hairy mug. After collecting herself and forcibly ignoring any possible issues, she pushed her middle finger against her thumb, her hand shaking as it neared his face. A monstrous flick made contact with the Irishman's nose, violently waking him from his peaceful slumber. Finnegan yelled incoherently, his thrashing limbs missing the retreating Aldon. He collected himself when he realized he wasn't actually dying, taking the time to don his hat. He took a deep breath as if to say something poignant and then simply offered Aldon his middle finger.

"I'm hungry," Aldon said. "Are you hungry?"

"Really? For food? You did that for food?"

"You said to wake you up if I needed anything. I need to eat. Where do you want to go?"

"Let's look at how much money we have." Finnegan pulled out his wallet and displayed its contents. "Oh, look. I'm broke. I imagine your wallet's equally unencumbered. Where might we find sustenance given our current financial situation?"

Aldon managed a smile. "Is the answer the pizzeria? I bet the answer is the pizzeria. The answer is usually the pizzeria when you start talking like a wordy doucher."

"The answer is indeed the goddamn pizzeria. Again."

"God bless employee discounts."

Spicy Crust Pizza was a small, supposedly local pizzeria. For the most part, this was true. John Ericson was a local man who had bought out the place from another local man. While Ericson operated his business like anyone else would, he did not actually make any money from the pizzeria directly. Instead, what would have normally been his money was funneled into an account that dozens of other supposedly small businesses pumped their owner's earnings into. Superficial Corrective Procedures; internet sensation Silly Crab Productions; even the lesser known Scalpels, Chains and Presents Ltd. The organization behind this bank account then paid Ericson and his kind their actual paychecks.

Unaware of all this, a certain employee entered Spicy Crust Pizza with a friend in tow. Aldon ordered two drinks and a large meat lover's, and ravenous duo forked over what little cash they had. They ate within the pizzeria, as they usually did. There wasn't much room in their apartment. While they technically had a kitchen, it was usually empty and was too small to house a table. The living room was too packed, and they were too neurotic to bring food into their respective work areas. So they sat at a table by the glass outer wall, watching pedestrians hustle and vehicles bustle as they ate.

"You ever get the feeling you're being watched?" Finnegan asked through a mouthful of spicy crust.

"No. Why?"

"Because we're being watched." Finnegan sipped at his soda, his gaze focused over Aldon's left shoulder. "Or you are, at least. There's a man and a woman sitting at that table, and they've been staring at you since they walked in. They're not very subtle."

"Crap." Aldon sighed. "Do they… Let's see, who do I not like?"

"Well, they're coming over now."

Aldon held her head in her hands. "Noooo. Make them go away, Finn."

"And talk to the scary people? Nope."

"God dammit, Finnegan. One comment. One goddamn comment and you never-"

"Hello, Jakeob." Cassandra 'The Director' Paulson stood over them, her arms crossed and her mouth pulled into a half-smile.

"Goddamn, it had to be you of all people. Go to Hell, Paulson. I have no interest in-" Aldon caught sight of the man with Paulson. Felix Cori smiled and lifted and hand in greeting. "Oh. Hey, Felix. Still palling around with these losers, huh?"

"Well, actually, it's just the two of us right now," Felix corrected. "So, just the one loser. And I'm kind of The Boss now. Well, The Critic."

"Oh, god, you're still using titles." Aldon sighed. "Wait, how did *you* become the leader?"

He palmed the fedora on his head. "Didn't say 'not it' fast enough."

Aldon couldn't help but laugh. She turned to Finnegan, who had ignored a majority of the conversation to continue eating. "For context, she's one of the idiots that fueled my desire to move out here. He's actually okay, even if he hangs out with a bunch of

jackasses. Felix, this is Finnegan, my roommate."

The two simply nodded at each other.

"So… let's get this over with, I guess," Aldon said. "What do you want?"

"Let me do the talking, Sandra," Felix said. "Allie, we want you to join us."

"Pass."

"But-"

Aldon was almost surprised how easy it was to call up the anger she had felt earlier. It took a fair amount of restraint to not start shouting. "Fuck your group. Even with you in charge. She's still there, and I'm sure she'll just strongarm you into recruiting more shitheads. I'm flattered you came to me first, though. Unless I'm not, and whoever else you tried also had the brains to decline."

Feix's shoulders slumped under the weight of defeat. "So, that's it? You've decided, and nothing can change your mind?"

Aldon resumed eating. "Pretty much."

Paulson cleared her throat. "What if I told you we had a way to give you a female body?"

Aldon almost choked. "What?"

Paulson wore the kind of smile that made Aldon want to instinctively punch her. "It's not exactly difficult, if you're not an amateur. We have the materials, we just need a new Sculptor."

"Wait, are you talking that stupid golem thing with the dong cult?" Aldon said. "The expensive 'Gee I Hope They Do Not Fuck This Up' thing?"

"No, of course not. We have plenty of clay capable of the task, courtesy of our old Sculptor. But we need a replacement for him for an upcoming project. Help us with that, and we'll help you with your

body situation."

"Just- here." Felix put down a small card with a phone number on it before Aldon could say anything. "Call me when you make a decision." Then he hurried out, Paulson right behind him.

Finnegan wiped his mouth and threw the napkin onto his empty plate. "What are you gonna do?"

Aldon rested her head on the table, staring at her food. Despite only having one slice, she didn't feel all that hungry anymore. "I don't know."

She glared at the piece of paper with the phone number on it. The image of the statue she had worked on that morning sprung to mind. The constant dreams-turned-nightmares upon waking up.

"Fuck it."

« **Anart Antics** | **Hub** | **Covert Cursing** »

Covert Cursing

Jakeob Aldon stared at the clock hanging from the wall with a look alternating between utter focus and total boredom. She stood behind the register of Spicy Crust Pizza, attempting to will the hour hand along. Maybe, if she tried hard enough, she would suddenly become a reality bender. Maybe she already was, and she just had a very specific ability- the ability to make her shift hurry the fuck up and end.

It turned out that she was not a reality bender, however. She was, in fact, a totally normal baseline human. Something that might change soon. Aldon had spent the last week thinking about what the aussies had in mind, and what she would get in return for helping them. A new body. Probably a golem fashioned from morphing clay, her soul transferred and bound during the clay firing process. Once finished, it would be identical to a normal human body. Provided everything went absolutely perfectly.

And if Aldon knew anything, it was that nothing was truly perfect. That niggling doubt that she would make some mistake, the idea that her own inability would doom her, had dogged her since she had made the call to Felix.

By the time she consciously realized she had gone from trying to break normality to very desperately hoping she would adhere to it, a whole twenty seconds had passed. It had felt like an hour. Or at least a solid five minutes.

"Go fasterrr," she groaned at the clock.

"Talking to yourself?" Margret Williams asked, poking Aldon in the back as she did so.

After spazzing out for a moment, Aldon stood up straight."What- no, I'm just standing here doing my job, like a normal person."

"R…right." Margret shifted her weight away from Aldon for a moment. "Uh, anyway, you're wanted in the back."

Panic lanced through Aldon as she realized just how much time she spent spacing out at work. When Margret then went on to mention it was for an employment review, Aldon's shoulders sagged so much they might have dislocated her arms.

"Right. Higher up. Inspection-review-dealio. Thanks, Margret."

Margret touched Aldon's shoulder as she passed. "You alright, Aldon?"

"Uh. No. Not really. Lots of stress. Um. Y'know- girl stuff."

Margret began to chuckle before she caught herself. She quickly cleared her throat in an effort to make it seem like that was what she had been doing all along. She opened her mouth as if to say something, perhaps apologize, and then continued pretending to cough.

Aldon just nodded awkwardly and made a beeline for the manager's office. She knocked on the slightly ajar door and peeked inside. A man she didn't recognize was sitting within, wearing a suit that he didn't look all that comfortable in. He scratched at the coarse stubble along his jaw absently until he took notice of Aldon.

"Oh, hey there!" He was up and out of the chair in one quick motion. He offered a loose handshake, a grin on his face. "Jakeob Aldon? Nice to meet you. I'm Daniel Navarro, I'll be asking you some questions. Please, take a seat."

He shut the door and locked it. Aldon thought that a little strange, but dismissed it as one of the neurotic tendencies she had picked up along the years. Navarro moved over to the desk while Aldon sat down, but rather than sitting down himself he popped open a folder and flicked through it for a moment. He then plucked one paper from it and slid it over to Aldon.

Act normal. Do not react to what I'm about to do.

"So, how do you like it here? Do you like your boss? Your fellow

employees?"

"Um. They're alright. Good. No complaints. I, uh, usually keep to myself, I guess."

As they said this, Navarro withdrew six small pieces of paper from the folder and bent down on the ground, affixing one to the floor. He stood and circled the room, placing one on each wall.

He climbed up on the manager's chair. "I see. Any particular reason for that?"

Aldon watched as he affixed the last paper to the ceiling. "Just… shy, I guess."

"That's okay," Navarro said as he hopped off the chair. He then sat in it, unbuttoning his suit and loosening his tie. "Nothing wrong with that. You can react now, by the way."

Aldon chewed on her tongue, nodding in thought. She went with what she felt was a good opening question. "Who the hell are you?"

The grin was still there. "I told you. I'm Daniel Navarro. I'm here to ask you some questions. And make you an offer."

Aldon sighed. "Right, but like, who do you work for?"

"You don't know?" Navarro palmed his chin. Aldon shook her head. "Ha! And they say memetics are bullshit. Spicy Crust Pizza. SCP. The Foundation."

Blocked channels within Aldon's mind suddenly flooded. She left the chair so fast she knocked it over. "Wait- fuck- what? That… Fucking memetics *are* bullshit."

"Well, bullshit in that they're annoying, not ineffective." Navarro shrugged. He was still smiling, which was beginning to bother Aldon. "Relax, Aldon. I come in peace. The Foundation wants to make you an offer."

Aldon sat against the opposite wall, her head in her hands. "I work. For the Foundation."

"Well, not exactly. See, this is just a front. Nobody save for the owner actually knows."

Aldon wasn't really listening. "I've been good. Careful! Don't do anything too big, nothing dangerous. Keep myself normal. And I've been under you this whole time. You guys probably have cameras and shit all over the place in here, huh?"

"Indeed, we do." Navarro got up from the chair and approached Aldon. He crouched down and offered her a much smaller smile than earlier. "But, hey. We haven't done anything to you. We've known since you applied, and rather than taking you in we gave you a job."

"That actually makes sense. Keep people of interest somewhere you can watch them. Man. Fuck. So, what- wait, what about Finn?"

"He's fine. For now. Depending on your cooperation that might change."

The conflicted look on his face did not stem Aldon's frustration. "Man, fuck you."

Navarro held his hands out apologetically. "Sorry. Just doing my job. Can I tell you what we want you to do?"

Aldon crossed her arms. She hoped to look indifferent rather than desolate. "Whatever."

Navarro took a breath and then became just a bit more serious. "We want you to accept that offer from the Are We Cool Yet? sect that contacted you. Aldon, you're not a problem. But they are."

"You want me to set them up."

"Correct. Most anartists manage to stay under our radar. Even a good chunk of the aussies don't bring much attention to themselves. But these guys do. They were involved in this big… mess on the east coast that we weren't able to deal with, and now they're on the west coast."

Aldon reached out and grabbed nothing. "Y'know, I finally had a

decent chance. A slim one, but it was all in my hands. And now it's gone cuz Big Brother was like 'Fuck you, Aldon.' Shit, I probably never *can* now that I know you guys are watching me."

Navarro slumped. "I'm really sorry about that. I have a trans friend, he's… not happy. I won't say I know what it's like, but I can empathize. I might- and this is a really tiny might- be able to help you with that. I'll submit a request. But I doubt it'll be accepted."

It meant almost nothing, and she wasn't even sure if he was serious, but even as an empty gesture it meant a lot to her. She shrugged again.

Navarro slapped her arm reassuringly. "Listen, nine years ago? I was in your shoes."

Aldon managed a glare. "And now you work for them."

Navarro grinned again. "Make the best of a bad situation. I'd like to think I helped the anart scene in my own way."

"So… why not just take them when they walk into your fucking pizzeria? Like, how hard would that be? Why do I need to double agent this shit?"

"My superiors think they may be the tip of the iceberg. There's been a lot of antagonistic anart activity in the area recently. They think Paulson and Cori are involved. And they are surprisingly difficult to find. Like they have something to clean up any tracks they make."

"Fine. Whatever." Aldon stood, rejecting Navarro's offered help to stand. She glared some more as he straightened his tie and buttoned back up. "Are we done here?"

"Well, you're in a sound-proofed room for the moment. You have to go back to work for a few hours after this. Care to vent?"

"Oh. Yes. Thank you."

Aldon took a deep breath and then began thrashing around.

"FfffffUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUCK!"

Navarro clutched at his ears. "Jesus! I meant let me leave first! Christ."

« **Boron Blisters** | **Hub** | **Divine Demands** »

Divine Demands

Jakeob Aldon stared at the card that Felix Cori had given her. Or maybe she should start calling him "The Critic." She let out a sigh and stretched out across her bed, flipping the card between her fingers. The side that had held the number she was to previously call was now blank, and the opposite side held nothing but a question.

Are We Cool Yet?

It was an interesting question, at the very least. A group that was little more than a question suggested that the answer could never be "Yes." Because then what? What if the opposition suddenly was cool with you? What if the art, and by extension the artists, became cool? To some that may not matter as it would simply mean dropping what amounted to little more than a label, but from Aldon's limited experience the aussie anartists were all about labels.

The Critic critiqued. The Director directed. The Sculptor sighed and waited for the card to do something interesting.

After several more minutes, the card finally obliged. Upon turning it to the side that used to be blank, Aldon found a new phone number to call. She pawed for her phone and when the search came up empty she sat up.

In the corner of the room she spotted Copper, Boron, Iron, and Zinc gathered around her crappy old flip phone. They didn't seem to be eating it, which was good. In fact, they appeared to be trying to use it. Iron and Copper were holding a phone book open while Boron read from it, Zinc punching in the numbers. Aldon crouched down to see Boron reading from a listing for some company that bought and sold gold items.

Aldon pinched the phone and tugged it away from Zinc, who protested by waving its little arms around. Iron hopped up onto the

phone book and hopped about pitifully.

"Sorry, guys, I need this. Besides, you need money to buy gold."

Now too occupied with dialing the number, Aldon missed Boron looking to the spot on Finnegan's desk where the roommates tended to leave their wallets.

Aldon waited while the dial tone droned on. After approximately four seconds the tone changed to a low pitched hum, which Aldon assumed was a memetic screening device or something. When the tone decided her mind probably hadn't collapsed in on itself, Felix picked up.

"Allie?"

"Hey, Felix."

"Um. Hi."

"…Hi." Out of the corner of her eye, Aldon caught Zinc trying to sneak up on the unsuspecting wallet sitting on the desk. She rolled her eyes and pocketed the wallet and gave the little golem a light bop on the head with her finger. All the while, Felix remained silent. "Felix?"

"Right, sorry, just waiting for this thing to triangulate you."

"What thing?" Aldon slid over to the window and looked to the sky. "You know you could have just friggin' asked where I live."

"I was busy! And nervous. And stuff. Look, it doesn't matter. This thing is almost done, and then I'll send The Janitor over to pick you up."

"That doesn't sound like much of an artist name."

"Well, no. She— it— is more of a… well, the cleaning crew. It's a long story. But don't worry, this triangle thing just finished so she— it — will be right over."

Knock. Knock. Knock.

"Shit, that was fast." She started for the door but a thought caught her midstep. "Did you know where I live this whole time and do this just for a cool setup?"

Felix just laughed. "I'll see you in a bit."

Aldon stared at the phone as it clicked and went back to the regular dial tone. "He so did."

After pocketing the phone Aldon went to the door. She glanced over her shoulder to make sure the golems weren't in an immediate line of sight, then she unlocked the door and cracked it open. She took a small breath and looked out.

Something looked back. Behind the lens of a gas mask, two tunnels bored into a skull that might not have actually been there. The resulting abyss drew Aldon in like a moth to a flame, despite the obvious dissimilarity due to an abyss being both dark and cold and a flame being… well, not those things. The being nodded in greeting but kept its gloved hands at its side.

A voice like a dying loudspeaker emanated from somewhere in its general vicinity. "Sculptor. I am called The Janitor."

"Sup," Aldon said with a smile. "Come in, before somebody notices you. You're… what, a demiurge? Full Urge? You're definitely *something*."

The Janitor cocked its head as it entered. "You are more relaxed than most I meet."

Aldon shut the door behind it. "I mean, don't get me wrong— you're still unnerving as fuck. Just, y'know, that doesn't mean I can't be polite. Besides, you're not the first god I've met."

"I am not a god."

Aldon shrugged. "Eh, whatever you are. So I'm guessing you have some teleporting thingamajig to get me to Felix, yeah?"

The Janitor slowly began to unbutton its trenchcoat. "I have a Way."

"Cool, cool. Well, uh, open 'er up and let's get going."

"Close your eyes. Cover your ears. I will guide you with my hand on one shoulder. When I release, you may open your eyes and ears."

Aldon shut her eyes but had to make the remark, "This is gonna be some traumatic jaunt through your personal Way, isn't it."

Before she covered her ears she heard the rush of fabric, as if the Janitor was opening its trenchcoat in a deliberately dramatic fashion. It was too bad nobody could see it. Or hear whatever followed, now that Aldon had covered her ears.

The familiar sensation of being shoved through a hole in spacetime quickly enveloped Aldon. An overbearing sense of something she couldn't quite pin down pressed upon her from all directions. A large hand grasped her left shoulder and gave her a light push, and so she walked. The feeling never lessened, and was so alien that she couldn't even gather some semblance of resistance to it. So she walked, The Janitor's hand on her shoulder. Blind, deaf, and drowning in a sea of mystery.

Then her body collapsed into a singularity for a brief moment, and when she regained her senses there was no hand on her shoulder. She cracked an eye open and saw Felix staring at a blank wall even more blankly. Next to him, Cassandra Paulson was glaring at an unknown third anartist who was painting the wall beige. They were inside a large, mostly empty warehouse. Anartists could be seen everywhere, most either cleaning or painting, though a few could be seen carrying around benches.

Power crackled behind her. "I have brought The Sculptor. Is there anything else you need?"

Felix snapped out of his daze. "Allie! Hi! Janitor! No, I don't think so. We should be good for today."

The Janitor nodded and trudged away. Aldon watched it leave, half expecting it to disappear the moment she stopped looking. And then it was gone.

"You okay?" Felix poked her shoulder and she snapped to attention. "Janitor didn't shake you up too much?"

"Nah, he's a big sweetheart," Aldon said. "Or she. Or it. Whatever. Anyway, what's with the whole… warehouse thing? That just looks like normal paint."

"It is normal paint. It's part of the piece."

Aldon looked around. It wasn't all that large a warehouse, really. "The whole place is the piece?"

"Yeah. C'mon, I'll show you around."

Everyone seemed to work a little more earnestly when Felix was near, and worked near frantically whenever Paulson turned her gaze on them. Aldon watched a group of anartists almost drop the mosaic window they were lugging around just because their precious Critic was watching. With methodical effort they hefted the glass up to their peers standing on a pair of ladders, who then somehow affixed the window to the solid wall. Colored light immediately began to pour into the warehouse, bringing the image of a rectangular prism sitting on a table into sharp contrast with the dark warehouse wall.

"Neat," Aldon commented.

"Oh man, neat doesn't begin to cover it," Felix said. "You have no idea how ambitious this whole thing is! I really think I'm making something great here."

Aldon drew her mouth to the side but said nothing, and Felix was too enamored with his self-proclaimed handiwork to notice. Glances at Paulson only earned glares in return, so Aldon quickly gave that up. The odd thing, at least to Aldon, was that the anartists seemed to have taken an interest in her. She caught a fair few of them pointing at her when they thought she wasn't looking.

If this was what it was like to be a celebrity, Aldon would gladly remain in anonymity.

Yet the sheer number of them niggled at her. "So where are all these people from? This is way bigger than your group was before."

Felix grinned. "People flock when word gets out that The Critic is looking for disciples. Everybody wants to be cool." He gave her a look she definitely didn't like. "Whether they'll admit it or not."

Punching him would have been too easy. "Oh, don't you get started. You know why I'm here. After I get my new body I'm bugging the fuck out."

"We'll see."

All Aldon saw was an authority figure who had earned his title by virtue of failing to say "Not it" fast enough. When she looked to the mosaics she saw nothing but a mimicry of former arts without understanding their purpose. Craftsmen and artisans capable of bending reality over backwards and making spacetime their bitch had gathered in such numbers that they needed a warehouse to fit them all. Yet all they strove for was the attention of a man who used to clip newspaper articles.

Surveying the scene around her was reminding her of something, though she couldn't quite place what. She watched groups pull in wooden benches and set them in rows. They all lined up and were facing in one direction, toward a podium with a large platform behind it. It seemed strangely vacant. Behind the poor, empty platform was an even larger mosiac of a man and a woman reaching upwards while the hand of what was likely God reached down.

"Oh." Aldon looked at the benches, now recognizing them to be pews. "Oh." The beige walls and cascading light seemed to finally click into place. "Oh." She stared at the platform that had a distinct lack of statue on it. "Oh."

"So, you figure it out?" Felix asked.

They wanted her to sculpt a god.

"Oh. Fuck."

« **Covert Cursing** | **Hub** | **Exasperated Efforts** »

Exasperated Efforts

Jakeob Aldon glared at Felix Cori, and Felix smugged at her. Smugged is now a word, it is the past-tense of smug, which is also now a verb. It means "to be in a state of deserving a punch in your stupid, smug face." But Aldon did not give into the temptation, because she knew that Felix was her ticket to a new body.

"Yeah, I think I figured it out," she said without a hint of venom.

"Jeez, no need to be so hostile," he said for no real reason.

A growling sigh escaped Aldon and dragged itself out into a long groan. She massaged her temples and surveyed the massive disc awaiting its future payload. It was just a statue, she told herself. This didn't have to be a big deal. In, make thing, out. Boy, thing, girl. Easy peasy.

"Explain to me… *exactly* what it is you want me to do," she said to Felix.

"We need you to make a statue of a person, that's it," he assured. The smug levels decreased, and for a moment Aldon could see the impressionable idiot she had befriended years ago. "Nothing anart about it, the entire point is that everything in here is not anomalous."

Aldon looked at the windows.

"Okay, most of the things. Some of them." Felix pondered for a moment before shaking his head. "Anyway, we're not asking you to make an *actual* deity or anything. Just a dude, like… I dunno, eight feet tall?"

"And it's not magic," she said.

"Not magic."

She eyed him warily. "And it won't hurt anyone?"

He smiled and shook his head, unabashed by her gaze. "Nope!"

Aldon stole a glance at Cassandra Paulson, who was busy being a bitch to the other anartists in the "church." Aldon watched the other artists hauling and painting and sweating and panting, and she had to wonder what the hell the point of it all was. These things usually had a point, AWCY? rarely made things just to make them. Because just making things for the sake of making things is cool, and aussies are anything but cool.

"Fine." She whipped her gaze back to Felix. "Where's the clay?"

Felix's shoulders sagged with relief, but Aldon caught a twitch of The Critic's smirk. She watched a man and his ego do battle for a moment before she leaned forward and flicked his nose.

"Felix. Focus. Clay. Where?"

He clutched at his stinging face. "Right, right. Sorry. Come on, I'll show you. We've kept it stored in this side room over here."

He guided her through the rows of pews, offering hellos and dispensing orders to the anartists as he went. The more Aldon bored her gaze into his back the less he acted the mighty leader, and by the time he pushed open a heavy door at the edge of the room he was silent.

Before them sat a miniature mountain of gray-brown clay. Aldon scooped a handful of the stuff and played with it in her hands. It was difficult to pull apart and she could see in several places the mountain was beginning to harden and crack.

"There a problem?" Felix asked, now edging into nervousness. Aldon would have laughed at how easy it was to break The Critic's faux confidence, if she wasn't so frustrated.

"Yes. You idiots literally just left it stored out in the open. It can probably still be salvaged, but I'm gonna need a bucket of water."

"I'll get right on it," he said, preemptively breathless from all the running he was about to do.

Aldon watched him dash out of the room with a sadistically satisfied smile. She traipsed after him, and found herself taking way too much enjoyment from watching The Critic actually doing something himself. Soon he came lumbering back into the main room with a bucket in both hands, water occasionally sloshing out as he went. Sweat dripped from his brow by the time he arrived back at the clay mountain.

A ferret looked up at her from inside the bucket.

The surprise kind of ruined her whole venomous persona. "Why is there a ferret?"

"It came out of the faucet."

Aldon took the bucket from him and stared at the animal within. "The ferret… came out of the faucet?"

"Yes. I dunno if it's a ferret, exactly, but it… watch. Ooga booga!"

As he screamed and waved his arms around, the ferret twitched and melted into a thin brown sludge inside the bucket. After a few seconds passed it slowly gathered itself and protruded from the bucket again. It hissed at Felix.

"Okay," Aldon said. "That… happened. Uh. Thanks for the water, Felix."

"Mhmm." He backed away from the hissing creature. "Good luck on the statue."

She set the bucket down by the clay, then glanced over her shoulder at the retreating Felix. "Does it have to be a dude?"

"I guess not?" he said between pants. "It's just what I pictured, initially."

"Eh, alright, why not." She had gotten enough enjoyment out of his effort, might as well indulge him. "Do I have a deadline?"

Felix leaned against the door frame. "Soon?"

Aldon laughed. "I can work with that."

Progress was slow, and at first just a tad agonizing. She knew that she had to get this done, not just for herself, but for the people waiting for it. It was not a particularly large audience, but it was larger than what she'd get in her living room. Even if she didn't know most of them, even if she didn't like a few of them, they were *her* audience.

It helped that the audience happened to be a magic-wielding group of artists promising to give her a new body to play with.

So she threw together globs of half-dried clay and splashed some water on it before slamming down some more. Digging deeper into the mountain yielded softer clay, so she burned a good hour excavating for better material. Once that was finished she went about molding together the clay to form some semblance of a person, pinching and smoothing the clumps into a single whole.

It was ugly, but it was a start. From atop his mountainhome of Dryclay, Everett McWaterFerret watched Aldon slave away at making the sculpture look less like ass. Except for the ass, which was made significantly more ass-like. Clothes were not included, as gods did not cater to human concepts like clothing, warmth, or basic modesty. Not that this particular god had much to be modest about, since Aldon did not particularly savor the idea of sculpting a giant dong.

Seconds dripped into minutes which poured into hours which flooded Aldon's mind with a torrent of anxiety. Was this really it? One statue and then that was it? Quest completed? No regal knights or fair princesses, just an idiot Critic and his bitchy accomplice? Not a dragon in sight, just a big fire-breathing metaphor for self-loathing and cynicism.

It couldn't be this easy. They wouldn't like the statue. Yeah, that was it. With each accented muscle and every smoothed surface, Aldon came to the realization that she was absolutely awful at sculpting. When she stepped back she questioned the proportions, when she leaned in she hated the detailing.

Steam thoroughly vented, motivation completely drained, and confidence utterly dashed, Aldon sat atop the remains of the clay mountain. Hunger clawed at her stomach as doubt bit into her mind. The only thing to drag her from her melancholic haze was Everett gently nibbling on her finger. She looked down at the magical creature and groggily scratched behind his ear.

"You hungry too, eh?" Everett made whatever noise ferrets make. Or maybe the noise polecats make. Or some weird mix of the two.

Regardless of what the sound could be described as she took it as a "Yes," so Aldon collected him in her arms and marched over to the door. After jimmying it open with one hand she glanced around for someone to yell at, but found the place largely deserted. The walls had been completely painted, the mosaics had all been hung in place, and the pews were arranged as they should be.

"Uh… Hello?" she called into the empty pseudo-church. "Fuck, how long was I in there?"

From Nowhere stepped The Janitor, and with him The Critic. Felix called and waved and bounded over to her, a mix of excitement and worry in his voice and actions. He grinned and reached out to grab her shoulders but hesitated when Everett hissed at him.

"Allie! You still have that. Hmm. But holy shit, you've been in there for ages. You… you didn't finish, did you?"

"No, I still need to do the face. I just… dead in the water, y'know? Then I realized I was hungry, and figured I should probably fix that before I passed out or something."

"Before you go, I want to see what you have so far."

Aldon sighed and slowly trudged back toward the room with him. "It's really not that great. I dunno if I should keep working or just start over, but… it's kinda shit."

The Critic gave her the same knowing look he had already given her so many times earlier, but for some reason she didn't want to sock him for it. It actually made her feel a little better. He threw the door

open and peered inside the room for a moment.

He laughed. "Allie, do you not like it?"

She shrugged and felt her stomach clench from something other than hunger. "Not really."

"I like it, no major problems. If *anything*, I might complain it's too short."

"What?" Aldon transferred Everett onto her shoulder and slipped into the room to act as a comparison. "No, look, it's too big. It's like nine, almost ten feet tall."

"Well, I like it," he said with a tone of finality. "I even like how the face isn't really all that defined."

"It's more just because I didn't finish than some intentional… thing," she admitted.

"I think you should keep it like that. I think it's great as-is, honestly."

The pit in her stomach slowly ebbed away, making the emptiness within all the more apparent. A long gurgling sound leaked from somewhere in her abdomen and she chuckled nervously.

"Well, cool. I, uh. I guess I can go, then?"

Felix nodded. "I'll get back to you when I can about your new body. Shouldn't take too long. Janitor, mind giving her a ride?"

The being nodded and Aldon waved Felix off before stuffing Everett into her shirt. She closed her eyes and waited for the Way to open, and as she stepped forward she felt like she had really accomplished something.

Maybe it really would be this easy.

« **Divine Demands** | **Hub** | **Facetious Fanatics** »

Facetious Fanatics

Jakeob Aldon squinted as The Janitor's Way collapsed behind her, nonlight from the being's personal space bathing her workshop in its ethereal unglow. She shivered, her shirt soaked with Everett. She gathered the hem in her hands and squeezed, wringing the ferret out of her clothing. It gathered in a puddle at her feet before morphing into its animal form.

The Janitor's filter rattled for a moment as if drawing a breath to speak, and on the exhale the pressure it exuded on the room began to dissipate. She heard the door into the living room open and then shut, and the presence was gone completely. Now that the room was properly lit, her attention was drawn to the statue she had been working on over a week ago. It remained untouched after all that time, the clay and the magic within dried out.

It wasn't all that bad, really. The hands might have been a little small, and the jawline was just a tad over-defined. But all in all it was a decent sculpt. Aldon nodded to herself, mentally doing away with the baggage she had almost entirely forgotten about.

She took a breath to say something, realized there was nobody to talk to, and simply let it out. It was an okay statue. She gave the okay statue a hug, resting her cheek on the flaky dome. She let out a half-satisfied sigh and inhaled clay dust. Perhaps it wasn't an okay statue. Maybe it was a stupid statue. She strengthened her grip on the stupid statue and lifted it.

The suplex she had planned quickly failed as she recalled that not only were statues heavy, this specific one was weighed down by concrete. So rather than shatter her spine she swung her hips, tossing the dumb behemoth to the side. Clay flayed itself from the concrete base, and the right arm broke just above the elbow.

Aldon stared at the mess she had made, guilt tearing at her stomach. No, wait, that was hunger. Probably. She paused at the

door's threshold, wondering how long she had actually been gone. Probably a while. Everett nibbled at her ankle and she picked him up, then she opened the door.

The living/bed/dining room was, for once, actually clean. Why this caused Aldon to panic she wasn't entirely sure, but for a good three seconds she was too confused to register the two other people in the room. One of them one was Finnegan, obviously. He lived here, it made sense. The man he was talking to, however, made much less sense being within Aldon's home.

Daniel Navarro looked over at her and grinned his stupid, Foundation-employed grin.

"The fuck are you doing here?" Aldon blurted out.

"I live here," replied Finnegan.

"Not you, you dumb asshole. Him! He's Foundation!"

"Oh. Yeah, I know." Finnegan waved his hand at his roommate dismissively. Aldon stared at the metal gauntlet strapped to his wrist for a moment before glaring at Navarro some more.

Navarro gave a friendly little wave. The fucker. "It's good to see you too, Allie."

A comeback tried and failed to present itself. Aldon was finding it increasingly difficult to be angry with him, which only made her want to hate him more. The sentiment eventually collapsed in on itself, leaving only an empty sense of apathy that Aldon was all too familiar with.

"Yeah, hi," she sighed. "What's with the power glove?"

"What's with the polecat?"

"The *what*?"

Finnegan indicated Everett. "Your new friend."

Aldon's voice hitched up an octave. "The ferret?"

"I don't think that's a ferret."

"Whatever. It turns into water. Now what's with the glove?"

Finnegan stared at the creature for several seconds before shrugging. He held up his gloved hand, displaying his palm. He pulled at a cord sticking out of the back of the glove and spoke in a bad French accent.

"Slap my hand."

Aldon's hand rose slowly. Her eyes darted between the metal glove and Finnegan's face. A glance at Navarro only earned a stupid grin. She sighed and gave Finnegan a high-five.

Or tried to, at least. Her hand came several inches short, smacking directly into physical noise. Nerves in her hand flared with confusion as they were bombarded with notes from various instruments. Neurons bounced back and forth with the beat as it delivered the messages to her brain. Lyrics bounced on her tongue for a moment while her brain tried to adjust to the synesthesia. She drew her hand back to stare at her palm, her body still tingling with solid echoes.

"I think you just made me an audiophile. Do it again."

"I don't know if repeated exposure is all that safe," Finnegan said. He thrust his hand high into the air when Aldon tried slapping it regardless. "Allie, no. Bad Allie. Down, girl."

"Then at least tell me we have food," Aldon demanded, her arms entangled around his.

"There's some leftovers from Uncle Larry's in the fridge, if you want it."

Aldon extracted herself, clapping her hands quickly. She made a dash for the kitchen, and Everett sprang onto the counter.

"You guys have an Uncle Larry's near here?" Navarro asked.

Finnegan hesitantly lowered his hand. "Yeah, down on Sixth and… McClintock, I think. You know it?"

"Never been myself, but I heard it's good." Navarro withdrew a pen and notepad from one of his pockets and jotted down a note to himself. He flipped it shut as Aldon pried open the microwave. "So. Allie. How did it go?"

She set about nuking the food. "Pretty alright. Made a big statue for their dumb art cult."

Navarro paused mid-scratch of his stubbled chin. "Art cult?"

"Eh, they got a big church dealio going on," she said. She rested her elbow on the counter. "Nothing too fancy, some glowing glass and a bunch of pews."

"And you sculpted a big statue of… what, exactly?"

"Oh, dude, chill. I didn't make Cthulhu or some shit. Even if they lied and the clay was magic, the worst they're gonna have is a big faceless dude with shitty proportions."

Navarro nodded. He rubbed the back of his neck and nodded again. "Yeah, alright. Well, we have their location and they don't seem to be on the verge of anything too dangerous."

"Er, how-" The microwave started blaring before she could give voice to the question. She hit the stop button and popped open the door. "How do you know where they are?"

Navarro smiled a smile that was significantly less friendly and much more mischievous than his previous smiles. Aldon's left lower eyelid twitched, and she was fairly sure it wasn't from the heat of the plate. Navarro grinned.

"Goddamn wizards," Aldon muttered before slamming the microwave shut. "So, is that all? We good? Or do I need to infiltrate the CIA now?"

"I actually spoke with the FBI about you," he replied nonchalantly. He laughed at the look she gave him. "Don't worry, it's for your benefit."

It took a lot of concentration to not drop her plate. "Did- did you get

clearance or whatever? Do I get magic thing?"

He winced. "Unfortunately, no. While you aren't able to use any anomalies the Foundation currently has under lock and key, they're willing to look the other way if you do it yourself. So if you do find yourself to suddenly be in possession of two X chromosomes, the UIU has you covered. Turns out altering US government records is much easier when you actually work for the US government."

"Oh." She set the plate on the counter. Her mouth danced left and right before she looked back up at him. "That's a start, right? More than I had. I guess that was always going to be an issue, it was just one of the issues that'd only come *after* I actually changed."

"Yeah. You should be receiving contact info in the mail fairly soon. Other than that, all I can really say is stay out of trouble. Wouldn't want to have to come after you. Until then. Heheh."

"What? Just like that, you're leaving?"

He slid over to the door. "Yeah, figured I'd get out of your hair. I'm sure Finnegan's hospitality is running dry after all these hours. I'll be around, though. See you two later."

Finnegan nodded and Aldon just waved dumbly as the agent left. Aldon stared at the door, the floor, at Finnegan, and then at her food. Maybe that was all there was to it. Mission Accomplished. She took a fork from the drawer and stabbed a piece of chicken. It tasted like victory.

And it had a distinct aftertaste of her cellphone ringing.

She dug into her pocket and brought it out, squinting at the tiny screen. It was Felix. Resisting the urge to growl at the device, she flicked it open and put one end to her ear.

"Yo."

"Allie! I need you to get to the Library ASAP, we have an issue- okay, an emergency and- holy fuck! Allie, hurry."

"God fucking dammit."

Aldon closed the phone and took a deep breath. She let it out, nice and slow. It would have been easy to just ignore it. Physically, at least. Ignoring the call required no actual effort on her body's part. Ignoring the look Finnegan was currently giving her, however, was much more difficult.

Finnegan sauntered over and plucked some food from the plate. "Let me guess. They lied about it being magic clay?"

"I don't know what the fuck they did, but they fucked it up. Par for the fucking course. Ugh. I'm too hungry and too tired for this." Aldon fingered her temples. "Our Way is fast, right?"

"Relatively."

"And we should probably help, right?"

"As painful as I'm sure it will be, yes. Probably."

Aldon sighed. "Fine. Fuck it. Let's go."

Finnegan tilted his head. "Would you like to say fuck a few more times? Or have you gotten it out of your system?"

"Fuck you," she spat. A small pause before, "Okay, yeah, that was the end of it."

"Finish your food, I'll get the bottles of blood."

"Okay, *dad*."

She stabbed another piece of chicken and shuffled over to where Everett had taken perch. The polecat/ferret sniffed at her food and hissed. Aldon shrugged and tore into the food. Meanwhile, Finnegan grabbed a pair of small glass bottles from the bathroom, both full of blood. Aldon eyed her blood for a few seconds before continuing to eat. Finnegan then gathered up various CD cases and books, dumping them into an old black backpack of Aldon's.

"Think that stuff will help?" Aldon asked. Finnegan shrugged. "Well, best to be prepared I guess. What about the golems? I could probably bludgeon Felix with those. And we should probably get

something for a fight in general, I guess."

Finnegan chuckled and gathered up the little humanoids. Nine of them now. He lowered them into the backpack. After glancing around the apartment for anything else that might be of use, Finnegan slung the pack over one shoulder.

"We have surprisingly few weapons," he said.

"Yeah, cuz you know what artists are known for. Owning tons of combat-ready weapons."

"It was just an observation."

She cocked a grin. "A dumb one."

He cleared his throat. "…Yes."

"Were you hoping to buy some time for a comeback?" she asked, sliding over to him with the bottles in hand.

He tilted his head back and grimaced. "Maybe."

She offered him the bottle containing her blood, which he snatched without making eye contact. Still giggling, Aldon popped the glass stopper out and dabbed her friend's blood onto her fingertips sans the thumbs. She slid it back into place and set the container on the counter. Finnegan did the same with the bottle containing her blood. Then they stared at each other for a few seconds.

Finnegan glanced at her. "I hate you for this."

Aldon just smiled, partially for what was to come, and partially because Everett had just clambered into the half-open backpack.

They arranged themselves side by side with a few feet between them, both staring at the wall Finnegan's computer was situated against. Finnegan let out a sigh and Aldon bounced on her heels. He slid his arm through the second strap and pulled them both tight.

In unison, they lifted their arms and held them away from each other, parallel to the ground. Still as one, they side-stepped toward

one another, sweeping their arms until their fingertips almost touched. They flung their arms away from each other, still parallel to the ground, but this time kicked their opposite knees toward each other. They stamped their feet out and leaned into each other, slamming their knuckles together with their fingers outstretched.

The blood on the fingertips sparked and twisted itself into runes neither of them really understood. Each of the sixteen symbols stabbed into the space around them, latching on and ripping it apart. The duo pulled at the fabric of reality, spinning in place and dragging it with them. They lost sight of more and more of their room as they surrounded themselves in the fold until they slapped their hands together. They dropped the torn fabric of spacetime and found themselves inside their Way.

While the usual laws that govern the way of existence said that the amount of space around them should match the space they tore away from their apartment, that was not their Way. Their Way was largely undefined, with fragments of ideas and personality strewn about, but it was largely empty. They had yet to truly find it, in a way, and so it had yet to anchor itself in any real way. Statues and floating music notes. A food catering truck with a blurry sign reading "Red Bear Bob's Food Truck" was parked outside a counselor's office.

And behind them was the exit, a set of mismatched double doors. One was a French door made from oak, a stylized A painted on the wooden panel below the windows. The other a flush door constructed from cedar, a simple F emblazoned in a position identical to the other door's A. The frame holding them was almost half a foot thick and carved from stained redwood.

"Ouch, that stung," Aldon said, waving the offending hand. "Why do you still have that glove on?"

"I forgot due to my disbelief of that ridiculous Way opening ceremony," Finnegan said, starting the march for his door.

"Shut up, you love it. It's fun!" Aldon trailed him, taking in the sights of their Way.

"It's embarrassing."

"Yes, I'm sure the ferret is making tons of fun of you in there."

Everett poked his head out of the backpack, as if he could tell he was the center of their conversation. "It's a polecat."

"What the hell is a polecat?"

"Forget it."

"Is it like towercat, but smaller?"

Finnegan laughed despite himself. He grasped the knob to his door and Aldon did the same to his left. Together they twisted their wrists, the latch of each door disengaging from the other one's frame. They pushed them open and stepped out into one of the many lobbies of the Wanderer's Library, shutting the doors behind them. After a moment the doors wavered, then outright dissipated.

They had only the briefest of moments before Felix Cori stormed up to them. He was a flurry of panic and another weather metaphor of desperation. He paused for breath and then went right into it.

"Aldon we need to get back to the warehouse ASAP, the statue we used got enchanted and it went ape shit."

"Why."

The flatness in her voice caught him off guard. "Why what?"

"Well." Aldon did her best to compose herself. "Why did you try enchanting the statue when you explicitly stated you were keeping the magic to a minimum? And. Why could that possibly be a problem? You said the clay wasn't magic, so unless you did something *really* stupid — not outside of the realm of possibility, obviously — then you shouldn't be in that much trouble. Why is it just you here, when there were dozens of anartists?"

Felix didn't say anything.

Aldon smiled. "So. Felix. No, sorry. *Critic.* Why."

She leaned in close and hissed through grinding teeth, "Why are you such a stupid fuckup?"

Felix continued saying nothing.

Bordering on hyperventilating, Aldon grabbed Felix by the shirt. "Just take us to the Way so we can fix your stupid problem."

It took a jog across the lobby, up and down and up and down and down several sets of stairs into another lobby, but it didn't take long. Felix frantically lifted the garage door embedded in the lobby wall, ducking under it when he had a little clearance. Aldon and Finnegan followed suit and the door fell down behind them.

"Is this seriously a one direction Way?" Aldon asked.

Felix still said nothing. The three of them dashed out into the main room of the warehouse, and were greeted by a strange sight. On the left was a series of sigils, runes, and symbols arranged in various patterns surrounding one spot. From that spot, splotches of clay led through the pews, which had been pushed together into rows much closer to the main platform than before. It was almost a full house, most of the anartists tied to their seats so they wouldn't miss a moment. The platform itself had since been converted into a stage, where the remaining anartists were performing a play. Which was quite an infamous play in certain circles.

And center stage was Cassandra Paulson, in the role of Alinda. In her hand was a bloodied dagger, and at her feet was a corpse with its throat slashed. She stood beside an animate clay being, molded to look as if it was wrapped in fabric from head to toe, with the toes also shoved into high-heels from the look of it.

"With this, our blood, it is the… The Sculptor's," she choked out.

And then the cast hung.

"Wow." Aldon said. "Wow. Holy shit, you guys fucked up."

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Gray God

Jakeob Aldon watched the makeshift cast of The Hanged King's Tragedy sway back and forth. Almost a dozen anartists hung from nooses that extended all the way up to the warehouse's rafters. The initial shock was still there, albeit grounded by the realization that the being was not *the* Hanged King. It was just some clay poser. A poser that was capable of forcing so many people, who had likely built up resistances to various forms of magic, to hang themselves. Without all the prep the King seemed to require. Aldon swallowed heavily, as Hollywood had taught her.

"Well, this is happening," she muttered.

Felix hissed a string of unhelpful curses as his arms seemed to be collapsing in on his chest. Finnegan examined the scene quietly before nodding to himself.

"Any suggestions, Critic?"

Felix ceased his fidgeting. He thought for a moment, then asked, "Kill it?"

"Oh yes, let me just pull out my big god-killing gun."

"You have one of those?"

"NO!"

"Oh. Because that would have been extremely helpful, given our current situation."

Aldon decided, for her sanity's sake, to drop the conversation. Which was good, because it looked like her little outburst had garnered the being's attention. It cocked its head before snapping back much farther than a human neck would allow. It strode over to them, by now leaving clay chips and dust behind rather than half-wet

clay footprints. When it was within stomping distance of them, it stopped. The ring on the center of its chest shifted into a mouth, which the being promptly used.

"Welcome back, Clipper! I see you've brought some friends." It stooped over to look at Aldon and Finnegan with its nonexistent eyes. "Care to take part in the encore performance? Although. The Critic hasn't shown up yet, so I guess the first might have just been rehearsal."

"Not much of an actress," Aldon replied after glancing at Felix. "Mind if I just watch?"

The actress comment seemed to give the being pause. Lips within the ring smacked together, only to come apart as eyelids. With its new eye the sculpture examined Aldon closely, namely centering on her face and chest, before it rolled back and the mouth reformed.

"Course not. Could always use a bigger audience. Let me gather the cast, should only take a few minutes."

Aldon nodded and politely waved as the thing departed, her mind kicking into overdrive. She watched it extract almost twenty anartists from their seats before lumbering over to the stage, where the curtain drew itself. All the while she wondered how she was supposed to kill the bloody thing.

Her gaze whipped to Felix. "Why does that thing think you're still The Clipper?"

"That clay we had you use? We got it from The Old Sculptor's workshop. Apparently it was clay he had imprinted his mind on. When he was trying to murder The Old Critic."

"Fan-fucking-tastic. So why is he murdering these guys?"

"When he first started talking, Sandra recognized his voice. She pulled a gun and started shooting, but… I mean, he's all magicked up. So he put on a play so The Critic will come to… well, criticize it."

"Okay, okay, okay," Aldon said. Her eyes darted back and forth as she searched the warehouse for anything that could be of use.

There really wasn't much of anything, except maybe dropping one of the magic 'windows' on him. Hopefully the magic within the things would hurt him, even if the physical impact didn't. She'd have to fight fire with fire, magic to destroy magic. She looked to Finnegan to think about what they had brought.

"Well, that's a frightening look," Finnegan said.

Vaguely aware of a powerful tugging sensation at the corner of her mouth, Aldon looked her roommate dead in the eye. It made him lean back slightly.

"I have an Idea," she said.

"Oh. It's *that* look."

Grabbing him by the elbow, Aldon spun Finnegan in place and began rooting around in the backpack. Everett slinked out of the pack and onto Finnegan's shoulder, allowing Aldon easy access to the various elemental golems within. She scooped them up and grinned at the little creatures clinging to her arms. There were now somehow ten despite the fact Finnegan had most definitely placed nine in the pack back at the apartment.

"Seriously, where do you guys keep coming from?" she asked, more herself than them. Glancing into the backpack, she noticed there were significantly less CDs than Finnegan had actually put in there. "I don't even know what element some of you are."

The new golem waved its arms and tapped itself on the head, and then tapped Carbon on the head. Boron nodded and scratched at Zinc, filing the number 30 into its dome. The others followed suit until they were all labeled. Hydrogen, Boron, Carbon, Oxygen, Aluminum, Iron, Nickel, Copper, Zinc, and Gold looked up at her as Felix and Finnegan hurried off to untie the anartists.

"Oh. Huh. Thanks, Hydrogen. Nice thinking." She glanced between the others as they freed more and more anartists. Her gaze hovered on the stage before she looked down to the golems again. "So, uh, I need you guys to make yourselves into a weapon. I guess a sword will work."

Hydrogen, being the smart little fellow that it was, began pointing at the others and making elaborate gestures with its arms. The group leaped to the concrete below and began striking at it, chipping themselves and the ground in the process. Hydrogen and Oxygen were completely amputated by their comrades, releasing small blasts of energy in the process as their limbs instantly warped back into gasses. They were then gradually fed the chunks of loose concrete. As they ate, their limbs grew back, and the two golems spat out small globs of compounds. The globs were passed around between the golems until they were honed into chunks of dull grey metal. The golems were stripping the concrete down into calcium, which was then molded to give birth to a skeletal golem named Calcium. Its skull was adorned with a 20 and it did a little dance to celebrate its birth.

Aldon watched with her jaw wide open. She had noticed that Boron, the lowest numbered element prior to Hydrogen, had been a bit sharper than the rest. Or less dense, rather. But this was just shy of ridiculous. Meanwhile, several rows of anartists were free, and more were only being released faster. The curtain had still yet to move.

Zinc and Iron went about smashing themselves into Carbon, who was squeezing at its own torso as if it was in an invisible straitjacket. With each collision, Carbon seemed to be getting skinnier and skinnier, until eventually it ejected a diamond the size of Aldon's thumb onto the ground. Awe struck Aldon as somewhere in her mind, she was reminded that diamond was only an allotrope of carbon. Then Carbon ate some of the aggregate compound left over from the concrete, fattened up, and they repeated the process. Aldon laughed like a madwoman when she saw Gold shaping the diamonds into bullets.

Boron, Nickel, and Oxygen now were conjoining their bodies into a flintlock pistol. Even their little faces remained on the grip and the end of the barrel. Meanwhile, Oxygen was half-embedded in Boron and looked to be chewing on air, its arms now positioned where the hammer of the pistol would be. No doubt it was the firing mechanism. Aldon picked up the golem gun and fed Boron diamond bullet after diamond bullet so that Nickel could spit them out later. She readied the gun, finger on the trigger, and Boron's little trigger-

limb held her finger in its tiny hand.

"Oh *fuck*, this is awesome," she choked out, hard of breath from laughing. It was heavy, though she wasn't sure how it compared to an actual gun. But she could lift it with one hand, and with two she could keep her aim relatively steady when she wasn't busy giggling.

Finnegan hurried over, also short of breath, but from running. "Okay, everyone's free. Are you done thinking or- where… where the hell did you get a gun?"

Aldon giggled some more and gestured to the bullet factory at her feet. Finnegan stared at them blankly before looking back up to Aldon.

"Okay, I was not expecting them to be able to do that."

"Surprise!" Aldon exclaimed, brandishing the pistol.

"Well, Felix has the aussies working on something to strip the statue-" His sentence was cut short when he whipped his head around to the opening curtain. "Fuck."

For a few awkward moments, the unlucky anartists up on stage began the play. Their movements were jerky and their eyes wandered, but they filled their assigned roles. The anartists among the pews collectively held their breath while they waited for the demigod they had created to notice they were no longer paying all that much attention to its work.

Aldon hastily scooped up some more bullets and loaded as many as she could. Nine shots total. A short distance away, Finnegan was fiddling with his backpack. He withdrew one of the few surviving CDs and placed it within the gauntlet. He cranked the volume dial to the max setting before nodding to himself. The anartists hastened their ritual as best they could. Or some of them did, several fled the moment the curtain began to open. Felix, to his credit, was not among them. Because he was too busy hiding under one of the pews.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. What the hell is this?" The Old Sculptor

stomped out from behind the stage. "Who said you could stop being hostages?"

Twenty seven hands flew up, twenty seven fingers pointed at Aldon and Finnegan. Twenty seven ungrateful assholes. The Old Sculptor marched to Aldon for the second time, this time leaning over slightly to loom over her. A line tore across his clay face until it split into a toothy grin. The maw stretched open, revealing an abyss within the sculpture. Paint splashed and paper shuffled and clay thumped and power screamed within the yawning chasm. Then the little mouth on his chest, which was about even with Aldon's eye level, opened.

"Hello," he said with soft venom.

"Goodbye," she said hastily. Aldon jammed the barrel of the golem gun into the open mouth and yanked on the trigger. Boron felt the tug and kicked at Oxygen, severing a tapered point from the body. It immediately expanded into its gaseous form, blasting the diamond bullet forward and out of Nickel's mouth. Oxygen started eating the air around it to reform the tapered limb for the next shot.

The entire exchange would have been entirely silent if The Old Sculptor hadn't started screaming about his new gunshot wound. For a little less than a second Aldon pulled at the trigger futilely because of how long it took Oxygen to reform the firing mechanism. By then The Old Sculptor had bit through the barrel, likely murdering poor Nickel in the process. But shortened barrel or no, the gun still fired, shattering ceramic teeth and embedding itself somewhere within clay. Which only caused The Old Sculptor to scream even more.

Still writhing in what semblance of pain his clay body allowed, The Old Sculptor tried snapping at Aldon with his gnashing maw. Before ceramic teeth could clamp down around her neck, Finnegan pushed Aldon out of the way. Using the momentum of rushing forward, Finnegan threw a punch with his music-encrusted fist. The hardened clay was able to absorb most of the blow, and combined with the sheer amount of it, the punch did little.

"What the fuck?" The Old Sculptor demanded with both mouths.

"The fuck do you mean, 'what the fuck?'" Aldon asked. She felt the pistol shift in her hand, but she ignored it for the moment. "What the fuck is wrong with *you*?"

The massive head-mouth closed, its front/lower lip jutting out. "Nothing. Shut up."

Aldon glared at him for a moment before raising the pistol with both hands, which had since expanded its barrel considerably. Oxygen's severed limb was considerably bigger to compensate for the larger bullet, and as such the recoil nearly ripped the golems from her hands. It did, however, manage to put a hole in The Old Sculptor's face despite his hardened exterior. So he responded in kind by morphing most of his upper body into a revolver, the barrel extending to just shy of Aldon's face.

From his precarious perch on Finnegan's shoulder, Everett tackled the barrel. He exploded into droplets of water, soaking into the clay. Finnegan followed up by swinging his fist around in an arc, crushing the barrel. The Old Sculptor misfired, a mouth just above the grip yelling the word "fuck" repeatedly. Perhaps more than necessary, even.

"Owe ya," Aldon said before unloading a second slug into the screaming statue.

"Okay, fuck this," The Old Sculptor growled. He ripped the twisted barrel off of himself, tossing it to the ground where it writhed slowly. A new head, more closely his original human self, extended from the shoulders. He turned to face the stage, where the hypnotized anartists were still performing a play. "Hey, shitbirds! Stop dicking around and help me."

Aldon unloaded the final shot into the back of his head as the performers hopped off the stage. He didn't scream, and Aldon smiled nervously. Had that done it? Were headshots really all the rage? Then a face emerged from the back of The Old Sculptor's head and he just glared at her, the bullet wound forming the right eye.

"I'm going to kill you now," he said.

Aldon held her arms out, the weight in her right hand shifting. She glanced down at the other golems, who were forming a tower on each others' shoulders. She leaned slightly toward them extending the already morphing pistol to them. "Come try it, bud."

The face protruding from the back of his head extended, bringing an entire body along with it. Once detached from the main statue, the clay clone launched itself at Aldon. Although she was somewhat taken aback by the new tactic, she had been a bit prepared. She brought her right arm up at an angle, lashing out with a crude blade fashioned from most of the golems. It honed itself as it slashed through the fresh clay clone, deftly slicing it in half. It splattered to the floor on either side of Aldon.

"Nice timing," she said to the tip of the blade, where Hydrogen's face was. It smiled in return.

A strong stench tore her from her thoughts. On either side of her the two halves of the body were morphing into a more detailed corpse, gore steaming as it slid onto the floor. Aldon surveyed her murder for a moment before looking back to The Old Sculptor. He was spewing out more clones, which were taking their time to fully form. Some were more impatient, and glomped onto nearby anartists and formed a shell around them with nothing but their faces showing. They then stalked the unwilling anartists toward Aldon.

"Let's see you deal with this," The Old Sculptor said. "And none of you kill them! I want that pleasure myself."

Aldon beheaded the first clay clone that came at her. It was pretty easy to differentiate between the full clones and the anartist puppets, and they didn't seem to exhibit any particular strength. The Old Sculptor didn't even seem to be able to form them well enough for them to fully morph into flesh and blood humans. They were very good simulacrums, but they maintained the same gray-brown color throughout their bodies. And they were only becoming worse as The Old Sculptor tried pumping them out faster.

"Shitty clones or no, they're going to overwhelm us soon," Finnegan said before jabbing at an oncoming clone. The music around Finnegan's fist splattered clay everywhere. "And it looks like them

being clay is actually working in their favor against the others."

Indeed, while Aldon and Finnegan had art on their side, the other anartists only had what few tools they had managed to find lying around. The clay clones they struck absorbed the attacks without flinching and encased them. Luckily, at least from certain perspectives, the hypnotized performers were easily brought down.

"So we have to deal with *him*," Aldon concluded. "Right, right. Okay."

The Old Sculptor took a few moments to laugh mockingly with his massive mouth, and the chasm within caught Aldon's attention. A few seconds of mental connections led her to pick up Aluminum from the ground and decapitate it with the sword made from its siblings. She then jammed the back of its head into Finnegan's gauntlet.

"Can you explain-" Finnegan yelled when the gauntlet came to life, moving his fingers farther back than they probably should. "Ah! Calm down little guy. What are you doing?"

"I'm going to need that in a minute!" she yelled as she sprinted for The Old Sculptor, completely ignoring the question. She slashed through two clones and dodged a puppet, then The Sculptor stood face to face with her predecessor. He looked down at her for a moment before leaning forward, roaring near-deafening music in her face.

And she dove inside the chasm within the statue.

She fell for several seconds before colliding with a tower of papers. As much of it as there was, she might as well have been striking stone. It knocked the wind out of her and nearly knocked the golem blade out of her hand. She resumed falling until she landed in a pile of shifting clay. After fighting her way out of it, now somehow floating through the ethereal nothingness, she tore bits of the clay away as music assaulted her eardrums. That seemed to be all it was, a congregation of art mediums in a black expanse of nothingness.

"Okay, so… Let's see if this works," she mumbled to herself as she

kneaded the clay.

She rolled it into a cord and pulled at the ends, forming a three-prong plug on one end and a something resembling the Space Needle on the other. She stumbled through the blackness toward what she decided was a wall, her new little creation shifting out of its clay form. The cord itself became an elastic polymer, both ends taking on a chrome shine. When she decided she was far enough from the writhing art supplies behind her, she haphazardly stabbed the air. The tip of the blade disappeared from her view.

"Well, shit," she said, almost laughing. "That actually worked."

She put all her weight onto the sword, slowly slicing through whatever veil separated the art abyss from the outside world. Somewhere near the tip the blackness switched the gray-brown, and beyond that she could see the warehouse. She pushed her way out, exiting The Old Sculptor from the back of his right shoulder. She rammed the blade into the bullet wound in the back of his head to get some leverage and hauled herself out into reality, the blade slipping out. She landed in an unceremonious heap on the ground.

"What the actual fuck was that?" The Old Sculptor yelled, wrapping his arms around himself to push the split clay together. "How did you do that? *Why* did you do that?"

Aldon just chuckled and shrugged as she stood. The Old Sculptor swung one of his massive arms, colliding with her back and sending her sprawling again. A pair of almost fully developed clay clones pinned her down. She tried struggling, but a pain in her chest kept her from putting much effort into it. That last blow must have cracked a rib or something.

"Well, who cares? Gotcha now, you little shit."

Aldon ground her chin against the concrete to look for Finnegan. He was attempting to fend off puppets, but was unable to put up much of a fight for fear of hurting the anartists within. Soon he too was overwhelmed and pinned to the ground. The aussies were similarly subdued, in one way or another.

"Now," The Old Sculptor said loudly. "What to do with you two? Should have some fun, I think."

"I think you forgot something," Aldon choked out.

He sneered. "What, The Clipper?"

"…Yes."

A pair of anartist puppets hauled Felix out from behind a pew. The Old Sculptor turned to face him, which was exactly what Aldon was hoping for. Now if only he would say something to further the distraction. Felix stared at Aldon while the puppets dragged him over, at least until something caught his eye. He only glanced at it, but after a moment he turned his attention to The Old Sculptor.

"I've still got one more trick up my sleeve," Felix proclaimed.

"Oh yeah? What's that?"

"Something actually really obvious, you're just too much of a goddamn idiot to notice."

The Old Sculptor laughed. "Oh, do tell."

One of the clay clones holding down Aldon found himself suddenly lacking a head as the golem sword bent and swung on its own. His associate likewise found himself permanently disabled thanks to an oversized Aluminum hand crushing his face in. Said hand skittered over to Aldon's right hand, and she jammed it inside after setting down the blade. Aluminum clamped down on her, fitting her hand snugly, and together they picked up most of its siblings.

She stood without making any noise, twirling the pronged cord in her free hand. A glance at Finnegan told her he wasn't sure what she had planned. Time to give him a show, she figured. She waited for Aluminum to merge with the sword, leaving her unable to release it. Then she slid the three-pronged side into his mouth and eyes, which were situated on the back of her hand. She stuck her tongue out at Finnegan as she continued to spin the mini Space Needle around. She then locked her wrist, flipped it, and jammed the very sharp needle directly into her chest.

The reaction was near immediate. Finnegan screamed at her in confusion, Felix yelled in alarm at Finnegan's screaming, and The Old Sculptor was left looking between them until his fragmented mind thought to look to Aldon. By then a blue light was shining from what little was visible of Aluminum's orifices, and the translucent section of the CD player within the gauntlet was ejecting the same shade of blue. One by one, up the length of the sword from the handle to the tip, the golems winced and then began to scream with their eyes wide open. Blue light surrounded the sword in tiny beams.

Aldon grasped the cord of the music gauntlet. She pictured herself as the hero of a horror flick, ready with her trusty chainsaw. But when she yanked on it, rather than the growl of a motor she heard nothing. However, both the sword and the gauntlet were now encased in a shimmer, which refracted the blue light and sent it spinning in all directions. After a moment to giggle over the success of her little experiment, Aldon slapped the flat of the blade into her open palm.

Or tried to, at least. Just like before, the blade stopped short by several inches. Except instead of just feeling a song from a CD, Aldon felt what the CD player was plugged into. Which just so happened to be her soul. It burned like nothing else she had ever felt, seeping so deep into her bones she wondered if her marrow would boil. Rather than instruments, or even a choir, she felt only a single voice. A very angry woman screaming louder than a jet engine.

"Yeah, that seems about right."

With what technically counted up to ten separate anomalies and a soul smashing against each other, Reality decided to take a brief paid vacation in Aldon's immediate vicinity. Light bent in strange ways, carrying a wordless roar into the eyes of all who beheld it. The air shook as the golems screamed twofold, deafening all those who heard it to everything but the sound of Aldon's soul.

Which, because of the small radius of alteration, was only Aldon. Senses overloaded with her deepest sense of being, Aldon began to laugh. It started as a broken chuckle under the weight of two cracked ribs, but developed into a cackle when she felt nothing but a

burning sensation as her nerves ebbed and flowed with tangible rage. The laughter extended into a yell until Aldon was little more than frustration made flesh and bone.

And clay. There was something distinctly clay now sticking into her abdomen. Her vision cleared and she saw The Old Sculptor, his arm extended and refined to a point, which he happened to have placed in Aldon's stomach. Blood dripped from the wound. It looked like his mouth moved to say something, but if he did Aldon didn't hear it over the throbbing in her ears. She took a moment to consider all this, and then decided that it was bullshit. She was supposed to be killing him.

So she swung her soul, channeled around the sword, and struck The Old Sculptor's arm. As the blade neared it, the clay became more chipped and began to warp, before shattering entirely when the blade made contact. Without Reality around, there was nobody to tell Aldon that The Old Sculptor had stabbed her. And so he hadn't. The wound in her abdomen was gone, and as far as Reality was concerned it never existed in the first place. Aldon slashed in the opposite direction, splashing almost half of the statue into paste.

The legs of The Old Sculptor stumbled back, and a large rock with ornate designs on it rose from his waist. It was still coated in wet clay, and more was pouring off of it. Aldon tried attacking it but the statue hopped away, kicking at her when she tried approaching. Which she found profoundly difficult due to her rib injuries, but she pressed on.

Abandoning his oversized form, The Old Sculptor shaped himself in his normal human form. Aldon slashed at his neck, hoping to separate the stone now embedded in his head. She succeeded, but his decapitated body reached out and snatched the rock from the disconnected head. He jammed it inside his chest, and she swung at it wildly. She missed, but flayed enough of the front of him to expose it.

"Give it up!" The Old Sculptor yelled. "Magic sword or no, I'm a fucking god!"

"While I still highly doubt that," Aldon replied. She had meant to yell

back, but her lungs had apparently decided they had had enough yelling for a few weeks. "I'm going to have to point out…"

She palmed the bottom of the hilt with her off hand and stabbed. He tried blocking it, throwing up both arms, but the blade went right through both limbs and slammed into his chest. While the stone wasn't immediately torn apart like the clay, it had very clearly been pierced. A single crack stretched from the slit to one of the runes, which lost its glow.

"Deicide is a word for a reason," she finished, taking a step and burying the blade up to her fist. She twisted her wrist as he began to scream, and then she slashed horizontally, blowing up the stone and obliterating most of the statue. When it didn't begin to reform Aldon let out a single "Ha!" and then fell on her back. Which hurt. She probably should have thought that through a bit more.

There was a long pause. Nobody said anything. The clay clones continued to suppress Finnegan, Felix, and several other anartists. The puppets kept their captives, though they remained still.

Then one of the anartists asked, "Now what?"

"Well," said another. "They don't seem to intend to kill us. They're just gonna hold us here, like he said."

"Forever?"

"I guess."

"But we'll die if they do that."

"But does that count as killing us?"

"Wouldn't it?"

"Um."

"Allie!" Felix called. "Idea! Tell them to let us go."

Aldon coughed as she ripped out the Soul Needle, the bent light around her disappearing. "Oh. Yeah. Do that."

And so they did. Without fully realizing what they were doing, the very basic minds of the clones and puppets forced them to release their captives. After all, they were created with the express purpose of serving The Sculptor. Aldon devoted what little brain power she had left and decided to have the clay constructs destroy themselves. And so they did. Some simply stopped moving, while others slowly turned to a clay slurry. The anartists gathered themselves around their savior.

"We should get her to a hospital," said one.

"And tell them what?" said another.

"Here," Finnegan said, pulling out his phone. He went to Contacts, which contained all of four names. "I know who to call."

"Ghostbusters?" Aldon squeaked. Reality was back on the clock, and it turned out having broken ribs and stabbing yourself in the soul was a bit exhausting. Especially when dumped on you all at once.

"…Yes, Allie, Ghostbusters."

"Cool." And then she passed out.

Aldon woke up in what she assumed to be a hospital. Her wrists stopped halfway to her face when she tried rubbing her eyes. She looked down at herself to find herself shackled to the hospital bed she was lying in. To her left was a curtain a set of monitors displaying her vitals. They all seemed to be beeping pretty well. On her right was Finnegan, sleeping in a padded chair. And also shackled to said chair.

"Finn. Finnegan. Wake up."

He stirred, catching his hat as it attempted to fall. "Oh. Hey. Feeling alright?"

"Finnegan, you did not call Ghostbusters."

"No, I did not."

"Finnegan, you called the Anartistbusters."

"That's a bit of a mouthful."

"We're cuffed inside a hospital!"

Finnegan nodded. "It's not that big of a deal. Flight risk or whatever. Navarro's got it handled, says we should be fine after some questioning."

"That guy?" Aldon mulled it over. "Y'know what, fuck it. I can't even pretend to hate him right now. So what did I miss?"

"You have two cracked ribs. I'm okay. Most of the aussies are in prison wards rather than medical ones." Finnegan shrugged. "Apparently The Critic got away."

"How the hell?"

"Dunno."

"Well, fuck. And I wasn't able to nab any of that morphing clay. Peachy."

"I think we should look at it in the light of us not being dead or incarcerated."

Aldon jiggled the cuff on her right wrist.

"Right. Well, it could be worse."

"I guess."

Finnegan grabbed her by the hand, since only one of his was cuffed. "Are you okay?"

Aldon sighed. She watched his thumb move circles around the skin between her thumb and pointer finger. "No. I guess? Whatever."

"Allie."

"Like, all that shit for nothing. I dunno, I just…" She trailed off, and he didn't pursue the issue. "I wish I could just be done with it."

"Well, you made some progress. Maybe not on an immediate level, but you've laid the groundwork now. And as far as I can tell the Foundation isn't going to dog you over it."

Aldon nodded. She decided to take what she could get. But her mind wandered to the events of the warehouse, and it made her queasy. Adrenaline was a hell of a thing, and Aldon was nothing if not good at distracting herself with activity. But now, just sitting in a hospital bed, her mind stagnated into pools of blood.

Daniel Navarro stuck his head inside the door, grinned his stupid grin, and then slid inside the room. His gaze bounced between the two of them despite the fact he never moved his head. Eventually his eyes landed on the duo's hands, and then he snapped his fingers.

"Let me get those handcuffs off you guys," he said. He produced a key and freed the two of them. They rubbed their hands and stared at him. Although the wording tried to edge into friendly, his posture and tone felt abnormally pressing. "So. Now that the gang's all here. What happened?"

When Aldon remained silent, Finnegan picked up the question. "Apparently the harmless statue they had her make was built using clay that contained some of the mind of The Old Sculptor. Then they magicked it up."

"Wow." Navarro looked to Aldon. "And then?"

"I killed it," she said simply.

Navarro nodded slowly. A sudden bulge in his cheek indicated he was thinking. When he reached whatever conclusion that he did, he nudged Finnegan and gestured to the door. Finnegan looked to Aldon, who shrugged and motioned for him to go. The two stepped outside, leaving Aldon to her thoughts.

Within four seconds Aldon was gripping the plastic railing along her bed frame and trying to tear it off. A coiling snake of frustration and anger and depression shifted within her. It reminded her of that moving emptiness when she felt sick to her stomach, only it was

within her head and unfurling into her chest.

Grinding her teeth didn't help. Shaking whatever she could get a hold of did nothing. So she just sat and seethed, waiting for someone to come to her so she could do something other than be by herself. After what felt like half her lifetime, Finnegan stepped back into the room. He informed her she was free to go. That her clothes were in the drawer next to her bed, and her possessions had already been moved to her apartment. Navarro had probably delivered Everett and the golems himself.

The duo departed after Aldon got dressed. They walked in silence. When the front doors of the hospital slid open, they took a moment before actually leaving the building. They both took a short but deep breath, and in tandem stepped outside. A harsh winter gust blew through them, but the sun basked them in a pleasant glow.

"You going to be okay?" Finnegan asked, trying not to shiver.

Aldon hadn't really noticed the cold yet, and just stared at the parking lot. "Eventually."

Finnegan took a step closer. "Can I do anything?"

A crooked smile worked its way up her left cheek. "You know, now that you mention it. I'm hungry. Buy a girl a meal?"

Finnegan grimaced. "I'm a bit strapped for cash."

Aldon bounced with the next few steps, jostling the growing serpent within her. "Pizzeria?"

Finnegan just sighed and began to walk.

« **Facetious Fanatics** | **Hub** | **Hugo Hijinks** »

Hugo Hijinks

Aldon sat on her tiny couch, quietly watching their tiny television. Or rather, she would've been watching the television, had their cable not gotten shut off earlier in the day. In the interim, she had been filling her time with stacking the golems on top of each other, making paper cranes fight each other to the death, and staring at the less-than-useful T.V.

She reflected on the struggle of being an art student on the west coast without a job. Art supplies were plentiful enough with their community, so there was never a lack of that. Never a lack of time, either. Tough to put food on the table with paints, though, especially if nobody was buying.

She glared across the room at the golems. *These little fuckers aren't pulling their weight, either.* In her mind's eye, she saw the golems putting on tiny suits in the morning and heading to the office, and returning with fat stacks of cash. She sighed. Her attention was pulled away from her periodic pals and to the door, which swung open as Finnegan pushed his way in past a pile of her canvases.

"Hey Al. You've got some mail." he said, pulling an envelope out of the pile. He tossed it in her direction. "Let me know if it's a check, because we need to take care of the water bill here before too long." He glanced down at the blank television screen. "And probably the cable bill, too."

She nodded, leaving her dreams of daytime soap operas behind her. "Did you cash the one from the exhibit I did on the 16th?"

Finn shook his head. "No, it didn't come in yet. Neither did the one from that piece for Morganson."

Aldon pulled at her face. "Holy shit what is the point of doing commissions without the money part."

They both sat quietly for a moment as they looked through the mail, Finn occasionally mumbling some displeasure about being poor. Aldon broke the tension by tearing into the articles addressed to her.

"Let's see here… ad, ad, coupon (*ooh and for that new hat store **awesome***), ad, bill, ad, bill, court summons (probably not important), and… oh, hey. Look at this."

Finn raised an eyebrow and scooted over towards her. The envelope in question reeked of butter and grease and was stained accordingly. It was addressed, oddly, to 'those goddamn liberal California art-types'. Finnegan cocked his head.

"How in the hell did we get this?"

Aldon placed a single finger over his open mouth. "Shhhhhhhhhhh," she said, "let's see what it says."

She flicked through the adhesive and opened the flap, pulling out a piece of lined paper. It too bore the same grease stains and shaking it revealed it was encrusted with what looked like salt, but Aldon was undeterred. She flipped the paper open and began to read.

"Dear goddamn liberal California art-types (*this is starting well*), I'm writing to you because people at my drive-in like that Hugo Weaving in movies (*can't fault them there, I suppose*), but I need him in more movies so I can sell more tickets and people won't get bored. I figured if somebody had the time to do something like this, it'd be you jobless, good-for-nothing art students who are riding the ass of decent people by pretending to have some kind of worth. I-"

"Hold on," Finn raised a hand, shaking his head and laughing. "Why are we not shredding this thing right now?"

Aldon carried on. "I know the only way to motivate you is with money, so I'll pay you $1000 if you can do it by the end of the month, $2000 if you can finish it this week. Don't call me, just show up if you want to do the work. Won't be surprised if you don't, though."

She stopped, and looked up at Finn, who was standing with his

mouth slack-jawed. He blinked twice, and ran off to the tiny closer where he kept his things. Aldon snorted, and called after him. "Where are you going?"

His voice was followed by the clatter of falling shoes. "To get my stuff, come on! We're going to Indiana!"

They arrived within the hour, after a quick trip through a meandering Way that may very well have been a cornfield in some other world. Aldon paused to pick a stalk out of her hair, before glancing up and down the dirt road they stood beside.

"Is this it?" she raised an eyebrow, sniffing.

Finnegan pulled a map out of his bag, eyes squinting against the sun. "We're close, I think. Kind of hard to tell, looks like there aren't a lot of Ways out here." He looked up. "Just down this road, maybe. Let's get going."

They strolled down the gravel road, Aldon kicking dirt about and scuffing her shoes in an attempt to make the most of their already worn soles. A quarter mile passed, and then a half mile, and with every step Finnegan's brow furrowed further into his eyes. When they rounded another bend and there was no movie theatre in sight, he stopped in his tracks.

"Alright, what gives," he said, gazing around mystified. "Are we in the right town, or what?"

Aldon shrugged, and then squealed. Finn spun on his heel to face a man that had not been there a few moments before. He was not particularly tall, but was particularly rotund, and smelled like cigarettes and old butter. His white polo was stained with a variety of unspeakable liquids, and his baggy jeans sagged below the line of common decency. He gave them a once over with his beady eyes, and then snorted.

"You two them Californee art-types?" he said, sneering. Finn nodded slowly, and Aldon continued to stare, shell-shocked. The man snorted again, and spat. "Got here faster than I 'spected.

Guess that's cause you ain't got nothin better to do." He turned around and started walking into the woods. "Get on, now. Don't need to waste time."

The two of them met eyes briefly, and then scuttled along behind the mysterious stranger as he traipsed through the woodland. Heavier clothing would've helped avoid the nettles and spines of the less inviting plantlife, but they hadn't planned for hiking. After another quarter mile and about a pint of blood loss, they emerged in a clearing before a fenced in field housing a building and a screen, both standard drive-in fare. Aldon gulped, and Finnegan knew why.

The building might've been a building at one point, but it looked now more like a delicately assembled arrangement of mold and mildew, with the roofing having long since caved in at the back and the mortal crumbling to dust whenever a strong enough breeze kicked through. The fencing itself was little more than rust, and the screen had easily seen better days. As they approached the shack, Finnegan noted a dirty, though recent model, red Camaro sitting a ways away from the clearing. He leaned in towards Aldon and snickered. "Found what he spends his money on."

Her face twisted into a half pout. "Sure as hell isn't this drive-in."

They entered the tiny building after the man, who stopped long enough to spit again before turning to face them. He gestured to his left and right. "This here's the projector. I just got it fixed so don't fuck with it or I'll make sure to charge you for it. Over here's the movies. We got a bunch, but only got a few of them Hugo Weaving movies. All you gotta do is get him in a bunch more movies, and you get paid." He sneered again. "Easy enough for you?"

Aldon's eyes opened wide, followed quickly by her mouth, but Finnegan averted danger by stepping in and smiling politely. "Absolutely, sir. We'll take care of it."

The man took a few more moments to eye them slowly, and then moved towards the door. "Don't break anything," he said as he exited. The door smacked him in the ass on the way out, and Finn thought to make a joke, but thought better of it. He turned to Aldon, who was poking through the movie collection.

"What do you think?" he said, coming up behind her. She paused briefly, and then pulled a film from the shelf. Her eyes labored on the cover as she peered meticulously over it, and then raised an eyebrow.

"Lot of porn over here," she said, her words slow and calculated. "Isn't this a family theatre?"

Finnegan snatched it out of her hands and tossed it into the corner. "That isn't important, or anything I wanted to know anything about. We've just got to make sure that we get this guy into a bunch of films, enough to *get paid*," he laid the emphasis on heavy, "and then we can get out of here. You dig?"

Aldon recoiled. "We need to get *that* guy into movies? Jesus, I don't know if he'll fit, I-"

Finn shot her a look, and she stopped. He rolled his eyes, and they both walked over to the projector. He threw his bag on the table and sat down on an old stool resting near it.

"Alright," he said. "Let's get to work."

"Fucking- no, holy shit how have you not seen any of his movies," Finnegan said, hands hanging in the air. The clay statue that Aldon had produced stood before him, but he was not particularly moved.

"What are you talking about?" Aldon said, pointing dramatically at the finished piece. "This is perfect! That jaw, the eyeline. This is exactly what you asked for, that guy from the Matrix."

Finn facepalmed hard enough to leave a mark. "No, Al. That's Keanu Reeves."

Aldon cocked her head. "Who?"

"You ever see Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure?"

She nodded. "Duh. It's a classic."

Finn rolled his eyes. "That's Ted."

Aldon squinted and turned back towards the statue. As it was, the statue was the spitting image of Keanu Reeves, in the buff. The statue turned its head slowly and raised an eyebrow at her, which caused her to nod. "Yeah, I can see that. This is the Matrix guy though, right?"

"Well yeah, he was in the Matrix, but no, this isn't the right guy. You want the other guy, the one with the suit."

"Laurence Fishburne?"

Finnegan nearly did a backflip. "How the fuck do you know who Laurence Fishburne is, but not who Hugo Weaving is?!"

Aldon shrugged. "I like CSI."

Finnegan shook his head. "This isn't going to work. We've been doing this for five hours, and we're not even done with one movie yet." He rubbed his temples, contemplating the choices that brought him to this point in his life. "Alright, how about this. Why don't we just go talk to Mr. Weaving and see if he wants to help. If anything, it'll give you a chance to see what he actually looks like."

Aldon perked up. "Oooooh, meeting a movie guy. That sounds fun." She paused, considering. "What if he says no?"

Finn shrugged. "Then we cast everybody as Keanu Reeves and hope nobody notices."

She paused again, and then nodded. "Alright, cool. Road trip it is."

Some time later, two gangly looking twenty-somethings stepped out of a Way and into the personal residence of one Hugo Wallace Weaving, much to the surprise of Mr. Weaving and the aforementioned twenty-somethings. There was a brief exchange of heated words, after which both parties found common ground to hold a discussion about their intent.

"So what you're telling me," Hugo said, choosing his words carefully, "is that you want to somehow cast me in every movie ever made, to appease a drive-in movie owner from Indiana, so you can afford to

pay your bills?"

Finn nodded while Aldon thoughtfully stroked her chin. "Yeah, that's the gist of it," Finn said. "What do you think?"

Hugo considered, and then squinted at them. "You know, I'm having a hard time believing you're not batshit."

Aldon rolled her eyes. "Hang on," she said, reaching into her bag. She fumbled through it for a moment, and the pulled out a tiny metal bobblehead. At least, that's what it looked like, before it started walking around and poking the furniture.

Hugo watched it ponderously. "Alright, an animatronic. I get it, but you said you were artists, not enginee—"

"Just watch it," Aldon said, shooting him a look.

The golem peered up at her and, with a nod, melted into a pool of liquid copper before reforming as a tiny man in a black suit. He wobbled around, shooting a tiny gun and chanting *"Mr. Anderson, Mr. Anderson, Mr. Anderson,"* before collapsing into a pool again and reforming in its previous bobbleheaded shape, making a noise that was unmistakable as tiny, metallic laughter.

Hugo nodded slowly. "I see." He looked down at the golem, now chewing on its own foot. "Can it do other movies?"

The golem popped back up, spun quickly, and was then sporting flowing locks and a bathrobe over a white t-shirt with black sunglasses. It looked up at Hugo and, with as much gusto as it could manage, said, "Shut the fuck up, Donnie."

He smiled. "If I do this, can I keep this one?"

Aldon reached into her bag again, and pulled out another golem. This one was slightly gaseous and buzzed with bright purple light. "You'll need two. They get lonely if they don't have somebody their size to torment."

He nodded. "Alright, then. I'm in."

Aldon and Finn smiled, and she shot a wink at the tiny dancing golems on the floor. *Little fuckers are pulling their weight, after all.*

The scene was set, in some Way or another, and Hugo stood in his wizard robe on one side of a dark room. He glanced over at Aldon and Finn, both sitting atop tall director's chairs. "When's my cue for this one?" he shouted.

Finn pointed at the door. "He's going to come in through there, then just read your line and run over towards him."

Hugo gave the thumbs up, and got focused. Aldon brought a clapper down, and a scrawny boy with messy black hair entered the room. Hugo charged across the room, cloak flapping behind him, with passion in his voice.

"Harry!" he shouted. "Didjapudyernameindagobbledefire?!"

"This is really cold," Hugo said, his breath catching. "Is this worth it? For a bit part?"

Aldon pointed off set. "No no, you're a really big deal in this one. All you've gotta do is hit that boat when it comes floating your way. Then you can just kind of float off over that way."

Hugo shrugged and resumed his doggy paddle. As the *Titanic* came into view, he kept paddling, straight through the steel hull and then off stage right.

Hugo sipped a cup of coffee and turned towards Finnegan. "So we could just keep doing this forever, and nothing weird would happen to us?"

Finn nodded. "Yeah, something about being outside of time and space, I honestly just kind of go with it." He looked over towards the treeline, where Aldon was chasing a Velociraptor with a broom. "Hey!" he shouted, "easy with that. We're going to need it later."

They were all quiet as they observed the flock in front of them, taking in the majesty of nature firsthand. The beautiful moment lasted as long as the silence, when Hugo broke it with a question.

"You want me to do *what* to that penguin?"

The two of them stood in front of the disheveled theatre owner, quietly sweating his reaction. A crowd had gathered to see Hugo Weaving as The Kraken in Pirates of the Caribbean 2, and business seemed to be moving. The owner, as usual, was unmoved, but hadn't insulted them personally yet. *Progress*, Finnegan thought. It wasn't until the movie ended and the crowd began to disperse that the man made a noise, when he spat on the ground in front of them.

"Huh," he said, shrugging. "So *that's* Hugo Weaving. I thought they was talking about that guy from Bill and Ted."

"Right?" Aldon shouted.

Finnegan put his flat hand through his face.

« **Gray God** | **Hub** | **Involuntary Isolation** »

Involuntary Isolation

A long yawn rumbled out of Finnegan. He couldn't quite call what he had just been through sleeping, and so the weariness from recent work weighed him down. He groaned and sat up, shifting his hat from his face to on top of his head. Joints popped as he tossed his head side to side, another yawn escaping him. After rubbing the sleep from his eyes he found himself sitting on a couch rather than on his mattress. In Indiana, not California.

At the foot of the couch was Jakeob Aldon, sleeping on a pile of blankets. She was curled into a loose ball, an even looser smile on her face. Nestled against her chest was Everett, the magic polecat she had apparently adopted after she poured it out of a faucet.

Finnegan took care to step well beyond her frame and eased himself off the couch and onto the carpet. The room itself was fairly cozy, if mismatched. The couch didn't match the armchair, which didn't match the coffee table they had moved to make room for Aldon. Assorted miniatures and collectibles adorned various shelves and countertop backsplashes. Nothing but things found on discount or scavenged during moves. It reminded him of home, which only made him want to leave.

He made his way over to the dining room, which was basically just the part of the living room that had a table and some chairs. To his right was the kitchen, which was separated from the rest of the room by a counter. It was little more than a nook with the bare essentials of a kitchen. He flipped open the various cabinets until he found some cereal, and then set about finding a pair of bowls and spoons. At least the milk was easy to find.

After pouring everything and returning the milk to its home, he dunked the spoon into the bowl and sat down. He took a bite and blankly stared at the box. The ugly, offensively bright box. It looked like something produced in the fifties, if not earlier. Standard's Super Coco Pows. His eyes were drawn to text in the top right, within the

tree, and within the box boasting of a prize inside. His subconscious mind paused the connections that the text was trying to force him to make, and he chuckled when he consciously realized it.

Super Coco Pows.

The crafty bastards.

When he finished the cereal he tilted his head back and drained the bowl. He slid out of the chair and rinsed the bowl and spoon, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. By the time he loaded them into the dishwasher, Aldon was up and groaning.

"Morning," he said.

"Mmng." Aldon never was much of a morning person. Bones popped as she stretched, and then she bent over and scooped up Everett. She pressed the creature to her face, splashing herself with water. She shook her hands and Everett reformed at her feet, where he pawed at her ankles playfully.

Clean-faced and clear-eyed, Aldon spotted the cereal box and grimaced at its design. Then her brow furrowed and she stumbled forward. She brought the box within an inch of her face and then dropped it. After a mutter of thanks she dropped into the chair and poured some into the bowl Finnegan had left out for her. When she realized she needed milk she set her forehead on the table and mumbled to herself.

"I'll get it," he said.

Her head snapped back up. "What- no, I can-"

"Getting it," he sang as he opened the fridge. He retrieved the carton and even attempted to pour it for her, but she smacked his hands in a flurry of limbs and snatched it away from him. She poured the milk herself and screwed on the cap, but didn't fight when he took it back.

She took a few bites and set the spoon back into the bowl. "It upsets me how good this is."

Finnegan chuckled. "Think it's anomalous?"

"Eh, doubt it. Magic food is hard. Sugarcomb is the only-" The spoon paused just short of her mouth. "Wait, are you being a smartass?"

"Maybe."

"Oh, fuck off," she said with a smile.

Finnegan took up a seat across from her, his vision roaming around the room. Eventually his gaze settled on her, and soon after his vision blurred as he really looked at nothing. He pondered all they had done recently, images and sounds floating around. Fond memories, by and large. Considered what they would do in the near future, all of which was about as clear as the the unfocused haze of his eyes registering. He didn't see much point in thinking about it. Then Aldon stood and his eyes snapped back to attention. He thought about what they were currently doing. Not always exciting, but never really boring. A happy medium. Contentment.

"So I'm thinking about going back east," Aldon said. "To visit my folks while I have some extra cash."

Surprise pushed Finnegan's eyebrows up. In the two years he had known her, Aldon had only mentioned her parents once. To say she wasn't living with them anymore. Presently, she was staring at his face with a bit more scrutiny than was typical of her. No doubt trying to gauge his reaction. He gave her little to work with.

"How long?" The question was easy enough. So of course Aldon just shrugged. Now that the questioning light was on her, however, she refused to meet his gaze. The back of Finnegan's chair hit the wall behind him as he leaned back. "Do you want to talk about it, or is this one of those things where I just nod and let you do your thing?"

"I had sorta thought about it before we left," she said. She crossed her arms on the table and set her chin on her forearm. Her gaze remained focused on the floral print of the tablecloth. "And being at the drive-in just made me really… nostalgic, I guess."

Finnegan glanced at the ceiling absentmindedly. "Going alone?"

Her head tilted, her cheek resting on her arm. She was finally looking at him. "Yeah. That okay?"

He shrugged. "I'll try not to be offended."

A soundless laugh escaped her. She pushed herself back up and after a moment she stood. Finnegan followed suit, and they collected their things from around the room. Their host had already left for work long before either of them had awoken, so Finnegan took it upon himself to write a note.

Again, thank you for everything. We really appreciate it. Cereal box is from a Foundation front, by the way. You did know that, right? -A&F

Aldon caught sight of it and punched him. "What did I tell you?"

Finnegan just grinned and rubbed his stinging arm.

"Gimme that pen."

Thanks. Bye. -A&F

"Pertinent," he said, reading it as she jotted it down.

"As it should be," she said, tugging on her backpack. "Now. Let's dance."

"Ugh."

Standing beside each other, the duo glanced at one another. In tandem, they threw their arms up in opposite directions. After a flurry of arms and knees and burning cheeks on Finnegan's end, they ripped through spacetime and stepped into their Way.

Adjacent to the counseling center, with the food truck parked right in between them, was the Moonlight Theater. It was fresh in their minds, and bold in detail within their Way. Bits and pieces flickered as their mental pictures of it did battle, but as a whole it seemed much more real than the rest of the Way's contents. After a brief stride they were at their doors, and then they were in the Library. The walk to the door containing a Way to her hometown was made

in silence.

"Guess this it," Aldon remarked when she reached the archway.

"Yup. You gonna be alright by yourself?"

Aldon rolled her eyes and began to turn. "Later, dude."

"Aw, come on." Finnegan held his arms out. "Humor me?"

She stepped into him almost immediately. It was hard not to chuckle. The embrace was short, but tight. When she released him she stepped back, sighing.

"It'll be fine," he assured.

"Yeah." She half-snorted. "Yeah! I'll see you later, Finn."

"Bye."

The walk back to their local Way was uneventful. Taking the trip from the library to their apartment was easy, quiet. He found the golems playing hide and seek, but their tiny bodies and lack of voices made it a hushed game. The enchantment around their room that prevented sound from entering or exiting, sans for noise made by the door, isolated him from the hustle and bustle of the street below.

To fill the silence, Finnegan activated his personal computer. The desktop quickly powered to life and he checked the various tabs he kept open. Once caught up on local events and goings-on, he opened up one of the various sound files he had been working on. He gave it a quick listen and then opened an editor to play around with it. After about twenty minutes he had to close the program, distracted by the growing bouncing sensation in his stomach. He attempted a different file, another project. It refused to garner his attention.

He closed everything and sat still for a moment. It felt like he had a stone sitting in his stomach. His gaze turned to the empty beds against the wall. At the door across the room, which was empty sans for clay.

For once in a very long time, Finnegan was alone. He had been by himself, surely, but it had always been a voluntary isolation. Aldon had always been right there, often trying to pull his attention away from his work when he was focused and ready to play when he grew restless. Even when she was at work, she often answered texts, and her guaranteed return had been something to anticipate. And now she was on the opposite side of the country, gone for an unknown amount of time.

Finnegan sighed, loud and long, into his beret.

"Oh gods, I'm bored."

« **Hugo Hijinks** | **Hub** | **Jam Jars** »

Jam Jars

The Utterly Bazaar was a roaring sea of merchants hawking, buyers haggling, and everyone in between fighting to make their voice heard over the rolling din of noise. Wooden stalls stood in the street to oppose the massive brick and mortar stores that flanked either side of the winding bazaar. The variance of the species within the throng was only outmatched by that of the goods around them, something the locals — if you could call a merchant who spent the night within his shop a local — were quite proud of.

Paddling through the peddlers was Finnegan, blissfully ignorant of the screaming around him thanks to a pair of faintly enchanted headphones. Instead he cycled through a playlist of an **`artist`** he had recently discovered, humming along as he went. It did quite a lot to quell the smashing in his chest from the pressure of the crowd, both physical and otherwise. But the small bundle of spending money he had recently earned weighed heavy in his pocket, and without Aldon to present a project he was left to his own capitalistic devices.

Finnegan squeezed himself between a pair of bickering Clowns, his backpack momentarily catching on the latch of cage carried by the merrier of the two. He quickly excused himself and slid further into the crowd, not noticing he had inadvertently freed the contained Fun-Lover. Because he was essentially deafened, Finnegan didn't hear the loud popping noise accompanied by an ecstatic "Wowwee!" So instead he entered Ed & Al's Alchemist Emporium, unaware of the chaos he had just unleashed.

After purchasing a pinch of magnesium and two vials of O-negative he slipped back out before the brothers running the store could try talking him into more. To escape the crowd he turned off into a side street nestled between the alchemists' supply store and an interdimensional pet shop, and save for the merchants distributed through the alley he was almost alone. The shops forced into the

alley ways often were little more than a carpet with all the merchant's otherworldly possessions laid out before them, forcing Finnegan to hesitantly tiptoe across the minefield of tiny skulls and jugs of potions.

It was not until he was half-past the one actual stall in the alley that something caught his attention. Or more accurately, his arm. Finnegan looked down at the cloth wrapped around his sleeve, following it to the mass of cotton and wool covering the merchant in question. Finnegan squinted into the gap where the merchant's head should have been. Instead he just saw the inside of the woolen hood.

The headphones on his head were displaced by a limb he couldn't actually see, and a whispering voice spoke to him in urgent tones. "How would you like to make some easy money?"

Finnegan considered his options. He could accept a job proffered to him in a back alley by a bundle of rags. Or he could eat ketchup packets when he got home. Tilting his head back and forth, he examined the stall. Every single item on it had the word **"ghost"** in its name. In some cases that was simply its entire name.

Finnegan took a short breath. "What would I have to do?"

A watch emerged from the cloth. Or something akin to a watch. Instead of an analogue or digital clock face it had a small meter with a black needle. Said needle was warbling very far into the red territory.

"Don't mind that, just picking up interference from my… uh, wares. I need you to take that and this filter here to this address, and collect all the ectoplasm you can. Really easy job. I'd go, but I have, uh… allergies."

Finnegan examined the large air filter. A sticker on its side claimed it to be doubly effective against both allergens and the various forms of ectoplasm. He took another look at the twitching ectoplasm detector and then looked back at the merchant.

"Yeah, I could do that."

Hinges squealed and light pushed its way through the must of the cellar. Finnegan squinted into the darkness through the visor of an old respirator. At first all he could see was dust flutter through the weak beams of illumination, giving the long-abandoned place a constant flurry of filth. He made sure his cuffs of his jacket sleeves and pants cuffs were taped down, that his gloves were tight, and that his hood formed a seal with the mask. After making sure his signature beret was firmly in place he scooped up the modified air filter at his feet with both hands and crept into the crypt. The needle of the device on his wrist slowly crept to the right.

The cellar was a mess of shelves and crates. Rusted metal and cracked porcelain jutted from wood and plastic, tempting him with the possibility of finding something worth salvaging. But he moved on, to the staircase leading into the house of the Birch family. Stairs creaked and the railing groaned, but Finnegan pressed on.

Only a glance was spared toward the detector, where it petered an eighth away from the left end; the place only had trace amounts of ectoplasmic vapor in the air. Something between caution and paranoia kept the mask on. Getting possessed was not exactly on today's itinerary.

The Birch home proper was not quite as bad off as its cellar. Its surfaces only wore a thin layer of dust rather than an inch-thick coat, upon which Finnegan deposited the large white device he had been carrying. The glass container snuggled into the filter slowly filled with a glowing green fluid.

The house was small, arguably tiny. Two bedrooms and one bathroom, and joint kitchen/dining room. A quick look into the cabinets earned nothing but cobwebs. The drawers were similarly empty. The fridge contained nothing but an array of jam jars. Pomegranate, if their labels were to be believed. Most of them looked coagulated enough to qualify as a solid. Turning the handles on the sink resulted in glowing jelly ejecting itself from the faucet.

He lifted the latch on the glass cylinder attached to the filter, and went about ferrying the goo from the sink and into the glass. The ghostly moan that accompanied each deposit did little for his mood.

It all struck him as doubly odd. Nobody had died within the Birch home within the last twenty years, and yet the place was chock-full of ghostly energy. Despite this, nothing was actually happening, outside of the usual ectoplasmic buildup. He supposed it was because he hadn't breathed enough of the air to allow a possession, and there wasn't much of anything left in the house suitable for a poltergeist. But there had to be something going on here he hadn't spotted yet. Once the sink was clean he turned the filter's power dial to max and went about exploring the house.

He found a bathroom and gave the sink an experimental use. More goo globbed out and slowly slid down the drain. Finnegan sighed. The entire plumbing system was likely backed up with ghost goo. He gave the toilet seat a lift to inspect the interior and promptly let it fall.

There had been a face in the toilet.

Muffled yelling came from beneath the porcelain, which Finnegan immediately took to ignoring. Fingers wiggled nervously while he considered what to do. Ghosts — or whatever these things qualified as — or not, a scientific approach was probably his best bet.

He walked back out to the kitchen and peered into the vial of ectoplasm the filter had collected. A tiny face looked back up at him from the liquid's surface. It gave him a high-pitched "oooooooo" for his effort.

Finnegan gathered a fair amount of saliva in his mouth and spit onto the floor. A face arose from the wet spot on the tiles. When it tried yelling at him he stepped on it. When he lifted his foot the face was still there, only now its tinny wail was chorused by a face on the underside of Finnegan's shoe.

Curiosity pushed him over to the fridge, and he slowly opened the freezer. Frozen faces stared back at him, warped into tiny stalactites. He breathed on them heatedly, earning a chilly wail in return. The moan petered out with his breath. He shrugged and yanked out what icicles he could, tossing them into the cylinder.

After wiping up the spit he went about exploring the house in full. A whole lot of nothing turned up until he entered the master bedroom.

Sitting on the floor next to the indent marks the bed had made in the carpet was a white panama hat. It didn't look anything special, other than the fact that it was in good condition.

But something about the hat gave him a weird feeling he couldn't quite place. Blurry memories of the **`anart mecha`** competition in Japan surfaced, and an indistinct image of the Wanderer's Library sat just outside his mind's eye.

He twirled the hat idly while his brain tried to unravel why it was thinking what it was being made to think. It didn't work particularly well. The more he pushed at the mental blockage the stronger it seemed to become, compacting in his mindscape. He found himself unable to draw his attention away from it. As the mass grew more dense, it began drawing in surrounding thoughts and memories.

Finnegan felt his mind slowly collapse in on itself as his brain tried very hard not to do the same.

Enough neurons were out of its event horizon for him to drop the hat, and the captured memories went supernova. His mind exploded in a blur of all the colors, sounds, and scents he could remember ever experiencing.

And then he passed out.

Luckily he didn't land on the panama hat on the floor.

« **Involuntary Isolation** | **Hub** | **Killing Knowledge** »

Killing Knowledge

Reality coughed chalantly as a Way warbled into existence within the roots of the oak tree outside the Birch home. Finnegan lurched off the tree and kicked the air filter and adjoined vial of ectoplasm into the hole, watching it stretch beyond infinity before disappearing completely with a faint pop. He grabbed the panama hat from off a low-hanging branch, taking care not to look at it or think about it for too long.

After a sigh he took a step over the void and he dropped down the rabbit hole.

Finnegan stepped, or rather slid, into one of the upper foyers of one of the many branches of the Wanderer's Library. The ectoplasm sloshed as he collided with the filter, threatening to tip over. A quick look around told him his entrance only served as a sort of catwalk between the two nearest "floors" of the Library.

After reorienting himself he stood and stumbled and slouched against the railing, looking down into the other lobbies from his pseudo-balcony. A group of authoritative individuals, whom through a fair amount of squinting and guesswork suggested to be from FBI's Unusual Incidents Unit, were communicating with another group of Serpent's Hand members.

The Hand was, so far as Finnegan understood them, a group of unlikeminded individuals gathering together under a name that sounded like a cult from an '80s film. They had no cohesive creed, had no way to filter out undesirables as joining amounted to claiming to be a member, and had no leadership beyond the self-imposed bosses of the various cliques.

This particular clique seemed to be missing said boss, as none of them in particular were communicating with the UIU head. One did step forward long enough to take a box from the hands of one of the UIU members. It looked like the groups continued speaking after

that, but from this distance Finnegan couldn't hear anything and he quickly lost interest. He had more pressing matters at hand anyway.

Like the human-shaped headache on the balcony opposite of him. Finnegan couldn't quite make out what they looked like, but they made his head throb. Snapshots of the Library, taken from various places, slid before his vision before being clawed away. His vision swam as he looked away, but the reach of the hole in his head extended as he began to associate the problem with the Library.

It took only a few moments this time, and Finnegan released the hat. A single row of books exploded into a massive bookshelf, which unfurled itself into an entire wing. Finnegan squeezed at his temples and leaned against the railing.

By the time he was fully cognizant he could see a group of authoritative figures down below, marching single file through a portal. He could barely make out the UIU logo on one of their shoulders before the last of them departed.

It was then he realized he had no idea where he was. He gripped the railing and leaned forward, craning his neck to take in floor after floor of bookshelves. They bent in on themselves and doubled back, like the cortex of some giant being. The immensity of it almost overwhelmed him, and he swung back away from the railing.

Finnegan bumped into someone in his backpeddling, but they caught his arm and steadied him. He offered a rushed apology and looked-

A black hole bore straight into his mind from the hands of an indistinct figure in a **`tweed wool newsboy cap`**. Eyes caught in the event horizon, Finnegan could only stare. The pit in his mind expanded, having grown large enough to continue growing without Finnegan actually holding the hat. Images of the Birch home fell away, quickly followed by more books of the Library. A gap opened within his minds' eye of The Utterly Bazaar, and shops and shoppers fell into the yawning chasm. He tried pushing his way through the crowd but the crack in the concrete eventually caught him, and he fell into nothing.

* * *

Nobody was on the balcony several minutes later. Two Nobodies, actually.

The newer of the two palmed the panama hat on his head and lifted it so he could properly see. A young Asian woman with a newsboy cap stared back at him with no small amount of trepidation.

Blinking, he tried to assess his situation. He couldn't remember anything, at least not specific to himself. Simple factoids and language skills remained, but the whens and hows of him learning them were gone.

Focusing, he found a slag of emotions, thoughts, and memories coagulated into a solid lump in the center of his mindscape. Something called a Finnegan pulsed from within. Pushing into his former sense of being, Nobody found Finnegan in a memory. He sat at home, alone, working on some audio project or another. He was content.

Nobody stood up slowly. His female counterpart cocked her head and they stared at each other for several seconds. Something in the air sparked between them as two similar forces butted heads. The longer they retained eye contact the stronger the friction became, and spacetime was not handling reality trying to ignore itself very well.

But then she looked up and the sparks dissipated, air collapsing back into the void while simultaneously popping back out into existence. A pair of wet pops went off and the area was no worse for wear, save for an unmemorable singed smell. She nodded at the space to his left and she walked off.

"Thanks?" he ventured over his shoulder.

She paused. Opened her mouth as if to say something, shook her head, but then hesitated again when she moved to leave.

"Wait, wait." Nobody hauled himself up with the aid of the railing. "Where do I go from here?"

"The Head Librarian might know something, but nobody just walks in and starts getting answers."

Turning on his heel, Nobody scooped up the nearby air filter and headed for the Head Librarian's office with a confident stride.

"Twizzler?"

Nobody eyed the bowl of candy suspiciously, then eyed the world serpent in the pit before him. He weighed his options before lowering the filter of ectoplasm- he still wasn't sure why he had brought it with him. It had just felt important, somehow. He nodded at the Head Librarian appreciatively and took a candy.

"You have come to question the nature of your existence."

"Something like that," Nobody said with the Twizzler hanging from his mouth. "I can feel who I used to be, poke and prod at memories, but it feels… distant."

"I cannot tell you who you will be, but I can speak of who you were," Satan replied. "Our multiverse- because yes, there are plenty of multiverses within the omniverse that do not include us- is constructed from thirteen intertwined baseline realities with a vast nothingness in the center."

Nobody eyed the bowl of Twizzlers.

"Within these baselines are thousands upon thousands of individual universes, with massive similarities between some universes from different baselines. Each universe of a baseline has one specific thing in common that roots it to the baseline. Of these billions of universes, your former self is within 74 of them."

Nobody almost choked. "That's it?"

"I suppose it might be 73, now. Within every other iteration of reality that he happens to be born in, he subsequently leaves it roughly twenty-five years later. Can you guess why?"

"I be- I mean *he*, Finnegan, becomes Nobody."

Nobody wasn't certain whether snakes could smile or not, but he was willing to bet that's what Satan did in response. Or smirked, at the very least. It was unsettling, whatever was happening.

"Or Reality tries to make him one, at least."

Something stirred in Nobody's mind. Said something, or someone, was shaped suspiciously like a Finnegan. "What do you mean tries?"

"It doesn't always… take, so to speak."

Faint quasi-memories of his mind exploding filled his mind. The thought of being ushered into the nothing between worlds filled the resulting void. It did not sound fun.

"How would I make sure I stay in place?" Nobody asked.

Something sparked behind the pince-nez spectacles. "Nobody really knows for certain."

With a grin and a twirl, Nobody departed with the filter in tow.

« **Jam Jars** | **Hub** | **Library Lifeline** »

Library Lifeline

It turned out that finding a book containing the location of a single cave against the backdrop of the entirety of the multiverse was not an easy task. Rows upon shelves upon sections upon floors upon wings of books loomed around Nobody as he searched for a book in a bookstack.

Wandering through the sections, air filter still in hand for some reason, was a painfully nostalgic experience for Nobody. Painful in the sense that the nostalgia-induced memories were not strictly his.

Finnegan sat at one of the many tables within his branch of the Wanderer's Library. Flanking either side were rows upon rows of empty tables further flanked by equally empty chairs. His only company was ***Joaquín Pablo Izquierdo de San Felipe*** *in the form of his autobiography titled* Heisenberg Shit*, his only conversation a one-sided debate by Grant Kirkhope. He was in his own little bubble, where he was… well, perhaps not quite fully happy, but certainly content.*

Said bubble was popped by a blonde individual moving into the one seat, among thousands, that was directly opposite of him. Well, one to the right of directly opposite of him. Regardless it made his stomach coil.

Finnegan examined them from over the rim of his reading material. He couldn't quite pin whether they were male or female. They had the sort of childish face that stood straight in the center of the scale and grinned. Their hair was cut at about chin length, but that didn't mean much nowadays. They weren't paying any attention, as they were already engrossed in their own book.

Finnegan returned to his reading and that was that. Several hours later he closed the book and departed for his apartment without either of them speaking a word.

Nobody whacked himself in the temple and the memory jarred out of place. Through the haze of recollection he had apparently found his way to a small section detailing various paranormal phenomena within Armenia. He grabbed several volumes detailing geographical oddities and piled them onto the filter, stumbling over to a table and setting it all down.

After several trips he shoved the books off the filter and moved it to the floor. He situated himself in one of the chairs, using the filter as a footrest. Choosing a book at random, he cracked it open to the index and felt something explode in his head. His vision stretched and tore, a fuzzy scene visible through corrupted film of his surroundings. The last shred of his surroundings snapped with an inaudible-

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The following night he returned to his usual reading place to find that the blonde had amassed a small tower of books on the table. They were nose-deep in a thick book titled The Hypostasis of the Archons, or a History of **Sarkicism** as related by Sage Sabaos the Blind. *As much as he preferred to read alone, he wasn't about to give up his spot. The blonde offered Finnegan a small glance when he sat down, their eyes ringed black from lack of sleep. They blinked dumbly and then went back to reading.*

Several hours passed, Finnegan poring over a single volume while his pseudo-companion skimmed through several. Eventually their stack was exhausted and they looked to Finnegan, taking in what he was reading. They said something, but Finnegan only saw the raised eyebrow and the moving lips.

He paused his music. "Sorry, what?"

"Are you an anartist?" They pointed to his book.

Finnegan considered lying. It would have been fairly easy, anartists across the ages had uncovered many unique ways to go about doing things and if all else failed he could simply claim to be a history buff. But the earnest tone and the hopeful look on their face made it difficult to deny them this small respite.

"I am. Mostly sound stuff," he said, marking his place. Then out of automatic courtesy rather than curiosity he asked, "What about you?"

"Sculpting, but I use a bunch of stuff. Clay, metal, bone. Did glass once."

The mention of glass sparked his curiosity. "You know how to blow glass?"

"Nah, it was a bunch of individual glass pieces I got from a friend. I just put it all together. Was a miniature glass house, heheh."

The spark fizzled slightly, but he pressed on. "Ah. I worked with glass once. It was a modified glassblowing technique that basically let you blow it out of sound."

"How'd that work out?"

"Poorly."

They barked out a laugh, and he chuckled. They picked up one of their books back up and cracked it back open, and after a moment Finnegan did the same. After another hour of silence Finnegan yawned and pushed back his chair.

"Night," he yawned.

"Night," they replied, only glancing up from the page.

This time he was walking down a staircase. Behind him was the pile of books he had amassed, still waiting on the table. Errant scraps of information floated through his senses. His own footsteps despite standing still, the faint rustle of pages.

Taking deep breaths and massaging his temples, Nobody ascended the stairs. He paused at the platform, leaning against the railing, before slouching over to the table. After crumpling into his chair he held his head in his hands and panted.

It had to be the Library. All around Nobody were sights and sounds

that played a vital role in some of Finnegan's strongest memories. But he had no choice, the Library was the only place to find the place he was looking for. So rather than flee he cracked open a book and began to read.

Deep inside, Finnegan stood up from the chair inside his cocoon and began to Wander.

The night after that, Finnegan hoisted a bag of food from ***Red Bear Bob's Food Truck*** *onto the table with as big a thud as he could. The blonde awoke with a jolt.*

"Wazzit?" they mumbled, hair in their face.

"Bob's," he replied, lifting a meal out of the bag and sliding it over the table. He grabbed his own meal and sat down. "Hurry up, it'll get cold."

"You know what that stuff does to you, right?"

"Yup." He pulled a small plastic card from his pocket. "Got the cure right here."

They nearly choked from how hard they shoved the food into their mouth.

"So," Finnegan said before he took his first bite. "I'm Finnegan."

A single finger rose as they chewed and swallowed. When it was lowered they replied, "Name's Aldon."

That did not particularly help in the gender department.

"What's keeping you here, Aldon?"

Rather than reply they took another particularly large bite.

Finnegan took his first bite and relished it deeply as something told him this was the best thing he would ever eat. The next bite was in his mouth before the first was gone. He swallowed and reached for a napkin, his gaze chancing upon the yellow card. The madness

quelled.

Even then, Aldon continued to stuff their face. When they put the burger down for a moment Finnegan held up the card. Their face screwed up in confusion while they chewed, eventually settling into an uncomfortable grimace when their mouth was empty.

"It's not so much anything keeping me," they eventually said. "I just have nowhere to go."

"Hmm."

Finnegan took another bite, and Aldon followed. The two of them finished their respective meals and wiped their mouths of the resulting carnage when it was over. Their eyes lingered on the card before their gazes met.

"Would you like to have somewhere to go?" he eventually asked.

He watched conflict tear across their face for several seconds. They seemed to try saying something several times, only to grit their teeth and think some more. Eventually they took a deep breath and let out an even deeper sigh.

"I could use a place to stay the night, yeah."

"Fffuck."

Sweat poured down FinNobody's face. Nobody's face. Not Finnegan's. Finnegan didn't exist anymore. He was nothing but a pile of memories sitting in the recycle bin that was Nobody's mind. It was just a matter of discovering how to empty it.

Slowly, Nobody lifted his hand. Practiced opening and closing it. It felt like he was watching it happen from behind his eyes, just sitting in cramped headspace and craning his neck to get a better view. His head felt heavy at its core, but as a whole it felt light and foggy.

Focusing on the book before him, he carefully analyzed a variety of geographical anomalies. Page after tortured page he flitted through the tome, feeling something pressing at the back of his head like the

barrel of a gun.

Then he found it.

An entry on a **`cave`**, burrowed somewhere near Mount Aragats. At its heart, a curator of sorts. A teacher, and a knowledge seeker. And Nobody had a sizable chunk of memories sitting in his head he'd just love to donate.

« **Killing Knowledge** | **Hub** | **Mental Mazes** »

Mental Mazes

Probability in the Foundation's multiverse is a fairly fluid concept, able to be pumped and dammed as the higher players see fit. Some, such as a certain Nobody, are not entirely conscious of the eddies swirling around them. They simply plunge forward and leave others to deal with the resulting wake.

"Sir?" said a voice in Armenian. "Sir! I asked you what you think you're doing here."

Nobody eyed the Foundation employee disguised as a member of the Armenite State Forest Service. The words were lost on him, but he had the distinct feeling he should wait a moment. He felt a small pressure in the crown of his head, something distinct from all the kicking and screaming coming from Finnegan.

"Sir, nobody is allowed in this area."

The dam burst and Nobody rode the wave forward. The Foundation employee did nothing to stop him. As he entered the mouth of the **`cave`**, Nobody turned to see them scratching their head and returning to their patrol.

He ignored the Foundation Site and plunged into the heart of the cave system, into the main chamber. As he did so a voice crawled up his back and nestled in the base of his skull.

Such a direct invasion.

"Excuse me?" Nobody halted. Stared at the ceiling.

He felt a probing at his mind. *You are not Breath's pawn. Who are you?*

"Nobody."

…Interesting. What do you seek?

"It's more how I can assist you. I've got someone's life story to tell." He tapped his temple. It felt like something tapped back. "All yours. Free of charge."

Nobody's spine tingled as the Spine of the World surveyed Finnegan.

6:17 PM
4/11/2012

Finnegan checked the display for the third time in as many minutes. He cycled through several tabs before checking a fourth time. It was almost an hour beyond when Aldon usually returned home from work at the pizzeria. She wasn't answering her phone, either. In the few weeks she had crashed with him, she had never been this out of touch.

After several more minutes of fretting he heard a knock at the door. He minimized his browser, double-checked to make sure nothing particularly incriminating in view, and opened the door.

A wall of white greeted him. Along one side was what must have been Aldon's hand. She had lugged a mattress up several flights of stairs. And likely across town from wherever the hell she actually acquired the thing.

"Help me with this, would you?"

Finnegan swung the door wide open and helped tip the mattress through the archway. After some awkward sidling they tossed it down against the wall opposite the door.

"Get sick of the couch?" he asked as he took his seat.

"I swear there's something inside that thing. Several somethings." She plopped down onto the white fluff. "This is so much better. Oh- and here's first month's rent."

He nearly fell out of the chair from leaning over to grab the bundle of cash. "Thanks."

Aldon stretched and put her hands under her head. She seemed to sink several inches without actually moving. "Nah, man, thank you. Seriously."

"Heh." Finnegan went back to his music and Aldon dozed off.

Nobody clawed at the back of his head in a vain attempt to rip the Spine from his skull. It felt like a door was gaping open in the back of his mind, and it was only a matter of time before Finnegan was able to find it. It took Nobody several seconds to notice Spine had begun talking, having already released its weak grip.

Could fit into Frozen Canvas Wing. Hallway to your right. The path will be shown.

Only half paying attention where he was going, Nobody trudged forward. It took all he had to shut the door and keep it barricaded against Finnegan's incessant pounding. With each beat of his heart Nobody could feel his head pounding in more ways than one.

After almost an hour of walking the pain stopped. The door shifted slightly, and out of a mail slot came a small fragment of a memory. A witnessing of a memory, more like. A script, a note.

> *"Within every other iteration of reality that he happens to be born in, he subsequently leaves it roughly twenty-five years later. Can you guess why?"*
>
> *"I be- I mean he, Finnegan, becomes Nobody."*
>
> *"Or Reality tries to make him one, at least."*
>
> *"What do you mean tries?"*
>
> *"It doesn't always… take, so to speak."*

Nobody leaned against the mental door and gritted his teeth. Was Finnegan hoping to distract him? Weaken his resolve to allow an escape? Well, it wouldn't work. Only a short while longer and Nobody would have his head to himself.

The door rattled and a second, smaller note shot out between his legs.

> You're not a person, you're a coping mechanism.

Nobody ran.

He sprinted as far as he could as fast as Finnegan's legs would carry him. He only had to reach his destination, and then it would be over. After several turns his lungs burned and his legs ached, but his ears pounded to the drum of a pursuer.

A mere glance over Finnegan's shoulder was all Nobody took, but he saw Finnegan following him through the tunnels. Hurdling over shattered statues and ducking under speakers jutting from the ceiling, Finnegan hounded him for what felt like miles. Under such duress several minutes stretched into what felt like well over several hours.

Whenever he blinked he was treated to images from his pursuer's perspective, alternating between the chase and a hodgepodge of assorted memories. He was aware enough to see the liquid crystal on the cave surrounding him, a droplet falling down and half-blinding him. One eye chased the other until it seemed Finnegan had caught him. He wiped his eye just in time to be almost blinded by a sea of white.

Twists and turns through snow, sand, stone, and salami. The last of which was a bit of an odd experience for both of them. Lunch meat collapsed underneath him and he fell into a jumble of instruments inside what looked to be a band room. Tossing aside trombones and trumpets in a haphazard effort to get away, tossing aside his own memories of Aldon with them, Nobody traversed the sea of brass.

Once free, he hit a dead run. He passed by columns of bookshelves and rows of pews, ignoring the clay humanoids that clawed at him. Nothing would stop him. Not this winding maze of a cave system, not Finnegan, not foreboding memories of his conversation with the devil himself, and certainly not-

Several thousand tons of rock hitting him square in Finnegan's

forehead could bring him to a stop. Or rather, him running straight into one of the cave walls could. And did. Nobody toppled over and hit the back of Finnegan's head on the hard ground. Blood soaked into Finnegan's hair in several places.

Finnegan groaned.

What are *you doing?*

"Hurting. Bleeding. Possibly suffering from a concussion."

What were *you doing?*

Finnegan sat up as slowly as he could. His head hurt. His *mind* hurt. It felt constricted, like a net had been thrown over it and pulled taught. No doubt what little of his Nobody persona remained constituted said net. But it was still there. Squeezing, hoping to shove his entirety back into a little cage.

But Finnegan, unlike what seemed to be so many other Finnegans, had a compelling reason to stick around. Something to keep him from acquiescing to Reality's demand for another Nobody. Someone that made life interesting enough to be somebody with.

"Sorry, minor mental crisis," Finnegan said, picking up the hat. "I know… 'I' told you I had an artist's life story to tell. But how about a Nobody's life instead? That's gotta be worth something."

The cave was silent for a short time as something seemed to thrum in thought.

It would.

Finnegan grinned.

The memory of a Way is almost as good as the Way itself.

After stomping his way through a small flurry of snow, Finnegan could faintly feel the presence of a Way. It seemed to be located within a small wood cabin in the center of a snowy grove. While he had gotten this far without shivering once, his bones ached with cold

the moment he was inside. He piled wood into the furnace, hurled books into the fire. Yet he still couldn't get warm.

With a secondhand sense of recollection he sat in the already smoldering coals. He shut the furnace door and withdrew a lighter he didn't own from his pocket. A few fumbled flicks later Finnegan stepped out into the Wanderer's Library. He rubbed his arms for warmth and set out to find the air filter he, as Nobody, had left behind.

After a stop at the Utterly Bazaar to collect his earnings for the ghost goo, he departed from his local Library and entered his local library. The walk home was uneventful, and Finnegan's mind was peacefully empty. So to speak.

The following days were likely unremarkable. He spent his days on his computer, going to work, and sleeping. It was oddly relaxing, to have the place to himself. Save for the golems and Everett, of course.

On the sixth day there was a rattling at the door. It swung open to reveal an exhausted looking Jakeob Aldon. Finnegan regarded her coolly for a moment before nodding.

"Have fun?"

"Ugh." Aldon slipped her pack off and stumbled over to her bed. She collapsed unceremoniously. "So ugh."

"Regret going?"

Aldon playfully poked at Copper. She was silent for a few seconds and then shrugged. "Nah. So what have you been up to without me to keep you company?"

Finnegan stared at her for a moment, his gaze drifting to his nearby mattress. There, instead of the room that was now Aldon's workroom. He looked into her eyes for a moment.

Then he shrugged.

"Eh, same ol', same ol'."

Nazi Nonsense

Sergeant Freudenberger squinted again at the tiny print on the manifest list, struggling to find his place. He jumped at the sudden sound of the train whistle as yet another load of prisoners disembarked into the makeshift station, dropping his glasses into his cup of tea.

"Oh, I'm frightfully sorry! Oh-oh my, just a moment, I'll have you processed and ready to go! My apologies, um, Fraulein… Fraulein…"

The woman standing before him slowly jabbed a finger towards the top of the page Sergeant Freudenberger was working on. "Aldon. Zuzanna Aldon. No Fraulein."

Sergeant Freudenberger gave his glasses a quick shake, then affixed them once more upon his bulbous nose. "Oh… oh! There it is! I-I'm sorry, erm, Frau Aldon-"

"It's not 'Frau' either. Just Aldon."

The sergeant peered once more at his manifest sheet, then back at Aldon. "Ah, pardon me. Whatever you prefer, er, Aldon. Whatever is most, uh, polite."

Aldon rolled her eyes. "I think we passed the point of polite introductions sometime after the raid in Kleparz." She pointed to the dark blue, rifle butt-shaped bruise on the right side of her face. "I've had enough German etiquette, thanks."

"Ach, dreadful! I would never sanction such barbarous treatment, surely! I-"

Aldon glared at the sergeant, gesturing at the sprawling intake center and the lines of prisoners waiting to be processed.

"Oh. Right. Um, that." The Sergeant's face went red with shame, not for the first time that day. "You're in Sector B, Tent 48, Fraulein- er, Aldon. They're not really tents, though, there was some confusion at the command center, and, um-"

"Would you please just hurry up and put me in the damn concentration camp!" Aldon said as she crossed her arms.

"Yeah, we don't got all day you know!" a man's voice called from somewhere behind them in line.

Several black-clad SS guards glanced towards the general area of the remark, heavy wooden truncheons in hand. The Sergeant quickly signaled to the guards to remain calm; the guards, after several moments, relented and acknowledged the Sergeant's direction, though not without an angry glare for their superior. Sergeant Freudenberger waved Aldon back towards the camp as the next prisoner came forward.

He sighed. Had there really been so many degenerate artists in the Reich? There must have been a thousand people here. The sergeant thought of his own sister, and her paintings and poems. He couldn't imagine her or her friends hurting anyone, much less presenting a threat that had to be solved like this. His hand again crept to his brace-supported right leg. He was not a fighting man, and it didn't take long before he was rendered unfit for combat by a Russian grenade. But as awful as that was, it was preferable to this. He waved the next person in line through to his station, employing the etiquette that he thought was the least he owed these people. His finger went back to the manifest.

"Erm, uh…Allendorf, I beg your pardon Herr Allendorf…oh, I've lost my place again."

A tall red-haired young man made his way through the assembled inmates in the central yard, already bedraggled and rumpled looking in his recently-issued bright red uniform. He picked his way through the milling crowd, spotting a long, lean young woman in the midst of a small knot of people, dressed in a blue uniform, her wavy blond hair in its trademark pile pulled to the left side of her head.

"Hey, Zuzu! Hey! Over here!"

Aldon looked up. A smile broke out over her face. "Werner! You're alive!" She rushed over to the young man and embraced him tightly, the two artists clutching each other tightly to reassure themselves that both were still there. "We thought they had killed you! Zanzibar heard that they were carrying your body out of the lobby when they marched us off!"

Werner smiled. "A little sleight of hand. They caught me two days later, though. Turns out Ratzinger's basement wasn't a Way after all. Rotten little phoney."

Aldon dismissively waved her hand. "You were the one who bought the instructions for the ritual from him!" Her smile evaporated. "And how about that, hmm? We were supposed to be able to get away from those Gestapo jerks when you chanted the words!"

"I figured that one out, actually." Werner assumed his crouched-over old man pose that he did whenever he used his Aleister Crowley impression. "Be it sealed in truth, by a man of foreign land, who speaketh the words of power, bearing the marks of his opponents."

The rest of the group had gathered back around the two errant members of the Young Collective of Weimar Artisans, now accounted for in its entirety. Aldon waited expectantly.

"Aaaand?"

Werner straightened his posture again. "Well, I had the words of power from the other sheet, and I had the Hitler Youth costume."

"Yes, what could possibly go right?" interjected Aldon.

Undaunted, Werner continued. "I just wasn't a man of foreign land, that's all! Germany isn't foreign enough to Poland, you see."

"You mean that was what put this all screwy? I could have told you that, you lummox!" She tossed a ration of bread at Werner's chest. It immediately dissolved into an unsatisfying mist of dry crumbs and sawdust. "And now look! Another fine mess you've gotten us into."

Zanzibar O'Reilly slowly shook her head. "Yep, just like home again."

"It's simple. All we need to do is find someone else who can complete the ritual, and we'll all be out of here in a snap." Werner casually brushed the crumbs from his shirt.

Aldon shook her head. "How are we going to do that? These goose-stepping knuckleheads run all of Europe now, it's all Germany as far as this two-bit ritual is concerned."

"Surely there's-"

Werner was interrupted by the speakers wired over the yard, as a disembodied voice addressed the inmates of the camp through squeaks and crackles.

"All inmates report to the central staging area." Repeated over and over, droning ceaselessly until all assembled were pestered into compliance. The guards were curiously absent.

As they made their way to the staging area, the assembled degenerate artists and moral deviants of the Reich found a stage, hastily constructed from exposed beams of freshly cut planks of white pine. To Aldon, it looked like someone had smashed together about eight sets of gallows. Most of the guards were assembled shoulder-to-shoulder in the front of the stage, uniform in stance down to the manner in which their rifles were slung over their shoulders. Others were busy separating the inmates into color-coded groups; green for the writers, red for the painters, white for musicians, blue for sculptors, and so on. The throngs of prisoners were a riot of color, surrounded by drab gray structures and hemmed in by a line of black SS men.

"That's the ugliest chorus line I've ever seen! I want my two reichsmarks back!"

The mysterious voice was back, calling somewhere from the crowd. The accent was strange, though familiar to Aldon. Where had she had heard that voice before? The guards separating the prisoners

scowled, surveying the crowd in vain for the heckler. After several moments of searching, they went back to their tasks.

Aldon stood in a crowd of other blue-clad sculptors. This is a travesty, she thought, I'm a multi-media artist. Lumping me in with just sculptors.

She looked back over the crowd. That voice. She was still missing something about it, but she knew enough to recognize it as belonging to a New Yorker. She thought back to Werner's two-bit ritual. She kept searching the crowd. A loudspeaker from the stage called everyone's attention forward.

"Willkommen, my friends!" called a high, insistent voice. A small man with a pencil-thin mustache and slick, pomaded hair took the stage, carrying a large microphone. The freshly pressed tuxedo sporting a blood-red party armband may have seemed out of place, but what stood out to Aldon was the pancake makeup and rouge outlining the man's facial features.

"Oh, how delightful! Look at you all, assembled and sorted! It's like being back on the set!" The man punctuated his remarks with a bout of extended giggling at some internal joke.

Aldon squinted. She recognized Max von Gruben, the German silent film star of the early 20s. He was still wearing the same makeup from *Der Schüler*. God that movie was terrible. His career vanished with the introduction of sound, and she now understood why. His high-pitched, nasal voice set her teeth on edge. From the looks of things, though, that may not have been the only impediment to Herr Gruben's continued work.

"Now, I know what you are all thinking. 'Why must I be persecuted for my art,' blah blah blah, *ja ja ja*. But we are here, not to imprison you, but to educate you on what art truly is!" Gruben giggled to himself once more. He strutted across the stage, behind the row of SS guards, walking the ramparts of an absurd human castle.

"I shall tell you what art is *not*. It is *not* the subversive doggerel."

The white-clad prisoners mumbled grumpily, though not too loudly.

"It is *not* ghastly paintings of twisted-up people, who don't even look like people."

Gruben kept strutting, stopping in front of Aldon's knot of blue sculptors. He seemed to fix his painted, purple-shaded gaze directly on her. He jabbed at the air, slowly, for emphasis.

"And, it is most definitely. *Not*. An ambulatory phallus. That ejaculates spoiled milk in the presence of party officials."

The guards, seemingly anticipating this remark, tightened their grips on their truncheons and rifles. Aldon bit her cheek in attempt to not burst out laughing. Others were apparently having the same problem. Her greatest work, recognized. She was equal portions pride and restrained hilarity.

"We have brought you all here for a single purpose. Would anyone here care to guess what it is?"

A silence fell on the gathering of artists, momentary mirth quickly forgotten. Every one of them had had time to speculate on what fate awaited them. Every one of them had come to the same answer.

"To witness the holy matrimony between Hitler and his mother?"

Gruben scowled at the heckler's interruption, seeming to come from a different part of the crowd than before. Silently, he dispatched two guards into the crowd with a flick of his wrist. He put the ersatz smile back on, and resumed.

"You, the corrupted potential of the Reich, are to be rehabilitated! You shall put on a grand production, the likes of which never attempted before, to show the world the power and strength of our Führer's vision! A tremendous spectacle we shall make, a worthy use for your misguided talents!"

The silence seemed to only grow more ominous. They were going to make them put on a Nazi propaganda play? Horror gripped Aldon, the only thing worse than death now confronting her; enforced tackiness.

"What, did you think we were going to kill you? How dreadfully

boring! No, we have much better, more efficient uses for all of you! This camp shall be a marvel, a testament to the triumph of our Führer's values!"

A slight, spindly man stepped out in front of the white-uniformed writer's contingent. He raised his expressionless face to Gruben. It was Bartleby, the quiet, unassuming poet of Aldon's group. Bartleby's voice was surprisingly loud and resonant for such a small man, audible to everyone in the courtyard.

"I would prefer not to."

Gruben scowled once more. "You would…prefer not to?" His voice trailed off into disbelief.

Bartleby remained where he stood. "I would prefer not to."

"I see. I am afraid we will have to make things quite dreadfully boring for you if you do not wish to join this effort."

Still expressionless, still resolute, Bartleby replied once more. "I would prefer not to."

The two guards, previously dispatched to find the phantom heckler, now descended upon Bartleby, grabbing him roughly by the shoulders and leading him off out of view and to a different part of the camp. Aldon immediately started to follow after her friend, silent while a number of high-impact curses and expletives churned in her mind and competed to see which would be the first to fly forth, before she felt a hand catch her arm and pull her back. She rounded quickly on a dark-haired man, eyes heavy-lidded behind a set of round glasses, his finger to his pursed lips.

"Shhhhh. You'll interrupt the show for these nice folks."

Through the confusion, surprise and anger, Aldon recognized the voice. It was the heckler! How had he managed to make his way over here without being noticed?

Aldon lowered her voice to a whisper. "But they're going to kill him!"

"Not yet they won't. They like to do things real by-the-book, these

guys. Whatever ones they haven't burned yet, anyway. Your friend is real brave, he should be fine till we can spring him."

Aldon kept studying the heckler's face. There was something familiar about him. "Brave? But he always says that! Do you know what his latest collection of poems is called? "I Would Prefer Not To"! He's going to get himself killed before- wait, what do you mean when we spring him?"

"You're the lady that makes the moving putz statues, right?"

"Um, I, uh, yeah. Why?"

A wry twinkle crept into the heckler's deadpan face as he gave Aldon a quick once-over. "You know, speaking of moving-"

"Ugh, stop, just stop." Gruben had started yammering again in the background. Aldon checked around to see if anyone was noticing this conversation. So far, no one had. "Tell me. What the hell is going on here?"

"You do some unusual stuff, lady. So unusual that certain bigwigs have noticed and decided to pull your little menagerie out of the cage here."

"Why'd they send you? You don't look like a soldier."

"Really? That's a relief, I'll tell that to the fella at the draft board when I get home. I'd hate to get sent over to a place like this."

Aldon sighed. "Is there anyone else coming?"

The heckler stroked his chin. "You got any friends that aren't jailbirds?"

"Ugh. You really don't have any sort of plan, do you?"

"Not at all, plans get you put into prison camps around this neighborhood."

Aldon shook her head. "These bigwigs you were talking about earlier. Who are they?"

"The kind that can get a guy out of a studio contract. So I dunno? God, maybe? I don't think he's got good enough lawyers, though."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"That makes two of us sweetheart. Now, if you'll excuse me a moment." The heckler waggled his eyebrows slightly, and cupped his hands to his mouth. "Get a load of this," he said to Aldon.

A voice suddenly called out from somewhere among the assembled guards on the stage. "Whatever it is, I'm against it!" Gruben stopped dead in the middle of his harangue, the guards suddenly turning their glowers and gazes on one another. Confusion erupted as the heckler's voice somehow kept emanating from within the fray on the stage. "Your proposition may be good, but let's have one thing understood, whatever it is, I'm against it," he sang out to the increasing fury of the camp guards. The scene devolved into chaos, as the stage was now a roiling mass of black clad guards, barking accusations at one another and jostling Gruben repeatedly. All eyes were now on the stage, which had turned against all odds into the scene of something of genuine interest.

"There, that ought to buy us a little more privacy for a few minutes."

Aldon had heard that song before. She thought back to a movie house in Krakow…no. It couldn't possibly.

"How…how did you do that?"

"Old vaudeville trick, sweetheart." The heckler began removing his blue uniform, a red one now showing underneath. "Now, let's talk about getting your little group out of here."

"Wait. This seems fishy. How do I know I can trust you?

At this statement, the heckler produced from his back pocket a small tin of black greasepaint. He dabbed some on his finger, and with slow, precise movements, painted two thick black lines over his eyebrows. Then he applied another across his upper lip.

Aldon gaped. Things clicked into place suddenly as she looked at the man's exaggerated new mustache and eyebrows, recognition

striking her like a lightning bolt.

He put his glasses back on. "Is this the face of someone looking to pull a scam?"

The young artist stammered. "You're…you're…" She stopped. She narrowed her eyes. "American."

"What gave it away sugar, the posh accent?"

The members of the Weimar Artisans knew that nothing made Aldon happier than some act of insane troublemaking, usually ending with a sudden relocation of wherever their headquarters happened to be at the time, minutes ahead of the authorities. A huge smile began to appear on her face.

"I think I have a plan instead. To get *all* of us out of here."

The heckler pulled a crisp new cigar out from his sleeve, bit the end, and thoughtfully put it in his mouth, preparing to light it with a clandestine Zippo. "I'm listening."

« **Mental Mazes** | **Hub** | **Nondescript Nose** »

Nondescript Nose

"No, no, no! The chorus does not start launching into *Horst Wessel Song* until the Hero of Aryan Purity is above the Threshold of the Fatherland! Above!"

Max von Gruben barked directions at the assembled stagehands, who were too busy pulling ropes and straightening pulleys to pay much attention. If they faltered, the lucky soul who was cast to play the Hero of Aryan Purity would fall about fifteen meters onto the stage. Aldon imagined Hitler in the harness, dangling in the air, and wondered if he would die upon hitting the wooden stage, or merely be horribly crippled for the rest of his life. She tried not to dwell too much upon this thought, lest her grip on the rope slacken.

"Ach, these people are impossible. Why, why did they send me such uninspired theater folk?" Gruben, as was his habit in staging this production, expressed his frustration by languidly batting his ever-present assistant, Sergeant Freudenberger, about the face with a limp white glove. "Why do they vex me so, Freudenberger?"

The Sergeant took several deep breaths after the latest half-hearted assault upon his face, composing himself and hobbling after the director. "They are staging a production at gunpoint, Herr Gruben. Surely they are doing a fine job under such circumstances."

Gruben batted the Sergeant once more with the pristine white glove. "Feh. Feh! I give them the most inspirational material the world has to offer, and I get mediocrity. Günter!" The tuxedo clad director called up to a single SS man sitting in a specially constructed balcony. "Günter, do you find yourself, *moved*, by this performance?"

The square-faced, black uniformed guard furrowed his single eyebrow, pondering the question with genuine thought. He took a surveying glance at the stage with a set of ornate opera glasses. He scratched his chin, and then slowly shook his head.

"Do you see?" Gruben lectured the assembled chorus members. "Günter should be weeping at the beauty of this performance! I see no tears! If you cannot budge the soft heart of a beauteous creature like Günter, how will we impress the Führer when he visits? Hmmm?"

Aldon suppressed the stupid grin that appeared on her face at the latest mention of Der Führer's Visit. When they had heard that Hitler himself was to attend their performance, the Young Artisans could barely contain their glee. They were going to put on a show all right.

"I tell you, the miracles I must work." Gruben collapsed into his folding director's chair. "Let's see that cow Riefenstahl crack wise when the world sees *this* production. Now, once more, from the top!"

O'Reilly, still dressed in her lederhosen from the earlier rehearsal, leaned out from the doorway of Tent 48 and scanned the night. No guards in her sector. She gave a thumbs-up signal to another lookout posted at a corner about thirty meters away, easily recognizable despite the darkness due to the oversized papier-mâché Wagner head that was part of his costume. Wagner returned the thumbs up, the encouraging gesture an odd juxtaposition with the sneering face sculpted onto the prop head.

"Coast is clear, no one in sight."

Aldon gathered her conspirators. From the shadows immediately outside, eight of the chorus members filed into the room, along with the actors portraying Young Hitler, Wicked Jew #6, the Ghost of Goethe, Otto von Bismarck and The Krampus. They joined Aldon, Werner, the now-infamous Mysterious Heckler, and the rest of the production crew, crowding into the rickety plywood and canvas cabin. Zanzibar O'Reilly came in and shut the door behind her. Aldon surveyed her crew and unrolled a large sheet of scavenged paper, produced from underneath a loose floorboard.

"Okay gang. Two days until showtime. How are we coming on the offering for the Library?"

A young woman with a green writer's uniform snapped to attention.

"We'll be done in time. The gold leaf for the illuminated manuscript was a nice touch."

"Ah, that guard wasn't using his teeth anyway," replied Aldon. "Our gift for Der Führer?"

O'Reilly carefully reached into her lederhosen and produced a small package wrapped in oilcloth. She gingerly unwrapped it, revealing a plain pair of reading glasses. Delicately picking it up with thumb and forefinger, she held it up to the light of the single bare light bulb hanging from the ceiling. The Young Artisans' resident fashion designer had completed her contribution. She raised a painted eyebrow. "Anyone care to demonstrate?"

The heckler spoke up. "I'll do it. I need a new prescription after looking at that stage. A sore sight for four eyes."

"Mmm, no. They won't produce the…desired effect with your face." O'Reilly smiled.

"My face effects all kinds of desire, lady. Or is that leaves much to be desired? I can never remember."

"All right, all right." Aldon intervened. "Marta, would you do the honors? Seems appropriate."

The slightly-built actor dressed in the schoolboy outfit with the painted rosy cheeks and pencil mustache stepped forward. Young Hitler carefully took the glasses, easing them onto her face. The effect was immediate. The room was filled with gasps, approving murmurs and laughs.

"Wunderbar," said Werner as he smiled.

"Aww, you shouldn't have," said the heckler. "I mean really, you shouldn't have."

Aldon peeked out the door briefly, then came back inside. "Great work. Now, everyone's familiar with their alternate staging directions?"

The chorus members nodded. They had practiced extensively under

cover of darkness. One of the chorus members cracked his knuckles in anticipation.

Nodding, Aldon frowned as she came to the last detail. "Now, Bartleby. Has anyone figured that one out yet?"

Werner shook his head. "We know where they've got him, but there's at least four guards posted at all times. This guy here seems to have the best idea of the camp layout." He nodded towards the heckler.

"You have any ideas on this one?" asked Aldon.

"Sure," said the heckler, "let's quiz this German fellow hiding under the window."

The occupants of the room suddenly looked alarmed, as the heckler calmly opened the window he was sitting next to, reached out his hand, and quickly tapped out the familiar refrain of "shave and a haircut" on a hard metal surface.

"Ouch ouch!" called a voice from outside.

A man in a German uniform slowly rose from where he must have been crouching the entire time. It was Sergeant Freudenberger. He groaned as he clutched his bad leg.

"What's the big idea? Can't a man concentrate in peace around here?" The heckler glowered at the red-faced sergeant.

"I'm dreadfully sorry. I don't mean to eavesdrop, I really don't! I just…overheard, and, well, well, I…"

"Quick, grab him! Maybe we can escape in his uniform! Or just his skin!" Aldon sprang to her feet.

"Oh, oh my! Look, your friend doesn't have long, and I know how to help him!" Sergeant Freudenberger unconsciously wrapped his arms around himself, concerned by the threat to his hide.

"Huh? You mean you're not going to turn us in?"

Sergeant Freudenberger adjusted his now-tilted helmet. "Certainly not. This camp is a dreadful business. And if someone can manage to escape it, well," the sergeant said. He smiled. "When the commandant asks, I know nothing."

Werner shook his head. "How do we know you're on the level?"

The sergeant leaned into the window, poking his head conspiratorially into the room from outside. "You are correct that there are always four guards at the holding area. But tonight, the Indentured Servant Mandatory Good Time Polka Association is playing at the officer's club. No one will want to miss it! So they've only stationed one guard for the evening, a gentleman on loan from Signore Mussolini's government. This is the best opportunity you'll have! When you see the number of guards, you'll know I'm telling the truth!"

Aldon stroked her chin. "Couldn't hurt to send someone to check it out at least. If they're just going to kill us either way. We'll need to send our best person to-"

The leader of the Young Artisans looked up. The heckler was suddenly gone.

"Nuts. I should go after him." Aldon looked at her blue inmate's uniform. "I'll need something a little more stealthy. Hey, you, let's switch."

In front of Stalag IV-MB, a single man napped on his feet beside the locked iron door, swaying slightly from side to side, the Tyrolean hat perched on his head constantly threatening to slide off, but never quite making it. An unloaded rifle lay beside him, propped against the wall.

The heckler approached the front entrance of the holding cell, having somehow acquired a dark suit on his way over, his greasepaint mustache and eyebrows reapplied in the interim. Quietly, he made his way to the vicinity of the guard. He then snapped his fingers next to the sleeping man's ear.

"Hey, buddy, wake up!"

The guard suddenly snapped to attention as he suddenly awoke. "Huh? No, I wasn't sleeping," he said with a thick Italian accent. "I had a dream that I was guarding this place. You can't fool me!"

The heckler fetched a cigar from inside his coat pocket and lit it. "A fine joint this is. World class service. I could be escaping right now!"

"Ohhh no. Impossible. I never let anyone escape. If you're escaping, I must be dreaming!"

"Well, while you're in dreamland, mind fetching me something out of there?" The heckler pointed at the door with his cigar.

"Not without the password. I only open the door when I hear the password."

"I would prefer not to," echoed Bartleby's voice from behind the door.

"That's pretty close, but no cigar." replied the guard.

"Oh, well allow me then." The heckler handed the remaining half of his cigar to the guard. The guard accepted graciously.

"Well?"

"Thanks for the cigar, but no dice."

"A fine way to treat a guest," grumbled the heckler.

Footsteps approached the pair as they talked. Aldon joined them, attired in a fine black suit with resplendent brass buttons, wearng a monocle and carrying an ornate walking cane.

"Gentlemen." Aldon adjusted her monocle.

The guard immediately stood at complete attention, fumbling for the unloaded rifle by his side. After a short struggle, he gained control of the weapon, holding it upside down. "Chancellor von Bismarck!"

The heckler snatched his cigar back from the guard and stuck it back in his mouth. "I gave Bismarck a chance once. Coldest winter I ever had in June."

Aldon had studied the exchange from the shadows for some time. The rules of this place were becoming a little clearer. "I'll be taking custody of this prisoner, soldier."

The guard lifted his rumpled hat and scratched his head. "Hey, wait a minute. Chancellor Bismarck is not a woman. Also not alive."

Aldon continued, undeterred. "What do you expect? This place is all backwards."

The guard's confusion deepened. "Huh?"

She snatched the cigar away from the heckler and jabbed the air with it for additional emphasis. "This is an open-air camp, right?"

"Yes, that is right."

"And all the people in the camp, except the guards, are prisoners, right?"

"Yes."

Aldon puffed on the cigar. "That means all the prisoners are outside."

The guard stared back blankly. Silence.

Aldon returned the stare. She puffed one more time. "Then why in the name of the Empire are you just standing there while your prisoner is *inside*, soldier?" she suddenly bellowed.

The sudden outburst made both men jump. "Hey, that's right, you should be outside, you tricky rascal!" said the guard. He began scrambling for his key to unlock the door.

"I would prefer not to," said the voice behind the door.

"Oh no, you won't trick me with that one this time!" The guard

located the correct key, turned the lock, flung open the door, and grabbed Bartleby. He roughly pushed him out of the cell, then planted himself squarely on the other side of the door.

"There!" said the guard. "Now don't you get any more ideas! Nothing gets past me!" At this, he slammed the door shut, the lock ratcheting back into place as it closed, securing the iron portal once more.

Bartleby, Aldon and the heckler now stood together, eyed warily by the guard as he peered out from the cell between the small, barred throughway.

Aldon saluted the guard with her cane. "As you were, soldier."

Immediately, the trio heard a thump from the other side of the door, followed by light snoring.

Aldon dusted off some stray dirt from Bartleby's lapels, then she turned on her heel to face her compatriots. "All right men. The gang's all here. Let's get to work."

"I would prefer not to."

"Oh, shut up."

The Führer took his place behind the podium as he readied his speech to the assembled denizens of the Koblach Artistic Rehabilitation Camp.

Gruben had spent the entire night making sure all of the camera equipment was positioned in just the right places to ensure that both his production and the Führer's speech preceding it would be filmed in the best possible light. That idiot Freudenberger had been bumbling into the props on the stage all morning. What he was playing at was anyone's guess, and he had finally sent the Sergeant away, before he could embarass Gruben further in front of the Führer's security detail. If he didn't know any better, he would almost have thought that Freudenberger was relieved to not be present for the grand spectacle. Gruben shrugged. His loss. At least that idiot had remembered the Führer's reading glasses.

He admired the handiwork of his repurposed artists as he surveyed the stage. Imposing, dark trees of the Black Forest flanked the sides of the now-fully decorated set. Bunches of freshly-picked edelweiss were strewn hither and yon, giving his vision the bucolic feel that he so desired. Dominating the center was a stark, unadorned marble obelisk, topped by a swastika. Now this, he thought to himself, was art.

Gruben looked up to Günter as he took his seat in the balcony, the designated Camp Critic settling in and adjusting his opera glasses. Gruben waved politely to him from the orchestra pit. Günter scratched himself.

Behind the stage, Aldon conferred with Werner and the heckler as the event approached.

"Right, the trucks are gassed up, Freudenberger's got the goods, and Zanzibar's scouted our route. Let's just hope your ritual works."

Werner nodded. "We've got the man of foreign land. And he's about to have the marks of our enemies. We're as good as in Geneva."

The heckler started to say something. Aldon glowered. He put his cigar back in his mouth.

"Let's just hope we get enough of a ruckus out of it that we can get the twenty kilos to the border."

Despite the risk, the presence of entirely too many Nazis, and the overall shoddy plan, Aldon was unable to suppress her smile.

"Ladies and gentlemen, on with the show."

The crowd went silent as Adolf Hitler, Chancellor of the Third Reich, Leader of the Fatherland and Führer of the Glorious Germanic Peoples, put on his reading glasses and began to read from his prepared speech.

He looked up from his notes. The Führer's reading glasses were somehow nowhere in evidence now. Instead, upon his face was a

pair of thick, black-framed glasses, attached to which were two thick, bushy eyebrows, and a fuzzy black mustache, which obscured his entire lip for a change of pace. All of which surrounded a giant, bulbous false nose. The Führer frowned, summoning all of his intensity.

"This, is the reforging of a new nation, and the art which was the province of our decadent enemies, shall be put to use in the glory of the Aryan Race!"

With each syllable, the mustache attached to the Führer's glasses appeared to waggle.

Gruben went rigid. How? How could he not notice what had just happened? Someone must tell the Führer immediately!

"Against our superior arms, our iron will, and our dominant culture, the degraded Communists and their allies stand no chance!"

Hitler's eyes seemed somehow whiter and more pronounched as they peeked through the dark frames of the ridiculous glasses.

"Now, we stand at the threshold of history, taking our rightful place as the leaders of the world!" Hitler pounded the podium with his fist at the end of his sentence. The false nose bounced up and down on his face from the force, ever so slightly.

This last remark was punctuated with a sudden change to the set decorations. Somehow, as the Führer had pounded his fist, the swastika topping the column behind him had disappeared, somehow replaced by a giant, painted wooden sign, displaying a fist with an upraised middle finger. Gruben had not seen anyone move behind the podium; how did this happen? Suddenly, he noted with horror that the cameras were rolling. No one had given the order to turn them off. This was being *recorded.*

"Their bombs, their tanks, their planes, no force of arms can stop our implacable advance! We will crush the Russians, the British, the Americans, and their hated Jewish collaborators!"

Images had started moving across the white backdrop of the stage.

Gruben squinted. Was that…was that Mickey Mouse? Riding a cartoon Heinrich Himmler like a horse? Why did Mickey Mouse now have penises for ears? Where were the projectors coming from? He could find no words. He could not break the paralysis that had gripped him. What was the Führer going to do when he found out? How was he going to stop this? He was gripped with mortal terror, tinged slightly by befuddlement at the acts that a caricature that looked an awful lot like Joseph Goebbels was now apparently perpetrating on Himmler.

Hitler moved to the big finish. "A thousand years! A thousand years this glorious Reich shall endure! And the great work begins here, in this place, today!" He lifted his right hand high in the air, giving the crowd his trademark salute, his hateful visage burning beneath the novelty brows and facial hair.

The entire camp was completely silent. Not a single word, utterance or reaction escaped any of those present. The sound of the cameras rolling was audible to all.

From the balcony, the sound of a single man clapping could now be heard. Günter had risen to his feet, applauding ecstatically, tears streaming down his swollen, brutish face. He wiped the tears with his sleeve as he applauded, hooting and heiling his approval for his dearest leader.

The Führer had never seen this before, in all of his speeches, all of the rallies and demonstrations. He glanced up briefly to the black-uniformed lummox in the balcony, seized with paroxysms of joy.

"Th-…thank you?" was all the great leader of the German people could manage at the inexplicable scene before him. He removed his reading glasses, putting the now-ordinary appearing spectacles back on the podium.

Aldon listened as Hitler concluded his remarks. She began planning how she would get a hold of the footage of what had just transpired outside, when she pushed the thought aside. She looked to Werner. They nodded. The two Young Artisans began lowering the ropes in their hands, the harness meant for the Hero of Aryan Purity now

descending with its payload down to the center of the stage.

Confusion, rage, and even fear roiled within the Führer. Why weren't they *doing anything*? What was going on here? He heard the sounds of pulleys creaking and ropes stretching above him, and looked skywards towards the beams of the stage overhead. A man in a harness was being slowly lowered down towards him, stopping only a few meters over his head.

There, at center stage in the middle of the Koblach Artistic Rehabilitation Camp, surrounded by one thousand degenerate artists and fifty *Shutzstaffel*, Adolf Hitler and Groucho Marx regarded one another. A world of possibilities existed there in the minds of the two men as each considered the next possible move.

From backstage, Werner stage-whispered to the heckler.

"The words of power! Say the words of power!"

Groucho puffed thoughtfully on his cigar. He flicked the ash expertly onto the top of Hitler's head. His expression remained unreadable behind his theatrical war paint.

"Abracadabra."

As the words left his lips, a blinding white flash suddenly enveloped the stage, accompanied by a teeth-rattling booming noise. Stage props were scattered, edelweiss flew through the air, and Hitler was thrown into the orchestra pit. The audience, including the guards, were stunned back into inaction and silence by the spectacle now unfolding before them.

As their vision returned, they now saw a man, bathed in gold light, his physique that of a Greek god, at least ten feet tall. The magnificent being had lightly-colored curls of hair adorning his head, ablaze like a halo of fire wreathing his face. In his hand, he had a bicycle horn.

Werner had now run onto the stage, Aldon, Zanzibar, and Bartleby in tow. Groucho had freed himself from the harness, and dusted the

remains of the stage props from his suit coat.

"It worked! I knew it would work!"

The towering, golden man looked down upon the Young Artisans on the stage. From the vicinity of the audience, numerous clicking noises could now be heard. The SS guards, recovering enough of their senses to determine that something seemed to have gone wrong, had drawn their weapons and were attempting to fire at the being on the stage. In their polka-induced haze of the previous evening, they had failed to notice the camp's ammunition supplies being loaded into a truck by their former colleague, Sergeant Freudenberger. Their weapons continued to click ineffectually, bullets being steadily replaced with bewildered curses.

The being lifted his bicycle horn high into the air. He looked at Aldon. He squeezed the horn, a mighty beep emanating therefrom.

Groucho's ears perked up. "He says he's come to grant you a boon."

Aldon tried to make sense of the scene before her. "How do you know what he's saying?"

Groucho shrugged.

"Well…okay, tell him that yes, we need his assistance."

The erstwhile heckler made a series of exaggerated hand motions, then proceeded to duck-walk around in a circle several times. The being responded with two squeezes of its bicycle horn.

Groucho translated. "He asks what you offer."

Aldon lifted the book that she had carried with her. "I bring you this, a true and accurate account of the time that Hitler addressed a crowd to no applause or accolades in his own empire, illuminated and illustrated, to be housed eternally within the annals of the Wanderer's Library!"

The stern, distant look on the being's face suddenly changed to what Aldon could only determine to be goofy delight. The golden figure squeezed its bicycle horn repeatedly.

"He says that'll do. And to hold on a second, your boon is coming."

The towering figure appeared to produce from thin air a giant bag, its countenance now one of unrestrained mirth and mischief. It unzipped the bag, revealing a yawning, dark, empty space. It seemed to grow wider by the second, easily large enough to fit a car through.

Gruben had finally dug his way out from under the rubble of the collapsed balcony, still shell-shocked from the scene that had unfolded before him. He saw the Führer sprawled across some upended chairs, a tuba lodged on his head. An inexplicable golden man was now on the stage, opening a gigantic bag of some sort. What was happening. My play, he thought ruefully, the only comprehensible thought that he could muster at the moment. This was supposed to be a play.

Then, the birds came.

The Young Artisans watched raptly as the entity's bag had now fully opened. Groucho produced another cigar and noted the scene with some interest. The golden being now raised both hands, his arms outstretched, as though a great proclamation were now about to be delivered. He honked his bicycle horn.

A tide of ostriches poured forth from the bag, dashing madly forth from a different plane of existence. The experience had apparently made them quite agitated, as they furiously beat their wings as they ran at full speed out into the crowd, knocking into chairs, upsetting tables, and unleashing yet more chaos onto the scene before them. An endless stream, it seemed, of agitated avians streamed forth from this eldritch portal.

Zanzibar O'Reilly shook her head. "Why ostriches?"

Groucho straightened his glasses. "We *are* in Österreich, lady."

The ostriches seemed to be gravitating to where Hitler had landed. The Führer had managed to dislodge himself from the tuba just in

time to see the storm of bipedal birds descend upon him. A number of guards looked on in panic.

"Protect the Führer! Protect the Führer!" one cried out. The guards rushed to the scene now, their focus singular.

"Good enough distraction?" Werner smiled.

Aldon was beaming. "Good enough. Let's get everyone to the trucks!"

The Young Artisans, Groucho in tow, leaped down into the fray, and begin directing all of the artists they could to the line of commandeered supply trucks that had been prepared during the Führer's speech. The lines of former prisoners began streaming past the ostrich-induced fracas, the guards too involved in the logistical challenges of fighting giant birds without the aid of firearms.

The express line to Switzerland awaited.

Finnegan looked at his wrinkled shirt in the mirror. "I thought you didn't need to iron these!"

Jakeob Aldon studied the chessboard in front of her. Boron wasn't a bad player. The small golem tapped its tiny foot insistently as it waited for her to make a move. Everett chirped quizzically.

"What do I know about dress shirts? Why are you doing this, anyway?"

Finnegan hastily tucked his shirttails into his pants. "I'm hoping the NEA will finally give us some grant funding. My next project is called, 'A Slightly Less Starving Artist'. Maybe this time they'll come through."

"Yeah, that's nice. Okay." Aldon moved her bishop. Boron's shoulders heaved. Was that a sigh? Everett chirped again, somewhat more downcast.

"Everyone's a critic."

Finnegan came out in a dash, running late for the downtown bus. Along with his bag, he had a pair of reading glasses in hand. Aldon sat up.

"Whatcha need those for?"

Finnegan put the glasses on. "I thought I'd need to fill out a bunch of forms and stuff. You know, paperwork." His concern at the thought of bureaucracy was evident through the bushy eyebrows and fake mustache.

Aldon tried her best to maintain her poker face. Or her chess face. Or whichever face it was. "Where…where did you get those?"

"I just grabbed them off your dresser. Why, do you need them?"

Aldon turned away. "Hrm- no, no. You take them. Just, you know, be careful, priceless -pffft- priceless family heirloom."

Finnegan rolled his eyes. "That's what you said about the lint brush and the pair of socks that I borrowed. Anyway. Wish me luck."

"Good luck," Aldon replied, her face turned resolutely to the chess board. Finnegan left in a rush. Boron checkmated her.

For once, losing a game of chess had lost its sting, as Aldon peered down from the window and doubled over laughing at Finnegan's intent expression behind the anomalous Groucho Glasses. Sometimes, she thought to herself, all other needs had to be set aside in the name of silliness.

« **Nazi Nonsense** | **Hub** | **`Overeager Ostrich`** »

A Darke Tale - New Age

The perpetual fear of every slave owner, spanning not only these years, but of slavery as an institution, is that of rebellion. African slaves were frequently taken from warring tribes, speaking different languages, and with known grudges, so cooperation might be mitigated. In some circumstances, males of fighting age were killed or mutilated.

On the plantations, rules created for the safety of slave owners were paramount. Farmers prudently forbid materials that could be turned to weapons in or near slave quarters. A slave master was often employed for their brutality in enforcement.

The hells of life on a sugar plantation are not known widely, but the danger is implied. A worker's life-expectancy is six-months, and the best death to be had is that of exhaustion. Many more will lose limbs to the machines than their breath to the soil. It is for this reason that an exception in general policy is made in these places.

On a sugar plantation, it is custom to keep a machete on the wall, so that the expense of a new slave could, hopefully, be avoided completely.

The Island of Antigua; English West Indies

Darke Sugar Plantation

June, 1633

A scream in the processing room had stopped signaling curiosity. It inspired slaves and servants to act, because there was an unspoken — and perhaps not fully comprehended — agreement adhered to

among the workers. All of them would do what they could to help the one caught in the red and orange folds of iron, because they could need the same help before the end of the season, and the difference of two seconds could mean losing not just a hand but an arm.

But The Tarp stood in the room, and before any of them had fallen in their first steps to keep from getting closer to it, it had pulled the machete from its hook on the wall and kicked out the feet of the negro screaming by the furnace. With a twist, The Tarp brought one elbow down on another, and a crack resounded. The arm broken between the wrist and the captured hand, The Tarp had a clean cut with the edge, and the negro's pain became much more acute.

Bending over, it ripped a strip of burlap from a dirty bag, and padded the wound. Another strip, and with the iron stake hanging from its belt it twisted the cloth around the stump until the spurts turned to a trickle. No words were spoken while it worked with its strange diligence, except the sickly half-syllable of the mutilated slave's word for 'no'.

The Tarp picked up the limp body, a few shades greyer than a moment earlier, and handed it to the manservant Brick, drawn to the shed by the initial panic. A neutral pat on Brick's head and The Tarp was gone, not a sliver of skin seen beneath its rough-hewn cloak.

Brick, stout but not particularly muscular, started to labor down the dirt road and called back for help. When two of the larger slaves had taken the body from him, he held his knees and ordered them forward.

“Bring him to one of the house girls! They'll… they'll.” He made to look like he hadn't tried to say anything else when they looked back, and waved them forward. When they had rounded the short dirt path and were behind the palmetto bushes that lined the right of the walkway, Brick bent over and retched, his elbows on his knees. His eyes started to cloud over and he fell to his hip, and then contented himself to lie down for a moment and let the faintness pass.

When Brick had first enlisted as a servant for his trip to the Caribbean, he had been twenty-five, and bold in his strength as a man. Eager to prove his merit as a strongman, while earning what

he believed to be an investment in his own plantation, he signed his service to work in the fields, and promptly died as one of the first indentured servants in the Caribbean.

In truth, he had lapsed into a deep unconscious state from exhaustion, and his body was stolen by a medicine man. It was through this that Brick met Mr. Darke.

The medicine man took Brick into his hut, where he was given a paste of food and water, and his blood was let as needed. He remained comatose for nearly three weeks, and by then his old master had assumed he had run out on his contract. *Just as well*, he would say, *as there was no way I or anyone else could serve in such a capacity.*

As it was, there *was* a people who could serve in the fields, but they came not from the metropolises of Europe, but the grasslands of Africa. Certainly not after Brick and his circumstantial peers had written with word of the work. In this fractional way, Brick had helped changed the world. Of course, his campaign to make wary his friends and family of the sugar plantations was secondary, his work for Mr. Darke taking up most of his time.

Mr. T. Darke was a frequent visitor of the medicine man. The story as he told it was not unlike Brick's, although his rescue by the island priest was from Oriental merchants and their 'tactical spices'.

“Since then, I've had tea with the old niggah at least once a month, and he's shown me a whole 'nother side of magic I couldn't of fathomed. Wouldn't recommend voodoo to men who haven't had their feet wetted in the waters, though.” During dinner one evening, Darke leaned forward and muttered through his grin “I've heard, their women can't forgive. I daresay they let the grudge ferment and try to poison your grandchildren with it!” Of no incident, Brick's employment had never been strictly addressed in conversational tones. His best guess was the medicine man's boredom, who had become increasingly disinterested in Brick the longer he stayed with him past his conscious return. This is debatably supported by Brick's initial acquaintance with Darke, when he woke up one morning on his plantation, and told that he was employed.

Anecdotes did abound at the table of Darke, and all of them, outlandish or close to home, would ring with an energetic truth that it made his various circles (very few of which overlapped at all) curious as to how a man as young as he could be so cleverly, damnably, experienced. Even after a pint or three, Darke would give the same answer to anyone who brought up his age. A furrowed brow, and then he would look into a polished mug, or spoon, or serving plate. After checking both sides of his face, he gave a tentative estimate. “A fortnight past thirty, I should think.” And that was that.

Brick's employment on Darke's plantation was humbling, but comforting. “A boy's chores for a man's meal.” His only bane was The Tarp, who both terrified and infuriated him. There were no assumptions that could be made about The Tarp, as Darke would say nothing on the subject, and the information gleaned from his actions only supported the conclusion that The Tarp was either insane or well past human. Brick opted to the latter.

Standing somewhere between six and seven feet, it towered over Brick's stout figure. There was little else to be discerned. Its cloak it wore in layers, the outermost tied with a belt, from which hung a few pouches, and one side an iron barb that was rarely touched. It smelled of leather and earth. Its gloves went past the cuff of its sleeve, and the top of its boots had never been seen. Both were a deep brown hide that looked comfortably worn. All of this, in any weather. Even the summers, when humidity was heavier than anywhere, and it was not uncommon to reach a point beyond a hundred and twenty degrees.

Its face had never been seen. Two white circles on a deep leather mask, wide that would cover its cheeks, on top of a small circular screen that, for whatever function, covered its mouth. Not much else was defined by anyone about The Tarp, because it was impossible to search for the details in its mask when its eyes had been caught. The only part of The Tarp that wasn't mechanical was the look it gave, striking an ice into the chords of a person's heart, and still this wasn't human. It surpassed any human capacity into the realm of devilry. Brick was sure that Hell was the only place The Tarp would call home.

Darke said that it was employed for the purpose of slave management. Its presence could accomplish this a dozen times over, and yet Brick had to know it was around every damned day. Its obviously inhuman strength further humiliated Brick, who once believed himself to be a demigod, although that had always had a youthful context. This constant reminder (if irregularly reinforced one), served to aggravate Brick, always and forever, although never to a degree that exceeded the amount of fear that he held for The Tarp, and consequently, never to a degree that would bring him to actually *do* anything about the creature.

And it had the habit of arriving at the most off-putting moments. Brick would go days without seeing it, but when it resurfaced, it was always sudden. *I've never seen him from across a field, no. Always bloody behind me.* Once, after a week without any such incidents, Brick had tentatively concluded that The Tarp had somehow come to understand the particular effect it had on him, and that they would stay away from each other from then out. That evening, he had opened a guest bedroom to begin cleaning, and struck a match to light a candle. The flare of sulfur illuminated the orbs of The Tarp's eyes a foot away from Brick, who alerted the entire household to the circumstances, and also broke Mr. Darke's cow-lamp.

Brick was hardly one to conspire. Getting rid of The Tarp was not an aspiration, but a pipe-dream to be nurtured spitefully until Brick became jaded and unfeeling enough to be legitimately apathetic, and probably die.

Any day now…

A night later, Darke sat across from a bleary eyed, dark looking young fellow, sitting in a tavern nursing a very dirty pint of beer, staring anxiously into his drink, in the way that only a man who owed somebody else more money than they themselves personally owned can. With a keen eye and a small smile, Darke engaged him in conversation, opening with a joke.

“BLLAAAARRRRR, YE BLIMEY FUCKIN' ARSE, STAND THE FUCK UP AND BE A MAN BEFORE SOME FUCKARD CUTS YER BALLS OFF.” When the younger man didn't laugh Darke clapped a

hand down on his neck and giggled for several seconds.

“Nah, nah! I'm fine, I swear I SWEAR,” he teetered on one foot for a moment. “Now, listen up, because I can tell you right now that you don't solver any o' those problems by pissin' around with your drinks. Now listen up, because I'm eight, HUN- no, wait, wait,” He bent over the counter and stared at his candlelit reflection in a bottle. The publican looked down at him from three yards away, decidedly nonbemused.

“I'm… THIRTY… years. Give or take. Old. See? You don't, you don't know. I don't know. Bu' tha's alright. Here, have a drink.” Before the fellow had said a word, his new friend had spilled half a glass of whiskey on his lap, and was whispering 'eight hundred' into his ear incessantly. As he drank, the younger man grew bolder, and explained his situation to Darke, and anyone else who was listening. It was a crowded tavern full of bawlers and drunks, and Darke bought a few rounds to create a sympathetic ring of listeners.

His name was Percival Cretum, and when he had driven his father's business into the ground (for business reasons, presumably; this was not addressed), he had found promise in the heralded western colonies. With no direction or any desire to continue his life in Britain, he got involved with a small company of merchants, and within four months was aboard an argosy to Antigua. His hopes to travel to the New England colonies, where he might start a new, profitable life, were suspended so that he could break away from the men whose ultimate goal was to create a stranglehold on slaving within the Windward Islands (so name for their position relative to the Caribbean trade winds) by laying a foundation in the surrounding islands, until such a time as the Windward Islands were available to be colonized. Percival Cretum had little faith in this plan of action, and certainly wasn't about to take an arduous path of growth and return, so he bid his compatriots farewell and relieved them of enough resources to carry himself to Boston by way of Nevis.

“Where I'd really like to be *now*, because they're probably going to kill me.” At this point everyone, including Percival, laughed heartily, because most of them hadn't been listening and laughing seemed appropriate. He wasn't entirely sure why, but at one point he knew that he *hadn't* wanted to share the information he had just given to a

public house filled with people he didn't know. Figuring that any damage was done, he decided to enjoy the rest of his evening, and promptly blacked out.

The drinking continued, and soon the tavern emptied out, with Darke cradling his new friend in his arms and up a dirt road, only dropping him six times before falling asleep on top of him, a mile from his home.

The next morning was an alarming one for Percival, who awoke to Brick lightly shaking him.

“Mister Darke cares to speak with you as soon as you're able. He also suggests you rub some of the brown paste in your washroom along your gums, and that it ought to help bring you out of any stupor.”

When the stout man had left, Percival stumbled out of the very tightly tucked sheet, nearly falling on his face, and into the first private washroom he had ever been inside. Footsteps from the floor below resounded in his skull like gunshots. He saw a small green bowl filled with a substance that looked thoroughly whipped, evenly light brown and smooth as an eggshell. Another time, he might have hesitated to put it into his mouth, but without skipping a beat, he curled his finger into the cream-like mush and stuck it into his cheek.

Before he had started to spread it along the inside of his lip, his body slipped into a euphoric sense of acuity. His pupils dilated, and the deathly headache evaporated with an inaudible sigh.

Feeling very sharp and prepared to fight his way through any consequences of whatever he might have done the night before, he strode out of the bedroom and observed his surroundings.

Ornate woodwork, oil paintings, and down the hall, a pedestal holding two massive barbs of ivory intersecting each other. It was a testament to affluence, and Percival had only seen the portion of the house outside of his bedroom. As he made his way down the staircase, envy and admiration upon him, and knowing nothing else about Darke, he knew he wanted to be him.

After making several aimless rounds and seeing nobody, he caught a glimpse of a tall figure's coat and called out to him for directions. A masked head and the shoulder it belonged to slid out behind a doorway and nodded in the opposite direction. Feeling as though he *should* have been taken aback, but not actually having the sentiment by whatever magic was in the bowl upstairs, he followed the nod to a brightly lit dinner room, and the back of his comrade's head.

Darke twisted around in his seat. “Percy! Join me. Eggs?”

“Gladly, sir. Thank you.” Darke scraped a pair of the bright and flattened orbs onto a dish he had prepared, and began pouring himself a glass of rum.

“Made, of sugar from this plantation, *on* this plantation, about four summers ago; I have since had a few other distilleries built around the side of the house, and am learning to create rum as a little side project of mine. Appreciate the taste of wine, but use rum, for the real drinking.” Percival noted how he would hesitate between words as he spoke, drawing emphasis to some of his absent-minded actions between clauses.

“On my first batch, I offered the first glass to one of the niggers who helped me move some supplies. Didn't know what I was doing. He's blind now. Step out on the porch with me.” Percival began to pick up his plate, but a bustling house servant took it out of his hands and carried it to a table on the sundeck. Overlooking the orchard in front of them, and to his left, the noon sun shown down on the tall fields of sugar cane.

“So, Percy, my new friend. How much of last night do you remember? Because as much as I put down, I do recall your very interesting story.” He pulled a pouch of tobacco out of his shirt. “And *you*,” he gestured with a pipe, also from his shirt, “have piqued my interest. No fear, no fear!” In response to Percival's fearfully crooked eyebrows.

“You made it very clear to me, and everybody else, that your greatest interest is money. And that you have the utmost faith in your own abilities. As do I.” He lit a matched and drew.

“Mr. Darke, I don't know what I said, but I hope you'll pardon me,” Darke stopped him with a thoughtful wave of his hand.

“Darke. I've been going by that name for a long time, Percy. And I think I'm about done with it. So here are my thoughts. Not many people can leave their mark on the world. And I believe that if you chase after luxury by money you've only made by using others, you won't care to have it in the end. I can promise you that wealth has never been a goal to strive for. It's truly secondary, and by the time you've created it for yourself, it will be too late to realize that you really wanted everything but.

“You have your gifts, Percy. Intellect and education, ambition. A hundred hells, you have youth. Real youth, not my youth. Forget I said that. Actually don’t, I’ll circle around. And I don’t know if you noticed, but before you vomited a barrel and a half, there was a tavern full of women looking you over. All of this, and you want money. I blame society.” He drew again, and took a swig of rum.

“My point is, Percy, you have *potential.* There’s very little legitimate potential in anyone, and you have mounds of it. Having seen the world change a few times over — no really, I’ll get to that — I’ve earned the right to say it’s people like *you* who make the difference. And here you are, no small thief, crooking over men who put faith in you to get to the mainland and make *money*?” He spat the word, and shot through Percy with a look of more paternalism than the young man had ever been shown. Shame was a foreign construct for him. It hurt.

“So if you’d like, *I’d* like to see to it you don’t waste yourself.

“There's magic in this world, son. It lives behind a veil, and it'll give itself up to people who go looking for it. I found it, and in my time I've done a great deal to make a difference by it. And then I got *wealthy*.” He gestured across the grounds. “Worst thing that could have happened to me.” He drew from the pipe again, and began to tell a story.

It was a fascinating story. Darke had had his fingers in nearly every European conquest in the last millennium. He had loved, and lost, and fought in countless wars. He had nearly died at the hands of

Francois Ravaillac, during his mission to kill Henry IV, King of France. He had advised the English crown and manipulated the Church of Rome, always for the greater good, *always by a code*. He had lived. When he drew his story to a close, how he had come to own his plantation and some of his lesser misadventures with the island's witch doctor, he seemed to expect something from Percival. If not belief, then perhaps acknowledgment. He got neither.

“Mister Darke, I must be on my way. Thank you for your hospitality,” “You can reject what you've heard today, Percy,” “Percival. My name is Percival Cretum, thank you.” Darke's sigh was not one of frustration, nor disappointment, but of understanding. A father watching his son make the mistakes that he couldn't warn him against.

“I'm afraid you're Darke, now. You can go if you like. But magic is upon you, and I only want to see you use it the right way. Admittedly probably a faux pas to make you magic without telling you, but there’s really no standard, so there you go.”

“What? What magic, would you say that you're magic, that-” “Not anymore, but I certainly was.” “that your eight hundred years old-” “I might be a *little* magic, still.” “and that paste upstairs, that was *magic*?” “Coca leaves, which I can't believe there's not a market for.” “You're insane.” “More for me, I suppose.”

“I need to leave. Thank you. Thank you very much, for everything, for your time, for breakfast, for the COCA LEAVES, thank you, and thank you again. Good bye!”

Percival Cretum Darke strode down the path he assumed was to the city, came back when it wasn't, and looked around the grounds, trying and failing to maintain the sarcastic indifference in his step. The man who wasn't Darke anymore pointed to the West, and with a parting, “Right. Thanks!” Percival Cretum Darke walked off the No-Longer-Darke Plantation.

The Tarp stood behind the man smoking a pipe. In a voice like velvet gravel he spoke. “Do you try again?”

A moment passed. “I’ve been at this game a while. Nine years, six

months, between two or four weeks, depending on that Autumn's tobacco harvest. He'll be back. See to it he gets to Boston, will you?" And The Tarp was gone.

Are We Christmas Yet?

"I still think this is a terrible idea."

"No, it's awesome! Like, deconstructive or whatever."

Overgang and Joey stared at the enormous red bauble that towered over nearby buildings, pensively sipping eggnog. It had several hundred minuscule trees hanging off the side of it. Overgang posed a question.

"So, it's an hour and ten to midnight. What happens when it's Christmas?"

"Presents happen."

"Presents happen?"

"Presents happen. Everywhere."

"Elaborate."

"It literally causes Christmas miracles."

"Elaborate more."

"Sick children will walk, Tiny Tim will get his presents, Scrooge will see the light. The town will be filled with cheer and goodwill, children will run downstairs only to see Santa Claus pop up the chimney. Rich people will let beggars into their houses, every church bell will ring twelve times. A cranky old man will smile for the first time in twenty years. Kids will ice skate while laughing happily, and be joined by their otherwise dismissive parents. Snow shall fall down, leaving beautiful white fields by morning. John McClane and Hans Gruber shall fight a war of wills, little Macaulay Culkin will fight off a pair of thieves. The Grinch's heart will grow three sizes, and Charlie Brown's sad little tree will get the love it deserves. Peace on earth, goodwill to man. The perfect Christmas."

"Well, that sounds lovely, if a bit boring."

"And of course, since Christmas is about the little baby Jesus and the mother Mary, every virginal female in the city will spontaneously give birth, whereupon the newborn is promptly crushed by a pile of gold, frankincense, and myrrh."

"That's more like it."

Watching Corpses

I don't quite remember the first time, but my parents told me about it. I would have been about… 5? Probably 5 or 6, yeah. It was one of my friends' dad. I just ran away screaming to the teacher about a monster in the playground. Got told off for being mean to grown ups. The next week he drowned. Fell off his fishing boat.

No, when I actually realised it I would have been about 11. When my grandmother was in the hospital.

Nah, it wasn't her. Cancer went into remission. It was all the other patients. Most of them were missing eyes. That's normally the first thing that I notice. She ended up dying a year or so later.

Oh man, you have no idea. Everyone just crowding over her. My mother kept making me go and talk to her, and hold her hand. I kept just seeing bits of skin falling off her. I think that's probably what fucked me up the most, you know. A whole week just being driven out to the hospital, every day, seeing more and more of her fall apart. And everyone just acted normal, you know? Making sure she was okay. Comforting a corpse.

Oh, hell no. I was old enough to know that I'd just be thrown in the crazy bin. They just thought I was crying because we were in a hospital.

Anyway, made my way through school somehow. Wasn't really great at anything in particular, so I ended up joining the army.

Well yeah, in hindsight it wasn't the best idea. Once we got into the field it was just… hell, you know. There'd just be people sitting in the mess hall, all dried up and shit. And they'd talk to me, and I knew that they were going to end up dead, and it's that… I tried to stop them, but it never worked. It wasn't great.

Yeah, well, you can't really blame me. Just woke up one day and

they were all like that. Easiest decision of my life: took the first plane out. The carpet bombings started a week later. That's when the GOC pulled me in, of course.

Well, it looked very "telling". Not the kind of thing the army really cares about, but the GOC figured it out somehow.

I can't really remember… he went by Tangerine, I think? Anyway, we chatted for a bit, got everything sorted out. They just stuck me in an office to organise teams.

Well, it didn't guarantee that they'd be successful, but they always came back alive. After a while they realised that the personnel I was turning down still turned up dead, even if it was something like a heart attack, so they pulled me out of that.

Well yeah, that's when they started thinking that it might be me killing them indirectly. Kept me locked up for a month, ran the battery of tests until they all-cleared me. After that, if I saw any dead personnel I was to keep it to myself. I felt pretty crappy about it, but like I said, I can't do much about it. They decided it might be better to send me out doing field work, you know? I'd been in the army, like I said. And let me tell you, I was the best. Worked as a spotter in sniper teams; of course, they'd always make their shots. I could go in and clear out buildings by myself, just because I knew they *had* to die.

Oh man, the worst was probably the crowd bombing. I knew something was going to go down, there were dead people everywhere, and then they all just… aligned in a perfect circle. And it was like, in those fractions of seconds before they all went, I knew what was going to happen. They were all going to die, and the rest would scatter. And I looked at the centre of that circle, and I swear, that bastard looked straight at me. Of course, I just saw a hollow skull, facing right at me, and then a ball of flames and shrapnel. That would have been in '97, you know, might have heard about it.

Yeah, I retired from active service, what, 6 years ago? They still pull me in for important stuff. Hell, they've probably noticed I'm gone already.

Oh, no, I'm not worried. They'll come and get me.

Within the week.

Dark Arts and Crafts

I used to see abstracts, nonsense, but somehow I understood. It was an instinct, an intuition; less like the bird knowing to build a nest, more like the twigs knowing how to become one. There was something magical to the way I interfaced with it. Each piece was a tiny fragment of the universe, and some of them hinted about it, or had a vignette from its history. A shattered mirror, twinkling in impossible hues. These things were intentional and accidental and incidental and absolute, and sometimes I found some occult wisdom lying around in the street.

Have you heard of the elephant that did abstract paintings? I went to visit it at the zoo because I thought that was interesting. I surprised myself. I'm cynical and I usually pass those things off, but I went and watched the elephant paint. I thought it was clever. The paintings gave me happy feelings, so much so that I bought one.

I hung new paintings up facing my bed. It helped me absorb them since they were the last and first thing I saw every day. I liked to think they influenced my dreams. I had a single dream during this painting's stint on the back wall. This dream was mostly colour. Colour, memory, and a strong taste of copper. There were no words, or sound, or touch, simply being… or, perhaps, simply not. This dream was different. I woke up excited.

I **experienced**. Trillions of people converging, dancing across vast distances, finally disappearing into a vanishing point. In the end I opened my eyes to see the elephant’s painting past the foot of my bed. In that context, the painting made sense. The elephant, I thought, must have had the same dream.

Other things made weird sense to me. I saw a broken mirror in a restroom. I felt that if I stayed long enough the person on the other side might start talking to me. Of course that didn’t happen, but when I fell asleep I could see Earth through a looking glass;

tumbling evermore down an endless rabbit hole.

The girl next-door. Every day she left the building with a mischievous smile on her face. I can't describe what I saw that night; but I woke in the morning with pins and needles down my throat. I felt like we saw it together.

One day I saw her leave with a man who smiled the same smile, and I thought I wouldn't see her for a long time after that.

I saw holes in a tightly stretched canvas. On the pavement there were spots of light where moths had eaten away. In my dreams I heard beams of light twisting through space; I saw screaming echoes of glorious tulips. My eyelids parted to taste the sun.

I wondered about the girl I saw earlier; Did the sun's gaze flow into her apartment, too?

I looked for answers.

Her room was completely furnished, knick knacks and all. Was she whisked away? Did she die? All that was left there were her memories and my approximation of them. I could see from her textbooks that she was studying economics, and that she went to the local college. A framed photo of a man who certainly wasn't the man I saw her with before. Who was the other man? The man in the photo looked like it was her boyfriend. I figured it was so.

I didn't dream that night. I saw nothing like a singularity, or a single pillar of light, or a broken reflection. I expected that I was on some sort of trail, and that was where the next clue would be. What I thought was magic turned out to be a day trip in my head, and here I was trespassing on someone else's life.

No more dreams. I got tired of the little bits of *stellar history* lying around my studio apartment. I got cynical again. I resented the elephant painting and the cosmic mystery I imagined.

Then the girl was back. I just glimpsed her turning a corner one day, and I could hear her arguing on the floor below me. When I left yesterday morning, she was screaming at someone in the hallway.

This isn’t the same!

It was the man in the photo. She turned around and started crying. The man seemed frustrated and scared. He looked a lot like her.

Why isn't this the same?

The man she left with long ago turned the corner with a middle aged woman.

She's not smiling.

The pair kissed at the foot of the stairs.

Why isn't she smiling?

The girl screamed at her brother, then seized and kissed him.

This is not her world.

Endorphins swam around in my head. I began to grin. I cried and laughed and I didn’t care about the looks they gave me. This was an accident. A masterpiece. I performed a miracle.

I understood how we exist in *their* memory… and other people exist in ours. My memories of her were wrong, but now they are absolute.

That night I could hardly sleep, but I dreamed. I dreamed of the things *escaping* into a distant spot. I saw them funnel out of the other end. They were screaming, crude reflections of what they were. I woke up and lay staring at the ceiling, lightheaded.

I disposed of some garbage; my room was empty but for the paintings. Happy little elephant scribblings all over the walls and roof and floor. I went to the zoo and I purchased every single painting they had and the brilliant splashes of colour were everything.

It is a fine thing to be a patron of the arts.

I went to sleep and I woke up and between the two was everything. The girl lived with her brother and the man had moved away. She cried and he cried and they cried because the world was not their

own and they knew it.

I started to make art of my own. I bought some paint and some horsehair paintbrushes and some gloriously beautiful white paper and I started to apply some colour, but they didn't mix the right way and it all came out wrong.

I went to sleep and I woke up and the green light of the sun flowed through every window. Meanwhile the universe tried to make sense of my art, so the girl next door and the boyfriend that was the brother sat and giggled and looked into each other's eyes and saw nothing but each others' retinas. The elephant paintings covered the roof and the floor and the walls and the sink and the lights and my clothes and my flesh and the world.

I wish I could paint like the elephant did.

I went to sleep and I woke up and my dreams were pyrite and sulphur. The boyfriend and his sister smiled and grinned and skipped in tune. I picked up the horsehair paintbrush with my trunk and flayed the flesh of the rough-hewn canvas with whips laced with black and blue and red and a shade of being that words are not enough for.

I went to sleep and I woke up and my paintings were not enough and so I took a brush to myself and painted my grey skin and the blue light of the sun on my indigo paint mixed with the red of the coupling next door and it all mixed into a single hue and had the consistency of vomit twice removed.

I went to sleep and I woke up.

I went to sleep and I woke up.

I went to sleep and I woke up.

I went to sleep.

Uncountable infinities of light swam into impossible oneness. An errant thought: wouldn't it be nice to dance among the fairies? The lights cackled and shone and whispered foreign words down my throat and the words became mine and the world felt like nothing.

I disappeared into the distance and never woke up.

A Defection

```
>cavalcade.bat -o -xk -scp 00315
LOADING… LOADED
PROJECT CAVALCADE CONTINGENCY
COMMISSION
STANDPOINT: 47.6097° N, 122.3331° W
CONTINGENCY 00315-XK-001
STARTING… ERROR [048500: INSECURE LINK]
>realgen.bat -a
RealGen Rootkit v1.31
OverDood Environment Loading… Loaded.
Enter Target Range:
>192.168.0.*
Scanning Ports… Scanned.
Enter Redirects:
>*.*.*.*
Redirecting…
System Redirect Loop Found.
Ignore?
>y
Redirecting… Redirected.
>quit
Exiting OverDood Environment.
>cavalcade.bat -o -xk -scp 00315
LOADING… LOADED
PROJECT CAVALCADE CONTINGENCY
COMMISSION
STANDPOINT: 47.6097° N, 122.3331° W
CONTINGENCY 00315-XK-001
STARTING… STARTED.
REVERSION POTENTIAL: 0.03740
RESOLUTION POTENTIAL: 0.00276
>revokePrivs.bat -all -s -m 73
Does the black moon howl73737373? (hard lock
disengaged)
```

>logoff -cor
Does the. (7373)?? howl black white black white black white black white black white gray moon does howl? how737373

Sedna Prewitt sighed, knowing she had ended thousands of lives with a few keypresses. At least it would get the point across. Sedna calmly walked to the safe in the corner of her office, rotating the mechanism until the lock opened with a satisfying thud. She swung open the safe door, revealing a rusted toolbox. She picked it up, then closed the safe door. Sedna walked out of her office. It was odd, she thought; a weight had been lifted from her chest, and yet her stomach felt like it was sinking. It didn't matter too much. She inhaled sharply as she approached the exit of Site-76.

Site Director Prewitt was waved past security without complaint.

Sedna walked out the front door towards the drab blue car on the opposite side of the road. Her pair of contacts sat inside it: Gamut Rückfall was reading her newspaper, resting it against the steering wheel; Krav Lichtenfield sat in the passenger side, chewing strawberry gum and rubbing his stubble. Sedna opened one of the passenger doors, eased herself down into the leather seat, then rested her toolbox on her lap. Gamut folded her newspaper, placed it on the dashboard, and started accelerating down the road. Krav turned around and leaned across, grinning and offering Sedna a stick of gum. She took it, unwrapped it, then placed it in her mouth. Krav's grin widened even more.

"Welcome to the Chaos Insurgency, Miss Prewitt."

PROJECT CAVALCADE CONTINGENCY COMMISSION
STANDPOINT: 47.6097° N, 122.3331° W
STANDPOINT DESIGNATION: SEATTLE
CONTINGENCY 00315-XK-001
DESCRIPTION: CONTINGENCY FOR SCP-315 XK SCENARIO FAMILY
SOLUTION: WIDESPREAD UNILATERAL DISSOCIATION AND TEMPORAL LOCK AS PER TS-7

PROTOCOLS
VECTORS: SPARSE AIRBORNE (CHEMICAL, PATHOGENIC), MEMETIC
MODIFIERS: SRA TYPE C, XACTS TYPE B
REVERSION POTENTIAL: 0.03740, LINEAR, 2 HOUR ZERO POINT
RESOLUTION POTENTIAL: 0.00276, LINEAR, 7 HOUR ZERO POINT

The Administrator contemplated the readout on his screen. A two hour window of non-zero reversion potential… plenty of time to address the situation. There had been worse breaches in the past, by far, and for worse reasons.

The phone next to the Administrator rang, and he picked it up. O5-4 was the one who would have to deal with the situation. Time was of the essence; there was no time for a council vote, so O5-4 made a direct petition. The Administrator listened to the requests, agreeing to all of them one by one. This wasn't the worst that the Administrator had seen, but it was the worst that O5-4 had ever needed to deal with.

Sedna Prewitt had been capable of doing much worse than this, and for that the Administrator was pleased and disappointed in equal measure.

A man was looking out a window.

The birds were flying, the sun was shining, and everything was right with the world. Everything was okay, everything was alright, there was nothing to worry about. He heard a car screech off the side of a road, then the crunch of metal against brick below his office. He heard people shouting, screaming, crying, and then the shouting stopped.

Everything was perfectly fine.

"Hello?"

A middle-aged man was talking to him on a laptop screen. Said

laptop was sitting in the lap of the man who was not on the laptop screen. The man on the laptop screen started talking again.

"You seem to be forgetting things every time we stop talking."

The man that was not on the laptop stared blankly. He started to talk, then coughed; he welled up some spit in his throat, then tried again.

"What?"

"Something is heavily affecting your concentration."

"Who are you?"

"Who indeed. Perhaps a more pertinent question: who are you?"

The man who was not on the laptop screen paused for a moment to think. Who was he? It didn't seem too important. It wasn't that he didn't remember. He knew that he knew who he was; on realising this, safe in the conclusion that he was aware of who he was on some deeper level, he refused to drag it up into his active consciousness. The man who was not on the laptop screen was struck by a profound, zenlike apathy. Easier by far to mirror the man in the laptop screen's words than to think his own thoughts.

"Who indeed."

"Well, for convenience's sake, let's call you Kevin."

"Why Kevin?"

"Because that's your name."

"Ah."

"As for me, you can call me 315. Ringing any bells?"

Kevin stopped paying attention.

"Kevin?"

Kevin's gaze started drifting from the man in the laptop screen. 315

clicked his fingers loud enough for the laptop's speakers to clip.

"Back to me, Kevin, focus on me, alright? If you look away, you'll forget again."

Kevin looked back towards the screen. Easier to go along with it. He spoke to 315.

"Okay."

"Alright. Good. First of all, we need to start moving. Pick up this laptop, be careful not to drop it, and we're going to start walking out the door. Okay?"

"Okay."

Kevin, at this point, felt the easiest course of action was compliance. He grabbed the laptop in his hands, then stood up. He started looking towards the window. 315 snapped his fingers again.

"No, Kevin, come on, focus. Look to your right. The door is on your right."

Kevin looked to the door on his right, then paused for two seconds.

"You need to walk towards the door, Kevin."

Kevin started walking towards the door.

Professor Thaddeus Xyank was annoyed. Not at the fact that a space the size of Seattle - indeed, a space that *was* Seattle - had been temporally corrupted. He was annoyed that nobody had told him that it was going to happen. The research potential into temporal corruption seemed enormous. This was mostly because Xyank still didn't understand what temporal corruption actually meant.

> From: O5-4 (1.1.861.291|
> artni_3ujk2bv6j3b5.4-5o#1.1.861.291|
> artni_3ujk2bv6j3b5.4-5o)
> To: Thad Xyank (1.1.861.291|

artni_83028fo3b4.knayxt#1.1.861.291|
artni_83028fo3b4.knayxt)
Date: [FIELD EMPTY]
Subject: Temporal Corruption
Content:
Seattle has been temporally locked as per TS-7 containment protocols. However, the Type B XACTS stationed around the breach have malfunctioned, resulting in temporal corruption. Considering your paper regarding hypothetical use of a Type B XACTS array to introduce temporal corruption, you are the person most suited to address the situation. This should also present a valuable opportunity to test the accuracy of your theories.

You will be transported to Seattle within the next twenty minutes.

Xyank hadn't written the paper that O5-4 was referring to yet. No, scratch that; he hadn't even designed a Type B XACTS yet. On the short trip to Seattle, Xyank thumbed through both the aforementioned paper, as well as the specifications document for the Type B.

Halfway through the latter, Professor Xyank saw the memetic trigger he was going to place within the paper. He felt his arms seize and slump, damned whatever reason he was going to have for putting it in there, then fell unconscious in the back of the unmarked van.

Sedna Prewitt watched her watch tick down.

90 minutes remained until Seattle was irrecoverable.

Gamut had taken them out from the city centre, through the residential areas, and out into the "semi-residential" zones. They had reached the strange sort of point at which a city seems to lose its steam; where more of the land is used for roads than housing, and more still is simply open grassland, as yet unclaimed by urban sprawl. Krav was staring out the windows, chewing his gum to calm his nerves. Sedna couldn't take her eyes off her watch until Gamut

broke her concentration.

"We're here."

Gamut slowly decelerated, rolled to a stop besides a well-forested area, then pulled up the handbrake. She unbuckled her seatbelt and got out of the car, momentarily stretching her arms and legs. Krav opened the glove compartment, pulled out a small packet of papers held together with a thick elastic band, then got out himself. He turned, opening Sedna's door for her, and gesturing with a smile.

"Out we get, Miss Prewitt. Watch your step, 'n all that."

Sedna grabbed the handle of the rusty toolbox and stood up outside the door.

"What now, then?"

Gamut answered as she walked around the front of the car, running her hands through her short pink hair.

"We have a five minute walk through these trees, then we hit an open field. Our plane's waiting there."

Sedna nodded. Gamut pulled a compass from her pocket, looking at it intensely; Sedna stared, confused.

"So it's just past these trees?"

"Yes, but we need this to get through. Walking in a straight line can be difficult in the wrong places, if you get my gist."

Gamut tapped the side of her nose, then started walking into the greenery. Krav gestured for Sedna to follow behind, then fell in at the back of the queue. They continued to walk; Sedna caught herself erring from Gamut's lead twice, involuntarily drifting from the intended path. After five minutes, as expected, they exited into a wide clearing. A small white aeroplane sat in the middle of a short paved runway; the trio walked up to the side of it. Gamut pulled a key from her pocket, pushed it into the small hatch on the side, then swung it open. Krav stepped in first, offered a helping hand to Sedna, and Gamut closed the door behind her. Gamut walked

through to the one-pilot cockpit, having to crouch slightly to get around; Krav and Sedna sat in the two seats behind, buckling up their harnesses. Sedna rested the rusty toolbox in front of her, then queried Krav:

"So, where now?"

"Next stop, London. Too much Foundation presence in America, much safer in England."

"And we're going there in this?"

"Yes. Were you expecting a commercial flight?"

"Well, it's just a bit small."

"Small enough not to be detected, even if we weren't already shielded in a hundred different ways."

"I see."

Ex-Site Director Prewitt looked back at her watch, feeling her seat vibrate as the engines started up. Gamut started to accelerate. The small plane hurtled down the runway, then lifted off the ground. Sedna felt her stomach drop from more than mere airsickness.

83 minutes until Seattle was irrecoverable.

« **CAVALCADE** | **CAV-002** »

Someone Steals Aldon's Penis

1. You should read Learning the Alphabet before considering reading this, at least to the end of the first act. (The content of this tale is probably the dream that occurs immediately prior to Boron Blisters, but there's no way to be sure.)

2. Explanation of why this exists.

This was written waaaaay back when TwistedGears, the author of Learning the Alphabet, had only written the first tale, Anart Antics. In chat, he had been discussing his plans for the series - at least, how the first act was going to go down. The plan was for Aldon to sculpt herself a new body, with the intention of inhabiting it, but then for that to never occur because of Plot getting in the way.

Considering that the desire for a new body is why Aldon participates in the whole thing, I thought that was a bit of a disappointing way to end Act 1. And so, for the sake of closure, I recommended that, shortly after the terrible ordeal of Act 1 concludes, someone should just… run past and steal her penis, which would clearly solve all problems forever. (n.b. clearly not the case)

This was, of course, a very silly idea. It was worth referencing offhand in Cool War 2, my 2014 April Fools contribution. And then, foolishly, someone told me that it couldn't be written.

So I wrote it. Woops.

> With that context, I hope you will understand that **this tale is simply an exercise in absurdity**, and I apologise sincerely for it even existing.
>
> 3. Nobody should read this. It includes a penis swordfight.

One of the few things that Jakeob Aldon liked about having been born male was that she could urinate while standing up.

It was with a mix of confusion and astonishment, then, that she rose from her groggy, half-awake stupor to find the organ which accommodated said action missing. Aldon walked from the bathroom to the small parcel of chaos she tentatively called a "living room", then tapped her roommate on the shoulder.

"Oi, Finn."

Finnegan responded, not looking away from his computer monitor.

"Wuzzat?"

"Do you still have a penis?"

"Um. Last time I checked, yes."

"Check again."

Finnegan pushed his fingers between his skin and clothes, then raised his eyebrows. He pushed his hand down his boxers, checking where the flesh would normally be. Finnegan scrunched his face into a grimace, finally turning away from his computer screen.

"…I'm not sure what I was expecting."

"When was the last time you… checked?"

"It's not the sort of thing that I really need to investigate actively. Jesus, there's nothing there. It's like I'm a goddamn Barbie doll or something."

Aldon rubbed her palms against her head.

"I have no idea about how to solve this problem. I have no idea how to even begin."

"Have you checked the tapes?"

"Tapes?"

"Like, the security cameras."

"We have security cameras?"

Finnegan blinked twice.

"No. That was stupid. Forget I said that."

The pair of them went silent, entering into deep contemplation for half a minute.

This silence was then broken by a faint giggle from outside their window. The pair of them looked towards the noise, catching a flash of movement. They skittered towards the door, swinging it open to see a green gnome-like creature scuttling around the corner, cackling madly while holding a pair of fleshy lengths above its head. Aldon and Finnegan looked at each other, sharing a moment to relish the utter absurdity of the situation, before chasing after the thing. Finnegan shouted out to it:

"HEY! I WAS USING THAT!"

The pair turned the corner, sprinting down the sidewalk. Finnegan, used to sitting in front of a computer for hours on end, started to lag behind. Aldon, being much more athletic, kept pace with the rapidly moving creature. She put in more energy, slowly closing the gap between the two. The gnome glanced over its shoulder, giggling while its prizes wobbled around in its hands. This did, however, distract it from where it was going; it tripped slightly, losing its grip on one of the two. It turned to pick the organ up, but noticing Aldon closing, simply left it on the ground. Aldon slowed down as she passed the discarded member, deftly plucking it up from the ground.

It wasn't hers.

She blushed as she pushed it into her pocket; the thief was getting away. It ran carelessly through a set of traffic lights; Aldon weaved through speeding traffic to make her way across. It ran through holes in wooden fences; Aldon hurdled over the top of them. They ran to and fro across the town, chasing each other in a seemingly endless game of cat-and-mouse.

Eventually, the gnome made a wrong turn, sprinting down an alley with no exit. Aldon slowly approached the tiny humanoid, menacingly towering over it. The gnome stood defiant, holding its stolen dangalang as a makeshift sword. It shouted squeakily at its assailant:

"Have some honour! Fight me on an equal footing!"

Aldon sighed, taking out the member she had already recovered. She shook it to attention, then closed in, crossing blades with the thief.

Ms Doreen Stedtworth, an 81 year old lady who lived with seven cats, heard some kind of racket coming from outside her window. She decided that she would go take a look at what it was.

whap whap whap whap

"EN GUARDE, COCK GOBLIN!"

"THE PENIS MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD!"

Doreen would request a change in medication during her next doctor's appointment.

Aldon disarmed her opponent, holding her own armament menacingly to her opponent's throat. It gulped down a knot in its throat, falling to its knees.

"Fine, I yield, I yield! You have great skill with a blade, even though it is not your ow-"

"God, just shut up."

Aldon pocketed the pair of penises, then picked up the gnome by the scruff of its neck. She turned around, only then noticing Doreen Stedtworth staring at her. Aldon waved cheerily, then started to walk home.

"So… reattaching them?"

"Oh, they should just stick back on. Probably."

The gnome sat tied to a chair as its captors turned around, awkwardly fumbling beneath their pants. There was a collective moment of uncertainty, and then sighs of relief. Aldon whispered to Finnegan.

"So, we've got it. What do we do with it?"

"I dunno. Throw it at the men in black?"

"There's a line between just punishment and abject cruelty."

"It literally emasculated me."

"It's a tiny green dangalang thief, but it's not malicious, just mischievous."

"It literally emasculated me."

"We could probably keep it."

"*It literally emasculated me.*"

Aldon turned around, putting her hand to her chin.

"I wonder how big a cage we'll need?"

"IT LITERALLY EMASCULATED ME."

The gnome sat and grinned at Finnegan, squeaking a response.

"You've gotta admit it was funny."

"No! No, I don't! You can't go stealing other people's body parts!

Allie, we know nothing about it! This thing could steal our eyelids in our sleep! We could wake up without fingers! And most importantly, our rent contract says no pets!"

Aldon crouched down, looking at the gnome. It was, to some degree, adorable.

"What's your name, little guy?"

"Johnson. Johnson Theef."

Aldon looked up at Finnegan, struggling to keep a straight face. Finnegan put his palm to his forehead.

"Okay, whatever."

And that was how Jakeob Aldon got her first pet.

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An Armenian Bodybuilder Exercises His Legal Rights

It was refreshing to have bruises on my skin.

My mouth felt slightly off. I reached up to my jaw, then clicked it back into place. I spat out blood and a few teeth, then felt hard matter extrude from my gums anew. The bruises faded away, returning to the colour of simple flesh. I grinned.

At this, my opponent was somewhat taken aback. He responded with another punch.

Heat flowed around my abdomen; the demigod's fingers ripped between my ribs and punctured my lungs, my previously inhaled breath now whistling through the open wound. He pulled back, then struck again, this time slicing my heart and stomach. My eyes widened, I felt blood and gastric juices start to pour into places blood and gastric juices should not pour into. Another blow popped my left eye; then my opponent took a step away.

He watched, intrigued, as my muscles rippled and realigned. The pain used to bring me to my knees; now, with my steeled mind, there is only extreme and excruciating discomfort. My diaphragm spasmed and I coughed up blood and misplaced vomit, then my gut tightened and I threw up vomit and misplaced blood. The wounds re-knitted, my stomach and heart sealing; then my lungs, which felt as if on fire as I drew a deep breath. I stared into Perseus' face as I felt a lens pull itself into existence, and felt my eye reinflate with vitreous humour.

Perseus grimaced.

"Well then. It seems I was mistaken. Which member of the pantheon were you looking for again?"

"Hephaestus."

"You think… you're a son of Hephaestus?"

"Yes."

"With your body and build? The god of craftsmen? I'd think you to be one of Ares' boys."

"My body is of his, for it is a work of art."

I flexed for emphasis. Perseus smirked a little.

"Maybe a son of Narcissus."

"I don't mean to brag. This is not my opinion on the matter."

"Then whose is it?"

"Professor Mared Gretchen's."

Perseus' eyes widened at the name.

"Old Mared sent you?"

"If that is what you will call her, then yes. You've met her?"

"No. She is, however… quite well known in our circles. She is known to override."

"Override?"

"Override and overwrite. The tales of Old Mared are… genuinely mythical, even to people like you or I."

"I've not heard such tales."

"Well… we try to keep them under wraps. They are mostly embarrassing to the rest of us. She kicked Zeus in the balls once."

I felt an eyebrow raise involuntarily. Perseus scratched his neck.

"Regardless… I cannot personally hold audience with Hephaestus, but I can certainly find someone who can. Your negotiations from there on will be your own. Understood?"

"Understood."

"Then let us exchange phone numbers."

I passed a slip of paper from my pocket to him, he passed one in return. He looked over my body, still slightly damp and red from blood, then nodded.

"It was good to meet you, Khoren."

"And you, Perseus."

Perseus started to walk away, then turned over his shoulder.

"If you don't mind my asking, why do you want to meet him?"

"Besides being my father?"

"Well, yes."

"He owes my mother a lifetime of child support."

Perseus chuckled lightly and walked away.

I selected the contact labelled "Prof. Gretchen" on my mobile phone, then called. After three rings, the Professor answered in her grandmotherly British accent.

"Khoren, my boy, my boy! How goes the epic quest?"

"I've got to say, Professor Gretchen, substantially better whenever I mention your name to people."

I heard her laugh; big, booming, gut laughs that I'd seen many times before.

"Good to hear they haven't forgotten me over there! The amount of drinking that went on at their parties, surprised they manage to remember their own names. Where are you up to?"

"I've made some progress with things. I'm mostly just calling to clarify something."

"Hm?"

"Did you ever kick Zeus in the balls?"

That big, booming laugh again, which I tried to interrupt.

"Really though. Did that happen?"

"Oh, absolutely. His fault for hitting on me. At the time, of course, he didn't know I swung for the other team, but he kept pushing and pushing. Clearly quite inebriated - normally a reasonable enough chap, but cannot stomach his alcohol. Goes straight to his head. Incapacitated him long enough for me to run out the back door with Eris and Athena though. Honestly, Eris throws much better parties, and Athena can do that thing where you tie a knot in a cherry stalk with your tongue."

"But you never met Hephaestus?"

"No, no, no. A few thousand years of turning down invites to sit indoors working on your next big piece, eventually they stop bothering to ask you at all."

"I see."

"Hm? What's wrong, boy?"

"I'm not sure why you didn't tell me this before I left, Professor. It might have helped a bit."

"Khoren, you get to my age, you gather enough stories to fill a hundred phone books. I could bore you to your death and mine with all the things I got up to with just that pantheon. And anyway, this is your quest, not mine. If I could just give you an address, it wouldn't have any meaning, would it?"

"It would certainly make things a lot easier, though."

"All I say is that nothing is easy, and the best things are the hardest. Gotta go, Khoren; have an appointment with a poker player."

"Thanks, Professor. Talk to you soon."

Perseus didn't end up calling; instead, he texted through an address, a date, and a time. I sent him my thanks in response. It was still not for another two days that he would arrive. I sipped my coffee lightly, enjoying the sun.

A loud bang echoed around the corner. The source then drove out; a brightly coloured van made a hairpin turn and rocketed past the cafe, followed by a pursuing large black van labelled "σκληρά κρούστα πιτσαρία". The sputtering of their engines faded off into the distance, and the patrons returned to their newspapers and beverages.

I felt some concern.

It was an uninteresting building. It looked like any other in the vicinity.

What was concerning about it was that I recognised the psychedelically patterned van outside.

Still, I had arrived to the meeting half an hour early. I read to pass the time; a small pile of visitor's pamphlets lined my hire car, and I slowly made my way through. Twenty five minutes later, a man wearing large sunglasses and a girl of school age exited the building, seemingly in deep conversation. They returned to the van, the man starting the engine with a low rumble, and then drove away.

The black van parked around the corner pulled out of their hiding place and drove to tail behind. I felt a deep itch in my shoulders, though I wasn't without a contingency plan. I confirmed the presence of the cold, heavy metal in my pocket. It was a short wait for the black van to leave from my sight; then, I opened the door of the hire car, stepped out, and closed it with a thunk.

The front door of the building was made of some heavy wood, not quite matching the rest of its construction. I knocked it solidly, then waited some time, before a man pulled it open from inside.

He looked young. He was dressed in a bright neon t-shirt, a pair of

jeans, a simple silver chain around his neck, and a tattoo covering the majority of his right arm with a hammer. The man looked up at me, then cocked his head slightly.

"Khoren?"

"Yes. I'm here to see-"

The man suddenly moved, hugging me around my midriff.

"My son, my son! Home at last!"

With some reaching, he put his hands on my shoulders and looked into my face. Looking at him closer, there was black stubble around his chin, and his right ear was pierced in three places. This was not the image of Hephaestus I had in mind. He slapped me on the shoulders, grinning and turning.

"Come on in, and close the door behind you."

I turned, pushed the door closed, and followed my father into what appeared to be a workroom. An anvil sat in the corner, which caught my interest; then I noticed the thick layer of dust along its surface. In the room's centre was a wooden table covered in paint and surrounded by similarly styled stools; on it sat a bowl of potato chips, which Hephaestus took a handful from and munched audibly. He looked up at me.

"Have a seat, have some chips. Some friends brought them here - really interesting flavouring, impressive stuff."

I sat across from him, picked a chip up, and crunched it around in my mouth. It tasted like strawberries. As I chewed, my father started to speak.

"I know what you're going to say: I don't look like all the pictures."

I swallowed and gave a response.

"I will admit, I was expecting an old man working at a smith."

"Not as much smithing these days as there used to be. Us gods

latch on to whatever gets us the most people within our purview. I've always been in charge of blacksmiths and fires, but these days being the god of artisans gets me a bit more attention. Quite a bit more, in fact. People keep asking me for favours - minor miracles, you know - and I really can't help but oblige."

I kept silent. Hephaestus sighed.

"But that's not why you're here."

"No."

"Right. Well. Tell me what I've got to sign."

I pulled out a packet of paper and offered it to the man across from me, along with a pen.

"Read it thoroughly."

"I don't need to. Your mother was a lovely lady, but despite what she's probably led you to believe, she was always much more interested in me than I was in her. That got her into trouble; as far as I see, this helps her out of it."

Hephaestus signed the paper with a flourish, passing it back to me along with an envelope. I took them both, looking at the front of the envelope. It was addressed to my mother.

"If you could pass that on to her I'd appreciate it. She should be more forthcoming with a few things after that. I would tell you myself, but it's the sort of thing that she'd want to say herself. Oh, and also, give her this."

Hephaestus pulled out a small ring from his pocket, then passed it over to me. It looked like weaved silver and gold. I placed the ring and the envelope in my right pocket, then folded up the legal document and placed it in my left. I stood, looking down at my father.

"I appreciate your understanding in this matter."

"Your mother really must have changed, she's raised you to sound

like a lawyer."

"No, she's not changed much, I think. I never quite fit what she wanted from a son."

"Bah, to hell with her. Anartists are a fickle folk, I'm sure she loves you all the same."

I bowed to Hephaestus.

"It was a pleasure to meet you, Dad."

He stood, showing me back to the door.

"The pleasure's all mine, Khoren. Come back if you're in the neighbourhood again."

I left his house, strode back to the car, and drove away without looking back.

That was the one time I saw my father while he was still alive.

« Oops | **Hub** | **Coldposter »**

Assistance for the Boss Lady

“Jeremy, you disappoint me.”

Doctor Isabel Helga Anastasia Parvati Wondertainment V, PhD[1] glowered over her folded fingers. The corgi sitting on her desk smiled back at her, exuding an air of incredible pride over the slightly-damp envelope that sat at its front paws. Isabel leaned back in her chair and sighed.

“I’m getting reaaaaaaaaal tired of this, Jeremy.” She pushed off against the floor, sending her chair rolling across the office. “Your brother was never like this.” Jeremy lay down, resting his head on his paws. “He never brought me bad news, but with you, Jeremy, it’s always bad news.” The high-backed chair slowed to a stop.

Isabel was slouched low enough to be effectively horizontal, her noodly limbs splayed out limply. Too much effort in sitting up straight now. Too much work. What was the point in work? What was the point in anything anymore? What was the *point*? She’d gotten the news directly from the corgi’s mouth: this quarter’s sales were in the toilet across the board. It was the worst quarter in a decade of bad quarters, and the Executive Board was not happy.

Several gallons of Dr. Wondertainment Quadruple Bypass Minty Fudge Ripple Ice Cream™ had done little to dull the barbs in that sternly-worded letter from the Executive Board.

We find your recent work to be severely lacking.

Lacking? *Lacking?* She put her life, her soul, the very entirety of her being into each and every design. How could they even dare say her work was lacking? She was Doctor Wondertainment! She built this company on blood, sweat, tears, and that nasty pus that fills up zits!

Kids just didn’t buy toys anymore. They were too busy playing those horrible video games, which rotted the brain and promoted all sorts

of unwholesome things like murder, foul language, and microtransactions. Isabel tried, oh she tried. Her work was not lacking. The whiteboard walls of her office were covered in scribblings, enough ideas to keep the Wondertainment product line going for a full generation. But it wouldn't do any good if the only people who bought her toys were a few odd collectors and the ever-dwindling number of Wondertainment faithful. All that work, all that effort, and no one liked any of her toys. Heart and soul poured out into her work, and the Board barks back with a wheezing "the focus groups don't like it." Focus groups! There never used to be focus groups in this company!

But there they were, and the Executive Board loved them dearly. What was the point in putting in her heart and soul if everything was just going to get shot down?

Isabel scooted herself back to her desk and turned the chair back around. There was Jeremy, there was the envelope that held the report about how the Wondertainment brand was getting stomped by the Factory.

The *Factory*. The very thought made all sorts of words bubble up from the recessed folds of her brain: ugly, angry words like floozy and fudgenugget and sassafrassin and consarnit and butt. Yeah, that was it. The Factory was butts. They wouldn't know fun if fun decided it wanted to be a butt-hat and roost on top of their head.

Actually that would be a neat idea, a hat for your butt, there are plenty of people who go around without hats anyway, so why not make a butt-hat so they can wear *two* hats…

No…no…what was the point? People would think it was stupid. People would look at the butt hat and go "Oh what's this? Some stupid baby toy for babies who poop? I'm not buying this because I am not some stupid baby who poops." But that was stupid because everyone poops, not just babies and *aaaaaaaaaaaaaagh*.

She needed more ice cream. A lot more ice cream. Something different…Cotton Candy Caramel Colada, Crunchy Frog, Good Day to Die (By Chocolate), Bananaramadingdong, Five Kinds of Rocky Road Medley, Kung-fu Ripple, Thoroughly Intense Vanilla,

Entropeanut The Buttery End of All Things…so many to choose from.

Bah. She'd have all of it. Drown herself in ice cream. Isabel nudged the corgi with her finger.

"Doink. Hey. Jeremy. Go get Jeremy, Jeremy, Jeremy, and Jeremy. I've got a job for you all."

The dog's ears perked. Jeremy stood up, hopped off the desk, and scampered out of the office. He returned a moment later with four other corgis. They all sat in front of the desk, looking both adorable and expectant. Isabel leaned over and scowled down at them with as much authority as she could muster with her bright cotton-candy pink, blue, and purple striped sweater.

"All right. Jeremy, I need you to go grab the keys and open up the warehouse. Jeremy, you and Jeremy man the forklift. Jeremy, you distract Mr. Security. Jeremy, you make sure the rest don't mess it up. I want literally all the ice cream we have in storage right here, in my office, on the double."

The Jeremys barked affirmative in unison and stampeded back out of the office on stubby legs.

Isabel sighed and spun around in her chair, slumping back down. Normally this would be fun, and she would be laughing with exceeding joyfulness, but she felt nothing now. Eventually she stopped spinning once more, her gaze coming to rest on the portrait of her father[2], Dr. Reginald Philbert Lionel Archibald Westinghouse Wondertainment III, MD, PhD, DDS, Esq.

"What do you want, dad?"

The painting did not answer[3], but it did look very important and mustachioed. He was one of those important-looking mustachioed men who hung around with other important-looking men with mustaches and said things like "yes, quite" and "oh indubitably". He also looked very disappointed.

"You never had to deal with video games, dad. Give a kid one of

those things and you have them eating out of the palm of your hand forever. The Factory can churn out the same thing every year and they eat it up and spend all their time on the line and they *don't buy toys*."

The painting did not answer.

"I know you had that trouble with Dark, but come on, cut me a little slack…"

The painting did not respond.

"Yes *I know* you got started by selling kicking cans on street corners, but I'm about to be put back on the street and…"

The painting did not reply.

"Shut up, painting of dad! You aren't my real dad!"

The painting did not react.

"What do you want? I'm not as good as you were, dad!"

The words hung in the air around her. Not as good. Did she really say that? Yeah, yeah she did. Not as good…maybe the Executive Board *was* right. Maybe she *was* slipping. Not like she could do anything about it. Bring on the ice cream!

The office door opened.

"Jeremy?" Isabel swung her chair around.

Jeremy was not there. In his place was a bespectacled and rather professional looking youngish woman with a clipboard. She was shortish and plumpish[4], with brownish coppery hair kept back in a bun, and a monopoly on the local freckle market.

The plastic gears and AA batteries inside Isabel's head clicked into place as she determined that this newcomer was not only not Jeremy, but had no ice cream.

"Who are you?"

“Emma Aieselthorpe-Brown. I’m your new assistant.”

Isabel blinked. Assistant? She didn’t need an assistant. She had Jeremy.

“I never asked for an assistant.”

“The Executive Board assigned me here. I have the paperwork right here.”

“Are you here to spy on me?”

“No.”

“Are you here to assassinate me?”

“No.”

“Oh. Okay.”

There was a long, awkward silence, as if an invisible elephant had decided to very slowly walk through the room.

“Do you need anything, ma’am?”

“Uh…” She already had the ice cream on the way what else did she need. “A spoon. Go get me a spoon."

“Right away, Ma’am.” She nodded curtly, handing a folded piece of paper to Isabel before exiting.

Hmm. Isabel read the note.

> *Dr. Wondertainment -*
>
> *In an effort to counter your recent drop in productivity, we the Executive Board have seen it fit to assign you with a personal assistant for the forseeable future. Ms Aislethorp-Brown has been judged as overwhelmingly competent in this regard, and we expect that she will serve as sufficient impetus towards improved performance.*

-The Executive Board, Dr. Wondertainment Inc.

There was a lot of very fine print and legal mumbo-jumbo underneath all that, but Isabel didn't care. No one ever read those things. She crumpled up the paper and tossed it in her Dr. Wondertainment Hungry Heinrich Wastebin™. Why give her an assistant if they were just going to fire her anyway?

It could have been that the Executive Board wasn't actually trying to sack her and didn't want her to fail, but the concept seemed hilariously stupid to Isabel. They were the Executive Board, a bunch of dusty old busybodies who liked writing long words in small print and asking for things in triplicate. It was their job to meddle in the state of things, to put up roadblocks, to try their damnedest to prevent fun from occurring. Trying to outsmart them had turned into something of a game: Isabel even kept score for a while. Maybe they were only trying to make themselves look like the big bad guys to get the game up and running again.

Maybe. But that still left the Factory to deal with, and the Factory was not something one dealt with. It wasn't run by anyone. It had no investors, no shareholders, no CEO, just miles and eons of blood-soaked gears and lonely sweatshop souls churning out soulless muck from its bowels, a cancerous structure seeking nothing but the mammon that allowed it to grow and spread and offer the universe its waste in exchange for more resources.

The Factory was good at its game. Very good.

Emma returned and handed Isabel a spoon.

"Thanks." Isabel said half-heartedly. She hated being wrong, or thinking that she was wrong, especially in this case because that meant that she really had no reason to get the ice cream at all and wouldn't be able to enjoy it properly because depression eating wasn't any use if there wasn't a good reason to be depressed.

There was another long, awkward silence. This time it was hippo-shaped.

"Mm-hmm." Emma cleared her throat.

Oh no she's initiating conversation…

"Jeremy! About time you got here!" Isabel shouted. Saved by the dog.

The corgi waddled into the office, balancing a bucket of ice cream on his head, followed by Jeremy and Jeremy, on and on down a line that stretched out of the office door, a little corgi conga conveyor line. Each dog dropped off his ice cream in turn and trotted back out. Isabel grabbed the first bucket and tore off the plastic lid. Marvelous Marshmallow Mania. Good way to start. Maybe she didn't need the ice cream now, but Jeremy had already brought it all up anyway so she might as well eat it.

She did so. Another awkward not-quite silence passed in monolithic, cringe-worthy horror. Jeremy continued to bring in more ice cream.

"Uh, you can have some too, if you want. I've got…" She glanced at the growing pile. "Bunderbelly Blueberry Bonanza…"

"No thank you."

"Very Vunderful Vanilla Vampire?"

"No thanks."

"Napoleon's Neopolitan Nepotism?"

"I'm good."

"Uncomfortably Tasty Orange 'Splosion?"

"I already ate."

"Mega Meat Mystery?"

"No."

"Suit yourself." Isabel put her feet up on her desk and continued to eat.

Emma cleared her throat again.

“If you don’t mind me asking, ma’am, are you planning on working any time soon?”

“Maybe, when I’m done with all of this.”

“There’s quite a lot of it here already.”

“Yeah, and? ‘S not that much.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” Emma’s expression remained unflappably neutral. “But I still think it best that you leave the ice cream for another time and focus on your work.”

“Maybe I am focusing on my work? A couple hundred buckets of ice cream to drown my sorrows should be more than enough brain food.” She grimaced. “Jabberwocky sneezy knee socks. There. Ideas.”

“Not a very marketable one.”

“Way to ruin the mood, Negative Nancy.”

“Emma.”

“I can see why you’d be concerned, but jabberwocks need knee socks sometimes, especially in the winter when they get the snifflies and the sneezes.”

“Ma’am, if I may make a suggestion: perhaps a more marketable toy would be appropriate.”

“Not you too. The Board is bad enough with that. That’s Factory talk, and they’re driving us out of business with their Battleduties and their Birdvilles.”

“There might be something that can be done about that.”

The spoon paused.

“Explain.”

“The Factory is, effectively, an unthinking force. Something like an

animal, right?"

"Right."

"A person can't talk with a bee, but a bee can talk with a bee, so to speak."

"So…we shoot bees at the Factory."

"No. The Factory is bees, here."

"Okay, Factory is bees. Butt-bees."

"We, the people, want to talk with the Factory, the bee, but can't, because we're people and it's a bee."

"So in order to deal with the Factory…"

"You just have to speak their language."

Speak their language…

"Wait…that's it…that's *it*! How did I not see it sooner that's *it*!" Isabel leapt off the table, tossing the bucket of ice cream across the floor, and grabbed Emma by the shoulders. A manic smile lit up her face. "That's *it*! We take the Factory's game and use it against it! It's the last thing they'll expect from goofy old Wondertainment! Aislethorp you're a *genius*!" Isabel planted an overwrought and slightly off-center kiss on her assistant's face before leaping away, pirouetting, and moving into a little victory dance. Emma wiped her face on her sleeve.

"Corporate sabotage!" Isabel continued dancing. "That's what we'll do! We sneak into the Factory itself, mess everything up, and run away laughing, and then we hit them with the biggest and best toy line in Wondertainment history! It'll be a coop-dee-grass!" She clapped her hands together, stopping the dance. Oh this was *good*. The game was back on. She'd show the Board, she'd show the Factory, she'd put Wondertainment back on the map. The Doctor was no pushover, she'd prove that.

"Steel yourself, Ms. Aiselthorp." Isabel grinned. It was a wild,

childish, grin, the kind of grin that came with schoolyard scheming and various puerile pratfalls. “We’re about to embark on ADVENTURES IN CAPITALISM!” She struck a dramatic pose to emphasize the point, one arm pointing skyward, the other one pinning Emma in a headlock.

Emma did not look particularly plussed by any of this.

“I’ll start packing the Wondermobile.”

“Excellent!” Isabel made a triumphant fist. “Jeremy! TO THE LABORATORY[5]!”

The corgis froze, and in unison dropped their ice cream. More of them poured into the room, swarming about in a vast furry carpet. Isabel spread her arms wide and fell gracefully onto their backs, laughing maniacally as they ferried her away out of the office.

Emma waited patiently for the last dog to depart before leaving, and took a quart of Papal Papaya™ on the way out.

« | **Hub** | **Part 2: The Super-Cool Road Trip Adventure** »

Footnotes
1. MD, DD, OD, PsyD, and EngD too.
2. For a given value of father. Wondertainment family genetics are notoriously convoluted.
3. Wondertainment family members had tried using Dr. Wondertainment Personable Portraits™ in the past, but the ensuing argument over the best design for the Dr. Wondertainment Super Stick-And-Hoop™ proved to be too much for Dr. Roxanne Lauren Joan Dora Peidmont von Wondertainment, PhD, who fed each and every one of them to the Dr. Wondertainment Crazy Confetti Machine™.
4. Granted, from Dr. Isabel Wondertainment's viewpoint everyone was shortish and plumpish in comparison.
5. Pronounced la-bor-a-tory. A lab-ro-tory is a dog that spins around.

The Super-Cool Road Trip Adventure

Shortly after the Boss Lady got an assistant…

The Executive Board of Dr. Wondertainment, Incorporated, sat around a circular table, in a square room on the top floor of a boxy grey building far removed from the toy factory and the Workshops of Wonder. The building contained a great many square rooms, which were divided into further square spaces, and each of these square spaces held an Accountant, or a Manager, or an Assistant to a Manager, or a Regional Representative, or a Department Head, or a Department Bottom, or a Supervisor, or a Supervisor to the Supervisor, or a Team Diversity Manager, or a Diversity Enforcer, or a Human Resources Manager, or an Executive Manager, or an Executionitive Manager, or one of many other fun-filled positions.

All of these many and varied individuals stood in their squares and stamped pieces of paper. The pieces of paper had words on them, but the people in the squares did not read the words. Their job was to stamp paper and move it to another square, not read them.

Above all, the fluorescent lights hummed.

The Executive Board had brought the stampers with them when they arrived: it was not proper for an Executive Board to be without their court. It was also not proper for the Executive Board to interact with their court in any way, so they stayed in their board room and never left.

As was appropriate for an Executive Board, the members had no eyes, so that they could not be misled by irrelevant information. They had no tongues, so as not to speak irrelevant words: instead, ticker-tape rolls of fluctuating stock prices and focus group data spilled out from their thin lips into the shredders that sat between their withered knees.

The Doctor has taken initiative… the voice was little more than a

whisper, a hiss of air escaping the mouth. *It has removed its sphere of influence from the Structure…*

Will the assistant be of use…

It will do whatever is instructed of it…

With the Doctor away, it falls to us to maintain order…

Correct…

—

The bright purple convertible Wondermobile, all spoilers and chrome, raced down the ancient raised road. Basalt paving tiles stretched out to an indistinct horizon that never seemed to come closer, a sharp line of black against the harsh red of the dry, flat land that baked under three suns. Lining the road were crumbling chunks of ancient masonry, and tangled rows of twisted old trees, their branches heavy with browning fruit.

Dr. Isabel Wondertainment sat with one hand casually on the wheel, the other flipping through radio stations, and a massive pair of rhinestone-encrusted pink plastic sunglasses taking up the majority of her face. The radio flicked through station after station, jumping from random clicks and number strings to K-pop jellybean ballads, to solar flare rap battles in booming Russian, to the “Tom Kenny (All Praise Unto the Immortal Dog-Emperor of Nine Realms) Musical Extravaganza”. Isabel eventually settled on the Galactic Plumbers’ Union Orchestra.

Emma sat in the passenger seat, reading a fluttering map. Jeremy sat between them, looking very happy with the trip. The back seat was filled with all manner of whimsical-looking plastic items: the Wondertainment Bubble Fun Gun Playset™, the Wondertainment Grabby-Claw-Thing™, the Wondertainment Big Foam Noodle™, a jug of Happy Hiker Grrrranola Trail Mix™ ice cream, the Wondertainment Super Secret Surprise Box™, and a great deal of other goodies: They had cleaned out the laboratory of anything that seemed to be of use.

“You know, you are the best assistant I’ve ever had, Emma,” Isabel said.

“I’ve only been working with you for a few hours, ma’am.” Emma kept her eyes on the map.

“Really? It feels like a lot longer than that.”

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but I believe I am the only assistant you’ve ever had, ma’am.”

“Right. I mean right as in you’re right, not right as in I understand that I should correct you if you aren’t right, which I don’t have to do because you’re right…though, I did have Mr. Butler when I was really little, but he was really just my dad’s assistant. He was a friend of one of my dad’s friends from way back, and dad took him in when he lost his old job.”

“Where is he now?”

Isabel shrugged.

“I…don’t actually know. He just sorta stopped showing up.”

There was another one of the long pauses that characterized their conversations, though it had in the space of a few hours become far less uncomfortable. The relationship had naturalized quickly, like the introduction of chocolate to marshmallow[1]: as soon as the connection had been made, it became impossible to think of one without the other, and unbelievable that a time of separation had ever existed.

“So, uh, how goes the mapping?”

“It goes well.”

“Anything I should be worried about up ahead?”

“Nope. It should be a straight shot for a while longer.”

Isabel glanced over at the white sheet of paper. Its surface was a shifting spaghetti mass of tesseractic lines in red, black, and blue,

twisting and curling and consuming each other, driving barbs to the brain through the eyes.[2]

She very quickly looked back at the perfectly straight road.

“I’ll take your word for it.”

“The Factory won’t give us any trouble while we’re in transit. It won’t know we’re coming until we’ve passed the corporation limit,” Emma said.

“That’s when the fun begins.”

“I trust you’re going to play it by ear.”

“I move where inspiration takes me.”

“I’ll start on the backup plan, then.”

“I thought you already had a backup plan.”

“I did, but I don’t think it will be enough.”

Isabel grinned.

“We make the best team ever.”

A roar echoed from up the road, off to the right, loud enough that it could be heard over the radio and wind. Isabel turned the dial down, straining her ears to see if she could hear it again.

“Did you hear that?”

“I believe I did, ma’am.”

“It didn’t sound good.”

The roar did not repeat itself for some time, and had been written off as a circumstance of no portent when several things happened in short succession.

A massive grey bulk launched itself up onto the road, tearing up trees and rubble. Isabel screamed and slammed her foot down on

brake. The Wondermobile spun around, tires screeching, rubber burning. The creature slammed down onto the road, debris showering down around it. The Wondermobile ground to a stop, rocking back and forth on ruined suspension. The creature didn't move. Neither did the Wondermobile and its occupants.

Isabel opened her eyes. Her sunglasses had flown off in the chaos.

"Are you guys okay?"

"Yes," Emma said.

Jeremy barked the affirmative.

She looked beside her to see that Emma was still in her seat. Jeremy had rolled onto the floor. True to their word, neither of them were hurt.[3]

Isabel sighed in relief, and stepped out of the Wondermobile. Emma and Jeremy followed.

The creature that had crashed in front of them was massive. More of a smooth, grey hill, big enough that its head and upper torso stretched across the whole of the road, with the back legs and tail draping down the slope. It rested on its side, rising up at least twice Isabel's height and exposing its white underbelly. A broad, wedge-shaped head, encrusted with barnacles. Gigantic serrated claws. The stench of salt.

It didn't move. Isabel tiptoed up to it, straining to hear or see some sign of breath. There was none.

"I think it's dead, ma'am."

Isabel nodded, and said nothing. The words got bunched up in her throat. She was aware of death, as a concept: sometimes people and animals stopped moving and looked like they were sleeping, but they weren't actually asleep, and they weren't going to wake up. But this was so sudden it had been alive when it jumped onto the road, and now it…wasn't. Things weren't supposed to die like that. Its eyes weren't closed. Its eyes should have been closed, but Isabel could just see the creature's pale yellow eye, staring blankly out at

nothing.

A sickly acid-green feeling welled up inside Isabel's stomach. She didn't know its name, but she knew its flavor. Impressions of memories, dredged up from subconscious seafloors. Old impressions of presence, of something that once was, and the empty space that now took its place. Buried wrongs and hidden loss.

Isabel found herself shaken by this, and the feeling remained. She tried shrugging it off, and it did not budge. The creature was dead. It had died here on the road. The road was dangerous, then, and the Factory even more so.

Isabel turned to Emma.

"We should keep going."

"That's going to be difficult."

"We can get around it. Let's just go…"

A great gurgling noise erupted from behind them. From the creature's body. Emma ran over, grabbed Isabel, and hoisted her above her head.

"I've got you, ma'am," Emma said as if this was the most normal thing in the world. Isabel said something that sounded like "eeeep".

The creature's belly split open. A thick wave of putrid brown fluid gushed out, flecked with crusting black foam and chunks of unidentifiable semisolid sludge. Isabel, being held above Emma's head, was kept safe from the tide of sludge. Emma, standing underneath Isabel, was not.
The air was ripe with methane and fermenting sewage. Steam billowed out from the burst innards. The flow slowed, and stopped.

Wordlessly, Emma walked over to a bare spot of road and set Isabel down. Behind her, Jeremy pulled himself out of the sludge and began shaking the gore off of him.

"Thanks, Emma."

“I am here to help.” Everything south of her collarbone was an unpleasant shade of brownish blackish reddish puke. Flecks spattered her glasses. She looked completely unflustered, as if she was standing in line at the grocery store or some similar task.

“Are you doing all right, ma’am?” she asked.

“I’m fine. Just a bit…”

A pause.

“Do you need a hug, ma’am?”

Isabel looked at her gore-stained assistant for a moment. Emma was not predisposed to smiling, but there was nonetheless a sort of reassurance to be found in her face. Stability and support.

Yes, a hug would be nice, Isabel decided.

It was a very awkward hug, given the difference in height between the two, but awkward hugs were okay sometimes, when a hug was really needed.

“Thanks, Emma.”

“It’s what I’m here for.”

Isabel righted herself, her sweater now thoroughly filthy. Jeremy wandered over, with a very plain “Hugs? I love hugs!” expression.

“Okay, Jeremy, hug for you too.” Isabel grabbed her still-dirty corgi and hugged him. “We’re going to need to get you a bath. And get me a bath.”

“There should be soap in the back of the Wondermobi…oh no."

Something was emerging from the carcass on the road. Something like a man, with rotten brown skin and stringy hair, and wide flaps of loose skin that hung almost like tattered clothing. It stumbled out, basalt cracking audibly under its feet. It moaned, shielding its eyes from the suns.

“Ma’am…I am going to have to ask you to run,” Emma said.

“What is that thing?”

“Ma’am, you need to run. Now. Pick a direction and don’t stop. Don’t let them touch you.”

“What? Emma, I’m not just…”

Two sunken sockets, now adjusted to the light, came to rest on the two women and one dog.

“*Isabel*. You need to go. *Now*.” The force of her delivery softened back into her normal, neutral tone. “You’ll be okay. I’ll catch up with you.”

Isabel swallowed nervously, and nodded. She couldn't really think of anything to say. With Jeremy in her arms, she ran. Ran off the road, down the hill, through the trees, and away.

Emma, running at the Rotting Man in nothing more than a casual jog, jumped up and landed a kick directly on its neck. The Rotting Man dropped to the ground. Emma did not. She planted herself on its back, swooped her arms under its withered limbs, joined her hands behind its neck, and with the full skill of the Viscount Nelson impeccably executed, cleanly severed its skull from its vertebrae, with the sound of a spoiled grapefruit trod under foot.

Emma stood up and removed the map from her pocket, its spaghetti strands still writhing. She tore it up, and tossed the scraps into the air.

The sky pulsed in shades out of space-time, and the desert was flooded with silence, and the ground crumbled into dust. The Way began to curl in upon itself like burnt paper, folding in like origami. Blurring at the edges like glasses in the rain.

More Rotting Ones pulled themselves up to the surface of the road. Men, women, children, lured by the smell of their decaying prey.

Emma stood there, and watched them approach, as the Way collapsed around her.

« **Part 1: Assistance for the Boss Lady** | **Hub** | **Part 3: Adventuring Interlude** »

Footnotes

1. Or chocolate and strawberry, or chocolate and vanilla, or chocolate and literally anything, really.
2. Cartography is one of Emma Aislethorp-Brown's secret skills. She has not once, in the entirety of her life, asked for directions: She is a woman who knows exactly where she is and what she should be doing, at all times.
3. Isabel was still prepared if one of them had been hurt, as she had a crate of Boo-Boo-Bye-Bye Bandages™ in the back. They had rocket ships on them, because bandages with rocket ships are objectively better than bandages without rocket ships.

Adventuring Interlude

During a particular **`road trip adventure...`**

A new toy rolled off the production line at the Wondertainment toy factory. It was a cube. The cube was grey, and consisted of six sides, none of which were in any way differentiated from any of the other five; All six sides were completely equal in their grayness and flatness. The edges and corners were rounded, so as to remove all threatening influences from the cube and to provide a safe, feelings-appropriate environment. In addition, the cube was designed so that it was incapable of interacting with any other cubes, so as not to form unbalanced societal hierarchies such as stacks, rows, or piles. While a green dot had been included on one of the sides in the prototype, this was found to be offensive to certain obscure minority groups, and was subsequently removed. Colored shapes were written off entirely after this point.

The Executive Board nodded in approval of the focus group results, in one slow, knowing movement. A new age for Wondertainment toys, they thought as one.

Wheezing admissions of thanks rose from the board to the cube's designer; a little old lady who stood at the far end of the table. A special guest to the Workshops of Wonder.

An outside adviser.

—

Nowhere

A tide of rotting flesh swept up around Emma Aislethorp-Brown, throwing itself at the leviathan in an orgy of scrabbling fingers, and gnashing jaws. She was ignored. The Rotting Ones found their prey by the sound of its heartbeat, by the heat in its blood, by the stench of the slow decay of life.

Emma had a heart, but it was purely decorative. She watched the Rotting Ones gorge themselves on the Leviathan's corpse. A few more had crawled out of the monster's burst stomach, shambling around, half-melted by digestive juices and torn by teeth.

The rushing sound of contracting time-space rose to a deafening cacophony midway between silence and absence that overpowered the snarling, slobbering horde. It all fell in upon itself at once, blinked, and went black. Like a station switched off.

And then Nothing.

Emma floated in-between Here and There. Somewhere around her[1], the collapsed Way existed in a negative state. An inside-out space leading nowhere, arriving nowhere. The Rotting Ones would still be feasting, frozen in a moment, but they could not emerge, lest someone else flipped the negative space right side out again and stabilized it. With the map gone, and no place in the overarching directive to permit her, Emma had neither the inclination nor ability to do so. An uncommon occurrence.

Emma drifted, and while drifting, she thought. She didn't have much else to do. The plan reorganized itself, the underlying directives planted new supporting actions. Redundancies merged together, events shuffled themselves into an abbreviated timeline. Contingencies were pruned and alternatives sprouted anew. Variables arose. The specter of *attention* drifted onto the stage where probability danced the tango on the back of turtles all the way down.

Unwelcome, but not unplanned for. Even this far out, a Way collapsing, especially one that had been breached by a Leviathan, would attract attention. Though not immediately. There was still time for things to work out, still time to adapt.

From this side. As for Isabel…she was on her own, for the time being. A contingency triggered long before Emma had originally hoped. She had shaped events as best as she could for the child, but uneasiness still settled like a patina on her mind. Isabel was outside her protection. Unsupported. Prepared for, but nonetheless unwelcome. Why delegate to others what you can do better

yourself? Why leave a vulnerability open?

Alas, she couldn't be in more than one place and the same time. All the threads she had woven would now be on their own. Drifting as she was.

A light opened upon the Nothing. A gaping maw of burning white, circles within circles within circles, twisting and swirling and spiraling about, on a field of gunmetal grey.

Emma looked up into it, and hoped she had chosen the right people for the job.

—

The Workshops of Wonder

Mister Merit tugged at his red ascot. A nervous habit of his, something to show what his face didn't. The neatly folded note in his pocket itched to be taken out, to be revealed.

The Doctor had left to go on an adventure, and this was not unusual. The Doctor often left, and her adventures were often lengthy, but this particular time something was wrong. Somewhere down in his gut, Mr. Merit felt that some cosmic tumbler had shifted awry.

The toy factory was never this busy when the Doctor was gone. Now, misters and misses and workbots and roving hordes of Jeremies scurried about, as if the Doctor was sitting down in her office churning out blueprints until the pen caught on fire.[2] The halls were clouded with swarms of Memobots, all carrying messages from the Executive Board. More messages than ever before, and Mister Merit was unsettled by them. The print was too small and the words were too big, and they all looked incredibly important, but none of them mentioned where the Doctor had gone. Or the Doctor at all.

What they did mention was that an Outside Adviser had been brought in, an adviser that did not sit well with Mr. Merit.

"I'm sorry, could you repeat that?" he asked the little old lady standing in front of him. She had little round glasses, and a pink shawl over her shoulders, and freshly permed blueish-grey hair, and

a warm, friendly smile.

“It’s nothing to worry about, dear. The Executive Board invited me in as an adviser for the new toy line. You don’t need to worry yourself at all.”

Mr. Merit glanced at the little old lady’s twin bodyguards; two tall robots with gleaming chassis and rubber faces to make them look like people. They did not look fun. They looked…wrong, to Mister Merit. He was used to Wondertainment robots, which had all sorts of knobs and dials and doodly-doos and thingamawhatzits and doohickeys and various other choking hazards. These looked like they were just popped out of the mold and fit together, without so much as a kung-fu action grip.

“I don’t recall the Doctor saying anything about you.”

“I was brought in after she had left for her trip, though I am looking forward to meeting with her when she returns.”

Mister Merit kept a brave face and nodded. Better to just let her go. He didn’t like the way her eyes twinkled, or the look of her robotic friends, and the appeal was lessening by the moment.

“All right then. Enjoy your stay here,” he said with the most genuine cheer he could fake.

“Thank you very much. Now, don’t get into any trouble now, dear. Wouldn’t want you to get involved in any messes while the Doctor is away.”

The little old lady walked off down the hall, her guards clanking alongside her. Did she know? Had she seen through the cracks of his act? Was she weighing her suspicions now? Or had she not picked up on it, and just seen the simple-natured Mister who was a bit confused at the change of pace? Mr. Merit had no idea which, but he felt himself erring on the side of fear. She was a little old lady. Little old ladies were powerful creatures. They could smell fear. And secrets. Mr. Merit had both of them in large quantities. The note in his pocket felt as heavy and conspicuous as a brick of lead.

Down more halls up some stairs, out away from the hustle and bustle of the workshops and up towards the Doctor's tower. It was empty, at least to appearances, but that said only so much. The Executive Board was not very good at listening, but they were very good at hearing things. Horrible at seeing, but excellent at watching.

Mr. Merit didn't trust them, or the little old lady. That alone would have been the source of his nervousness, but the note in his pocket outdid all of that.

Miss Emma had given him the note when the Doctor was preparing to leave. It read:

> My quarters. 1650.

It was four-forty-six right now. Mister Merit didn't question the directive: he had no reason to distrust the Doctor's assistant. One didn't doubt assistants like Miss Emma.

Four-forty-nine. He had reached the room, just down the hall from the Doctor's office. He opened the door.

Miss Emma's room was empty. A blank white room. No bed, no chair, no desk, no papers, no windows, no carpet, no vents, nothing but a tile floor and whitewashed walls and a vague, diffused light.

That, and a single, lavender note was stuck to the far wall, artistically out of place. Mister Merit went over and read it. The handwriting was perfect, nearly typewritten.

> Go into the center of the room and say 'Hello, are you there? I need help' in a loud, clear voice.

Mister Merit pulled the note off the wall and walked into the center of the room. He had no idea what to expect from it. He hoped some sort of help, to set things straight. That's what Miss Emma was there for, right? To put things in order.

"Hello, are you there? I need help," said Mister Merit in a loud, clear voice.

A nothing sound whispered down the back of Mister Merit's neck, as

if someone was standing in the room behind him. That, of course, was ridiculous, as there was nobody in the room, and he had closed the door behind him.

He turned around, and saw that he was not actually alone in the room.

The stranger standing there looked to be a miss with very short brown hair, wearing a ratty blue t-shirt, jeans with frayed hems and a jacket that had faded from black to grey. They smelled of smoke, the old, stale kind that soaked into clothes.

The stranger had their head tilted to the right.

“You called?” The voice was bright and cheery; a bubblegum and lollipops voice.

“I did.” Mister Merit tugged at his ascot. He had had enough of strange people today. “Who are you?”

The stranger tilted their head to the left.

“Who’s the one person you can always find in an empty room?” The voice was rough and gravelly now; a two packs a day voice.

“No one, I suppose,” Mister Merit said.

Tilt to the right.

“No one important, at least! Though since I introduced myself, I should be asking you who you are, because you don’t look much like Em.”

“I’m Mister Merit. Miss Aislethorp-Brown is not here at the moment.”

Tilt to the left.

“I can see that.”

“She left a note.” Mister Merit handed it to the stranger.

Tilt to the right.

“Oh Em, what have you gotten yourself into now?”

“What? What’s going on?”

Nobody sighed, crumpled up the paper, and stuffed it in her pocket.

“Hope you like the cleanup crew. Em has some leftovers for us to mop up.”

—

Somewhere

Isabel Wondertainment looked out over the cliff’s craggy edge, at the valley choked with ancient pines. Two moons, too big, hung in the deepening blue sky above the young bladed mountains. One was grey and plain. One was made of clockwork.

“Jeremy, I don’t think we’re in the workshop any more."

« **Part 2: The Super-Cool Road Trip Adventure** | **Hub** | **Part 4: Memory of Days Long Past** »

Footnotes
1. Though “around” was a purely subjective term at this point, at least anywhere that was not Emma Aislethorp-Brown.
2. The invention of the Wondertainment Asbestos-Pen™ had cut down on this significantly.

Memory Of Days Long Past

> Hey, have you read the Adventuring Interlude and the rest of Adventures in Capitalism? You probably should!

Isabel's bright red high-top sneakers crunched through the snow. The shadows had grown long in the pines, and night was falling. She walked with her arms wrapped around her thin frame, attempting to keep warm. Jeremy waddled next to her, less enthusiastic than he had been when they had begun their journey those hours-days-years…forever ago.

Truth be told, Isabel felt her spirit fading as well, sapped out by the cold wind and the darkening shadows. Emma was gone now, and Isabel didn't know where she was.

She was, for the first time in her memory, afraid. All she had wanted was a fun little adventure with her friend, and now…now she didn't know where she was. She had lost her friend in a very bad place, and she kept imagining bad things happening to her. Scraped knees and bruises and even a cut, and one image that kept repeating; Emma lying on the ground and not moving.

Isabel kept walking, though she didn't know where she was going. She couldn't feel her toes. She wanted to go home, and for Emma to come back, and for everything to be all right again. Let the Factory make their games. She just wanted to go home with her friend.

The sun set, and the forest faded to blue, and slipped into black. In glimpses of the sky through the trees, Isabel could see the stars and the moons, but their light was weak. She stopped walking. There was nothing but darkness around her, save the patch of moonsilver snow that she stood in.

Isabel curled up in a ball and lay down in the snow. Jeremy licked her face, and curled up next to her. Being a dog, he did not understand why her face tasted saltier than usual.

*

The sun was black iron, pocked with craters of sickly fire. A halo of ragged smoke drifted from its pores, crackling with aurora bands of lightning. Streams of glistening, burning oil poured from its grinding mouths, into an eternal, abyssal ocean, its water thick with oil and slurried flesh. Shards of bone, the corpses of old gods, rose above the water, fashioned into crucifixes for the ones who were spared. Icebergs, filled with thousands of bloodied souls, melting slowly.

The air, cold and empty, hummed with the distant moans of pain.

Isabel stood on the water, and saw beneath its obsidian sheen the pale, bloated faces of hundreds, packed together tight enough that each bone had been broken. Jellied eyes spun about in crumpled sockets; crushed jaws mouthed without sound.

She didn't know how she'd gotten there. Jeremy wasn't there either. She tried closing her eyes and opening them again, and she was still there. She shut her eyes tighter this time.

"It's just a dream, it's just a dream, it's just a dream…"

She felt something wet and slippery wrap itself around her ankle. She looked down.

It was a hand. It yanked down, plunging her foot into the water, and Isabel felt it go instantly numb. The hand's broken owner pulled itself above the surface, its wailing joined with Isabel's screams.

Isabel beat at the thing's misshapen head, the flesh and bone separating like pudding around her fists. More arms reached up to grab her, to pull her down, to pull themselves up, and their grips did not loosen. She sank into the numbing murk, up to her shins, up to her thighs, up to her waist.

"Emma!" Isabel screamed as loud as she could. "Emma, please help!"

Emma wasn't there to hear her.

Lower, lower, colder, colder. To her armpits now. Her struggling

grew weaker, though not for lack of effort. The things were crawling on each other now, attempting to escape, and their weight pushed her ever down. Up to her chin. As she gasped for mouthfuls of air, Isabel saw, in the distance, a throne.

Upon the throne sat a King, all adorned in scarlet. The king had seven spears, which pierced the brides that lay bloodied at his feet, from whose wombs spewed the great Leviathans that teemed around the throne.

The King raised an arm, encrusted with barnacle-gods, and turned his thumb down.

Isabel dropped beneath the surface, and all was cold.

You will not have her.

Return to your abyss.

You will not have her.

Begone.

Begone, all you evil spirits.

Begone, all you ranks of demons.

Begone, all you inhabitants of the Abyss.

You will not have her.

Begone, first of the Fallen Gods.

Begone, Defiler of Worlds.

Begone, Rapist King.

Begone, Usurper.

Begone, Lord of the Throne of Despair.

You will not have her.

I cast you out!

Isabel woke up, gulping in frigid nighttime air. She could feel the snow against her, and hear Jeremy's whimpering by her. She was back in the forest, far away from the horrible place she had seen. Her breathing slowed. Just a dream, she thought, the images melting away from her mind like snowflakes on skin, leaving only impressions. Deep cuts of cold and fear…but just a dream. It wasn't real.

She sat up, and saw a man standing before her. He was short, stocky, draped in furs, with a broad face lost in folds and wrinkles of wind-tempered skin, and a wide bulbous nose like some overripe fruit. A thick mane of tangled silver hair rested on his head and on his chin. In one hand he held a stone-tipped spear. In the other, a torch.

Standing in the flickering shadows behind him was a great grey wolf whose shoulders came up to the man's chin, watching intently with yellow eyes.

Isabel grabbed Jeremy and held him close. The old man smiled gently.

"I am not going to hurt you," he said. His voice was guttural, rumbling and groaning as if he had not spoken in a long time. Yet, his words belied a great joy in even their very speaking. So different from the vision she had received – his air was of safety, of warmth.

He knelt down in the snow in front of Isabel, placing his spear to the side. "What is your name, child?"

"Isabel," she said, letting go of Jeremy. "Who are you? Santa? You kinda look like Santa."

The old man's smile creased his face again.

"No, no. I am just an old man. And who is this?" he motioned towards the dog, who had not barked at all the entire time.

"Jeremy," Isabel said.

“Ah.” He extended his hand, and Jeremy sniffed at it for a moment, before licking it. The old man scratched the corgi behind the ears. “He is a fitting companion for you. And what are you doing out here in the snow, Isabel and Jeremy?”

“I’m…I’m looking for my friend Emma. I lost her, but now I don’t know where I am, and I’m worried about her, and I don’t know if I can find her or my way home…could you help me?

“Would you allow me to help you?”

“Yes please.” Isabel nodded her head vigorously.

“Then I will help you.” The man stood up, and Isabel followed suit. Jeremy went over and attempted to sniff the wolf’s butt. The wolf pushed him onto his side with a lazy paw, then grabbed him with its mouth and proceeded to carry him, like a pup.

“Come with me,” the old man said. “I will show you a safe path.”

Isabel followed him.

They walked through the dark, passing from the woods to the switchbacks up into the mountains. The old man said nothing, but it was the good kind of nothing, Isabel had decided. The kind of nothing that filled up afternoon naps and cloudwatching. The wolf had decided that Jeremy squirmed too much, and now the corgi trotted along beside, nipping at the wolf’s heels. The wolf ignored him.

When they had risen above the trees, the old man paused, and looked out over the valley.

“What are you looking at?” Isabel asked.

“Merely where we have been.”

“Oh.”

The path rose higher up the cliffside, before levelling off in a shelf scattered with snow drifts and banks of pebbles. A cave entrance yawned in the mountainside, a trickle of water flowing out of it to

freeze as it dripped over the edge.

“This path will lead you homeward. I cannot follow you beyond its mouth,” the man said. “You and your companion must walk it alone.”

Isabel frowned as she gazed into the darkness. She had grown used to the old man’s comforting, quiet presence.

“Is it safe?”

“It is as safe as you will it.”

“Can I at least have the torch?”

There was no answer. She turned to see that the old man and his wolf were gone, as was his torch.

“Oh…well he was a load of help,” she said, and she meant at least some of it. “Come on Jeremy. Stick close to me.”

Isabel placed a hand on the wall of the cave, and slowly began to walk.

The tunnel’s path was at an incline, though it did not wind about. Soon removed from the light of the moons, Isabel navigated solely by the rough stone wall under her fingertips and the crunch of gravel under her feet. Time did not pass at all, and it did not pass in large quantities. The trickling of water and Jeremy’s padding steps were her only accompaniment.

The wall ended. The floor flattened out. Isabel stumbled, righted herself, moved her hand back to where it ought to be and found only open air. She waved an arm in the general direction of where the wall had been. Nothing.

She spun around, feeling out into the blackness.

“Jeremy? Jeremy!”

Her voice did not even echo. The trickle of the water was absent. The empty space closed around her, choking her heart with long fingers. Gouged impressions of that terrible cold, that terrible fear,

erupted in her mind, and she could not shake them.

“Jeremy! JEREMY! *JEREMY!*” her voice snapped. “Jeremy…don’t leave me alone.”

She sank into the darkness, and faded.

And she heard a voice. Two voices. More. A chorus, rising up from the dark.

I know of the names of the stars

And sung the animals their names

And discerned the course of the winds

I hold the heart of all stories within my breast

And mark the kinship of the beasts of the land

And know the land as friend

Who first looked up?

Who first loved?

Who held the first child?

It was I.

It was I.

It was I.

Who seeks beyond the horizon? (It is I)

Who makes real the future? (It is I)

Who carries the past? (It is I)

By wonders untold, the gift to create wonder

It was I

Who was gifted in humility

In creation I am made

In creation I am whole

In creation, I create

And the span of humanity rests in me

For I raised up my hand

“And there was fire…” Isabel whispered. A flame, delicate and small, flickered to life in her palm. She picked herself up off the ground, and the fire in her hand grew brighter, warmth and light pouring out, casting away the darkness.

She stood in a vast cave, the hollow heart of the mountain, now illuminated by the fire in her hand. Statues of stone, plaster, copper, steel, wax, clockwork, plastic, wood, refuse, and rubber filled the floor, peeked out of alcoves, clung to stalactites, sat carved in pillars. Paintings were spread across the walls in oil and ash and store-bought tempera, mosaics across the floor in tile and shell and bone. Men and women of the whole spectrum of humanity, from every age, from every place, from every time, thousands upon thousands upon tens of thousands upon more. Among these were other figures. Assistants, apprentices, companions, human and animal alike, all as varied as their employers.

Isabel walked alongside the stream towards its source, and was awed.

In the center of the cave, there was a pool of water, fed by a spring, and a great stone column that reached up to the shadowed dome of the ceiling. A face of the column had been cut to provide a flat face, and upon it, Isabel saw an image of herself, standing there, legs akimbo, fists on hips, grinning goofily. Emma stood next to her, unflappable as always, and Jeremy sat at her feet, chewing on a squeaky toy.

At the base of the pillar was a smaller stone, upon which was, in black and ochre, the figure of a man in furs, holding a spear in one

hand, and a fire in the other, alongside a great grey wolf.

“It’s me…” Isabel murmured. “It’s all me…it’s always been me…” She whirled around. “It’s all me! Memories of you! You’re all me! All of this is me!” She no longer saw statues and paintings, but a vast multitude, their faces as familiar as her own. She *knew* them. She knew their names, their histories, the twined and bundled paths of their lives. Each facet of their souls was a face of her own.

She knew each and every wonder they had made. She knew them all, the greying bishop with a sack full of toys and his fat, red-coated brother. The girl with deep orange hair and purple thigh-high boots, obscured by a cloud of moths. The dusty woman with a bonnet, sitting atop her medicine wagon. The smirking man with waves of hair and an accordion. The dark woman with a headscarf, who smelled of ink and paper. The serious, pale woman with a worn guitar and a weathered soul. The ancient tinkerer with his clockwork animals. The entrepreneur from the north in her flamboyant blue sealskins. The lanky man in a tacky purple suit, with top hat and cane. The girl with braces and glow in the dark sweater, sitting atop a wild boar. The old man and his wolf, and on and on down through the thousands.

And her father. Jeremy sat at his feet. The corgi waddled over, to Isabel, barked, and she picked him up.

“Don’t you ever do that again, young man,” she said with mock sternness. She looked over to where she saw the image of her father – herself – standing. He gave her a nod.

And that was that.

Isabel stood there in the presence of all her other selves, her spirit now unified with theirs, and knew precisely who she was, what she was doing, and where she was going.

She was Isabel Wonder-Maker, and she was going to find her friend.

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Alternate Character Interpretations

New York City

"Hey, Sal, got a cig I can have?" Mary-Ann Lewitt looked between her husband and her latest creation, sprayed on the wall of a vacant warehouse, and it was sprayed on the *entire* wall, at least 20 feet high. It was a bright red vulva with a hand, flipping off the audience, sticking out between the lips. It was painted entirely in menstrual blood, which had taken her months to collect; she called it "Period Piece: The Modern Age."

The Pakistani man frowned at Mary-Ann upon hearing her request, looking at her pregnant belly. "You're with child. It's generally not a good idea to smoke-"

"It's not for me, ya dimwit." She pointed up at her piece, wiping her bandana-covered brow with one hand. "I need a proper way to express how women are destroying their bodies with drugs and pills and plastics and lord knows what else." She dug in her pocket, taking out several dildos that, by all means, should not have fit in there. "I won't smoke it, I just need it to tie the piece together."

"I think it's fine as is!" He waved a hand at the Period Piece, smiling at her. "It's just saying that a period is the way a woman's body says "fuck you" to itself once every month. Maybe you could put a mirror over there-" He pointed to a warehouse opposite the wall- "or a sculpture of Eve or something, but really, it's fine!"

Mary-Ann elbowed him in the side. "You say that about all my work, Sal. It's getting old. I at least have the balls to criticize your shit."

"…did you really think that my Bacon Treaty piece was disgusting?"

"I thought it was disgustingly *simplistic*. But I did appreciate you trying to be 'Cool' in the sense that 'we agree'." Mary-Ann patted her stomach and sighed. "I'm hungry. Let's get some pizza or

something."

"How about we go to the old place? You know…" Salah smiled, pulling a map of New York City out of his pocket and pulling Mary-Ann close so that she could see the map, too. "It was right… here." He pointed to a spot on 32nd and smiled as the warehouse district faded away to be replaced by the urban sprawl of Manhattan. Mary-Ann rolled her eyes and bapped him in the gut.

"You're gonna get fat if you keep on relying on the Cartographer's stuff," she muttered, walking up to the pizza parlor as Salah put away the map. "A bit of exercise is good for you. You can't just rely on those candles forever."

"The City of New York says I'm not allowed on the subway anymore, remember? Gimme a break, honey." He walked up to the pizza place as well, and looked at the menu. "Veggie-lovers pizza sounds good."

An hour later, the pair of them stood in front of the entrance to the BackDoor. Mary-Ann had taken the map from Salah and had forced him to walk; he was visibly winded, while Mary-Ann had barely broken a sweat. "Now that's pathetic. I'm three months pregnant, and you can't even keep up with me." She looked around the alley and frowned. "Where the fuck is Chuck?"

Charlie came out of the wall, his pink hair done in a mullet today. He frowned at the both of them, toying with a nose ring. "Now is not a good day to be in the BackDoor. Just warning you."

"Why?" asked Salah, still panting for breath. "Did Gilligans get in again? Just give them to one of the Baileys; they know what to do with Gilligans."

"Not the Skippers," said Charlie. "The Critic's in town. She's looking over the Cartographer's new thing. You know, the Korea one?"

"The one that shows every person in the country who wants to dissent?"

"That's the one," he said, holding out a hand for their token. "You sure you wanna go in? It's gonna be Bedlam in there."

Mary-Ann handed Charlie her token and nodded. "We'll just avoid the Cartographer's place for now. We're probably going to head home, anyway, unless something comes up."

"Something *will* come up," muttered Salah. "It has the last five times the Critic's come into BackDoorSoHo. Why should it change now?"

"Point," said Mary-Ann, looking at Charlie. "You know where to contact us if shit goes down, right?"

"Yeah, yeah…" and with that, Charlie vanished into the brickwork. Soon after, Mary-Ann and Salah vanished into there, too.

Agent Ruiz Duchamp was not having a good day. His non-Newtonian shock armor was starting to rip at the seams, his gun jammed on the firing range this morning, he was getting cold sores again, his arch-nemesis was in town, and the barista at Starbucks put cream in his coffee this morning. He was lactose-intolerant.

Then again, as everyone in the MTF knew, Ruiz Duchamp never had good days. He hadn't had one since Milwaukee. He hadn't had a good day since his brother had defected to the Chaos Insurgency. He hadn't had a good day since he had met Nobody.

Ruiz was one of the few survivors of the Milwaukee incident, and ever since then, he had been ruthlessly chasing the shadow that was known as Nobody. He had almost caught up to her, once, in Dubai, before the scarf-wearing bitch had literally frozen him on top of one of the tallest buildings in the world. He survived, even though it took three days to thaw him out.

And today, the stupid motherfucker was here. In New York City. He knew exactly where she was, too, and he was going to take his entire platoon and kill that fucker dead this time. And there was nothing- not a fucking thing- Pico could do to stop it this time.

The van pulled up to an alleyway, and the task force stormed out,

surrounding a large spot of graffiti that was located in the Alley. With an audible sigh, Charlie emerged from the brickwork, arms crossed. "I'm not gonna let you in."

"We have tokens," Ruiz said, taking out a pouch and opening it onto the concrete. Several tokens with the words "ARS GRATIA ARTIS" stamped on them, some still stained with blood. "You kind of fucking have to."

"I ain't *gotta* do shit, Gilligan. Piss off." Charlie reached into the brickwork, and pulled out a detonator from a red piece of graffiti. The cord went back into the wall, merging seamlessly with the entrance to the BackDoor. "Or I blow this whole alley to the Oort Cloud, and then your friends can have a hell of a time explaining to the NYPD why an alleyway blew up for no reason."

The entire MTF raised their rifles at him, with Duchamp sneering. "Go ahead and try, Aussie."

Charlie shrugged. "Eh. I can just be painted again. But since pink spray paint is so damn hard to find…" He sighed. "I'm going to give my guys warning first."

"Of course."

"The Critic probably already knows you're here."

"Naturally."

"You won't kill her."

"Fuck you, paint huffer." Ruiz spat in Charlie's direction, but by then, he had gone back into the brickwork to raise the alarm. A subordinate of Duchamp's looked at him.

"Sir? How will we get in without him?"

"We wait." Ruiz grinned with a grim satisfaction. "We wait."

The Cartographer paced around his apartment, wondering where the hell she could be. She said 6:15 promptly, and it was almost

6:30… just where the fuck was she? Did she not think his masterpiece was worth critiquing? He had spent the last year working on it, and now she wasn't even going to show up?

"Son of a bitch!" York, the Cartographer, felt like flipping his cartography table. Didn't she think that maps would be considered art?! That little-

"Hello there, Mr. The Cartographer." He spun around, seeing a woman in a cloche hat, gray dress suit, and a red scarf standing in his display gallery. "I apologize for my sudden entrance. I take it I am not too late to see your piece?"

"O-of course not, ma'am." The Cartographer looked at his watch, and saw that it was exactly 6:15. "Come here, come here. The piece is right this way." York walked into the display room, and directed her at a map of North Korea. Once every second, blue dots appeared and dissipated in it. A countdown clock was in the upper-left hand corner, ticking down despite being made entirely out of ink, while another clock ticked upwards; the count on the second one started on December 17th, 2011. "I call it 'The Map of Dissent'."

"A rather uncreative name," commented the Critic, looking over the map. "I do admire the technique, however. It mirrors the cartographic techniques used in the Gojoseon period. I assume all these dots are dissenters?"

The Cartographer nodded enthusiastically. "Yes! Each one represents a single dissenter that can be found in North Korea, or at least, someone with dissenting thoughts. You can even zoom it in to a certain degree; I'm still working on the magnification."

"This clock," said the Critic, pointing towards the top. "It detracts from the work, somewhat, but it also serves as a nice juxtaposition; a pseudo-digital appliance in an otherwise medieval piece. What is its purpose?"

"The one counting down indicates how much time is left in the life of Kim Jong-un, down to the second. Once that clock runs out, he dies. The other one is how long it has been since Kim Jong-il died."

"Check your calculations," snapped the Critic. "Kim Jong-il's been dead for far longer than that — although nobody but the North Korean government knows, so I suppose I can't blame you *too* much." She reached into her pocket and took out a smartphone. "Apologies. I have to answer this mail."

The Cartographer frowned, and was about to comment on how rude it was to do that, when suddenly, chaos broke out outside of his window.

---

wow
much shibe
so cool

"For the love of-" Mary-Ann rubbed her eyes to clear away the Comic Sans as she stared at their dog, calling to Salah. "Honey, I think Gerry got his hands on Amaterasu again!"

"Is that font appearing around her?" He called back, chopping up carrots in the kitchen.

"Yeah! Tell him that if he touches our dog again, I'm gonna kick his-" Mary-Ann's phone suddenly rang, and she took it out of her jean pocket, sighing into the receiver. "What."

"M-A, it's C." Charlie was on the other end of the line, and he began to sing. "Sit right back and you'll hear a tale, a tale of a fateful trip…"

"Shit! I understand." She clicked off the phone, and called to Salah. "Dinner's cancelled. We got Gilligans."

Salah stopped chopping veggies and stepped out of the kitchen, grabbing a pen off of his writing desk. Mary-Ann took up a metal slingshot, and looked around the living room of their apartment briefly. "Crap, where is it?"

"Where is what?"

"The cricket bat we got from Marshall, Blackwood and Dark! We're gonna need it if they're packing heat!"

"One: 'if'? Two: We loaned it to Dickens, remember?" Salah picked up his own slingshot and made for the door. "Now, c'mon, we got some Gilligans to kill, again!"

"Let's do this." Mary-Ann grinned as she rushed out the door and up the stairs of their building.

The Critic looked through her purse for a very particular item, her attention now completely distracted from the Cartographer's work. "I do apologize, Mr. York, but I need to take my leave."

"Wha-who? Do we have the Gilligans on our back again?" He peered at the Critic as he covered his map with a tarp."They're after you, aren't they?"

"Such insistent terminology!" muttered the Critic as she took out an aerosol can. "Just call them the Foundation. I know you think that dignifies them, but really, the fact that you even know about them is humiliating." She went to the window, looking below her; a large crowd of anartists was armed with slingshots, bullets that shot guns, cream pies filled with something that was both acidic and vulgar, copies of *The DaVinci Code*, swords made out of newspaper, and pens. They were ready in case the Foundation Agents came this way. "You all down there!" The entire crowd turned in the direction of the Critic's voice as she threw down several aerosol cans. "Have a party for me, will you?"

The crowd took up the cans, and handed them to the unarmed members among them. Nobody smiled, and everybody grinned at the new gift. With that, the Critic made her way for the door. "Perhaps we can pick this up some other time, Mr. York."

"Perhaps," said York, looking over a map of the BackDoor that he had drawn years ago. "Perhaps."

Nobody walked out the door, and nobody was in the hallway a few seconds later.

Ruiz Duchamp broke the neck of some no-name anartist who had

tried spraying his visor with paint. It was ruined now, so he took off his headgear and started firing into the crowd. Around him, members of his Task Force died as their chests were penetrated by miniature guns flying at supersonic speeds, or their arms were chopped off by claymores made out of back issues of the New York Times. Ruiz still stood though. He scanned the crowd of bright, vibrant colors for any sign of grey-

There. Coming out of the apartment building in the back. That scarf gave her away immediately. Ruiz ran through the crowd, firing in front of him and gunning down innocent anartists in pursuit of his mark. Said mark saw him, and smirked in his direction before making her way down an alley. Agent Duchamp ran after her as fast as he could, not noticing the Pakistani man and the American woman on the roof above him.

"Salah, for fuck's sake, you don't have to make a bridge every time I need to jump a rooftop!" She frowned as her husband drew a basic bridge using his pen before letting her cross. "The baby will be fine!"

"Mary-Ann, you shouldn't even be doing this," he said the pen re-absorbed the spent ink. "You're pregnant, you should be staying at home in the panic room with Ammy and not out here, fighting the god-damn Foundation!"

"Oh, so just because I'm pregnant makes me a fragile woman now, does it? Ugh!" She rolled her eyes and took out her slingshot, taking aim at an agent that was just coming in through the breach in the gateway. She let lose a stone which grew in size as it passed through the air, eventually blasting a hole through the agent's leg. "Damn. Was aiming for his balls."

Salah got the message. "I'm just saying it won't be good for our daughter if you keep on over-exerting yourself like this." Salah started to draw up a chair when he noticed that an agent was running through the crowd, after a woman in… grey… "Shit! That guy, right there." He pointed at the rogue agent. "He's going after the Critic."

"Already on it," said Mary-Ann, loading up her slingshot with a cherry

bomb taking aim at the runner. "Just need to account for trajectory and…"

Ruiz Duchamp let off a shot at Nobody. "Hold it right there."

The Critic turned to face him, crossing her arms with a wry smile. "Hello again. How long has it been since we last met? 6 months? 7?"

"Seven months, 18 days, 15 hours, 24 minutes."

"Zero heartburn," quipped the Critic. Ruiz raised his rifle at her, and she put up her hands. "All right, I get the message. You want me dead." She tsked. "Ruiz, you are the very definition of obsession, you know that?"

"Shut up!" Ruiz fired a bullet that grazed her dress suit. "You killed a lot of good people in Milwaukee."

"For the umpteenth time, Ruiz, I did nothing. All I did was try and encourage a little fun."

"Half the city died because of your 'fun'!"

"Well, yes. But that bug's been worked out now!" She sighed. "Nothing I say is going to keep you from killing me, is it?"

"Not a fucking thing, Lady. Not a fucking thing."

"Very well," the Critic said as she typed one last messaged on to her smartphone before turning it off. "Give my regards to Pico, if you see him again."

"Fuck Pico, and fuck-" Ruiz blinked at the sound of whistling coming from behind him. He turned to see a small cherry bomb fireworks sailing towards his head. It landed at his feet, the fuse disappearing into the casing. For what seemed like the longest time, nothing happened.

And then the Cherry Bomb went off.

The last thing Ruiz Duchamp remembered before it went dark was the smell of fruit, the taste of wild cherry Kool-Aid, and his eardrums popping. The last thing he saw was a woman in a grey suit turn on her smartphone as she walked off into the distance.

The Critic

The Critic sat silently at his desk at the front of Room 238, his long gray hair in a ponytail, his wrinkled, septuagenarian face frozen in an unreadable glare as he drummed his fingers on the tabletop in rhythm with his stopwatch. None of the half dozen who sat silently waiting were more than half the Critic's age, and some barely a third. The Painter, the Sculptor, the Clipper, the Builder, the Composer, and the Director all sat at their smaller desks in the almost-empty gallery. Those were not their real names, of course, but they all knew each other by code names in this meeting. Most of the time, Room 238 was an ordinary classroom, in an ordinary community college, in an ordinary American city. Tonight, however, it was the world headquarters of an international terrorist organization (or at least one chapter of it), and the Critic was its leader, to the extent that a group such as this could have one.

What a bunch of failures, he thought to himself.

"Can we get on with this?" the Painter asked. "We've been sitting here watching you twiddle your thumbs for half an hour, and…"

"Be quiet," the Critic interrupted. "We are appreciating the silence and the sensation of unease. You'll know when the piece is over."

The Painter was silent, and the Critic timed another seventeen minutes on his stopwatch while the six waited and watched. Having completed his "performance", he rose from the desk, dimmed the lights, and powered on a slide projector that must have been nearly as old as the man himself. A press of a button and a photograph was displayed on the classroom whiteboard - a photograph of a pudgy cat with grayish-blue fur, frozen in time with an unusually happy-looking grin on its face. The question "I CAN HAS CHEEZBURGER?" was superimposed over the photo.

"Who can tell me what this is?" asked the Critic.

"It's a lolcat," the Painter volunteered.

"That's right, Painter," he responded. "And how long have 'lolcats' been around?"

"Well," he replied with the knowing confidence of an art historian, "the style of that particular picture originated in early 2007, but it had its origins several years earlier on 4Chan, and examples of humorously-captioned cat photographs have been found dating to the late 19th century."

"Very good, Painter," said the Critic. "Director, tell me; is there anything about this piece that you find particularly compelling? Eye-opening? Mind-blowing?"

The Director stammered, seeming surprised and alarmed to have been called out. It was a moment before he could muster a response; "Not particularly, Critic. It's just a cute little joke."

"Then how would you justify this, Director?" The Critic pressed a button and a new slide popped up. It was a photograph of a parking lot, taken from a camera a few meters above the ground. Dozens of cats lay on the ground, bloodied and dead, their bodies arranged spelling out a message - "NO U CANT HAS CHEEZBURGER". The Critic brought up another slide - the same parking lot, more dead cats, spelling out "DED CATZ IS DED". Another click and a third slide came up - more dead cats, arranged spelling out the message "R WE KEWL YT? LULZ".

"It was quite a bit of work acquiring these photos from the Man's database," the Critic said sternly. "Their intelligence indicates that we're responsible for this, and at our last meeting, you mentioned that you were working on a project involving cats. Can I assume this is your handiwork?"

"Yes, Critic," the Director said.

"Explain what we're looking at," the Critic demanded as he brought up a slide with more dead cats spelling out the words "INVISIBLE MORGUE".

"It's produced by a memetic agent that specifically targets *felis catus*," the Director said. "They're compelled to come to this particular site and fight each other until they're fatally wounded, and to lie down before they die in patterns that spell out the messages."

"I'm not interested in the how," the Critic said. "Tell me *why* we're seeing this. How does this installation represent our objectives?"

"It's recontextualization," the Director nervously replied. "By taking something meant to be amusing and adding to it elements of tragedy and horror, it forces people to look at lolcats in a new way, especially if their own pet cat is one of the ones involved."

"If I wanted to see funny things recontextualized as tragedy and horror, I could log on to Youtube," the Critic said. "Killing someone's cat to open their mind is more likely to produce such a base emotional response that it's going to drown out whatever message you're trying to deliver. What I'm seeing here is a bunch of dead cats being used to parody internet memes in a way that makes us look like a bunch of sadistic Anonymous wannabes."

"But, Critic, the current zeitgeist of the-"

"That will be all, Director," the Critic interrupted. "I've been part of this organization for a long time, and I'm not going to say this is the worst thing I've ever seen. It's ill-conceived, it's poorly executed, and it's not going to achieve what you want it to. If recontextualization is the direction you want to go, talk to Clipper - that containment file he garbled all up with newspaper headlines and sent right back to the Man's front door was brilliant."

"Thank you, Critic," the Clipper said.

"You're welcome," the Critic said as he turned the lights back on and sat down. "The reason I bring this up is because the problems with this installation mirror the problems I've been seeing in a lot of pieces lately. To be frank, the work that this organization has done in the past month or so has been very unimpressive. Sculptor, you made a fire hydrant that emits gamma radiation when connected to a firehose, correct?"

"Yes, Critic," the Sculptor responded.

"And Painter, you made a sidewalk mural that people get absorbed into like quicksand, which then adds their likeness to a crowd scene."

"Yes, Critic."

"And Composer, you produced a recording of an electric guitar solo that causes the listener's face to liquefy."

"Yes, Critic. The idea of 'face-melting awesomeness' was first raised by Blue Öyster Cult in 1972, whose debut single "Cities on Flame With Rock and Roll" included the line 'Three thousand guitars, they seem to cry, my ears will melt, and then my eyes.' By the mid-1980s —"

"Later, Composer," the Critic said. "All three of these works are severely flawed, and all in the exact same way. Who can tell me what that flaw is?"

The room was silent. None of the six knew the answer - or if they did, they feared to share it.

"I see the cat has gotten our tongues," the Critic said, casting a knowing eye at the Director. "All three of these installations, ladies and gentlemen, are artworks that kill people."

"Critic?" asked the Painter. "Isn't that what we do?"

The Critic sighed. "Let me tell you a story. Back when I was your age, artists, *real* artists, were all about what we used to call 'freaking out the squares'. Ask your parents or your grandparents sometime about how closed-minded mainstream America was back then - blue-haired grannies listening to Lawrence Welk and Liberace, who thought people like *the fucking Kingston Trio* were dangerous subversives and Jackson Pollock was just an idiot with too much time on his hands — if they even knew who he was at all. We were all about pushing the envelope, blowing people out of their closed-off worldview, making them understand how big and crazy the world really was. And you know what? We were doing it. Our generation

changed the way people think of art. We really thought we were cool.

"I was doing things back then that nobody had ever seen. And when Andy - I'm sorry, that was what the Critic's name was back then - when he asked me to join this organization, I leapt at the chance. I did things that really had the Man running scared, things that really forced people to change their minds about how the world around them works. To me, that's what this organization is all about."

The Composer interrupted. "But doesn't the manifesto say…"

"There is no manifesto," the Critic said. "Now answer me this, boys and girls - how can we open people's minds if all that our projects do is *kill them*?"

"It isn't really so much for the benefit of the victim, right?" asked the Director. "It's more for the people they leave behind - the family, and the friends, and the people who happen to be standing in the right place. Why, that invisible shark that you yourself made back when you were the Director was pretty much the same thing."

"You could say it was," the Critic answered, "and I'd say you were right, and I'd also tell you that the shark was a masterpiece in the way it exposed the bystander phenomenon and the apathy of men to the problems of others. But that was in *1975*. Are you telling me that the best projects that this organization can come up with are recycled ideas from before you were even born?"

The Director was silent.

"Look, there's more to this than just making a piece of art that kills people and then slapping our slogan on the end of it like some kind of punchline. Some of our most interesting pieces have never claimed a single life. Composer, have you ever listened to the interpretation of Cage that your predecessor recorded?"

"I can't say I have," the Composer replied.

"Good answer. If you had, you wouldn't be the Composer." The Critic opened his briefcase and withdrew a cassette tape, placing it

on the Composer's desk. "Don't listen to that yourself — give it to one of your friends and get them to listen while you're not there. Or one of your enemies, if it suits you. Just give 'em a few days and ask them how it's sitting with them, because this — this is something that grabs the listener by the balls and *forces* them to forget everything they ever knew about what music is, and so far it's never killed a single person.

"I'm not saying that death can never be a source for artistic expression. I'm sure you all know about that contraption up in Alaska? My predecessor was *furious* at the old Builder when he pulled that one off. Tore him a new one right in front of the rest of us - how could you be so irresponsible, you could have killed us all, the Man is going to come down on us like a ton of bricks, and so on. I thought he was going to kick him out for good, or worse. But I found out later on that the Critic pulled him aside after the meeting and told him it was the most thought-provoking piece he'd seen ever since Chazdwick's buddy made that talking atom bomb back in sixty-three.

"I know most of you only came on a few years ago after what went down at the Baltimore Expo. I don't know why the old Critic picked you out of the hundreds of people he looked at, but I know he would have expected better than this. We can't just keep putting out the same stuff over and over again and slapping a new coat of paint on it. At this rate we run the risk of becoming predictable, and worse yet, becoming *boring*.

"That'll be all for today. Next meeting won't be until four weeks from tonight - the spring semester starts tomorrow, and I'm going to be up to my ears teaching Intro to Art History to a bunch of kids who don't know *Fountain* from a urinal. I expect to see some much more thought-provoking projects in the meanwhile. See you then."

The Critic made his way back to his desk and sat down to read over his class syllabi as the six gathered their things and made their way to the door. An overlooked thought occurred to him as he noticed the Builder making his way out. "Oh, by the way, Builder?" he said.

"Yes, Critic?"

"Those ancient statues you found and jazzed up? The ones with the

rain and the starving children? Keep up the good work. That was pretty cool."

Concerto in D-Major, Orchestrated for Paintbrush and Fedora

Hiro P. always said that a successful art-strike required speed, cunning, and above all else, *style.* In retrospect, he'd never said anything about things like "artistic vision" or "ability to fight off the Masters of Bougie". Hiding behind a steel shipping crate because people were shooting at you, while your art-splosion slowly unfolded itself like a bloom of paint and death not even fifteen feet away… Well, it was almost enough to make you wonder whether you could've done something better with your life, like sticking your dick in a mound of bullet ants.

Hiro was fucking around with the detonator, stupidly trying to make the art bomb stop or even reverse. Melanoma-on-the-arsehole-of-existence ("Arsehole" to her friends) had pulled a marker from somewhere and was scribbling some drawing on the side of the container. She was a little fucked in the head, even for your group, but she was an artist to the end. And you? You were thinking and noticing you were thinking and noticing that you were noticing and wow, who the fuck was that over there?

Some dude was just *walking* through the bullet fire, like he knew where they were going to be and just happened to be where they weren't. Looked like a parody of a banker, too, or maybe a private detective from those old movies your ma made you watch with her, all dapper and shit, a figure drawn in shades of slate and charcoal.

He walked around the corner of the container, out of the field of fire, and stood with his back to you, looking at the Paintball-o-Doom expanding slowly but surely towards you. After a minute or so, and another few inches closer to polychromatic glory, he turned to the three of you, shook his head, and said a single word: "Amateurish."

He turned to go and you quickly darted over and grabbed his shoulder. "Dude, what about us? We can't get away while those

pricks over there are shooting at us!" He sighed and gave a little half-frown, then pulled a stub of chalk from his pocket and tossed it to Arsehole. "Make your own way out, if you can. Or sacrifice it all for Art, your choice." With that, he turned and walked back through the rain of gunfire. (Shit-fucking Christ, how many bullets did they *HAVE?!*)

Arsehole looked at the stub for a second, then drew a submarine hatch on the pavement in front of her. She barely had enough chalk, but got the finishing touches on it just as the first splat of viridian burned against your face. She gave the wheel on the hatch a twist and a circle of concrete popped open. The three of you scrambled down into the hole, and you pulled it closed just as the first sizzle of azure frostbite hit your hand.

And that was how you met The Critic for the first time.

Turned out a lot of people had encountered him in one way or another. He had a lot of names: The Critic, Mr. Gray, Fuckface, The Man, and a shit-ton more. You tried calling him "Your Private Dick", but nobody else thought it was funny, so you stopped after a while. Nobody knew where he came from, or who he was, but he would show up at particularly… *exuberant* pieces every now and then, give a fast-and-dirty review, then disappear again. Sometimes he'd help people out of a jam, like he did for you, sometimes he'd grab artists and toss them to the wolves of the Establishment. Sometimes literally wolves, too. You heard one particularly gruesome story involving a collective trying to do some kind of PETA-esque shit at a zoo (*sooooo* derivative), and they ended up kibble for about half the carnivores because of him.

You got a little obsessed with him for a few months, and got partway through half a dozen pieces about him before you blocked. Every time you tried, it was like there was a hole in the middle of it that refused to be filled. The closest you got was a neat little art contagion that would make infectees go gray and monochrome, like The Critic's color palette, but it seemed… blah. Lifeless. Childish and obvious and dull-witted, when you should be going for dynamic and mysterious. You ended up shelving it all, sticking it in a U-Stor-It out in South Fuckington, Middle of Nowhere, USA.

You decided to do a little traveling to get some perspective on the Man From Nowhere. You spent a couple of years doing a variety of middling-to-moderately successful shows and actions in Eastern Europe down into Spain. The latest was a direct-action performance piece in Nice, France, where a group spiked the water system with a custom fast-acting hallucinogen that ended up with half the tourist trade tripping and seeing the gaps between the strings of reality. The early reviews were that it was ambitious but poorly executed, but at least you got a few people to wake up. You had a few inklings about the nature of Humanity versus Mystery and were taking the train to London, to catch the scene bubbling under the surface there, when you noticed The Critic sitting next to you.

"Hello, artist."

Startled, you replied, "Uh, hello. I, uh, didn't see you there."

"Very few people do. I'm here to discuss your little project about me."

You frowned. "Wha- Oh, I guess you've been watching me. Kinda creepy, man."

"Not really, but I did read a little something about you working on something of potential interest."

"Wait, I'm getting reviews on something that I haven't even finished yet? Mother*FUCK*. It was Kaneese, wasn't it? I'm going to wring that little poseur's neck," you grumbled darkly.

He seemed amused by your little outburst. "No, no, it was no one you would know or even be able to contact. Nevertheless, I want to warn you that you need to be more… original in your interpretation. In the waters you're splashing in, clichés will do nothing except get your work flamed and removed." He waved his hand vaguely towards the ceiling as he said, "Harsh criticism is the nature of the game, is it not?"

"Removed? No, nevermind." You shook your head. "Have you seen my, I guess, treatise on you? What do you think?"

"A little staid, as I'm sure you know, but some parts have potential. Pare it down to the core of your statement, your meaning, then elaborate from there. Don't feel that you have to add flash to make it acceptable; just work with what you have and *make* people like it."

"Uh, thanks for the advice." You paused for a moment. "Um, can I ask you a question?"

He made a small go-ahead gesture and said, "I don't guarantee that I'll answer, but ask away."

You steeled your nerves and asked, "Why do you act so… randomly? I mean, you'll help some people one time, then the next you hand the same people over to the U.N. or whatever, then the next you just stand on the sidelines and watch."

He smiled a Mona Lisa smile at you. "Your theme on me is 'Mystery', isn't it? Think of it as part of my charm. I know what needs to be done, or undone, and take care of things as I see fit." He paused, then continued, "I do have to say that I find you art monsters to be some of the more entertaining under my watch."

With that, he rose. "Well, I must be going. I look forward to seeing the finished work, little artist." He tipped his hat to you, walked away, and you sank into a contemplation on how to edit and redefine your current scraps back "home".

And that was how you met The Critic for the second time.

The rest of your trip back to your storage unit in BFE, West Who-Gives-A-Damn was uneventful. Just a few days blitzed out of your mind in Boston, an induced flash-mob recreation of Debbie Does Dallas on the 50-yard line of Cowboys Stadium, and a lovely evening over tea with The Possibly Reverend George St. George the George'th of the Church of Bob the Irredeemer. Delightful wo/man.

You were feeling energized yet serene when you finally unlocked the door on the unit and rolled it up. Looking at everything tossed into it, you realized that The Critic was right; most of what you'd

done before was trash, derivative, or clichéd to hell and back again. You spent a few days untangling one piece from another, picking apart what worked and what didn't. The next month was spent in a haze as you invented and engineered, called in favors, salvaged and scrapped and scraped and stole and slept.

Eventually you ended up with something totally new; something you didn't even realize was in you, yet somehow tasted distinctly of your touch. You arranged for the first showing to take place on the grounds for Burning Man. Not while it was actually going on, that would've been a bit too… public for this particular piece's opening, but during the off-season. Besides, that gave it time to take root and mature for when the borderliners showed up.

You passed the word out and around forty people showed up in person, although you saw some phones out, presumably streaming video elsewhere. In the center of the space was a seventy-foot-tall saguaro cactus made out of sheet metal and strips of malachite. It glowed, even after the sun set, with a purple-gray-green shimmer that pulled at the mind, like light reflecting off a pigeon's wing. Set into the base of the ivory tower were two narrow archways, barely big enough to squeeze into, through which could be seen Nothing. People kept trying to look into them, but their eyes refused to register anything at all. There were a few appreciative murmurs as people noticed that, but you tuned out most of the comments as you geared yourself up for the Real Deal.

You let the audience circle the engraved spire until the new moon rose above the empty wooden scaffolding. In a spotlight of starlight and moondark, you walked up to the enormous sandstone anthill and stood, framed before the first archway.

"Here is the unknown and the unknowable, the place through which we cannot speak. I invite anyone to walk in this man's shoes and tell themselves they are unchanged."

You then took a step backwards, into and through the archway.

It's strange seeing everyone like this, you think. Scrambling and rambling and even the brightest stars are stuck in the void of reality. You wonder why people don't just tear the veil from their eyes and

remake everything into something more *interesting.*

You see The Critic (oh, but now you know his name, don't you) walk out of the blind spot you didn't know you had, and stand, real and true amongst the flitterings around you both, a 4-D man in a 2-D world. He walks a slow circle around your edifice, and steps into the other archway.

A creditable effort, he thinks. I'm not sure that many people will understand what you've done here, but I do believe that this grand (a/e)ffect is worthwhile. Hmm. You should take a step forward, though. I believe that things are about to get slightly more interesting that you anticipate.

You think that he might be right. After all, you can smell that he's telling the truth as he knows it. You step out of the arch and found yourself surrounded by a crowd of well-wishers and sycophants, all clamoring to praise you.

You held up your hands and managed to stick a stiff smile on your face. "Ladies, gentlemen, teegs, nulls, please settle down. 'Nobody Knows Me, #6239' is an interactive piece, but I believe we're going to have some unwelcome company soon. Anyone who doesn't want to become a commercial sale or an exquisite corpse might want to leave now."

Most of the audience looked uncomfortable and started to drift off to their vehicles, but a handful stuck around, questioning you.

"How many-" "What inspir-" "Whenceforth came-" "*Love*ly materi-" "The luminos-"

You answered in generalities and layered meanings for about an hour. The helicopters were surprisingly quiet, but that wasn't too remarkable, given who flew them. You hugged yourself and awaited the coming cuffs and chains. You wondered if your new "patrons" would let you have access to some art supplies before they shot you in the head. Just a little chalk would do.

And that was how you met The Critic for the third time.

Acquisitions - a Marshall, Carter & Dark Tale

Eight, sir; seven, sir;
Six, sir; five, sir;
Four, sir; three, sir;
Two, sir; one!
'Tenser,' said the Tensor.
'Tenser,' said the Tensor.
'Tension, apprehension,
And dissension have begun.'

Alfred Bester, 'The Demolished Man'

Prelude:

The boy sat pale and stiff in his chair, looking at the board with a curiously blank expression. His opponent, a teenager a couple of years older than him and about to enter his first tournament, moved his last minor piece to menace the boy's queen.

"Are you sure that's what you want to do?" asked the boy, distantly.

His older opponent blinked. The touch-rule was in effect, but the tips of his fingers were still brushing the knight's crest. He could still retract.

"Why do you ask?" The teenager glanced over his shoulder to see his mother and father sitting, watching intently. The younger boy's mother had wandered off somewhere to make a phone call.

"That approach leads to checkmate in four moves," said the boy, fixing his opponent with a large blue eye. The teenager looked over the board, then took his fingers off the black knight. He moved. Then moved again. Then moved again. Then he couldn't move. The younger boy had placed his king in double check between a knight and his remaining rook, with the teenager's promoted pawn on the far side of the board only able to capture one of them in his next

move.

As the teenager's parents clapped him on the back gently and told him there was still plenty of time to raise his game, a couple of figures at the next bench looked on.

"That," said the Russian, jabbing his finger in the direction of the twelve-year-old, who still sat serenely in contemplation of the endgame. "*That* is what I want. Or will you tell me it's not possible?"

His companion peeled his lips back over perfect white teeth, and he chuckled, softly. "My dear fellow, nothing in this world is off-limits."

Acquisitions:

- Act I—'Jellybeans'
- Act II—'You are invited'
- Act III—'Rainy in London'

SCPs and Tales referenced, derivative elements and Author's Notes—spoiler-heavy:

Spoilers

SCPs used as plot devices:
SCP-1552, **SCP-1418**—both written by the author

SCPs unambiguously mentioned but which do not appear:
SCP-1425 (with permission)

SCPs enumerated but not elaborated on:
SCP-538, **SCP-1729**

SCPs alluded to:
'A statue which has an orientation that cannot be altered.'—The former **SCP-518**, now an **Anomalous Item**
'a truly talented magician-aerialist appeared to fall apart in mid-flight'—**SCP-568** via Tara Unknown's **'A Circus for MC&D Ltd'**

'the roadworks were back, this time right outside his apartment. The workmen seemed to eye him suspiciously as he drove past and wrote things down in little notebooks.'—the author's **SCP-1251**
'a mist spread out over the whole ballroom, arching over the guests'—could be **SCP-1660**, but primarily inspired by a sandboxed SCP I saw on the IRC which was a free-standing arch of mist which irritated your eyes until you closed them, whereupon you were able to view somewhere else entirely. I advised the author that it didn't work unless the secondary location was somewhere sensitive like a Foundation facility—guess I was wrong. I don't think it ever made it up onto the site.
'throwing sugar into people's eyes'—**SCP-989**
'doors that opened into other places'—**SCP-384**
'a liquid that turned anything into food'—**SCP-1600**
'a chessboard that was not a chessboard'—**SCP-177**, in a darker shade
'a shattered Exidy Sorceror home computer'—an iteration of **SCP-079**; the things are mass-produced, you know
'a wind-up monkey'—a distant relative of **SCP-050**, perhaps?
'"Sunny in Mogadishu," said a voice close behind him.'—some iteration of **SCP-652**, by way of Tanhony's **'Fun'**
'The dragon's new, though … thoroughly disgusted…'—seriously, do I have to explain this one?
'a man in an orange jumpsuit painted a door clamped horizontally to a pair of workbenches'—**SCP-1199**
'Examining a horse, hanging in a set of medical stirrups from the ceiling, as though it were some kind of alien creature'—open to this being **SCP-042**, **SCP-1194** or even **SCP-1156**; all can be interpreted as being in Britain (see my compilation of skips associated with **Sector-25**)
'Pouring a popular brand of detergent on clothes within a fumigation tank via a robotic arm'—**SCP-325**

Tales alluded to:

Tara Unknown's **'A Circus for MC&D Ltd'**
Blegg's **'Fortunate Son'**
Tanhony's **'Fun'**
Clef's **'Game Day'**
Bookwizard's **'MC&D Agent Orientation'**, quoted near-verbatim during the orientation sequence
Arlecchio's **'Taking Stock'**
DrMann's **'Thank You For Your Time'**

Other:
MC&D's SCP-generated business cards taken from pooryoric's idea in **this thread**, endorsed by Gears
Carter's appearance largely drawn from Arlecchio's **'Taking Stock'**. One slight difference; Arlecchio's Carter has rheumy eyes and a full set of teeth, albeit yellowed and hideous. When I was writing 'Acquisitions', I opted for a toothless Carter with clear eyes to set him apart from the grinning Marshall and make him seem sharp in the small glimpse we get of him. As far as I know, Carter-as-anthropometrist is a new quirk I've added.
The character of the Bagman is drawn from Clef's **'Game Day'**, though his appearance and modus operandi is rather different.

Credits:
First off, the big disclaimer. This is unambiguously and intentionally crossover fiction between the SCP universe, Harry Bingham's 'The Money Makers' and Lev Grossman's 'Codex' (those popular and beloved universes…). 'Crossover' is here meant in a very literal sense—Edward Gradley is a portmanteau of the names of two protagonists from the books and the revelation of his mother's maiden name furnishes the point of convergence between the two worlds. The following characters and scenes are inspired by plot elements that appear in one or the other work:
- Bernard Gradley in his entirety is a five-finger discount from 'The Money Makers'. The nature of his will is changed significantly and the competition that forms the

basis of Harry Bingham's work removed altogether (though a simplified allusion to the plot of 'The Money Makers' is made in a dream sequence).
- Edward's encounter with Raymond MacIntyre in the car park and subsequent unexpected salary boost happened with Zack Gradley and minor character Dixon Banderman in 'The Money Makers'.
- The Cholmondeley deal is heavily inspired by the Hatherleigh Pacific takeover that formed the climax of Zack Gradley's plot arc. Some of the language regarding the salary review was also inspired by Matthew Gradley's subplot.
- It is never explained why or how Edward Wozny in 'Codex' lost his ability to play chess. I rectify this in the course of 'Acquisitions'.
- The (fictitious) Gervase of Langford and his codex are very intentionally taken from 'Codex' as an exercise in metafiction, though the circumstances surrounding it are obviously different. The paraphrased plot of the Viage has not been changed, though details have been added and an ending (not provided in the original) supplied—in the original work there is no explanation at all for the Viage's unusually sophisticated writing style nor its disintegration into insanity; I hope the solution I have provided here is both elegant within the context of the SCP Foundation world and that the ending I have written for the Viage also makes a narratively satisfying conclusion to 'Codex' as well. It's notable that I actually make reference to two CK-class events in the course of this story. It's left as an exercise to the reader to determine which SCP (not listed above) is the crux of this subplot. It does exist, and is popular.
- Bashir 'Slasher' Khan owes a debt to 'Black Nick' Draper, on whom Matthew Gradley gambles and loses in 'The Money Makers'. Both, however, are obvious expies of the real-life figure of Fred 'The Shred' Goodwin, one of the major figures in the 2008 crash.
- To a lesser extent, Edward's grilling by MacIntyre over suspicious use (or lack thereof) of his research card and his bailout by mentor David are inspired by a similar

scene in 'The Money Makers'.
- The Carmichael & Sons deal is a nod to George Gradley's plotline and the dirty tricks campaign by Gissings against Aspertons.

David Went's surname is drawn from a key family in 'Codex' but his character is more closely inspired by Tip Skikne from Chip Kidd's excellent 'The Learners' (Read it. Now.). Edward's treatment of Peter Davis owes a debt to Ayn Rand's 'The Fountainhead', which I also allowed to furnish some of Edward's Gradley's own beliefs (not shared, you may be relieved to learn, by this author); the way they are expounded is heavily influenced by (the criminally forgotten Victorian society novel parts of) Lewis Carroll's 'Sylvie and Bruno'. He is, in fact, a portmanteau of Peter Keating and Tim Davis, the two figures in the corresponding Rand subplot. You may also detect in Davis shades of Hal Gillingham from 'The Money-Makers'. Having made this decision, I subsequently repurposed a scene from the end of 'Atlas Shrugged' for Edward's brief encounter with Matt Berkeley, which may go some way to explaining why it suddenly veers off into a philosophical rant.

The name Maria Beaumont and the Sardines game have been appropriated from Alfred Bester's 'The Demolished Man'; it's the last remnant (other than a deliberate nod back to it the dream sequence) of a very early sketch of the piece where Lady Penelope and Maria Beaumont were the same figure; the head of the London MC&D chapterhouse. The Demolished Man's Maria Beaumont, the plastic surgery-addicted 'Gilt Corpse', is a rather different character, with my Maria playing Barbara D'Courtney to Edward's Ben Reich.

A scene in Clive Barker's 'Weaveworld' was the inspiration for **SCP-1418** and subsequently Edward's encounter in the dark, which became the seed for this Tale. The 'Four Horsemen' started life as expies of the 'Lone Gunmen' from X-Files but have subsequently

taken on rather crazed life of their very own.

The ACTLE/Wincanton nationalisation was pulled straight from the headlines with Repsol and YPF.

Author's notes:
My portrayal of Marshall, Carter & Dark (I originally planned to keep the 'canon' formatting 'Marshall, Carter, and Dark' but was advised on IRC that it's probably a typo that's become engrained in the mythos) is possibly a little off the beaten path, especially at the start. This is partially because I wanted to portray the GoI from the perspective of someone outside the Veil, rationalising what they are seeing; if you look closely, the mindwiped servants and dubious back rooms where members indulge unconventional desires are still there, but simply aren't the focus of this Tale.

I wanted to attempt to harmonise different interpretations of MC&D I've seen on the site. Are they an exclusive auction house, a politically-influential secret society, entrepreneurs seeking world domination with a private army, a brothel, a shadow government? Personally, I dislike the notion that MC&D are a seedy sex club—whilst they certainly wouldn't balk at providing such services in 'Acquisitions', and in fact use them to increase their control over their members, they also have to be an organisation that the rich and powerful, both men and women, aren't ashamed to be part of. The idea of MC&D as a **gentleman's club** seems to tick all the boxes.

I wasn't sure about the idea that MC&D operate off the radar with clubhouses hidden using skips; when I started I had the idea that MC&D were going to be almost out in the open—they wouldn't have their name on the sign, but their buildings would be in plain sight and you could see the right and powerful going in and out; they would be protected by the status of their members and a certain measure of mutual respect by the Foundation. Blegg's 'Fortunate Son' changed my mind and I eventually went

Harry Potter on their security arrangements for this Tale.

As to the military capabilities of MC&D, existing Tales as one might expect take different views. The MC&D in 'Taking Stock' who intimidate with armed thugs seem a world away from the world-menacing MC&D who unleash lethal and fully controlled skips in 'Fun'. Hopefully the middle ground I've taken here is appropriate.

As the story goes on, I allow Marshall to act out more and more until by the end he's hopefully back to his typical characterisation, reflecting the slow perspective shift as Edward moves through the Veil. “The body, Mr Carter!”, which I fully intend to use as the title of a shorter work as soon as I can find a good picture for that teapot, is the line that separates 'manipulative information dealer Marshall' and 'cartoon villain Marshall'. Before people leap down my throat I should point out that I am not actually establishing Marshall's first name as 'Jeremy'—if you notice, that's an assumption Edward makes based on the pseudonym Marshall uses to introduce himself (cf. DrMann's **`'Thank You For Your Time'`**).

In my headcanon, all three founding partners are the original ones. Dark is long dead, as per pooryoric's **`'From The Desk of B. Dark'`**, which doesn't stop him from showing up from time to time as well as running the club from beyond the grave, Hari Seldon-style (see my short 'Dark', written for Gears' birthday challenge, for just how far I envisage his control freakery extending). Marshall has some kind of skip that is keeping him young-ish, although as the one past appearance of Marshall in 'Acquisitions' is only thirteen years ago, this isn't really a necessity and isn't mentioned outright. Carter has to make do with sucking on the juices of the occasional young man (and that sounded wrong), which keeps him circling the drain; he refuses to die, if only because he actually can't stand Marshall and doesn't want the club in his sole hands.

I am aware that as a Tale with no fights, no explosions, and only one ambiguous death possibly due to a skip 'Acquisitions' is far from high-octane; with 5,600 words before the first element from the SCP universe is introduced it might even qualify as a medical anaesthetic. Hopefully enough people appreciate what I've tried to do with 'Acquisitions'—as someone (if it was you, please let me know so I can replace this damn placeholder!) bemoaned on IRC: 'No-one writes normal shit'. Well, I didn't quite succeed in writing a completely mundane Tale set in the SCP universe, but I think this may well be as close as it's possible to get while maintaining interest at this length. And hopefully it's not shit. We'll see.

Further documentation of phenomena relating to events referenced in this file:

SRegan's Personnel File

FoldUnfold

Table of Contents

Chapter One: "Jellybeans"
Chapter Two: "Antitrust"
Chapter Three: "Tender"

Chapter One: "Jellybeans"

The last will and testament of Bernard Gradley

So, I'm gone. You're sitting there in dear old Mr Pierce's office, waiting for the big news. The only question in your minds is, how is this all going to work? Old Bernard's company must be worth a few bob. More than a few. I'll tell you, it's forty million. It'll be sold on to the Japanese or the Chinese or whoever the hell else is buying Britain by the time I snuff it and then you can go and get your places in the sun and never have to worry about where the money's coming from again. But are there strings attached? That's what you're asking. Beatrycze, you're wondering whether you're going to have to go cap-in-hand to Edward because I've left everything to him. And Edward's wondering if it's all going to be stuck in some tiresome trust until he turns thirty or forty or whatever.

Well, that's not how this is going to happen. You can hate me all you want, because I'm dead, but I've thought a long time about what to do and this is the only course of action I can take and still hold true to the values that made me the man I am, or rather, the man I was. Beatrycze, I'm not going to pretend that you loved me while we were together. At best I was a nuisance standing between you and my money. I don't think it even occurred to you that you would have nothing had I not behaved the way I did—you wanted the great

industrialist *and* the great family man, and I couldn't be both. The gifts I gave you were never good enough—too large, or too small, or last year's fashion. So here's what I'm leaving you—five hundred quid's worth of crisp M&S vouchers. Have one last splurge on me, dear, and this time you can make sure it's right.

And Edward. You've made me proud—and you've also made me disappointed. Everything you've excelled in you've dropped out of—the chess, art, music. Now it's philosophy, which I'm sure will be just as temporary. Guess it just seemed like too much hard work with a life of leisure ahead. I'm sorry that you've ended up thinking that way—I take the blame for that. And I'm sorry if I let you believe that you'd never have to work a day in your life. That's not going to be true. If you want to be rich, you have the intelligence and the talent to achieve it. You could be a philosopher, you could be anything. But you'll have to do it by yourself. You'll have to get your hands dirty, like I did. To my son, Edward, I leave nothing.

Gradley Industries, my child, my prize, I leave to Gerald Spointer, who I know will continue his sterling work in the role of Chief Executive Officer…

Edward Gradley swore softly as he eased the Vauxhall Astra around yet another one of the serpentine parking bays in Cooper Drake's gargantuan car park. All full, of course. He squinted at his watch. Eleven forty. Five minutes to find a spot, get out, run what seemed like two miles to the front door of the CD head office, check in, and get to his interview. He ran a hand through short dark hair. Calm down.

Another painfully tight corner, maneuvering around bollards which seemed to have been designed for a Segway. And there it was, sitting invitingly between a black Cadillac and a lovingly maintained Bentley. A space! Edward gave thanks to a god he didn't believe in and pulled towards it hard. The Astra ramped over a speed bump and promptly stalled. Edward dutifully put his indicator on while he shifted out of gear, which didn't seem to bother the silver Mercedes which cruised effortlessly past, executed a distinctly cavalier three-

point turn that almost claimed Edward's wing mirror and reversed into the spot. Its occupant, a neatly folded and pressed sixty-something in an expensive suit with incongruously gelled grey hair got out and raised an eyebrow in the direction of Edward, whose pale skin was turning vermillion.

"Some problem there, young man?" He adjusted his tie, bared his teeth and examined the result in the window of his car.

"Yes, actually, you prick," Edward said, a few dozen decibels too loud. "Didn't you see I was pulling into that space? I had my indicator on and everything! Plus, you almost hit me!"

"Is that so? Well, 'almost' never needs apologies. Besides, how do you know this isn't my space?"

Edward fell silent for a second as something small at the back of his mind tried to draw a conclusion from that and didn't like it.

"I didn't see a name on it," he said, at significantly reduced volume but still carrying a boom that made the little voice cringe.

"You're right! My word," said the older man, winking at him before walking towards the offices. "Must be I just like to screw with people."

"Wanker!" shouted Edward after him in a moment of catharsis before realising that the whole exchange had cost him close to a minute.

Edward finally arrived in the Cooper Drake reception at eleven forty-six and thirty seconds, trembling and breathless. The secretary gave him a sympathetic glance before passing him a series of forms and a viciously sharp name badge, which he just about managed to get pinned to his suit (thirty-five pounds from Matalan) without goring himself.

"Edward! How are you doing?" Edward jumped and turned to see a short, stocky young man about his own age grinning up at him.

"Erm, hi."

"How are things with the—oh, you know, the…" The over-familiar stranger patted Edward on the arm, rolling his eyes in what was apparently meant to be a gesture of solidarity.

"Terribly sorry, but this is going to seem awfully rude. Do I know you from somewhere?"

"Nope! It's David. David Went." He held out an immaculately manicured hand, wrist graced by a Rolex. "Don't mind my introductions, I always like to see how people react. You've passed the first test, by the way. I always tell Peter not to hire people who try to bullshit by pretending they remember me. Or if they tell me to go away, of course. I'm lead Partner for Stocks and Shares, so I get to sit on all Peter's interviews. That's Peter Davis, by the way. He'll be your line manager. So, let's get you introduced!"

This process first required a lengthy trek through the halls of power. Cooper Drake wasn't anywhere near as old or established as Redmayne–Bracknell, Edward's previous firm, but it made a bigger return on almost every investment it made and was widely seen as the uncrowned king of the British investment portfolios. There had certainly been an attempt to create the impression of old money, thought Edward, looking at the rich, slightly worn dark green leather seats in the consultancy area and the lacquered wood finish on the walls, adorned with a dizzying array of digital and analogue clocks displaying the time in New York, Moscow, Beijing…

Finally Edward was ushered through into a comparatively small office with a polished oak desk. At its head was a bored-looking ponytail in Raybans, probably no more than thirty himself. He was toying with a half-eaten sushi box while trying hard to appear absorbed in a slim document file.

"Peter! Meet Ed—can we call him Ed?" Edward nodded mutely, knuckles white on his slightly battered travel case. "Great. Come on, let's get sat down and we can have a chat."

Peter Davis removed his shades and seemed to see the document in front of him for the first time. "So, Edward," he drawled, ignoring David's suggested nomenclature. Edward thought the man sounded like Nigel Mansell after a few dozen pints. "Edward Gradley. Now, I

look at that, and I think—any relation? To, you know, erm—"

"Bernard Gradley? The industrialist," prompted David, smiling broadly. Peter seemed to have taken that as the culmination of his question, so Edward drew himself up.

"He was my father, yes."

"Hmm, must mean you're pretty loaded." Peter's critical eye swept Edward up and down with the implication that he had done an exceptional job hiding it. "So, why are you slumming it with us?"

Edward groaned internally. Secret origin story in three, two, one…

"Unfortunately, he didn't leave me a square nickel of it." Peter seemed visibly surprised—David just continued his Cheshire cat grin.

"Not a penny?" Peter crossed his legs and did a passable imitation of 'sympathetically distraught'.

"No."

"Must be some resentment there!" exclaimed David, rather too happily for Edward's tastes.

"To be brutally frank, yes. I hate him for it. I don't hate him because I think I was entitled to something I didn't earn. I hate him because he let me believe I was preparing for one way of life, one mode of existence, then gave me another one altogether."

"That must be the, er, Philosophy degree talking," said Peter.

"Now, as I recall Mr Gradley passed away two years ago. Did that have any impact on your work?" David walked his fingers over the table and slid out two sheets of paper with the Redmayne–Bracknell letterhead clearly visible. Jesus Christ, thought Edward, they've only gone and told RB that I asked for an interview at another firm. I'd better pull this off, otherwise I won't have a job to go back to.

"I think you know it did. At the time I was an intern, and not a very good one."

"Honest!" exclaimed Peter through a mouthful of rice; he'd given up any pretence of examining Edward's CV and was tucking into his plastic clamshell of norimaki.

"I was marking time, waiting to get bored of investment banking like I've gotten bored of a lot of things. Then—well. The will basically said I was a disappointment to him, a dropout. I'd like to say that it was a sober wakeup that I took to heart, and that's why I pulled my finger out. It wasn't. I just wanted to prove him wrong. So I came in at five every morning, got coffee for the traders, did research on the hot stocks for the morning; did everything I could to add value. After six months I told RB I thought I was ready to trade. They recognised the effort I was putting in and gave me my first account."

"But now you want to leave them," prompted David. "Do you think you have loyalty issues?" Edward drew a deep breath. One of the *tricky* questions.

"RB took a chance making me a trader; I appreciate that. They invested in me. And in return they've made a profit from me of almost six hundred thousand pounds. That's after factoring in my salary. I believe in money—I wouldn't be in the business if I didn't. I believe in contracts. And the contract I signed with Redmayne–Bracknell says I have to give them four weeks' notice. I'm in investment banking because I want to get rich—"

"Don't we all!" interjected Peter with a glazed expression.

"And that won't happen if I stay at RB. Cooper Drake has taken over one thousand four hundred clients from the firm since I joined. You're going to flatten it."

"And you want to be on the upper side of the boot, so to speak?" David asked. He was looking for something under the desk. "I wonder, will your gratitude to Redmayne–Bracknell get in the way if you have to do business with them?"

"No. That's based on my philosophy of business." Edward wondered if he was about to put his foot in it. Please, *please*, said the little voice, don't start lecturing.

David had found what he was looking for—a glass jar full of something colourful. Right now he was trying to get the lid off. Peter waved his hands ineffectually in David's direction as though offering to try and open it before thinking better of it.

"Please, just give us a précis. It's really good to be able to get inside the head of someone coming to work with us." David beamed.

He didn't use 'potentially'; that's got to be a good sign, right? Edward marshalled his thoughts.

"Businesses are collections of individuals, just like countries or religions. The difference is that companies recognise—or should recognise—the fact. The ideal of capitalism is that everyone working for his or her own interests—and purely for his or her own interests—is ultimately beneficial for all. When I do business with Redmayne–Bracknell—or Lyons Patrick, or Kleiner, Puttel & Minsc, or swap stocks with colleagues, I'll be working in my best interests. If I'm working for you, my best interest makes you money."

"I like him!" chortled Peter, rocking back in his chair and twirling his Raybans. "David, what do you think? Give him the job?"

"Not just yet. We normally say 'we'll let you know in a week', don't we Peter? I will say that I'm impressed. You did well on the phone interview; you did better today. Have a jellybean?"

Edward blinked at the non-sequitur and saw David was holding out the jar, the lid still firmly jammed on.

"Thanks." Edward took the jar, gripped the lid firmly and with a sharp counterclockwise twist managed to push it past the obstruction; a flattened sweetmeat caught in the screwthread of the lid. Edward delicately reached in and took one orange jellybean. He looked up, suddenly conscious that he might have done the wrong thing. Peter was smirking and looking sideways at David with a knowing glance.

"Well done," said David. "Just a little something I like to do. Pinched it from Reagan. Decisiveness, will to profit, ability to hear and remember terms of contract. Bean, *singular*. Very good. Why orange?"

"Well, Belfree's jellybeans only come in two flavours—plain, and orange."

"Really?" Peter was mesmerised.

"They have two vats; one with just the sugar, corn syrup and starch, and another where they add orange flavouring. They found in the nineteen-fifties that the orange flavour was the most popular and that there were no other strong preferences, so they cut costs. There are eight colours, but orange is thirty percent of each pack. The seventy percent is their profit margin. You eat a red jellybean, or a black jellybean, or a white jellybean, and you think you can taste raspberry or blackcurrent or lemon. You can't; that's your body's learned response to the colour. You offered me *a* jellybean—I chose the more valuable flavour. Plus, I happen to like oranges."

"Fuck convention," announced David, after a second's silence. "I think we can move this along. As far as I'm concerned, you're in."

"Oh—yes, right, sure," Peter chimed in, leaning over the table. "Well done."

"Thanks. Glad to be on board." Edward got up and shook Peter's hand, then extended his hand to David, who pumped it enthusiastically.

"Well," said David, "there's one more hurdle to jump through. Just a formality, really. As head partner I get to introduce you to the floor manager, Raymond MacIntyre. He's the one with the final say in hiring. Come on, I'll take you up to the trading floor."

'Up' was right. Leaving Peter behind at his desk, Edward and David were wordlessly ushered into an opulent glass-sided elevator that gave its occupants a view of each floor as they passed through. Secluded, plush-walled rooms for meeting clients gave way to hard-linoleum warehouses of regimented accountants sitting at their computers, who in turn gave way to richly appointed executive offices. And finally, with such grandeur that Edward almost applauded, the elevator rose through a thick perspex mezzanine—literally punching through the glass ceiling, he thought, as if it made

any difference to the silent, pretty secretary in the thick glasses who stood by the door buttons to let them off—to reveal a vast, open-plan area where men in designer suits barraged back and forth between colossal monitors displaying stock indexes in a hundred different countries and huge round glass tables strewn with paper like the aftermath of some gargantuan infant's temper tantrum.

It was a good four times larger than Redmayne–Bracknell's trading floor. At the far end, where David was leading him now with assured, vigorous strides, was a small enclosed area—comparatively small, he realised, as several more steps seemingly failed to bring it any closer—clad in light, honey-brown wood. When they finally reached the door, a gleaming plaque announced this to be the residence of Raymond MacIntyre.

"Here we go—good luck! Just kidding, he's a pussycat, really." David smiled reassuringly before rapping the wood with his knuckles and swinging it open.

The prick from the carpark, the wanker in the Merc, looked up from scribbling on a notepad and saw them. Recognition flashed immediately in his eyes and thin lips slid back from immaculately whitened teeth.

Oh fuck.

"So David, this is young Edward. Starting off as a junior associate, I presume. You must be taken to bring him up here on his first interview. Is it love?" There was an edge to his voice that Edward couldn't quite pin down but which couldn't be good.

"Well, he's proposed. And now we're here to get daddy's blessing." David winked and stepped aside to give Edward a full, unobstructed view of his own demise.

"I've met him already." Raymond MacIntyre started opening a letter with a very long, very sharp knife.

"Really?" David seemed utterly oblivious to the razor-atmosphere which Edward felt sure was about to engulf him.

"Yes. We ran into each other in the car park. Well, almost." A dangerous glitter again.

"'Almost' never needs apologies," said Edward. No job at Cooper Drake, a dismissal notice probably already waiting for him back at Redmayne–Bracknell. His father must be looking at him now and laughing his ass off. He'd be looking up, of course. Even if Edward was at ground level.

"No." Turning his attention to David. "This fellow cussed me out for backing into his spot. He didn't back down, even when I hinted as strongly as I felt able my position in the firm. Called me a 'wanker', as I recall." Edward saw David's florid face lightening to apricot out of the corner of his eye. "Now, how much were you intending to *pay* this young man for the privilege of doing that every day?"

"Erm, thirty-five thousand. Signing bonus of, ah, three thousand." David looked like he would rather be somewhere far, far away.

Something horrible was moving in Edward's chest, expanding and contracting rhythmically. Some parasitic thing, about to burst through the sparse flesh over his ribcage. It took him a minute to realise it was his heart. The room was filling up with yellow mist. I'm going to pass out, Edward thought. Failure, failure, failure.

"Really? Make it forty thousand. And double his signing bonus. He comes in at seven his first day, you hear me? I'll work him until he's dry. You may hold me to that."

Edward almost passed out anyway—David discreetly clapped a pally arm around him and steered him to the door. "Well done," he muttered.

The conversation with his manager at Redmayne–Bracknell went as well as could be expected; there are better ways to answer "why is our primary competitor asking about your work performance?" than "here's my notice." The phrase "ungrateful little bitch" was used; Edward was sure he'd never seen a man with so many letters after his name so closely approximating a primary colour. As it turned out, a philosophical expounding of capitalism proved less persuasive for

those no longer served by your own self-interest.

On his last Monday at RB he found his name had accidentally been added to every slot on the coffee and danish errand rota. On Wednesday someone tipped the rubbish bin in his drawer. Edward didn't mind. In his last week he signed thirty new contacts and made sure to give them all his card. No company—just a name, private email and mobile number.

Edward spent his last weekend before starting work at Cooper Drake playing video games and trying for the fifteenth time to crack Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. He tried to get to sleep early, on the assumption that MacIntyre wasn't the sort of man who would be disrespected twice if he came in late.

Instead he lay awake, mind churning. He found himself thinking—how much is enough? When have I proved to my father—who, let's not forget, is currently hard at work decomposing—that I've applied myself? Five million? Ten million? Maybe I need to beat him; that would be forty million.

Of course, he'd never accept I'd earned it, the way he did, putting together a company from the ground up. City traders, with their soft hands and wacky ties, were as far from Bernard Gradley, the man who'd made his millions selling furniture from the back of a van, as you could get. Perhaps I need to get a wife and kids just so I can leave them everything? Is that it? Do I never get to feel like I've won as long as I'm alive? Madness. It's madness.

Man works to cease from working, he reasoned; the purpose of work cannot be more work, as at each stage the objective of work is to reduce the total mass of labour left to do. In some ways the City exemplified this—you put in crazy hours, worked yourself to the bone, took insane risks, and the reward was the accumulation of wealth; early retirement while you could still enjoy the leisured lifestyle. But what of the grey-haired men who'd spent decades in finance, turning their whole lives into one huge accumulator bet as though they could take it with them? Bernard Gradley had gone one stage further—working month after month, year after year, burning his flesh like a candle: he had not enjoyed rest from his work, and he

had denied it to his wife and son as well. In some ways Edward could see the sense in it. Gradley Industries had been a *project*, a great work. In his will he had called it his 'child', his masterpiece. What great work was there in finance?

"Time to get started!" chirped David as he ushered Edward around the great glass tables on the top floor of Cooper Drake's great City offices. Faces came and went in front of his sleep-starved eyes, people he needed to remember as his lifelines. Concentrate, he warned himself.

"This is Elizabeth. Treat her well; she's your source for leads. Her analysts work around the clock to tease out data from international stock markets and convert it into essential narratives for CD brokers."

At Redmayne–Bracknell you were more or less given a stack of newspapers and expected to get on with it. Elizabeth Keating was a plain, slightly overweight girl barely older than Edward; she favoured him with a winning smile but his mind was already somewhere else.

Edward would be working in Peter's team—a pod of four associate brokers focusing on British and international industry. Each would be working to invest money in stocks and shares around the globe; blue-chip companies would likely already have a recommendation from the firm's analysts—Strong Buy, Buy, Hold, Sell, or Strong Sell, but for the majority of startups, medium-size enterprises or just plain old-fashioned firms that refused to play PR ball with the market, brokers were left with gut feeling and what facts they could dig up themselves.

Edward was issued with a gleaming transparent plastic keycard—his research pass, which when swiped into the Cooper Drake systems permitted access to their vast, labyrinthine records of stock movements over the past century. "Don't lose it," warned David —"these things literally cost half your monthly salary. They're laser-engraved; everyone's is unique." At Edward's previous firm there had been a lengthy keycode instead; you were absolutely forbidden to write the thing down, but everyone did it anyway. If you wanted to snoop around someone's search history and get some juicy tips all

you needed to do was open their drawer and find the sixteen-digit number scrawled on the Post-it note. Not that Edward would ever admit doing something like that.

"So Edward, I think I'm gonna throw you in the deep end," drawled Peter. "I've got some big aerospace trades and I want you to take a look. See what sense you can make of them, you know?"

That turned out to be not a lot. Edward went half the morning believing this was some kind of surreal training exercise or prank before he realised what he was seeing were actually Peter's positions. He was selling fast-growing R&D stocks with acute nervelessness, often missing out on hundreds of thousands, while clinging on to big-name shares that showed no signs of ever breaking even. Some delicacy required, he reflected, when your direct manager is probably the least capable person in the building. Peter wasn't even incompetent—he was clueless, making trades half an hour after the herd and hoping for the best. Edward would bet good money that each of Peter's prematurely abandoned tech picks had been the result of some offhand comment by a member of his team, while his touching faith in the stagnating giant firms that formed the core of his position seemed based on formulaic language in press releases no-one—except Peter, apparently—saw as exciting or indicative of rapid change anymore.

"Some bold choices," Edward finally concluded after spending the morning sweating over the bizarre pileup of incoherent stock picks that constituted Peter's portfolio.

"Really?" Peter sounded aghast.

"I mean, I don't think I'll have the nerve for some of these trades for a while. Like the Boeing position; that's huge."

"R-right. I mean, don't just copy what I'm doing. You've got to make your own style. To be honest, I think I'm a bit long on Boeing, even." A bit? It's been a Strong Sell for two weeks, thought Edward glumly. Over the course of the afternoon he was able to cajole Peter into abandoning most of his current positions and adopting a far more diverse spread with significant spend in the rapidly expanding British space sector. Peter finished the day half a mill up, and Edward

caught him squinting in his direction from behind his shades.

"So how are things going?" David asked as the traders, at seven, slowly began filtering home.

"Great," said Edward with as much enthusiasm as he could muster. "Peter had me take a look at his portfolio; I was able to suggest some changes."

"Ah—good." David rubbed the sides of his nose with his thumbs. "Change definitely sounds good where Peter's portfolio's concerned. Glad he's started you on something challenging."

Poor Peter, thought Edward. He's a laughing stock at his own firm and he doesn't even know it.

"Say, will you do something for me?" asked David. It's going to be something weird, thought Edward, I know it. For some reason you couldn't help taking to David; he was relentlessly affable, though Edward sensed a hard core of steel beneath the chubby exterior. "Put your arms up, like this."

David raised both hands above his head, as though he were preparing to clap along to an old Gospel song. Edward did likewise, wincing as his suit pinched his chest.

"See this here?"—David ran a finger along the folds that ran from shoulder to shoulder on Edward's cheap suit. "These should not exist. This is your second trading job; you're pulling in the big bucks, well, comparatively speaking. You should get a better suit. I know a guy on Ludgate Hill that does the most amazing tailored suits… old Greek guy, he gets all his fabrics under the counter from the textile manufacturers who supply the big designers; Versace, Newman…"

"This conversation obviously has anti-gravity properties, because I can feel my wallet getting lighter," retorted Edward.

"You're thinking about it the wrong way. You spend the money to get the money. You show up at a client's offices in a cheap suit and shabby shoes, you think he's going to give you the time of day, let alone all his cash? No, you show up in a tailored suit and you let him

see his face in everything else. *That's how he knows you work.*"

"I guess," said Edward. But I *like* my suit, he thought. I don't think it looks bad, per se. How often during a meeting with a client do you have cause to walk around with your arms above your head? Maybe a deodorant manufacturer… He had absolutely no intention of visiting David's expensive friend.

"Yes, Sir has definitely gone up a size in the waist since his last visit. Would Sir like me to take out his current suit or place an order for a new one?"

Edward watched as David happily paid more than the price of Edward's car for a new pair of trousers and apparently on a whim ordered the next size up, too. The wizened gentleman in charge of Stathopoulos Fine Tailors and Drapers looked positively ecstatic as he took his details and arranged for the garments to be delivered hand-pressed and ready to wear. Always good when each time your client came in they made a bigger order—fabric-wise, anyway—than the time before, Edward mused. David didn't seem to mind his weight and appeared to wear it like a badge of his prosperity.

"Come on then, Ed, you're up next."

Edward tried his best to look stoic while the old man looped his tape measure around various parts of Edward's anatomy, making little clucking noises as he scribbled them on a yellowed tailor's pad.

"Sir is very slim; department store clothes that fit well around the chest will be too tight at the shoulders. You lose ease of movement. If Sir would just try this…" The old man brought out a mock suit frontage with adjustable bands and loosened and tightened them while asking Edward to raise and lower his arms, bend at the waist, lean sideways. When he was satisfied he totted up a few numbers on a pocket calculator.

"I can have a new suit in Sir's size ready by Thursday. As Sir is a new customer I shall make a special rate of seven hundred and fifty pounds."

Edward's jaw made a dedicated bid for freedom from the rest of his skull. David sauntered over and rested an arm on Edward's shoulder.

"He'll be paying by plastic."

While Edward was changing back into his off-the-peg suit—had it been this itchy before?—David sat in a leather armchair by the tailor's window and sipped tea brought to him by the tailor's equally elderly wife.

"You know, you should be looking at a new car, too. Surprised that old thing out there even works. It's like the suit—it's false economy. You get a car that gets you there fast, every time, and looks good when you arrive."

"Not much good if you can't find parking," Edward retorted.

"Hmm. You'll get the picture eventually. I'll tell you every trader does need, right off the bat—membership at a gentleman's club."

"Just the essentials, eh?" said Edward, thoroughly bemused.

"Damn right. Think about it for a second. When the clubs were founded they were originally just for people who were independently wealthy. That was the definition of 'gentleman'. But then came the franchise extensions. These days, who goes to gentleman's clubs? The captains of industry, the politicians. And why are they there? To talk business. I'm sitting there reading the Daily Telegraph, and behind me a Cabinet Secretary is discussing scrapping import restrictions on semiconductors. That's not a hypothetical situation—that happened last week. What do I do when I get back to the office? I sell every share I have in Ferranti at a quarter pence below the market price. They get snapped up by some chip freak at KPM. Bad news for him, because tomorrow when the news comes in that you'll be able to buy in the things from China at half the price, he's going to be left holding scraps while I got out forty k up."

"Is that legal?"

"Absolutely. It wouldn't even make a difference if instead I'd heard

the CEO of Ferranti saying they were about to lose market share. If I'm privy to a conversation in a club at which I'm a member, it's no different to overhearing it on the street."

"I see. So where do you go, if you don't mind me asking?"

"Well, I started out at The Athenaeum, moved up to the Arts Club in my second year at Cooper Drake. Then I found my current haunt—they keep themselves off all the lists. They prefer to describe themselves as a 'private concern' rather than a club. Go in any time of the day or night; you'll see ex-PMs, foreign diplomats, billionaires…"

"Would I have heard of them?"

"If you have, they'd be mortified. I'll have to take you along sometime on my guest's pass; it's incredible. They're called Marshall, Carter & Dark."

Chapter Two: "Antitrust"

Over the next weeks, Edward picked up enough to put together his portfolio, centred around aerospace—a core of reliable performers like Staines Aeronautics with tendrils in fuel efficiency and carbon reduction research; any time a government anywhere in the world announced new breaks for cleaner fuels or started taxing emissions they would jump up in value. He built in a cheeky position on a couple of low-cost airlines; it fell outside his remit, but he figured Cooper Drake wouldn't mind too much; big, established companies were going broke all the time and their fleets being snapped up for a fraction of their value by budget carriers. It was trivial to predict takeovers and anticipate share price spikes.

At the same time, Edward continue to volunteer to handle Peter's stocks—always carefully phrased:

"You know, Peter, I'm a bit stuck for ideas. Mind if I take a peek at your portfolio? I'll tidy some of your picks up if you like—only fair while I'm snooping around."

"Peter—you've probably already seen it but Blue Zone is tanking fast. Do you mind if I pair up our positions? I have an American buyer who wants a lot of them inside the hour."

Peter was always pathetically grateful and soon Edward was more or less running his portfolio as a subsidiary of his own. Pacing himself carefully, he started putting in even later nights, staying long after Peter had shambled off to the pub. Each day he was able to persuade Peter to take leave of his desk sooner—'I'll finish these up for you,' 'Don't worry about these reports, I'll have them on Raymond's desk.' Members of Peter's team started coming to Edward with their requests for the research team.

These afforded him access on a regular basis to the Research desk, where he always lingered for just the right amount of time, flashing a boyishly embarrassed smile at Liz and making the feeblest attempts at small talk he could muster. The homely young woman didn't take long at all to pick up on his apparent attentions.

"Mr Gradley, if I didn't know better I'd think you were flirting."

"Well…" Edward had always had the ability to blush at will. It had proven incredibly useful in getting out of childhood misdemeanors for which he had felt not the slightest bit of contrition. And women seemed to find it cute. "Maybe we can meet up for coffee sometime?"—from then on Edward got the research team's leads coming in as well.

Around this time, Peter announced that he had become engaged to a woman called Roweena, and his already superfluous attendance became increasingly fragmentary. Edward did his best to encourage this behaviour. "No, don't worry about anything, Peter—we're on top of it."

Three months after Peter Davis hired Edward, Raymond MacIntyre walked past the industry brokerage team and stopped, sniffing. Edward was sitting at Peter's computer, pumping out a three thousand word investor report.

"Peter not in again?" MacIntyre looked at his watch and glanced around vaguely, as though Peter might be on the ceiling or under

one of the desks.

"You know how it is, Mr MacIntyre—young love. You'll have to forgive him, his mind's not on his work." Edward looked up, face a picture of guilelessness.

"Hmmph." That one little noise as MacIntyre moved away told Edward it had all been worth it. He had just seen that the best-paid member of his stock brokerage division was the person who least needed to be there.

That Friday Edward was called into a meeting with Raymond MacIntyre and David Went where he was asked about how he felt about taking the 'Junior' part off his Associate title and assuming some managerial responsibilities.

"But won't the rest of the team mind working under me when I've been here for such a short amount of time?" Edward fell silent as soon as the words came out of his mouth, suddenly afraid he had assumed too much.

"I don't think so. They've already seen you can handle the responsibility and to be honest, I understand they're already coming to you for advice."

David looked over and smiled, and although it was superficially no different than usual, Edward was suddenly struck by the idea that there was some dark, gleeful recognition in it; as well as perhaps a hint of a warning: "Don't you dare try that on me".

Edward might have been *persona non grata* to Redmayne–Bracknell's management, but he was still on good terms with their HR Manager, Wil Hamilton. When he casually mentioned that one of the bright young things at Cooper Drake might be about to jump ship he knew that RB would be all too happy to take them on. Peter Davis left Cooper Drake 'eager to take on new responsibilities at one of the country's oldest and most established brokerage firms' and forever in Edward's debt: as far as he was concerned, Edward had done everything possible to prop him up and camouflage his lack of skill, all out of a selfless nobility of the heart. That's not how it works, Peter, thought Edward, as he took his seat at the head of his little

team and allowed his gaze to stray further up the great glass hall.

The knock on the door of Edward's apartment took him quite by surprise; he was by this time firmly ensconced in his pyjamas, wanting nothing more than to catch half an hour's TV before bed after a punishing thirteen-hour day. He answered the door toothbrush in hand, and blinked owlishly at the sight of David in full evening dress, a couple of pretty if rather shapeless young women floating around behind him.

"Oh, don't tell me you've forgotten already," griped David, gesturing to the girls. "He's in his bloody nighties!" A peel of laughter.

"Forgotten what?"

"Really? I was supposed to be taking you to the club—you know, the gentleman's concern."

"Oh, right. That was for tonight?"

"Christ Almighty. Not one for the night life, are you? Come on, you've got five minutes before I leave without you. I hope you've got something presentable."

Edward ended up dressing in the suit David had pressured him into buying from Antonis Stathopoulous. He had to admit, the old man knew what he was doing. The material was light and cool without being slippery and for the first time in his life he could see his waist, normally hidden under a voluminous billow of surplus fabric. He actually thought he looked quite dashing. He tutted disappointedly at the contrast made by his cheap plastic watch. At least the shoes matched, now, a £140 purchase from a middle-of-the-road outfitters —sharp-toed with a slightly raised heel.

David's dark blue Ferrari purred happily as he drove them through the late night traffic. Edward had taken to walking around the City after hours, taking in the sights, and thought he knew most streets in the Square Mile by heart. David surprised him by taking a turn on Newgate Street he didn't even think existed; a half-concealed thing behind the projecting wing of St Bartholemews. From there he made

turn after turn through strange streets lit by soft yellow streetlights quite different from those on the main streets. One could almost think one had left modern London behind and entered some twilight realm.

"They keep all this quiet, don't they?" Edward said as he stared out at a lavishly baroqued pile encrusted with grotesques.

"They appreciate their privacy," said David, as he drew up in front of a blind brick edifice protected by wrought iron fencing and fronted by a simple marble arch. If he had been keeping track, Edward thought, this was Twenty-Eight Great Rojet Street, which he had never even heard of before tonight.

"Here—hold onto this." David passed Edward a slim black card; gold-edged, bearing the single word 'Guest'. At the top left-hand corner was an ornate cartouche, which, on closer examination, resolved itself into the letters 'MC&D'. The card felt smooth; the corners rounded as though pressed individually rather than cut from a larger section of card. Edward had a horrible feeling this card probably cost more than his monthly rent.

David, Edward, and the two ladies whose names he had not asked for got out, breath hanging in the cold air, and made their way to the door. David rapped and a section of the door slid aside, revealing a perspex plate. From the other side a baggy bloodhound's eye roved back and forth before finding David's face.

"Mr Went! So good to see you. And Misses Parker and Cholmondeley!" The eye found Edward and searched him, disapprovingly. Edward found himself drawing up defensively before a word had been spoken.

"A friend of yours, Mr Went?" The voice managed to imply 'friend' occupied a position slightly higher than something you had trodden in.

"That's right," said David, unphased. "Now open up, there's a good fellow."

The door opened just wide enough for each of them to slip through

—the haggard-faced porter shut it with an air of finality behind them.

"The party is taking their seats in the main room, Mr Went, ladies. If you would care to join them, a number of acts will be performed for your amusement before supper at eleven thirty."

At least at this time of day, the reception was shadowy and inhospitable, strange shapes pressing in from all sides. That one of them was almost certainly the porter, who had contrived to disappear into the darkness as soon as he had finished speaking, did little to allay Edward's nerves. As his eyes adjusted to the gloom, he picked out Regency furniture, gleaming candlesticks, grand portraits depicting strange, almost perverse, scenes. The transition to the cloakroom was blinding—they found themselves in a narrow corridor, dazzling white with golden hooks on either side. The attendant was tall, almost unnaturally so—as high above Edward as Edward was above David—and strangely gaunt, with a long, lugubrious face and dark, large-pupilled eyes whose gaze made Edward as uncomfortable as that of the porter, but in a different key; the feeling of handling something sick and squirming. He took charge of David's wallet and the women's purses, placing them into an itemised tray of polished wood which slid back into the wall of the cloakroom. Edward opted to hold onto his.

Then the main hall! From outside it seemed impossible that this space should be contained within—a grand ballroom in the rococo style, but so exaggerated in scale that it made Edward feel miniscule. A dozen separate fireplaces burned at distant points in the hall, which comprised the entrance level, a graceful marble mezzanine and a great balcony above. Directly ahead was a colossal theatrical stage, purple velvet curtains with gold trim and the 'MC&D' flourish closed, awaiting a performance. The men and women who stood or sat at the many tables, armchairs and rounds scattered around the edge of the hall immediately struck David as familiar—it took a moment to realise that he saw them every day; on the news, or presenting it. He wondered whether David had chosen this night to impress or whether it was attended at this level on a regular basis. Cabinet Ministers rubbed shoulders with TV personalities and knighted businessmen.

"David! David, you came. I wanted to see you again." The party was

almost immediately waylaid by the petite brunette, dragging a much taller blonde woman by her dress. The former looked to be in her mid-twenties, like Edward—her hair styled in soft ringlets that brought out her Mediterranean complexion. Her lips were curled in soft amusement as she embraced David then looked over in his direction. Edward found himself blushing without having chosen it.

"Well? Won't you introduce us to your guest?" the brunette prompted David, who reluctantly disengaged from her.

"Of course, sorry, my manners. This is Edward—Edward Gradley. Edward, meet Maria Beaumont, of the Paris Beaumonts."

Edward was floored. The Beaumonts were one of the richest families in France—old money, based on colonial trade; Beaumont Shipping remained a dominant force in the French-speaking world.

"Gradley? You are not by some chance the son of Bernard Gradley? Our fathers did business, I think." Maria offered her hand to Edward, who found himself at a loss as to what to do with it. To let it go seemed rude—shaking it, terribly gauche. In the end he opted to bring it to his lips and offer a kiss—David turned away immediately, bringing a hand up to his mouth in a feigned yawn.

"And this is Lady Alexandra Penelope." David ushered Maria aside. The tall blonde was somewhat older than Edward—perhaps 30—and elegantly beautiful in a ruffled yellow dress. She favoured him with a smile but did not offer her hand; Edward made a mock bow instead.

"Edward—so, are you a man of leisure, or making your way in the world like David?" Lady Penelope asked, fixing him with very light blue eyes in which the pupils stood out like pinpricks. Edward sighed. One more time, ladies and gentlemen…

Fifteen minutes later, the group had found their place by one of the log fires and were chatting over honeyed sausage entrées and glasses of a sparkling white wine as though they had known each other for years. The conversation had drifted onto business, where Edward had shared his thoughts on labour and leisure, and Maria had begun expounding her own theory.

"Surely *leisure*," she said, "is merely doing any project or task which you enjoy doing, and which you direct. This last seems to me to be most key—it's all very well talking about getting a job you love, but unless you work for yourself, you're doing what someone else tells you to do. This seems incompatible with leisure—there is always that gap between the two. Labour is what earns leisure and it's foolish to talk about making your job your hobby."

So speaks a woman who has never worked, thought Edward wryly. "There's some truth to that," he ventured, "but a competent employer will recognise that he is hiring an employee to do something he cannot—or rather, satisfaction is to be gained in attaining such a role where it is recognised; work becomes leisure if a man is allowed to act freely, to use his reason to decide the best course of action and act upon it. If an employer comes to think that all those who work for him are are simply extra hands—people who do the jobs he doesn't have time to do at an inevitably lower level of quality than if he were to do it himself—then he sets himself up to fail. A man who makes himself the final arbiter of everything his employees do, who requires his approval for any task, no matter how minor—who seeks to micromanage them to that extent—*must* be immaculately logical and fair, otherwise he is abolishing truth and logic in his company. People who work for such an employer will ultimately no longer care about truth, only what he wants to hear—if their own initiative isn't valued, why should they exercise it? A man's creativity can only be exercised by his own free will and for a cause he believes in—I find it incredible that private companies think they are any different from the state in that regard."

"Oh, he's *darling*!" exclaimed Lady Penelope. "Where do you find these firebrands, David?"

"They all start out like that," grinned David. "It's the natural state of man."

"And long may it continue," proclaimed Maria. "To idealism." She raised her glass and the others drank with her.

There was a sleek glossy catalogue on the table and Edward flicked through it idly. From what he could gather it represented a place for members to buy and sell antique goods as well as advertise

services. Very little of it made sense to him; it was written in an overwrought, hyperbolic fashion that made each item seem like the Second Coming. Take this one—"A statue which has an orientation that cannot be altered." How was that supposed to work? The statue itself was nothing special; a craggy sculpture of a human arm and hand, fifty centimetres tall. He took a look at the price tag and almost snorted Château d'Yquem out of his nose. If I was paying that much it would face whichever way I wanted, thank you very much.

The evening's entertainment started shortly afterwards; various illusionist and acrobatic acts led up to a final spectacular piece where a truly talented magician-aerialist appeared to fall apart in mid-flight; one by one his limbs seemed to detach from his body and continue the act unaccompanied—at times interacting with his body in ways that should have been impossible if they were still attached. By the end he seemed to have been reduced to a quadruple amputee, still arcing above the stage in partner acrobatics with what were purportedly his own limbs. Finally, the performer's disembodied arms and legs maneuvered his torso into position for one final gruesome trick; looping the ribbon around his neck as though preparing him for execution. A second later, both head and body fell to the ground with the other seemingly lifeless limbs. The curtain closed, and the performer did not re-emerge—though Maria, perhaps noticing Edward's pallor, whispered to him that she had seen the act several times previously, including versions of the trick where an assistant put him back together on-stage afterwards. Edward prided himself that he had a logical mind and could usually work out the mechanism between most magic acts. The severed-limb trick, however, defied explanation—he supposed there must have been at least four other acrobats on stage, with the rest of their bodies somehow concealed from view; how the performer had seemingly severed his own head in full view of the audience however went beyond the best of Copperfield. The only clue, to his mind, lay in the fact that each division of the magician's body had occured in an area wrapped in the white ribbon. The man needed his own TV show, Edward thought, he'd kick the shit out of Dynamo.

The chefs had emerged from the kitchens shortly before serving to explain the theme of the repast—the public school dinner, gourmet-style and eaten with oversized cutlery to recreate an authentic

atmosphere. It was the right venue for it, thought Edward. He could scarcely credit the notion that Marshall, Carter & Dark had even contrived to get the owner of the Fat Duck and the Hell's Kitchen star around the same stove let alone produce something coherent. The result, however, was indescribable; a fusion of subtle undertones and a few big explosions of colour and taste that made him wonder if he could ever go back to his microwave ready meals. No wonder David keeps Mr Stathopoulos in such good business, Edward thought, savouring a shepherd's pie made with Kobe beef and topped with a selection of artisan cheeses. The serving staff—all young, attractive men and women in formal attire—were silent and efficient, if a little glassy-eyed. No wonder, if this is typical of what goes on here—I'd be perpetually shell-shocked if I worked here too. Or perhaps, like him, they'd just had a long day.

"So David," he asked his companion, currently gorging himself on waffles made from whole Tasmanian seed potatos and a take on the Turkey Twizzler whereby Bowman Landes free-range turkey meat was cut directly into the shape of the twizzler and breaded using vapor-deposited batter. "If you don't mind me asking, how much does membership at this place set you back?" Edward wasn't sure exactly how much David Went made at Cooper Drake, but he doubted it placed him in the same league, as say, Richard Branson, who he was fairly sure he'd seen disappearing into one of the Members-Only siderooms earlier in the evening.

"More than you could afford," was the reply. David must have seen something in Edward's expression as he rapidly amended himself. "I mean, more than I could afford too. I have limited access and some guest privileges; I'm not really a full member as such."

"And in return, they get?" Edward prompted.

"Payment in kind—look, I really don't want to get into it right now. Come on, you'll upset my stomach."

"Sorry." Edward turned his attention back to his shepherd's pie and the cheese-crusted leeks that formed his side dish.

If Edward had thought that the meal formed the climax of the evening, he was mistaken. As guests drifted back to their seats

around the edge of the room a DJ in a vaguely sinister helmet resembling a neon Mickey Mouse with blank, empty eyes conducted an electronic tidal wave of sound from a podium atop two huge, illuminated glass slabs rising out of the floor. What kind of gentleman's club has guests dancing in full evening dress to house music? Edward wondered, finding himself plucked out of his seat and thrown between a number of young women. The guests danced in graceful loops, spotlights picking out white collars, silver ties and lacy décolletage.

As a new song began—upbeat but with a hint of something very dark underneath, like most of the DJ's set thus far—Edward found himself face to face with Maria. He must have looked as out of depth as he felt, for she just beamed at him, took his hand and led him confidently over the floor.

"Can you understand any of the lyrics to this?" he shouted.

"It makes more sense if you assume the 'Russian unicorn' is heroin."

"I generally assume every song is about drugs until proven otherwise."

"Oh, now where's that idealism?"

They arced over the floor, Maria subtly correcting his occasional stumble. Edward found himself wishing time would—not stop—but loop, right in this moment. Gradually reality reasserted itself and his mind cleared a little.

"I should return you to David. I don't want him jealous."

"Yes, he does get so protective of his new recruits."

"Very funny."

She spun away from him elegantly, moving towards David, who had evidently run out of breath and was waiting at their table. Edward waited just a little longer, just standing on the dancefloor, before he followed her.

As David made his bows for the evening and led them back out

through that shadowy reception area, Edward was almost unsurprised to hear, distinct but unmistakable behind him, that the last song in the set, apparently without any sense of irony, was a remix of 'All The Right Moves', though as the grim-faced porter cautiously let them back through that great front door into the night he noticed that 'we' and 'they' were reversed.

Edward had expected to wake up the next morning—well, later the next morning—with a splitting headache. Instead he rose after no more than three hours' sleep with a sense of clarity, feeling energised and enriched for the experience. You have to make an outlay to profit, he thought—perhaps that also applies to time?

On the way to work, he noticed that the unannounced roadworks that had blighted traffic in the area all month with their shoddy diversions had disappeared overnight. Now if only the damn rain would clear up, he thought. Nothing seemed to have been done to the roundabout at the centre; in fact, it seemed in worse shape than before, with several pieces of the edging removed and left broken at the centre in a pile of dirt and rubble. Edward resolved, as he had so many times before, to write to the borough council and demand to know what firm the works had been hired out to. He supposed, though, that even if he remembered he would give up after trying to find their complaints form online. He was sure the council hired someone specifically to redesign their website on the fly to remove the information you most needed.

The next couple of days, buoyed by his promotion and experience at David's club, Edward was walking on air. Every deal he touched seemed to turn into gold. Even his mistakes seemed to come right in such a fashion that they looked like visionary thinking on his part; Edward had shorted stocks in Quadrant Turbines, an elderly firm that seemed to be going nowhere, when the news came through that it was to receive a one point five billion dollar contract from the US Department of Defense. His team had barely finished commiserating him when Liz sprinted in, flushed and out of breath, begging him to hold his position just a little longer. Half an hour later, it was being widely reported that the contract had fallen through and that Quadrant itself had made a surprise announcement that it was

to be placed into administration. As it turned out, the bad news was a false flag—circulated by bloggers most likely in the pay of Lockheed Martin—but the effect was to send Quadrant's shares into a death dive. By the end of the day it had become a self-fulfilling prophecy and Quadrant were seeking bankruptcy.

In one month Edward had his first review. The review, to the investment banker, was God—a magic force that examined your life and blessed the worthy. Or perhaps it was like the lottery—one where every player expected to win every time, more each year than the year before. Whilst the firm didn't punish its traders for deals that turned out poorly, provided they were based on solid research, the size of your bonus would depend on the profit you'd generated for the organisation. A growing bonus would indicate to others in the organisation that you were going places and worthy of another rung on the ladder to partnership. A stagnant bonus—or no bonus—would indicate a poor performer, someone to pass over or even push out.

Edward already had a solid profit margin, but he didn't want to be 'solid'. He wanted the verdict on that gold slip to read 'exceptional'. By age twenty-five his father already owned his own factory. Edward's calculations said that if he wanted to outdo Bernard Gradley he would need to make partner in the next year. In any other profession and in almost any other city this was almost unthinkable—but this was the City of London. And no firm could fail to advance a trader who outstripped all his peers.

So it was that Edward went in search of a magic bullet—a deal that would in one month make him the crown prince of Cooper Drake. He took piles of papers from the Research team home with him and scoured them for something truly special. And after a couple of days he believed he had found it. A burgeoning EU antitrust investigation into Cliffes Aeronautic and Ballistics, premised upon alleged collusion between Cliffes and a couple of other aerospace semiconductor manufacturers to control the European import market. Cliffes' CEO, Martin Jacques, would be called to give testimony on September Fifth—that was when Edward would make his play. A firm's share value typically dipped between one point nine and four point eight percent during an investigation; Edward

would buy up thirty-five million in put options on Cliffes Aeronautic Ltd. If its share value dropped by only three percent, Edward stood to make over a million pounds in profit. Normally a trader, seeking to make a huge investment on this scale, would consult senior colleagues, sound it out, and hope to spread blame were something to go wrong. Edward couldn't afford to do that—if the Cliffes deal were to have the effect he wanted he needed to be able to take sole credit for the move. Thirty-five million was well above his own daily transaction limit; fortunately, CD's tech team were slow movers and Peter Davis's account remained on the system, live and accessible by anyone in his team. Between the two accounts Edward drained the market dry before news of the investigation hit.

Cliffes released a press release filled with officese—"We look forward to co-operating any way we can with the Commission and reassert our belief in the European project and a free, open market," the sort of stuff that made traders throw up a little in their waste paper baskets before hollering 'sell'. By the time the markets closed Edward was already a good hundred thousand up; he hung on, however, sure that as soon as Jacques took the stand Cliffes' losses would snowball.

On the Fifth of September Edward sat silent in front of his computer, hammering the refresh button every few minutes as the investigation continued. It soon became apparent something had gone wrong. The hearing—held in a recently refurbished wing of the Château of Val-Duchesse—ended hours early, and it quickly emerged that Martin Jacques had experienced some kind of nervous breakdown, having an aphasic episode under questioning where he had gibbered nonsensically with no awareness that he was speaking anything other than his native French before collapsing. It had further impacted Cliffes' share price, but with no further information on the alleged collision coming to light, investors were wary about giving up their positions on a high-performing firm. Jacques had been a charismatic front man but his good health, or lack of it, impacted little on Cliffes' value. Looking back, Edward thought later, he should have taken the one hundred and fifty thousand profit and run—it would have been a decent trade, even if he would have had a dressing down for his use of Peter's account. Instead, he clung on a full week, barely closing any other trades, as Cliffes' shares

teetered, wobbled, and even revived a little, until Jacques finally recovered enough to face the Commission again at the Berlaymont.

It was a disaster. Even before Jacques had opened his mouth, the share price spiked sharply, and continued rising until it had wiped out the profit Edward hoped to make. Edward interpreted it as a simple reaction to Cliffes' CEO looking hale and hearty as he waved to reporters outside the Commission, but later he wondered if documents had been leaked to key investors.

Then the hammer-blow. Jacques—now cool, calm and collected, to the extent that it seemed immediately obvious that his previous performance had been a sham to buy time while he collected ammunition, brandished papers documenting electronic communications between Cliffes and the Commission weeks before the announcement of the investigation. Cliffes had signed a contract with the Belarusian government to provide chips for a new generation of cruise missiles; the European Commission had warned Jacques off—even spelling out that they would find some fault with Cliffes Aeronautics' import agreements—but found their bluff called.

It was horribly obvious that the investigation could not go ahead; it had become a political embarassment for the Commission and the European Union more widely, with Belarus' Lukashenko weighing in smugly on the hypocrisy of EU protectionists. The market saw it as a triumph for Cliffes—not only was Edward now making a loss, but so unwilling were his partners in New York or Beijing to accept his tainted options that he had to watch Cliffes' share price skyrocket for a full eight hours before he was able to unload them all at a sickening low of twenty-eight million. Instead of making the company a million pounds he had cost it seven million. It was an appalling failure, something the average trader would barely be able to make up in a year. But Edward didn't have a year; he had under a month before he had to sit down with his managers and explain what had possessed him to break company rules to make such a horrendous trade.

Within hours, he thought, the little bespectacled men on the floor below them would have noticed the loss and reported it to Raymond MacIntyre. He might not even last until the review unless he pulled

something now that wiped out every last penny of the deal. He sat for half an hour, clenching and unclenching his fists, face white as a ghost. He was lost.

The feeling clogging his throat was the feeling he had whenever he tried to play chess now; there was some shining path, some route that would save him, but the door was locked. He could no longer roam those mental avenues. As a child he had been a prodigy—he had stalemated his father—Bernard Gradley, a man who would never let another sentient being win a game if you tore his fingernails out—the first time he showed him the game, beaten him the second time. His parents had taken him to clubs and tournaments where elderly men stroked their beards and swore in Polish as he skewered their queens and forked their knights and rooks with a pawn.

His success had excited his father, who had a bespoke display cabinet produced by one of his top designers; dark wood with rounded corners and a polished glass front, lit by small, triangular spotlights. The cabinet had collected a steady smattering of trophies as Edward's victories grew, and his mother began to speak in hushed tones of a professional career. It all ended when Edward turned thirteen—his ranking collapsed almost overnight with the onset of puberty and his matches became a litany of defeats, reducing him to tears. Even now he could more or less remember what it had felt like to be able to think that way—looking at dozens of possible outcomes six moves ahead, comparing probabilities then sliding one's own life into the universe where success is guaranteed—but he could no longer access it. Whether it had been banished by hormones, the pressure to succeed or, as his father contended, just incipient laziness, his talent was gone. He had sought that vanished golden aura in everything he did, abandoning it as soon it became clear he was not a genius at it—music, arts, philosophy. Now banking was failing him too. He was hyperventilating, tears prickling his eyes. Fuck you, Bernard Gradley.

There was nothing else to do. He got up, knees weak, and walked what seemed like a mile to David's table, where he and his high-powered team threw tens of millions of pounds of government debt backwards and forwards like it was confetti. In Edward's head,

everyone was watching, intimately aware of his humiliation. He was trembling—shaking like a leaf, worse than with MacIntyre.

"David. David," he said, his voice tiny and adrift.

"Edward? What is it? You look like hell. Seriously, calm down, you look like you're going to have a coronary."

"I've screwed up. I'm sorry, I've screwed up. I need help." David listened as Edward told him what he could, omitting how his desire to beat his father had led to him taking such a senseless risk. David spent a while in thought then spoke.

"Okay. How much liquid capital do you have?"

"W-what?"

"You haven't registered a ticket for the twenty-eight mill, right? It's still in yours and Peter's accounts?"

Of course he hadn't. He'd been too upset. The little men at their terminals wouldn't see anything, because as far as they were concerned the money was still in play.

"No. It's still there."

"Good. Now, I'm going to do you a huge favour. Maybe sometime down the road you let me in on something big, or we pair up our positions and I get the excess, right?"

Edward nodded, mutely, still mortified beyond belief at his own weakness and stupidity.

"Cholmondeley Holdings is buying up Hong Kong Electric. The announcement is this afternoon, three pm sharp. HKE has subsidiaries on the mainland; Cholmondeley's gone from having no presence in Asia at all to being the pack leader. I was really hoping to save this one for myself, but with the amount you need back there's no way anyone else can get in on this. You'll need to use Peter's account again. Oh, and you absolutely didn't hear this from me, okay? Seriously. I'll fucking bury you if you say otherwise."

Edward was still shaking so hard he had to get one of his team to help with the transfer; they would almost certainly tell MacIntyre, but it no longer mattered. Cholmondeley was considered a busted flush in Beijing and Edward bought everything he could find. At three in the afternoon, just as David said, the venerable utility holding company announced its latest venture, taking over a concession-era Hong Kong utility with holdings throughout Guangzhou. Edward watched, hope welling in his heart, as the face value of their shares rose one percent, two, four, eight… By the close of the markets Cholmondeley was worth a quarter again what it had been and Edward held stocks worth worth well over thirty-five million pounds. He had not only made up his lost ground but converted a loss into a profit of close to a quarter of a million pounds. He cashed out immediately, not waiting to see if they rose further. Fortune had deserted him once today. Now he just needed to explain why he had used a previous colleague's account to gamble with far more money than he was trusted to handle. But there was one thing that needed to be done first.

Edward felt very small and fragile as he went over to David and shook his hand. David clapped his arm and looked him in the eye, smiling darkly, as though some great secret had passed between them.

"You see, Ed? It all worked out in the end. Don't forget that favour."

Somehow the nature of what he had done escaped Edward in the rush of adrenaline, the flight-or-fight response that comes with the loss and subsequent gain of seven million pounds. He woke up that night, screaming, scrabbling at the sheets. You bastard! There was no way David could have found about that deal—it had been agreed in total secrecy to protect Hong Kong Electric's shareholders. He lay, soaked in sweat, mind a black whirlpool. Insider trading. Probably the police were already coming for him. He would walk in tomorrow and MacIntyre would be standing with a squad of New Scotland Yard's finest, and he would point to Edward and say "That's him." They would walk him past David, who would sit there with that smile on his face. "I'll fucking bury you." But what did he have on Edward besides knowledge of the failed Cliffes deal? There was nothing illegal there, just another gamble by a City trader that

went wrong. I'll tell them everything, swore Edward panickedly, curling up into a fetal ball. But was it illegal if you didn't act on it yourself? As far as he knew David had made no moves on HKE under his own account. Christ, oh Jesus. Maybe David had done it to get rid of him, feared ending up like Peter… Morning saw Edward still plotting, engaged in his long, dark Mutually Assured Destruction of the soul.

The roadworks were back, this time right outside his apartment. The workmen seemed to eye him suspiciously as he drove past and wrote things down in little notebooks. It did not escape him that no-one was even remotely near the roundabout.

Chapter Three: "Tender"

"You've impressed," said Raymond MacIntyre dryly, fingering through the stack of papers detailing Edward's trading over the past four months. "You've worked hard and added value—both on trades and in terms of new clients. I believe congratulations are in order."

"Thank you," said Edward, breathing slowly and carefully. The days after the Cholmondeley deal had been nervewracking, always wondering if something was about to happen. Now, the final moment of truth—the review. Once again he sat in Raymond MacIntyre's office with Will, as lead Partner, sitting in. MacIntyre furrowed his eyebrows and tilted his head forward so the light through the expansive glass ceiling lit up his scalp through his gelled hair.

"Frankly I thought your stunt with Peter's account was too cute for your own good. We place restrictions on how much associates can throw around for a reason. However, I understand you made several hundred thousand on the deal and we are not in the business of punishing success."

"Much appreciated, sir."

"Sir, now? Ah, it seems like just yesterday you were calling me a 'wanker'. Just one little query on the Cholmondeley business," Edward's breath caught in his throat again, "it seems an uncharacteristic choice. Your portfolio is overwhelmingly weighted

towards aerospace; a utilities company seems a little out of your area of expertise. May I ask what influenced your choice?"

"I," Edward began, suddenly aware of David's eyes drilling into the side of his head. "I thought this was an excellent opportunity for me to expand into a new area; I think I'm ready to take on a broader portfolio and hope to continue to diversify my stock picks over the next few months."

"Good to hear it," replied MacIntyre—was there a brief sideways glance at David there, a measured appraisal of the situation?

"You will receive a bonus of twelve thousand pounds,"—significantly less than Edward had hoped, barely above average in fact, but a miracle given what he thought was inevitable after he screwed the pooch over Cliffes. "You'll be expected to better your performance next year, and the next, and the next; if you continue to perform, you're well on the road to partnership."

It was with some surprise that Edward heard himself speaking in an eager, almost aggressive tone. "And if I wanted to make partner this year?"

"I'm not sure I follow."

"How much would I have to bring in for you to make me a partner straight away, with no consideration of seniority?" Oh Christ, Edward, what are you saying. You've learned nothing, have you?

"I think, Raymond, he's asking whether there might be some target he can hit to accelerate the process, as it were," chipped in David.

"Hmm—our friend David here brings in three million pounds in profit to the firm every year, not counting clients added. I think, if we were talking theoretically, that any associate able to equal our lead partner would be automatically considered for partnership. I must stress, however, that does not mean that I am looking for you to take risks with the company's money." He looked away and started tapping away on his computer. David nudged Edward, clearly taking it as a sign for them to leave. They had risen from their chairs and were halfway to the door when MacIntyre threw out a final comment.

"And I highly suggest not gambling on the outcome of antitrust investigations in future. We had enough of that with Microsoft in '98."

When the door closed, David leaned against it heavily, looking at Edward through slitted eyes.

"I think we need to talk," Edward said.

"Sure."

There was a fire escape at one side of the trading floor—the actual alarmed fire door was a couple of floors down, transforming it into a deep well. Due to its lack of lighting and enclosed nature it was useless for a surreptitious cigarette, but it was a place you could go and be assured of privacy—the walls were too thick to overhear anything said in the stairwell and the steps were separated so one could see if someone was standing anywhere above you.

"So, Edward, is this about the Cholmondeley trade? Come on, out with it. You've been acting like a spooked deer for days."

"Yes. I've been out of my mind, waiting for the knock on my door. Even the Hong Kong Electric CEO didn't know about the takeover—the Board of Directors told him about at the same time Cholmondeley told the press. So how did I know about that, David? How did I know to buy up twenty-eight fucking million pounds worth of shares?"

"Relax, and stop being a prat. Think about it. Where have you heard the name Cholmondeley before?"

Now David said it, Edward recalled the name had seemed familiar, after a moment scanning his memory, he found it—the old porter at David's gentleman's club had said it. One of the blandly pretty girls who had shared David's Ferrari.

"Didn't I tell you? Anything you learn at a party, at a club, while having dinner with the CEO's daughter—it's all legal."

"David, I know the law. This is a tender offer. If you know the merger's non-public…"

"Who said I knew there was a merger at all? Maybe I just heard that Cholmondeley was going to be making some serious outlay on expansion. Exciting stuff. And voila, it's legal again."

"But…"

"I didn't see a tape recorder when we spoke on Wednesday. Did you?"

"No."

"Good. If anyone asks, you were the one who heard Bernice Cholmondeley blabbing about how much CI was going to make and how her daddy was going to buy her a new pony, or something. Now, if you'll excuse me, 30-year UK government bonds don't sell themselves."

He left Edward in the dark stairwell, deep in thought.

There was no knock on his door. Instead, there was an IRC tab. It had opened in the background while he'd been trading midnight barbs with an advocate of natural theology on a philosophy debate channel. If the concept of God is not omnipotent, Edward was arguing, then it is evil; it is incumbent upon every moral person, if he or she believes God to be less than invincible, to wage war on the founder and author of all evil, pain and death.

When he idly flicked to the additional pane, bearing a single private message, he assumed it was a continuation of the debate, or perhaps someone playing a joke; their nick was 'Death'. The content of the message, however, dispelled that thought:

> **Death:** we know about Cholmondeley

Edward straightened his spine in his chair, irrationally looked around him as though someone might be watching. The message was ambiguous enough that it *might* not refer to the trade—perhaps a friend of that forgettable woman; Bernice? He typed:

> **EGradley:** ???

Death: don't play dumb. you brought twenty-eight million pounds of shares four days ago based on confidential information.

EGradley: who is this?

Death changed their nick to Death_4H

Death_4H: just some concerned citizens. we know who gave you the information.

EGradley: Bernice Cholmondeley

Death_4H: not exactly. whether you're protecting your friend or whether he has something on you doesn't matter

Death_4H: let me spell this out for you. you heard about the HKE takeover from David Went. he was given the information by Marshall, Carter & Dark

God damn it, thought David. What exactly had he gotten himself into here?

Death_4H: Bernice Cholmondeley traded the information to MC&D for membership.

War_4H has joined the channel

EGradley: and how do you know this?

War_4H: you'd be surprised at what people write down these days. MC&D's email servers are ironclad. the Cholmondeley's private network—not so much.

Edward blinked. That wasn't possible, was it? You couldn't just waltz into a PM thread mid-flow.

EGradley: as far as I'm concerned all my transactions are legitimate. if you have any concerns, David Went is lead partner at Cooper Drake. why don't you talk to him if you have some concerns about my transactions?

War_4H: we'd rather play with you. here's how this is going to work; you help us or we make an anonymous tip-off to the FSA, and they decide whether the Cholmondeley deal was above board or not.

War_4H: whether you give us Went or not doesn't matter; we already have emails indicating that MC&D intended to give him the info in exchange for various favours.

Shit. Shit.

EGradley: what, exactly, do you think I'm going to help you to do?

Death_4H: we'll be in touch.

War_4H has left the channel.**

Death_4H has left the channel.**

And just like that, they were gone. Edward sat in front of his computer, staring at the impossible conversation. He wondered whether this was David Went himself, or someone close to him, testing Edward to see if he would reveal his own involvement to a third party. But then, why would he contradict his own story and implicate himself in a trade for illegal information? Cautiously, Edward highlighted the whole conversation and saved it in a Word document, then encrypted it, just in case.

It was evident, he reflected, that Went was protected somehow by his affiliation with Marshall, Carter & Dark. Otherwise they would have gone after him rather than trying to scare Edward, a marginal player in what increasingly sounded like an illicit black market in insider information. At the same time, it was no longer clear that he could trust David Went, who had involved him in this mess. That left him with just one option.

Edward sat in the café, sipping a blisteringly hot black coffee and watching the rain washing down the windows like a giant carafe of

lukewarm water was being slowly tipped over the world. It had to stop sometime, didn't it? He had begun to pity the poor workmen, who he had cautiously decided were probably not watching him. Today he'd seen one of them apparently in the grip of a nervous breakdown, ranting and raving like a lunatic and trying to scrabble towards the traffic island in the middle of the interaction while the others held him back. He checked his watch. Eleven thirty, he thought, sagging visibly. He had taken half the day off and increasingly suspected it was going to be fruitless.

Actually contacting MC&D had proven a chore in itself—their website was nothing more than a password-protected portal with sealed whois information, and their contact details weren't listed anywhere. One night after work he had gone walking on Newgate Street to see if he could find their London chapterhouse by memory, but quickly found himself lost in the strange maze of roads beyond the hospital; his phone and Google Maps couldn't even agree what street he was on. And of course, Great Rojet Street appeared absolutely nowhere. He had almost given up when he had remembered his guest card, left in the back pocket of his coat. It was folded and looked rather the worse for wear, but on close inspection it had what he was looking for—a phone number, made out almost invisibly in matt black lettering on the glossy black card, on the lower left corner of its reverse side.

When he had phoned it, there had been silence for almost twenty seconds—punctuated by the occasional pop of static—before a distant, faint ringing had begun. A short time later a cracked, singsong voice had answered, identifying itself as the Marshall, Carter & Dark switchboard. Edward had impressed himself by demanding a meeting with the head of their London club, refusing to be put off or transferred away. Once he had given the voice his name and sent it to get approval from a manager, it had been replaced by a smooth, lower-register male voice that made no mention of Cholmondeley, David, or even the club itself, but quickly arranged a meeting for eleven o'clock the following morning at an upscale eatery. Edward was sure he hadn't imagined the looks the staff gave when he mentioned he was waiting for a business associate; he guessed this was a locale used by MC&D for sensitive meetings where they didn't trust them enough to admit them to the

clubhouse.

Just as Edward was about to call it a day and leave, the door chimed and a man walked in. He wasn't carrying an umbrella but was visibly bone dry, not a hair out of place. Impressive, thought Edward, though I can think of about five ways he could have pulled that one off. However he had made it from his vehicle—almost certainly the black Rolls Royce with gold trim parked outside—there was no doubt that the stunt had been intended for his benefit and that this was his contact. The man was tall—about Edward's height—and handsome in a high-maintenance, polished way. He could have been anywhere between thirty and fifty, with blue eyes and a wave of fine blond hair. He sat, drawing back his lips to reveal perfect white dentition. 'Smile' was probably the wrong word for it.

"Mr Gradley. So good to meet you." They shook hands; the man had somehow contrived to signal for a tall latte, which was placed down quickly and efficiently by a wide-eyed young waitress who immediately backed away and all but ran into the back of the café, followed by the older brunette.

"And you are?"

"Just call me Jeremy. Now, I understand you have an interest in our little establishment."

"Yes. I've seen what you've done for David—David Went—and I'd like the same deal."

"I see. And do you understand the terms?" Jeremy listed his cup and sipped expectantly.

"I think so. I receive conditional membership—entitling me to, ah, help and support from your association, and in return I pass on information and make financial opportunities available to Marshall, Carter & Dark."

Jeremy chuckled, shook his head and emptied a packet of Splenda into his latte.

"It's a bit more formal than that, I'm afraid. Mr Went's membership

comes with his place in our Acquisitions team. You see, we at MC&D offer our members the most expensive and exclusive experiences and articles anywhere in the world. You've seen our catalogue?" Edward nodded. "Well, for those who would ordinarily be unable to afford our membership we offer a limited package that permits access to our private events and the benefit of, well, *bespoke consultation* with MC&D experts on matters which could further their career. Oh, and complete immunity should they act on, or help others act on, the advice they have received. In return, they help us acquire special objects and people of interest to our established members. If they continue to get results, then they can expect a corresponding increase in the level of advice they receive until—who knows? They may be able to purchase full membership. And then they'll be the ones requesting rare and beautiful things from across the world."

Edward thought this all sounded very familiar.

"I see. And if I wanted to join this Acquisitions group?"

"Then you would need to undergo a formal *orientation*. If the opportunities I have discussed are of interest, please call through to our switchboard and have one of our cars bring you to our chapterhouse this evening. Orientations begin at ten sharp."

And with that the meeting seemed to be over. Jeremy left still holding his drink, elegantly dipping into the door of the Rolls-Royce held open for him by a stocky man with short salt-and-pepper hair who didn't seem to enjoy the same protection from the elements. Edward swirled his coffee and smiled at the staff as they ventured back out.

"Bit of a dragon, is he?" he asked cheerily. No-one responded.

The orientation was a surreal experience. One of the black Rolls stopped outside Edward's apartment, the contrast with his Astra finally persuading him that he would have to visit a dealership soon and spend some of his bonus. The driver, a skinny, young man with bright red hair and a long, lipless sneer, drove him in silence through the soft-lit streets that had somehow avoided Google Street View's

vans, finally stopping outside the sightless facade of the clubhouse. Once inside a heavy, silken cloth was tied over his eyes and led through several rooms until he reached a cold, echoing space where he felt the presence of many other people waiting, probably similarly blinded. Then he heard a voice—it sounded somewhat like Jeremy, though the acoustics meant he couldn't be certain. This is what it said:

"Welcome to Marshall, Carter & Dark Ltd. If you are here, then you have been accepted into our ranks. Congratulations.

"A short summary of our organisation is in order. We are a gentleman's concern, providing our members with the most exclusive, expensive, and rare experiences available. We are centered in London, with agents all over the world, finding and retrieving items for us so we may better provide said experiences. Those of you here today, sitting blindfolded in the audience, are to be our finders, our *retrievers*.

"Many of you have connections to other groups that deal with objects or information that we are interested in—we expect full loyalty to our cause despite these connections. Any sign of deviance will be punished.

"As you will work on a case by case basis, I will be very broad. Cases, known as Acquisitions, will be assigned based upon your personal areas of expertise. You are not allowed to turn down an Acquisition. While working on an Acquisition, you will have access to the resources of our organisation, depending on the case. Abuse of these resources will be punished.

"You are to apply yourself to the assigned Acquisition with all due haste, whilst keeping up any required appearances. Under no circumstances are you to reveal that you are working for Marshall, Carter & Dark. Any attempt to speak about Marshall, Carter & Dark with people that have not been sanctioned by Marshall, Carter & Dark will be punished.

"This concludes your orientation. Please face to your right and take short, measured steps. You will be guided to a room where you will be allowed to remove your blindfold. Some of you will receive your

first Acquisition case; upon completion you will receive limited membership and a reward to be arranged with your contact. Thank you for your time."

As Edward walked carefully towards the door he was struck by the fact that the other footsteps were only echoes of his own; in fact, the more he allowed himself to reflect on it the more certain he was that he was, apart from MC&D's employees, alone in the chapterhouse, and that the whole initiation ceremony with its cultic trappings had been arranged specifically for his benefit.

After walking a good hundred paces he heard a door close behind him and hands lowered him into a rich leather chair. The blindfold was removed—as he had expected, Jeremy sat across from him on the other side of a dark wooden desk lit by an elegant angle lamp, surrounded by densely packed shelves of aged-looking books.

"Edward! Glad to see you made it. Welcome aboard." He was toying with a gold-banded fountain pen.

"So, I imagine you'll be presenting me with a task right away." To prove my loyalty, he thought. He strongly suspected no-one walked out of the chapterhouse without a favour to complete.

"That's correct. There's a document we want you to acquire; nothing illegal, just a little straightforward persuasion. Some charm, Mr Gradley. Ten thousand pounds will be wired to your personal account to make the purchase—you will be expected to return any money left over. The current owner of the document does not know its real value and the amount we have provided should be more than adequate to persuade her to make the sale."

"Would I know the owner?"

"You were selected for this acquisition exactly because you have made her acquaintance; she is an infrequent guest of the Lady Penelope. The daughter of Christophe Beaumont—Maria Beaumont."

Edward fell silent for a second. He was effectively being asked to

scam the woman. Not only that, but his instincts had told him of the existence of a relationship between her and David Went; she had not confirmed his suspicions but it was enough to make him wary of the errand. After a few moments he made up his mind.

"This document—what am I looking for? I imagine Miss Beaumont will have lots of valuable papers in her possession."

"A very astute question. You are looking for a manuscript authored by Gervase of Langford, a fourteenth century writer thought for a long time to be apocryphal. He is supposed to be a contemporary of Chaucer—a long-lost pioneer of English literature. Excerpts from the manuscript in question, *A Viage to the Contree of the Cimmerians*, were touted around in the late Victorian era as prophetic literature, but scholars widely considered the book a 'ghost', a phantom invented by later authors or perhaps an embellishment of a more well-known document. Shakespeare's "Cardenio" is another so-called ghost. Except of course, the *Viage* has been found; traced, at considerable expense, by our Documents team." He slid a slim briefing document over the table—noticeably absent, Edward noticed, was any trace of the MC&D cartouche.

"In the possession of the Beaumont estate."

"Yes; the original manuscript is recorded as having been sold for four guineas to a French businessman called Guiger in the sixteenth century. There the trail ended, until we discovered a reference to a 'Voyage au Pays des Cimmériens' having been acquired by the library of Jean-Paul Beaumont in 1897."

"What would it look like?"

"Obviously we can't say for sure—we believe, however, that it will be a codex."

"A codex?"

"Much like the tomes surrounding me—a book. Most likely bound in metal, given the documentation. We believe it was transported from France in the 1980s with the rest of Christophe Beaumont's collection. It should be in the library of the Beaumont residence,

which should not be hard for you to locate."

"And if it isn't?"

"Then our working relationship will be a brief one. Now, there are several non-disclosure agreements to sign, prohibiting you from discussing the involvement of Marshall, Carter & Dark during the transaction or thereafter…"

The Beaumont residence, located in Belgravia, was a six-storey terraced property; white stucco with fluted columns supporting an expansive porch supporting a balcony filled with a tasteful assortment of topiary. Edward all but hurdled the distance from his car to the doorway but still somehow managed to get drenched from head to toe. He rung the bell and stood shivering in his probably ruined suit until Maria opened it, summery in a floral blue dress and a wide-brimmed hat.

"Oh look at you; you're soaked to the skin. Come in, come in." Edward wasn't even sure if she recognised him from the clubhouse.

She laid down newspaper for Edward to tread on and took his coat, which she spread over the radiator.

"You should come through to the solarium. I'm just doing some gardening."

After removing his shoes Edward followed her through the elegant interior, furnished in the Louis XVI style and lit with high, diffuse lights that offset the cream walls. She led him up a short flight of stairs and into a wide circular courtyard surrounding a neatly maintained flower bed. The light here was a warm orange and they seemed to have suddenly entered evening in late summer. Edward looked up and saw the rain beating against a tinted glass dome. Maria knelt down on a small cushion and began bedding a number of small pink flowering plants from a tray.

"You have a lovely home," he said.

"Thank you, but it's not mine. It belongs to my father—but he spends

most of his time in France, on business."

"Oh." He watched her gardening for a few minutes.

"I thought you might have been coming by to give me flowers," she said. "I don't like that. David always brings me flowers and I watch them die. Being uprooted like that; it's too cruel." Edward wondered if she was thinking of her own childhood, brought to Britain at the age of seven if the research he'd done last night on the family was correct.

"Actually," he said, "I was hoping to ask you a favour. There was a certain book I was looking for and can't seem to find anywhere. Someone told me that the Beaumont library might have a copy."

"Oh dear. You can certainly come and look, but I don't think I can be of help to you. Come with me."

Again Edward found himself trailing behind Maria as she navigated flights of stairs and led him through various impossibly lavish drawing-rooms.

Finally she came to a stairwell that led sharply upwards to a trapdoor.

"When my father came from France he had the whole collection put in crates and shipped over; but he never had the time to recatalog it." She opened the trapdoor and they rose into a high-vaulted loft space, the floor littered with dozens upon dozens of great boxes, every surface covered in a thick layer of dust and fibreglass fluff. Edward looked on in despair.

"So you see, if the book you were looking for is part of my family's library it is somewhere in there." She shook her head. "I'm so sorry."

Edward looked at her—the light from the trapdoor lit up her arms and legs and made her seem something ethereal, less than solid. He had already decided what he was going to say.

"I'll help you. I'll get it all organised, put them up on shelves."

Maria's expression was hard to read in the shadow of the attic.

"Won't your bosses mind?"

"I'll do it out of office hours. That is, if you're happy?"

"Yes, yes! But you mustn't do it for free. I'll phone my father and ask him to pay you for it. There's a room on the second floor he always meant to be the library—there are some mementos on the shelves I will need to clear."

And that was how the weeks played out—Edward would play the stock market during the day and spend the evenings and weekends at the Beaumont residence, hauling boxes down from the attic and cataloging their contents. First-edition Proust, an autographed copy of Les Misérables, the complete works of François-Thomas-Marie de Baculard d'Arnaud. Several times Edward found himself sitting and reading through volumes of Comte and Montesquieu in their original French, before chiding himself for wasting time. No date had been set by Jeremy for the acquisition of the *Viage*, but he imagined this delay could not have been appreciated.

The little library soon filled up and Maria annexed the parlour next door, bringing in new shelving during the day. Edward opened box after box of tomes packed in yellowed styrofoam, but there was no metal-bound medieval manuscript. Maria would walk in from time to time, bringing him sweet tea in little china cups and wafer-thin biscuits.

"Edward, you will not be able to come around tomorrow evening," she told him once.

"Oh. Why?"

"Well, David is coming over, and you were right. He can be a little jealous. You have been so good in doing this—I do not want him to get the wrong idea." She held his cheek with her hand for a moment and suddenly flushed before turning away.

One rainy Saturday—there was no sun anymore, it seemed, at least outside office hours—a bone-tired Edward levered off the top of the

latest crate, a damp, miserable thing he had found lurking near the edge of the attic. The books at the top were ruined; little more than dried pulp between the covers. Seventeenth century Molière, now mush. Below the ruined books there seemed to be only emptiness; an expanse of styrofoam peanuts all the way to the bottom of the box. Or was it the bottom? The cool, unyielding surface he had encountered didn't seem far enough down. Scrabbling around he found one corner, then another, and lifted the object out of the packing crate.

It was more a box than a binding—a plain, almost crude iron cuboid with a hefty haft. On it the word 'Gervais'—presumably the French spelling—had been not engraved but *scratched* into the metal. He held his breath as he undid the clasp. Had it been reduced to mulch like the others? The pages were yellowed, brittle, cracked at the edges; but intact. The title page took his breath away—still-vivid reds and greens spiralling together in an ornate 'A' that began the title: 'A Viage to the Contree of the Cimmerians'. He closed the box, and took a deep breath. Now the hard part.

"To buy? Oh, no, I'm sorry, Edward. That book is part of my family estate—they all are. I could not sell them, not for any amount of money."

"Perhaps your father…"

"My father entrusted the house and everything to me—do you see? I cannot sell you the book."

"But … they were in packing crates for years. Your father probably doesn't even know it's in here, surely there's no harm in letting it go?" he said, a little roughly. Then, softening his tone, "It would mean a lot to me."

"Edward! Please, listen to me. You are a dear man and I hope a dear friend. I do not like to say no to you. Please do not let some old silly book come between us."

Edward collapsed into a chair and gazed into the middle distance. Maria, unwilling to let Edward see her cry, turned away. Edward left

shortly afterwards, books and packing material still strewn around the floor like the wreckage from some terrible explosion.

Maria called several times over the next few days, each time on his home phone during office hours, hanging up when it went to answerphone. He couldn't bring himself to call her back.

Unable to decide what to do next in the Beaumont acquisition, Edward simply let it rest for the moment, the ten thousand pounds resting accusingly in his personal current account. He would have been content to leave it there forever before something happened to make him act. This time it didn't come from apocalyptically-named IRC personalities, shady gentleman's clubs or even David Went. It began with an innocuous phonecall from Wil Hamilton, his one-time best friend back at Redmayne–Bracknell.

"We should meet up for a drink sometime," suggested Edward, reflecting that since joining Cooper Drake he had all but given up friends. His occasional outings with David Went were the closest he came to sharing time with friends these days, especially since he had stopped going to Maria's house.

"Sure. So how are things as a master of the universe?"

"Tiring."

"You don't say. Keeping your eyes on the prize, right?"

"When I can. How is HR treating you?"

"It's my busy season too. So many companies are closing we're getting deluged with applications. You know how it goes—all the handwritten letters, in the bin. All the 'To whom it may concerns'—in the bin. Pile A is the first-class degrees from Oxbridge, pile B is the first-class degrees from other unis. The rest go in the bin. All the off-white paper; in the bin. All the ones on company letterhead; in the bin. Interview the first ten from the top of each pile and chuck the ones who start the interview with 'um'. If you're left with one candidate from pile A and another from B, chuck the B-lister."

"Heh," Edward thought: you're missing out a trick there, mate. I know for a fact you look at the surnames and chuck the ones that don't sound like they attended Eton in the 1950s.

"Here's something you could probably use—you know Western Instruments?"

Edward vaguely remembered it as a dinosaur of a New England firm that made graphic calculators and replied in the affirmative.

"Well, they're jumping ship in their dozens. I'd say about one in every five applications we're getting over in Accounts are from them."

"Why?"

"Well, nothing's been announced yet, but it's common knowledge at the firm. They're only getting jumped by the Slasher."

Bashir "Slasher" Khan (he wouldn't have got into Redmayne–Bracknell under Wil Hamilton's watch, sad to say) was an aggressive young tycoon who had made millions buying up dying British and American companies, ruthlessly cutting them to the bare bones and selling them on to multinationals. He was the master of the hostile takeover, appealing directly to shareholders and bypassing management altogether. After firing half the workforce and paring back output to its most profitable components a company 'slashed' by Bashir Khan could be worth as much as fifteen percent more.

"Really? I'll look into it. Thanks for the tip."

They concluded their discussion with some light ribbing and a promise to get together some time, maybe pulling in friends who had left for different firms.

Then Edward started researching Western Instruments and Bashir Khan. It all seemed to check out—Khan hadn't made an acquisition for months and was surely looking to expand again. Western Instruments was a sad, bloated carcass of what it used to be, still insisting that people needed single-purpose computing equipment at

the price of a smart phone. A trickle of orders from the schools were the only thing keeping them in business.

This time Edward ran the deal past everyone—Liz, David, even popping in to let Raymond know. Everything came together—Liz reported confidently that voluntary redundancies in Western Instruments were sky-high. David confirmed something big was in the works from Slasher Khan. Edward was authorised to buy up eighteen million in shares in Western Instruments.

"What, that old thing?" asked his American contact in disbelief. "They're dead, son—you might as well invest in abacuses." But Edward pressed ahead, confident that as soon as the Slasher made his move he would be holding gold dust.

A week passed. Two weeks. Then the news—Edward's heart leapt as he saw the headline 'Slasher strikes again!'. It might have been a grisly murder—which in some ways it was—except it was in the Finance section.

> **Bashir 'The Slasher' Khan** has struck again, announcing a hostile takeover of Global Merchandise Limited, the international PR firm, which had been languishing for years following the collapse of the dot-com bubble…

Edward couldn't believe it. Surely there had to be some mistake, something misreported. He scanned the news for any mention of Western Instruments. And there it was.

> **Western Instruments** today announced losses of twenty million in its second quarter in a major blow to the ailing scientific calculator manufacturer.

He had been set up. Instead of gold dust he'd been left with fool's gold. In under an hour the face value of his stocks dipped by eight percent. While desperately trying to find a buyer, any buyer, he dialled Wil's number.

"Hi there Edward." He sounded horribly, nauseatingly chipper.

"Hello Wil. Is there something you want to tell me now?" He couldn't prevent the note of panic from entering his voice.

"You know, Edward, some companies have institutional memory. Not Cooper Drake, of course, but *proper* companies. Companies with history and character. You fucked us over, Edward. Did you think we'd just forget?" Edward was speechless as Wil continued. "RB gave you your break, forgave you all those months you farted around twiddling your thumbs like the spoilt brat you are."

"I thought we were friends," Edward said. I wonder if Peter finally realised, he thought—put Wil up to this. There's a justice in it, I guess.

"I thought we were," said Wil. "That was before you screwed with Redmayne–Bracknell."

Edward's mouth went tight. "Then screw you, you piece of shit. You're a bloody racist, as well, you know that? You run your fucking HR department like the Klu Klux Klan. Go to hell." He put the phone down. One more bridge well and truly burned, he thought.

In some ways this was worse than what had happened over Cliffes—though the trade had been above board, signed and sealed by Cooper Drake's management, it had been based on lies, lies predicated on a personal vendetta against him. Lies he had believed and presented as fact. Even MacIntyre wouldn't fire me for this, he thought mutely. He'll just move me quietly to a back room and make sure every other investment bank firm in the world knows I can't handle the trading floor. And now, only now, did the sick lump form in his stomach, as he saw his only option to make good.

The first time he had gone to the Beaumont residence he had forgotten his umbrella. This time it was with him, but he left it on his passenger seat. He walked through the rain to the porch and rung the bell. Just like the first time. Put things back to how they were. Another visit to Mr Stathopoulos would be in order, of course.

Maria came to the door in a thick, fluffy dressing gown, hair tightly wrapped in a towel. She looked at him and a suggestion of tears

began to form again in her eyes.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"You poor man! You poor man!" she said, grabbing him and bringing him inside, where she rested his head on her shoulder and allowed the water from his suit to soak into her robe. He didn't allow her to take his bag but placed it on the newspaper she brought out.

"Maria," he said, "I came—that is to say I stopped by—I felt bad for leaving the library in such a state—and even if you didn't want—I wanted to finish it—and I was so out of line—and—" Edward was unable to tell if his own breathless incoherence was an attempt to win sympathy or not. She took him by the hand and led him back to the library. To his amazement the books and styrofoam remained where he had left them; scattered on the floor.

"Nothing has changed, you know? I was just waiting for you to come back. I was worried."

He leaned closer to her, kissed her hair. She took his still damp collar with both hands and guided his face to hers, kissed his mouth, hard. You bastard, he wanted to shout at himself, you fucking bastard. He was crying now, and she took a tissue and wiped his eyes.

"Please," she said, her smile illuminated in that little plaster room, "don't cry. I'll bring tea and biscuits."

After she left, he watched his body move over to the bookshelf where the Gervase codex sat, taller and wider than the books around it and 'Gervais' scratched on its spine. He watched himself take the iron box off the shelf and swap it for the shoddy replica he had pieced together from the remains of an old washing-machine, smoothly transferring the manuscript to his bag. And that was all there was to it.

He swept up the packing chips and picked up where he left off. A few minutes later Maria brought warm, sweet tea, and he drank it like a man dying of thirst.

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Chapter Four: "You Are Invited"

"I must say," Jeremy said happily, "I was beginning to think you had taken our money and run. I mean, investment bankers." He chortled as he caressed the codex with long fingers, feeling the texture of the illustrated letters. "But I shouldn't have doubted. This is quite incredible."

They sat in a long tearoom at the clubhouse—this time Edward had been allowed the privilege of walking through without a blindfold. Thus far he had seen at least two of the Dragon's Den judges, a pop star and a member of the royal family. There was a tray of jam scones with clotted cream on the table—Edward had not dared take one. Jeremy, on the other hand, showed no such compunction; Edward winced at every crumb that fell onto the fourteenth century document.

"And what's this?" Jeremy's voice changed to one of genuine surprise as Edward held out a traveller's cheque for ten thousand pounds. He held it up, chuckling.

"You certainly give good value for money. I am impressed. How did you … no, don't tell me. However you did it, I have to admire your ruthlessness. I think it's time you got to know us a little more closely." Leaning back languorously he pulled on a white silk cord which engaged an intercom.

"Please tell Mister Carter that we're ready for him."

A few moments later the doors opened and an attractive young

nurse entered, preceded by a shrivelled figure in a wheelchair. If he had to guess, Edward would have put Mr Carter's age at a hundred and ten or more—alarmingly frail, folds of liver-spotted skin rippling inwards towards a collapsed, toothless mouth. The ears and downturned nose seemed overlarge on him, in the way they often appeared on the extremely elderly. Edward had read somewhere that cartilage continued to grow throughout one's life. A thin ruff of white hair surrounded the lower back of his head, with the occasional straggling hair clinging to his pate. The eyebrows in contrast were thick and bushy, and the eyes underneath still alive and twinkling with a sharp, predatory brightness that belied his outward decrepitude. His hands fluttered from his lap and shook as the young nurse poured him a drink.

"So! Mr Marshall. What *do* we have here? That—bright young man you were talking about?" When he spoke it was in short, anoxic gasps. Nasal tubes connected Mr Carter to a bulky apparatus mounted on the back of his chair, discreetly covered by a deep blue throw with silver threadwork; some sort of iron lung, Edward supposed. He found it vaguely disquieting to look at—it wheezed with him, rising and falling in a disturbingly organic way, as though there were some horrific tumour or Siamese twin under the cloth, growing out of the back of the aged man.

"Mr Gradley," prompted Jeremy, smoothing his tie. Or rather, Edward realised, Mr Jeremy Marshall. He found it incongruous that the two could have undertaken any enterprise together given their difference in ages. Mr Carter might well be old enough to have founded a prestigious gentleman's club, but Marshall? Most likely, the named partnership had been transferred dynastically; Jeremy's father had clearly had no compunctions in giving his son the keys to the kingdom.

"Gradley! A good—*Yorkshire* name," wheezed Carter affably. "But the build doesn't match. Actually -" he struggled for the spectacles hanging around his neck with the hand and the nurse retrieved them for him—"yes, the face is all wrong. I consider myself an expert in—anthropometrics. I can see that you're—baltoid, gracile, brachy—excuse me—cephaly—I'm going to guess Baltic or perhaps—West Slavic." He scanned Edward's face for a reaction. "Am I close?"

"My mother was Polish," said Edward, feeling a sudden twang of revulsion towards him.

"I knew it! Still sharp, eh, Mr Marshall?" The blond nodded, almost affectionately. "Ah, yes, Bernard Gradley. I remember him well. Thought he was much too good for us in the end, as I recall, and after all the help we gave him. Mail order bride, was it?" He chuckled for a second before collapsing in a coughing fit. Edward sat silently, reasoning that contradicting the ghastly old man was unlikely to yield results. Another thing you never told me, father, he thought.

"Mr Gradley has completed his first Acquisition for us. The Codex, if you recall." Jeremy Marshall reached into his drawer and withdrew something wrapped in a rich velvet cloth.

"Ah—at last! I've been waiting to get my hands on it for some time. Try not to lose *that* one to You Know Who; at least until you've perused every last delightful inch. It seems like only yesterday they sent the poor fellow back…"

"Indeed. Perhaps the status of our mutual friend might be reconsidered after being so thoroughly beaten to the prize by Mr Gradley here—even after we fulfilled his perverse little Cinderella fantasies."

"Ye-e-es, the problem being that at midnight he turns into a pumpkin!" Carter chuckled.

Marshall, seeing Edward's bewildered expression, interjected to return the conversation to something approximating sanity.

"Accordingly I felt it time for us to present Mr Gradley with provisional membership—and to discuss his reward, if he feels this an appropriate time. Would you care to do the honours, Mr Carter?"

Carter put his wine down and took the cloth in hands which suddenly seemed a lot surer than they had a few minutes ago. He leaned in, eyes lit by an unholy light, putting it in Edward's hands.

"This is knowledge. This is power. Take a look."

Unwrapping the soft fabric his fingers encountered a cold,

transparent sheet about six inches by three. Perspex? No, glass, he realised, turning it over in his hands. In one corner, the MC&D cartouche, in another, a contact number. In the centre, in almost unreadably tiny gold lettering, the words 'Edward Gradley, Acquisitions'. The reverse side showed what at first glance appeared to be a circuit diagram but which on closer examination was a tiny map of the City of London engraved into the glass, with several clubhouses marked.

"Take good care of it, my boy," wheezed Carter. "Keep it safe. You only get the one!"

"Thank you," said Edward, coolly. "Now, as to my reward…"

Edward knew that Marshall, Carter & Dark had held up their end of the bargain when he walked onto the trading floor the next morning. Went, MacIntyre and a couple of the other early risers had made it in ahead of him and had populated his table with little pots of bombay mix and bottles of champagne.

"I think congratulations are in order," MacIntyre hailed him.

"Oh?" said Edward.

"We were getting a bit worried about your Western Instruments speculation. But you came through in the end, even if it wasn't quite the way we thought. Cheers!" David popped a cork and filled glasses for the early brigade. Edward casually walked over to one of the touchscreens and saw the headlines.

> **Western Instruments to be acquired by 'Mad Hacker' Reginald Price**
>
> In a shock announcement, troubled scientific calculator manufacturer Western Instruments has become the subject of a hostile takeover by American cost-cutter Reg Price. Nicknamed 'The Mad Hacker' due to his efforts to restore profitability to failing firms by making steep efficiency savings, Mr Price will be looking to reverse the fortunes of the ailing giant…

Edward trotted back to the table with the others and accepted a glass of champagne. He raised his glass and smiled at Liz, who didn't smile back, instead looking away with a troubled expression. Now what have I done, he wondered.

That morning Western Instruments' shares rose by thirteen percent; Edward cashed out at midday, making a profit of £540,000. Edward couldn't comprehend the magnitude of what MC&D must have on Reginald Price to be able to compel him to launch a hostile buyout worth hundreds of millions in the space of a few hours, but right now he wasn't complaining. And, he thought, feeling the heft of the folder Jeremy Marshall had presented him, this was only the beginning.

"Edward, thank you. Come in."

Edward closed the door of Raymond MacIntyre's office. MacIntyre, David, Liz and a couple of other partners sat around a table. Edward felt a frisson of anticipation but also apprehension. Their faces were neutral.

He sat down at the table, taking in the documentation in front of each member. He had received a simple message by email, asking him to attend a meeting that afternoon, and to leave the rest of the day free. Edward had felt confident that it had been good news—recognition of every perfect, unbelievable deal he had made since his meeting with Jeremy Marshall. But as the morning had gone on, little things had made him feel more and more uneasy—the way Liz couldn't meet his eyes, the way David kept pacing back and forth between the desks, on several occasions walking halfway to Edward's team before changing his mind and walking back. The junior associates under him had picked up on the atmosphere and begun ribbing him about a coming inquisition.

"He's done it now! You've made 'em so much cash they want to know how you're smuggling that much coke into the country!"

Now he sat on the opposite end of the table to Raymond MacIntyre and he still couldn't determine whether he was about to be promoted or roasted over a slow fire.

"Edward," said Raymond MacIntyre slowly, "I don't think there's any doubt that your trades have been—sensational. From Cholmondeley Holdings through to Abacus Productions, you've made the company three point one million pounds in profit over the last six months. I'm a man of my word, and I haven't forgotten what I said when you asked how much you would have to pull in before we bent the rules for you and gave you a fast-track partnership." Edward began to pull himself up in his chair, eyes bright. "But Cooper Drake is an ethical firm, and before we can think about admitting a new partner, we need to clear up a few things. Ensure everything has been -" MacIntyre loosened his cotton collar slightly, visibly perspiring, "on the level."

Edward immediately modulated his body language—concerned, understanding.

"Take this trade, for example, on the Sixth of November. A ten million pound short sale transaction against ACTLE. It was taken out twelve hours before the Argentinian government announced the nationalisation of Wincanton Oil, a wholly owned subsidiary of ACTLE. I have spoken to the heads of both ACTLE and Wincanton, and this was news to them until the Minister of Industry made her announcement. Now, there's nothing wrong with scooping a firm on a political sea change that could affect them. If that's what you did, congratulations."

"I -" Edward began to speak, unsure of what he was going to say, but Raymond rode straight over him.

"Then there's this business over Carmichael & Sons. This is especially concerning to me because of the involvement of Gerald Spointer, a man whom I believe you may know. Someone—and it has not been established with certainty that it was Mr Spointer's company that originated these rumours, so to avoid prejudicing the partners I shall not mention the name of this company—leaked false information to the press about alleged corner-cutting and use of cheap materials in C&S's latest furniture range. Now, you sold and persuaded other members of your team to sell a total of twenty-five million pounds worth of shares in Carmichael & Sons, half an hour before the leak went to press. Just prior to this meeting Carmichael & Sons' share price has recovered somewhat but it is still

significantly reduced, most likely as a result of your trades. The Director of that organisation is understandably upset that large sales were made based on false information and I still have to get back to him to justify why—or even how—that decision was made. There are two ways I can get back to him; firstly, that the trade was made by our latest partner based on immaculate planning and assessment of C&S's long-term prospects and the connection to the dirty tricks campaign was coincidental. Or, I could tell him that the shares were sold at the insistence of a trader with a personal family connection to his competitor, and that the trader has since been disciplined for ethics violations." Edward felt a thin film of perspiration forming. He hadn't even made the connection between the rumours about Carmichael & Sons and Gradley Industries. He wondered if Marshall had found pleasure in linking him back to his father's firm.

"You see Edward, what concerns me most about all these wonderful trades is that for the last few weeks there has been almost no activity at all on your research pass. When a trade which could be construed as potentially based on insider information goes through, we like to look at our traders' research logs and see plenty of data that shows they've been looking up that organisation's past trends, scouring industry gossip, etc. I called this meeting because we haven't found anything like that. To get your side of the picture. If you can justify your trades, Edward, then a partnership is open to you. Right now. If not, we need to think about what we do next."

Edward's mouth was dry, ashy. He scanned the faces at the table. Of course there was no activity; every single trade had come straight out of Jeremy Marshall's big bent playbook. Why the hell hadn't he thought to cover his tracks? Had he thought Cooper Drake was stupid?! He had one tenuous lifeline.

"Liz," he croaked. He didn't want to say anything more.

Liz was studiously gazing down at the table, face bright red. "Sorry Edward, 'fraid I can't play along on this one. We've been rating Carmichael & Sons a strong buy for months. And we had no clue on Wincanton." Her voice had a bitter edge to it. "You seem to have some insight we don't. Sorry for lagging so far behind you." She seemed to shrink under Edward's vaporising gaze.

Raymond was sighing now, putting aside his paper and reaching for a set of other forms. Gardening leave, Edward thought mutely. They'd pull apart every email he'd ever made, ransack his phone records. When they found out that Western Instruments had apparently been a hot tip from Edward's old firm, he'd be finished. The whole world buzzed around him, and it was a second before he realised that David had weighed in.

"No, Edward's getting mixed up. There won't be anything on his research log because he lost his access card in a taxi. He couldn't afford to report it at the time so I've been lending him mine. Sorry, it's a breach of protocol, I know."

Edward was left speechless, as much because it seemed like a suicidal gesture as anything. What would that do? They'd just look up David's records and find the same absence of evidence.

MacIntyre turned; something weary in his voice. "I see. As you say, that's a breach of our policy, David, I'm surprised at you." David nodded, almost smiling now. "So you're saying that if we looked at *your* log we'd find excellent, bookmarked documentation showing that young Mr Gradley here has exhaustively researched Argentinian domestic economic policy and the furniture wars in the north of England?"

David nodded. "Amongst quite a lot of other stuff. You see, I have to confess that Edward wasn't the only person I was loaning my card to. These things are just so flimsy—and they slide right out of your pocket when you're sitting down. Half my team have been using it, and Michelle, and Paul." He glared meaningfully at two of the other partners, who immediately started nodding their heads. "That's a hell of a lot of data to sort through, Raymond. Besides, as lead partner, to go through my research logs would mean a formal investigation into both Edward and myself. Are we sure that's justifiable?"

Edward sat, gobsmacked by David Went's audacity. He had effectively dared MacIntyre to sack his two most valuable traders, and he could see from Raymond's increasingly washed-out face that he was in no mind to call David's bluff.

"As you say, David, I don't think that's warranted. I'm happy to have

received justification for these trades, and will now move to call a formal meeting of the board to admit Mr Gradley as a partner. Edward and anyone else who has"—he coughed—"*lost* their research passes is to purchase a new one immediately, and I expect to see all future trades documented on the right accounts to avoid embarassing situations like this in future."

MacIntyre walked over to Edward, whispering something in David's ear along the way, and shook his hand.

"You almost self-destructed there," he said quietly. "I think you owe Mr Went a big favour."

"'Almost' never needs apologies," said Edward evenly.

"Damn right. Well done, Mr Gradley," MacIntyre said in a louder voice, clapping him on the back before opening the door.

Everyone filed out, Edward's team making distant football-celebratory noises when they saw his relief-flushed face.

"David -" Edward said, grabbing the shorter man's shoulder, "Thank you. Why did you do that?"

David looked at him with a deadpan expression.

"Because we're friends, I thought. Besides, I'm 2-0 on you now, by my reckoning. I'm gunning for the hat-trick."

He didn't see Elizabeth again until he broke for coffee—she was the only other person in the trading floor kitchenette, sitting under a dark cloud at the table with a cup of cocoa.

"Liz?"

She looked up at him, eyes and nose red. "Guess you want to know why I didn't back you up earlier. Well done on the partnership, by the way."

"I kind of do want to know, yes."

Her gaze carried absolute venom.

"We never went for that coffee, did we?"

He saw in that moment that she felt used, had realised the part he had made her play in the departure of Peter Davis. Perhaps she had even figured out where the Western Instruments tip had come from; even now she had refrained from doing the worst she could to him. He turned and walked away.

Death found Edward browsing for ideas for a new car. As partner his salary would start at two hundred thousand a year, not including bonuses. Right now he was trying to decide between the Porsche Panamera and a Toyota FT-86 Coupe. This time they didn't wait for him to log onto IRC; they did that for him, opening a new foreground tab that jerked him wide awake.

> **Death_4H:** I see you've been busy

Edward had almost forgotten about these jokers. They were the ones who got him into all this by trying to threaten him over the Cholmondeley takeover of Hong Kong Electric. Thoughts of saloons vs sports hatchbacks set firmly aside, he began typing.

> **EGradley:** yes. working for a living tends to imply that. what do you do?
>
> **Death_4H:** very funny. we said we would be in touch.
>
> **EGradley:** still with that? let me guess, you want information on Marshall, Carter & Dark
>
> **EGradley:** i don't feel like playing
>
> **Famine_4H has joined the channel**
> **Pestilence_4H has joined the channel**
>
> **Death_4H:** I know you've been trying to squirm further into their confidence because you think it will protect you
>
> **EGradley:** I'm pretty sure it does, as a matter of fact.
>
> **Death_4H:** you have no idea who you're in bed with

EGradley: really? here's a thought: I'll tell you whatever you want if you go away

Pestilence_4H: tell us what you think you know

War_4H has joined the channel

EGradley: MC&D the gentleman's club incorporates an art brokerage which is a front for insider dealing.

EGradley: you can earn membership by acquiring pieces for resale, which is rewarded with information

Pestilence_4H: which you've used

EGradley: definitely did not say that

Death_4H: try telling us something we don't know

Pestilence_4H: wasn't a question

Famine_4H: like the man says

Famine_4H: no idea

EGradley: what the hell are you going on about?

Death_4H: we need to meet in person

EGradley: not going to happen.

Death_4H: it will. we're going to expose MC&D and you're going to help.

EGradley: why is that, exactly?

Death_4H: because, your recent illegalities aside you're not actually evil, as far as we know

Death_4H: when you're ready, you'll figure out how to contact us.

Death_4H has left the channel.

War_4H has left the channel.
Famine_4H has left the channel.
Pestilence_4H has left the channel.

Well, that seemed to be it. Edward noted that they hadn't tried to blackmail him this time, which as far as he was concerned indicated they'd waited too long to play their hand. He couldn't decide whether they actually knew more about MC&D's activities or whether he'd just handed them Jeremy Marshall on a plate; either way, he thought, they were more likely to go after someone else now.

Edward was returning to his apartment after picking up the new car —he'd opted for the Porsche—when something struck him as slightly off. The door remained firmly locked—all the windows were closed, and at first glance nothing seemed out of place, but he had a sudden and unmistakable feeling that someone had been there. He immediately booted up his computer and checked the access times, allowing himself to breathe out as it showed no unusual activity. The two encrypted files that now held his strange communications with Death and his friends were apparently inviolate.

He had almost forgotten his worries when he found the card, nestled inside his fruitbowl. It was smooth and black, with rounded edges and a familiar gold cartouche. This is what the card said:

Edward Gradley

You are invited.

Christmas Ball
24 December 9.30pm
London Chapterhouse

Edward sat for a while looking at it. Did everyone involved with Marshall's little club get this special treatment? Or was this a warning?

The twenty-fourth was the busiest Edward had seen the clubhouse —though the foyer remained intimidatingly shadowy, the doors were

for once wide open, as guests from politics, finance and the media flocked in. Edward had followed the directions on the glass membership card and arrived at the same time as David, who had brought Maria and the Parker girl. Edward felt a twinge of—pride, guilt?—that his car, suit and watch were all significantly more expensive than David's this time around. He had eschewed the services of Mr Stathopoulos, opting instead for Huntsman, Saville Row.

Before he could speak to Maria she was whisked away by David and he was left talking to the willowy blonde who had sat with Maria before—Lady Penelope, he remembered—who had materialised suddenly.

"Edward! So good to see you. You look positively *edible*," she said, as before not extending her hand but smiling prettily.

"Thank you. Uh, are you here on your own?"

"Yes, I'm afraid so. I usually come with Maria Beaumont, but she's been stolen away by that fat little banker." She sounded genuinely put out. "Oh, but I forget; you're in the trade too, aren't you? You must excuse me, that was horrible."

"That's okay. Erm, do I say Dear Lady?"

"Only if you have to! Call me Alexandra."

"Thanks. I'm here on my own too."

"Oh, you're too cute to be on your own. I'll keep you company."

Lady Penelope was an amiable enough companion; he wasn't sure if her flowery compliments indicated sexual interest on her part or whether that was just her way of getting attention. They chatted for a few minutes while he tried to catch sight of Maria, wondering what spectacle MC&D would put on for its guests.

They didn't have to wait long. A mist spread out over the whole ballroom, arching over the guests, faint pricks of precipitation spotting their hands and faces. After a few moments the air became vaguely irritating to the eyes—guests started to murmur that

something had clearly gone wrong and a few started for the exits. Edward closed his eyes for a moment to clear the stinging mist and to his amazement another scene altogether appeared before his eyes; a picturesque rocky shore, somewhere northern, pocked with rockpools and with seagulls flying overhead.

It was clearer than a dream—as though by closing his eyes he had opened another pair somewhere else entirely.

"Close your eyes," he said to Lady Penelope, then louder, to the other guests. One by one, they seemed to populate the scene, appearing in their tuxedos and elegant ballroom gowns along the shoreline. They started to clap as they realised that this was no mere illusion—however MC&D had managed it, they were able to see and interact with each other in this ethereal world. The eyes of every other guest appeared closed; Edward wondered how his own eyes would appear in the nearest rockpool, and cautiously stepped towards it, wondering if he was about to walk into a table or another guest. The still, clear water showed no signs of his reflection, though he was able to cup the water in his hand and taste the sea salt. He realised he could hear the seagulls.

A low, bass music began, booming out of the tide and the sea. The Marshall, Carter & Dark Christmas Ball had begun. Edward offered Lady Penelope his hand again but she shook her head, a strange mix of longing and fear on her face.

The guests of Marshall, Carter & Dark danced on that strange, otherwise deserted shore in their ballroom garments, whirling and turning in space, kicking up small plumes of sand. Not one guest stubbed their foot on an invisible table or stumbled into a clubhouse wall. Edward had no idea how this was being effected, but it was the most astonishing thing he had experienced in his life. He looked at a distant, crumbling lighthouse on a rocky outcrop, and wondered if he could reach if it he walked long enough.

Suddenly left adrift on the sand by his previous partner, who had spun away, Edward found himself facing Maria, wearing a white, almost bridal gown. Looking at her, he remembered the codex and almost turned away, heart stung. Instead, she took him firmly by the hand.

"Dance with me," she said.

It was a surreal experience—dancing on the shore of a great silver sea under a watery sun, seemingly miles away from London, his partner's eyes and the eyes of the dancers all around pressed firmly shut. As they moved he drew Maria closer until his nose was buried in her dark hair. She clung to him fiercely.

They slowed and stopped, and the dreamlike dance around them seemed like an eternal progression; as though time had ceased to exist in this place. Then Edward looked past Maria and saw David there, facing them. His eyes, like the others, were shut, but his face was etched with lines of misery and betrayal. Edward disengaged himself from Maria, who turned and realised what he had seen.

They hid themselves in the crowd, then, watching diplomats and celebrities dancing to that great thrumming noise at the edge of the impossible ocean.

After a long time, the hiss of mist they realised had been there all along faded and the shore grew wavery and dim, as though the tide had come in and drowned the scene. One by one they winked out of existence, opening their eyes to find themselves seated or standing where they had been at the start of the dance. Out of the corner of his eye Edward saw Maria get up and leave David's table, though she did not come to him.

Guests were not left long to discuss what they had experienced—a German-language operetta began, the female soprano's voice hauntingly beautiful yet startling in its mundanity next to that timeless waltz. During the opera guests were served small dishes of seafood and crudities in fresh seasonal dips, and it seemed normality had reasserted itself. An authentically MC&D touch at the end of the opera—the pain of the singers and the blood as the tenor threw himself upon his sword and the soprano agonisingly dragged herself onto the point projecting from his spine seemed very real, though this time the performers did re-emerge after the curtain came down to make their bows.

Christmas dinner was served thereafter—marine variations on Christmas fare. Three chefs had been drafted in for this occasion,

and again Edward had to wonder whether the Ready, Steady, Cook presenter, the Domestic Goddess and the school food campaigner in one kitchen wasn't a case of too many cooks spoiling the broth. However, his meal of wild salmon with fennell and stuffed with bacon, pears, pecans and caramelised onion put paid to any criticism. For dessert, mixed white, milk, and dark chocolate had been woven into the form of various sea creatures, doused in spiced milk and nutmeg. On other tables he saw artificial coral crennelations in the shapes of Christmas trees, stars and angels, miniature undersea castles made from strands of sugar, a honeyed ship-flambé slowly drowning in a lake of warm rice pudding, bodies of marzipan castaways littering the surface.

As guests finished their meals, the only thing left to do seemed to be to depart. Then, the lights began to dim, until the ballroom was lit only by cold, distant stars in the domed ceiling above.

"I have a special part to play this time around," said Lady Penelope, as she stood up, taking a slim red leather volume out of her carrypurse. Edward obligingly clinked his glass until its sound had covered the whole length of the great hall.

"Ladies and gentlemen," announced Lady Penelope, "we thought you really couldn't go home without just a little more excitement. So, we're going to play a party game. I've looked through this darling little book until I found something that sounded just right. We're going to play Sardines!" A couple of appreciative murmurs.

"And because this is no ordinary place and no ordinary time, we're going to play this game with a twist."

To Edward's surprise, Lady Penelope began disrobing in sight of the astonished guests. "We're going to play it entirely nude." Lascivious chuckles.

"In a few minutes we'll draw straws and the longest is our first Sardine. At that time we'll extinguish all the lights. Our Sardine will go and hide somewhere in the chapterhouse. Every successive player will have to clamber in there with them, and we'll all feel sorry for the poor loser, as they'll be wandering all on their lonesome, in the dark."

Each guest took a 'straw'—a piece of starched seaweed of varying length, some already beginning to remove their clothes. Edward saw David taking his straw—a stub of wrack—and heard him laugh, loud and bitter.

"We have a winner," exclaimed Lady Penelope, "Maria Beaumont."

Flushed with embarassment, Maria Beaumont stripped to the waist—Edward tried to avert his gaze, but caught a flash of tan skin. He glanced, and met her eyes—wide, the whites showing, like a wild animal. She shrugged off her skirt, her shoes. The lights went out, and he heard her footsteps pattering away, before they were engulfed in a tide of rustling and clandestine giggling, as though the great and good had been reduced to so many teenagers. He undid his zip, his buttons, and let five thousand pounds sterling of suit fall to the ground. The temperature of the ballroom had been lowered enough to induce shivering, all the better to make guests huddle together. Then the hunt began.

Feeling their way in absolute darkness, the finders called out to each other to avoid colliding and to determine who was still in play. One by one, they went silent as each found Maria's hiding place. Occasionally enough moonlight shone through a vent or a locked backroom door to suggest some feature to the dark-adapted eye; an ornate lampshade or an Elizabethan chair.

"Hello?" he called. "Am I the last one still out here? Come on guys, it's cold!" He thought he could hear a quiet suppressed snigger but careful exploration in the direction he thought it had come from failed to yield any results.

Suddenly, a collision in the dark with something yielding, motile. He barely checked a yelp and startled back, his shoulder impacting what felt like wood panelling. For a moment there was nothing and he wondered if he had imagined that it had been a body—something about it had felt too cold, not alive. Then a hand touched his shoulder—icy, painfully cold.

"I'm—sorry," he said, "I didn't hurt you, did I? I didn't think there was anyone left."

The hand began to slide along his shoulder, up the side of his neck.

"Erm, hi," Edward said. "I really don't think…"

Before he could continue the shape pushed up against him—a body, unmistakeably female but so unbearably cold the absurd thought crossed his mind that he had somehow collided with a mannequin or something else human shaped. The notion was dispelled as it began to move against him, and he found it had pinned him to the wall by both shoulders, impossibly strong. It pressed in—so cold, and *damp*; clammy, like uncooked meat. It pressed against him, chilling, insistent, and Edward found himself fighting his gag reflex.

"No," he said, and tried to pull away. The presence gripped him by his arm and chest, its nails digging into his flesh. "Let me go!"

He twisted sideways, the woman's nails tracing lines of pain across his chest and left arm. He stumbled, bruising his shin on a low table, and half-ran half-crawled away on all fours.

He blundered around in a daze, trying to navigate by the thin shafts of light, until a hand gripped his arm. This time he cried out, but was immediately checked by a chorus of muted laughter, and he realised the hand holding him was warm and alive.

"Is that you, David?" said Maria's voice. He muttered an affirmative.

"Somebody scratched me," he whispered, unable to vocalise the horror that he had felt.

"It was probably an accident," she said, holding his face.

Moments later, the lights slowly brightened—politicians, bankers, debutantes and stock traders found themselves in an undignified pile at the base of a staircase, spilling up as high as the mezzanine. Sheepish cheers gave way to a more businesslike atmosphere as everyone bustled to find their clothes.

"I thought it was a cupboard," Maria said, standing up, covering herself with her arms.

Who had been left out? Scanning the faces Edward could see only

one omission—David Went. This has got to be the worst night of his life, thought Edward. He didn't know what he could or would say to the man. A couple of other other guests went searching for Went, whom they agreed had probably got turned around somewhere upstairs.

He redressed, noting ruefully the creases and footprints across Huntsman's best. Maria joined him, and acquiesced to his barely audible offer of a lift home.

A sudden scream rang out, amplified by the domed roof. Then another. Edward got to his feet and ran towards the sound. Why 'towards'?, said his Philosophy lecturer, sitting on the lower fold of his right ear and kicking his legs against his earlobe. The human survival instinct as commonly understood that you run away from possible danger; that you take concern for the collective rather than yourself proves you to have social—in fact socialist—tendencies. Now, are they innate, or are they learned? Are you running because as a man you are socially conditioned to risk your own life for others? Are you incapable of resisting that programming, or do you have free will?

Maria followed, still buttoning her blouse. As Edward crossed the threshold into the back stairwell, an elegant thing of three floors and jutting balconies over an alcoved space filled with flowering plants, and saw the thing hanging from the top railings by its belt, he doubled back and caught Maria.

"Please," he said, "please don't look." She tried to push past him but at the same time buried her head in his chest, as though she already knew.

The body of David Went, suspended in the air, rotated a quarter-turn, then reversed itself. One of his shoes—Church's, two hundred and fifty pounds—had fallen off and lay on its side two floors below. A crowd had gathered to behold the spectacle; some of them even started to applaud, as though it might have been some grisly finale to the evening—Murder in the Dark, which it was—before realising everyone else was looking on with horror. Edward pushed past them and went back to his table. No-one would be going home yet.

Chapter Five: "There's Five"

Along with the Parker girl, the only other guest from Cooper Drake, he had been asked to come down to the police station and provide an oral statement. At the firm's insistence he had been accompanied by Cooper Drake's lawyer, a hawk-faced gentleman with thin, slicked-back dark hair in a widower's peak who answered every question with a question and would only allow Edward to answer after whispered consultation. The police had found a note in David's pocket, handwritten, scrawled apparently blind on a napkin. Edward knew what it said because the police had shown it to him.

This is what it said:

> I am guilty. Tomorrow is Christmas Day and I cannot bear to see it. I have made millions from deceit and I can no longer stand silent. I cannot confess and I will not go to jail. I am left with one honourable outcome. I say honourable, but I will be spoiling everyone's evening. I am sorry. Birkman, Solico, UN Ltd. There is more. I operated alone; I did not involve others from Cooper Drake, or any other firm. I'm sorry.

Edward stared at it, speechless. Something was terribly, horribly wrong here. Could David have been driven to suicide by the events of the evening? Perhaps. Would he have completely omitted his betrayal by a man he thought of as a friend and perhaps protégé? By a woman he loved? Would he have imputed his own death to guilt felt over insider trading? Edward couldn't believe it. All the deals the note mentioned predated Cholmondeley; the note read like it had been penned by someone ignorant of the last few months of David Went's life.

The lawyer allowed him to tell the police that David Went had not seemed suicidal earlier, though he had appeared agitated at the party. Was it Went's handwriting, they asked. Edward considered the haphazard lettering. The lawyer permitted him to express the view that never having seen anything written by David in the dark he was unable to form a verdict. The police nodded sagely and handed the plastic bag containing the note back. Had Edward ever known

Went to be anything less than a perfectly ethical broker? Before Edward could even begin to formulate a response the lawyer leaned in and snippily told the officers that any questions about Went's performance were a matter for Cooper Drake's management alone, in the first instance for his direct manager, Raymond MacIntyre.

At work, Edward watched in shock as police came and took all David's computer equipment away for forensic analysis. Another round of interviews for everyone on the trading floor; Edward insisted on hiring his own lawyer, who sat on his other side and got into short, terse disagreements with Cooper Drake's representative for four hundred and fifty pounds an hour. It didn't help that at some time since the ball Edward had caught some respiratory infection which left him hawking great lumps of phlegm into a tissue, which both his lawyers insisted on pointing out to the present police officers—every single time—did not constitute an answer and should not be taken as an affirmative or negatory response.

After intense discussion with both his legal counsel, Edward was able to represent to the police that David had passed on several leads which seemed unusually hot; but which he had insisted originated in conversations overheard at his gentleman's club. It did not escape Edward that the words 'Marshall, Carter & Dark' were never mentioned by the police at any time; the venue's own lawyer, slick and toothy in a black suit and coiffed hair, seemed to have the power to always appear just outside any room where David Went was being discussed.

Edward had phoned through to MC&D and demanded to speak to Jeremy Marshall.

"Complete immunity, you said. When the police search David's computers and find reference to the Cholmondeley deal…"

"You're safe, Edward," he crooned, voice slightly distorted by the line. "Everything's being taken care of. How unfortunate about David. Still, we have a bright new star at Cooper Drake, don't we?"

Edward had ended the call and immediately thrown up in his sink.

He had not been mistaken; there had been no other guests

legitimately playing 'Sardines' left by the time he was wandering in silence. He felt sure that David Went had been killed, perhaps as soon as the lights had been extinguished. That cold, damp presence … the woman who had effortlessly pinned him to the wall but whose body felt like a dead thing—he was left in no doubt that she had been the killer. And he was just as sure that the agency behind her had been Jeremy Marshall. He suspected that Went had made no further acquisitions for Marshall after Cholmondeley. But if Edward had not involved himself directly with the firm, surely David would still be alive. No, Marshall, Carter & Dark had David killed because they had a shiny new toy, at least, until they got bored of him too. Perhaps it had even been a warning. Probably all three—Jeremy Marshall didn't seem like the sort of man to order a murder for just one reason.

He needed a plan. Googling '4H' yielded nothing useful. '4H Death', similarly. '4H Death War Famine Pestilence' told him what he should probably already worked out, that '4H' meant 'Four Horsemen', but nothing else. Finally, in desperation he returned to #theologywars and asked if anyone had heard of a group or organisation called '4H' or 'Four Horsemen'.

> **Acts238:** Actually, it's Conquest, War, Famine, Death, and Hell. There's five.
>
> **Acts238:** But only four horses; Zech 6:2-3 calls them the spirits of the heavens (KJV 1611)
>
> **nodeceit:** that's a deceitful interpretation. there are many horses of each kind in Zechariah, and they are chariots, not horsemen. they don't represent the same thing
>
> **nodeceit:** and KJV-onlyism is a doctrine from hell, see our expose
>
> **landoverbaptist:** Your mother sucks cocks in hell.

Edward sighed. He probably should have known better than to ask about anything with an eschatological subtext here. Then something caught his eye.

911truther: They're a conspiracy theorist group. Let-it-happeners.

911truther: Big into black helicopter stuff: see here— **link**

The blog seemed to have been abandoned a long time ago; mostly blurry pictures of paramilitary-style SWAT teams raiding houses, unmarked planes and the standard conspiracy spiel about various shady non-state actors who supposedly had tendrils in every level of national and supranational government. No wonder Marshall, Carter & Dark are giving them such a boner, he thought, Secretaries of State, big business tycoons, movie stars… if the Illuminati exist, MC&D are cramping their style.

The nicks of the authors were the same—Death_4H, War_4H, Famine_4H, Pestilence_4H, confirming for Edward that he'd found the right place. There were no contact details listed, but after trawling through their archives he found an appeal for information about an obscure Red Scare-era organisation called GRU Raskolnik P (supposedly headed by chess grandmaster Ivan Sokolov and the Soviet counter to Project Stargate), with a hotmail email address. He had no idea if it was even still active, but decided it was his best shot. He wrote:

To: **FourHorsemen**
From: **EGradley**

Subject line: Marshall, Carter & Dark

It's Edward. I'm ready.

O'Reilly's Grill and Diner was about as far from the art deco café used by Jeremy Marshall as you could get. Dark colours, stained padded seats, with a cracked television blaring out horse races and occasionally football. The smoking ban was in force but the smell remained, pressed horribly into every surface by years of nicotine exposure. The owner, an incomprehensibly Irish man with a limp, scowled when Edward ordered a black coffee and what slid over the counter a few minutes later was some sort of tea with black grit

floating in it. Edward strained some of the granules out with a napkin and took a cautious sip. It tasted like burnt toast.

Edward wasn't sure what he had been expecting from the Four Horsemen—what did conspiracy theorists wear these days? Tie-dye and ripped jeans? Then again, if Hollywood had taught him anything about hackers, he should be looking for beautiful people in black leather and wraparound shades. The odd couple who walked in the door and ordered drinks didn't even register on his radar until they slid in beside him. One was literally a kid—a young teenager in a school shirt and trousers with dark hair in a flippy haircut with white highlights and painted fingernails. The other looked to be well into his forties, tall and borderline obese, with a massive gut hanging over his belt below a Metallica teeshirt, a goatee and thinning curly brown hair scraped into a ponytail. He did wear shades—but they were brown with big plastic frames.

"Edward Gradley," said the kid with the black fingernails.

"You two? You're the four horsemen?" said Edward, amusedly.

"Well, I'm Death," said the kid, who had the good grace to look a little embarassed as he said it. "This is War -" he gestured to the overweight metal fan. "Pestilence's mom wouldn't let him come and Famine couldn't get the day off work."

"If you don't mind me saying so, you're a bit of a mismatched pair."

"This is the first time we've met up in person, actually," said War, looking distinctly uncomfortable. "Look, we're here for one reason, and that's to talk about Marshall, Carter & Dark. Why the sudden change of heart?"

"They killed David Went."

"We heard suicide," said Death measuredly, sipping his glass of Sprite.

"That's what the police think. But his suicide note doesn't make sense. It couldn't have been written by him. Things that happened that night, things that could have really pushed him over the edge,

he doesn't mention at all. There was a party game—in the dark. I bumped into someone still walking around after everyone was supposed to be hidden. A woman."

"And you can prove that MC&D were behind it?" War sounded excited.

"No. Sorry. But Jeremy Marshall…"

"Who Marshall?"

"Jeremy. That's what he said his name was."

"Interesting," said Death, and scribbled something in the margins of the ringbinder he'd brought along.

"…Jeremy Marshall all but told me he'd had David killed because I was … better controllable, more promising, I don't know."

"You must feel good about yourself right now," Death said flatly.

"Look," said Edward angrily, "I didn't come to get lectured at, okay? You said you were going to explain what's really going on here."

"We're trying," said War. "You got it the wrong way round. The art stuff isn't a cover for the insider trading—the trading covers a worldwide art theft and money laundering operation. Members ask for a piece and MC&D get it, no questions asked. In return they're taking in money from drugs, illegal arms deals, regimes like North Korea and Iran. They have a catalogue—you've seen it?"

Edward nodded.

"That's so any criminal can walk in and trade as much cash as he can carry for a legitimately acquired piece; guaranteed value. Right now they're untouchable—their membership includes police chiefs and politicians; not just here but in the USA, France, Germany. They make sure they have something on all their members; whether it's dodgy deals based on information they've provided, photos of kinky sex scandals orchestrated in their own clubhouses, or just straight-up bribery."

"So they're a gentleman's club fronting an insider trading ring fronting an international crime syndicate? It seems unbelievable."

"Well," said Death, "you've apparently met the fuckers behind this thing. Does it strike you as beyond them?"

Edward fell silent for a moment.

"What can I do?

"First, you need to figure out who you can trust at Cooper Drake. If what you say is true, MC&D wouldn't have had Went killed unless they had someone else in place to keep tabs on you. Then you'll set up another acquisition with Marshall."

War nudged the kid's arm and he stopped talking.

"I don't wish to alarm you but that car's gone past twice already." Edward looked up but it had already gone. "Black Citroën, license plate starts 'SE'".

Death looked up, eyes flashing. "You idiot! You didn't check to see if you were being tailed?"

"I think you're being paranoid," said Edward, though even as he said it he thought: *but that doesn't mean they're not out to get you*.

"Fuck that," said Death. "Look, we'll be in touch. Hey, O'Reilly, is there a back door to this place?" The barkeep said something neither Edward nor apparently the Horsemen could make out. Instead, Death tapped his watch and War nodded. Death left first, followed fifteen seconds later by War. They went in different directions. Edward was left with his toast-flavoured hot water, which after a moment's consideration he swapped for Death's half-finished soft drink.

Who can you trust, he thought? It would help if I could trust myself first.

After another twenty minutes he left the bar and walked back to his apartment. Half-way he bumped into a man he didn't recognise—

thirties or forties, stubbly, balding. "Sorry," Edward said, absent-mindedly. The man's reaction, however, stuck in Edward's memory —he fixed Edward with a look of fear or embarassment, then brought his hand to his mouth in a strangely feminine gesture. Then he turned and fled. There was something strange about the way he ran, but Edward couldn't put his finger on it.

This time Edward walked from his car to the Beaumont house under cover of an umbrella. She opened the door, resplendent in an apron and the smell of something hot and sugary filling the air.

"Edward," she said, smiling. "I wasn't expecting -" she trailed off as he shrugged off his shoes, walked past her wordlessly. She followed him, tugging at his sleeve, asking him what was wrong.

They stopped in the library, and he took her to the shelf containing the replica codex. Lifted it out, placed it in her hands, saw her feel its weight. He opened it for her, let her see the Currys-spare-part hinges and chipped washing-machine paint interior—its empty interior. She dropped the box, turned and grasped him tight around the chest with one arm, beat on it with the other.

"I'm sorry." he said. "I'll get it back. I swear. I'll get it back."

As he drove away he saw another car, a red Vauxhall Meriva, put its lights on and pull out of the row in front of the terrace. He looked in the mirror every few minutes and could see it hovering at the very edge of visibility in the London traffic. Then he saw it signal off and turn into a side road, and he allowed himself to exhale deeply as another vehicle emerged. Then, five minutes later, the car that had turned onto his road turned off, and the red Vauxhall was back. Edward deliberately took a detour from his usual route, even circling around a roundabout three times as though trying to make up his mind. When he exited, the second car was a short way behind him. He pulled over, watched it pause, then indicate that it too would park. He got out of his car and walked towards the vehicle, not caring about the rain. When he got ten paces from its tinted windows its engine started up again and it pulled away.

That night he played chess online again for the first time in years,

against a self-professed first-timer from Texas. He played under a pseudonym, just in case anyone still recognised him from that brief glorious summer when he had seemed invincible.

Edward hadn't been able to see six moves ahead—those corridors were still closed to him. But he realised he could *remember* thinking that way, could recall the output of that black box if not the mechanism by which it had operated. He had played White and the game had resulted in a stalemate. Still, he thought, it was a start.

To Liz, he said that he had gambled on the launch of the latest iPhone and lost. Raymond MacIntyre heard that he had been blindsided by aviation fuel increases that put paid to a key engine refit on Ryanair's fleet. He confided in Michelle Myers that he had tied himself into four million pounds in European options on Microsoft that unless Ballmer spectacularly screwed up in the next month would leave him hundreds of thousands down. Paul Reagan offered sympathy when Edward bemoaned a million pounds of Turkish government debt wiped out by a bondholder haircut. Various members of his team were left believing he had made disastrous trades in biotech, solar power, soft furnishings or vacuum cleaners.

No matter how you looked at it, Edward had had a rough week. Except, of course, he hadn't. The secrets left in Marshall's little red book had expired, but he had put in a few long nights and his current trades—geothermal startups in Norway, Chinese infrastructure firms in Ghana, an Oxford outfit that had worked out how to manufacture buckypaper for electronic heatsinks at a fraction of the usual price, and for old time's sake some aerodynamics contractors who had recently been signed by Lockheed Martin—were ticking over very nicely.

Now he was just waiting for the phone call.

"Mr Gradley," Marshall's voice oozed from his mobile. "I'm so sorry to hear you've been having some difficulties. Oh, but I shouldn't offend your pride. You're being faced with new challenges, and new opportunities. Mr O'Leary *clearly* lacks vision—those new engines would have paid dividends in the long run. I'll tell him how disappointed I am at our next brunch. In the meantime, perhaps you

would care to consider making another acquisition for us?"

"I'd love to," said Edward, through clenched teeth. MacIntyre, you insufferable shit. No wonder you called that meeting. I wonder, did you know what that meant for David? Did you realise he was signing his own death warrant by saving me?

Breakfast at the smaller MC&D clubhouse on Wood Lane was a surreal affair. BBC personalities—including several Edward had been quite sure were dead—and private sector TV and newspaper execs rubbed shoulders with international dignitaries over freshly baked crumpets and sticks of warmed salted butter while small drama and music acts performed enthusiastically. Every so often one of the media goliaths would politely excuse themselves and shamble over to the performers that had just left the stage. It's a glorified talent show, Edward realised; he could only imagine what the young people on stage had had to do to get their chance.

There, at the centre of it all, was Jeremy Marshall, alternately smiling and nodding to the presenter of Newsnight and snarling into a slim mobile phone.

"Too rough … no, my dear fellow, you gave them exactly what they were asking for. Excuse me … well, I didn't give the PM a bloody horse. Take care of her! My apologies … yes, I've seen University Challenge several times… Ah, Mr Gradley." His companion apparently sensed he had been dismissed and wandered over to the next table where Sir Trevor McDonald was holding court with a surprisingly risqué story about his time in the Caribbean.

"Well, plant some of Mulcaire's letters in her home. No, we didn't destroy them, do you think I'm an idiot? You're supposed to be the professional, think of something." He ended the call and looked up at Edward.

"Please, have a seat. Have a crumpet—or there are cinnamon bagels, if you like." He clapped his hands and one of the blank-eyed serving staff appeared with a serving dish covered by a cloche. Edward shook his head.

"Very well," he said, dismissing the young man, who vanished quietly and efficiently. "Now, Edward, you are familiar, I gather, with the Lady Alexandra Penelope?"

"Yes. I spoke to her at the Christmas Ball."

"Very good. Yes, the dowager countess of Swindon. How tragic, to be widowed under suspicious circumstances at such a—well, at her age."

"Which is?"

"Entirely irrelevant, Mr Gradley! A dashing young man such as yourself should have learned never to ask a lady her age. Now, as to the acquisition I want you to make. Since you have proven yourself so able to acquire items without financial outlay—and are a man of means these days, I understand—I don't anticipate any expenses will be necessary in this case. The Lady Penelope has a certain antique comb which you are to retrieve without delay. Oh, don't adopt that ridiculous expression, Mr Gradley. The comb in any case belongs to Marshall, Carter & Dark and was lent to Lady Penelope on the understanding that she could retain it only if she met certain conditions, which events have now rendered it impossible for her to do. Go to her house, get the comb. I don't really care how you do it. And then we can talk about rectifying your latest misadventures in the big wide world of finance."

"Okay."

Marshall passed him another briefing document with an image of the comb—an ugly, twisted thing wrought in ivory and bearing a singularly confused version of the Last Supper, wherein at least the central four figures all appeared to be Jesus Christ. Edward thumbed along the photo, counting the participants; excluding the ones with haloes and short beards there were only 11 other figures. Now he knew what he was looking for, he realised Lady Penelope had been wearing it at least the last time he had seen her.

"So, where do you keep all this stuff?" he asked, as nonchalantly as he could. "I'd love to take a look at the warehouse, as it were."

Marshall looked at him, warily. "Have your eye on what's behind the shop curtain, eh? Maybe once you get the comb. Don't push your luck, though—you've already chosen your reward for this acquisition."

Lydiard Manor, the family residence of Lady Penelope, formally the Dowager Countess Swindon, was a stately Georgian pile set away from prying eyes down a long, leafy private lane. Edward pulled the Porsche up next to the expansive lawn, framed on either side by leafy conifers, and walked up to the front door—a plastic sheeting was visible pulled over the door from the other side.

"Side entrance," the cut-glass vowels of Lady Penelope intoned from the window directly above him. He looked up but could only see billowing lace curtains. Obligingly he crunched the gravel path which he suspected had been a moat and found a bay door wide open to the exterior, propped open with a singularly hideous garden ornament. It led through to an attractive summer-room, decorated with fine portraits of the family—the Bolingbrookes, he recalled.

Lady Penelope stepped out from behind a rich purple curtain, wearing a diaphanous, floaty dress that seemed at odds with the wintery drizzle outside. She looked tired—certainly older than he remembered, maybe late thirties rather than late twenties. The skin around her eyes seemed loose, as though she hadn't slept for days, and her complexion was pallid. Her hair was loose, shoulder-length, and pale—a section had been pinned diagonally over her eyes for a fringe and he could see the cream outline of the comb holding it in place.

"La- I mean, Alexandra," he said, recalling their conversation at the Christmas Ball. "It's good to see you."

"So good to hear from you too," said Lady Penelope. "I heard they investigated David's work—how tragic! How is Maria taking all this?"

"I don't know," he said. "I haven't spoken to her much."

"Really," said Lady Penelope thoughtfully. "So, what brings you to this little place?"

"Not so little," chuckled Edward. There was something in all this that was making him nervous; the air was so dusty it was aggravating his sinuses. Didn't she clean, or hire someone to do it? He supposed if she was rattling around in here alone after the death of Lord Swindon she might only clean the rooms she used on a daily basis. He had planned to flirt his way in, exploiting her apparent affection for him, find the comb and leave—after all, he had no intent of actually leaving it in the hands of Jeremy Marshall. However, the sight of her wearing it had drained his courage and he felt suddenly guilty.

"Alexandra, it's about Marshall, Carter & Dark."

Her expression grew troubled. "What have they said? What have they told you?" she said, voice suddenly sharp.

"No, no," he said. "it's just that I've gotten myself into a bit of a bind, and you might be able to help." Her expression was replaced with one of all smiles and she gestured to the staircase on their right as they left the summer-room.

"Why didn't you say? I'll help in any way I can. But let's go somewhere in a bit of a better state, shall we? I'm sorry about all the mess, I just haven't been keeping up appearances, I'm afraid. Upstairs, first room on the left. I'll get something to drink."

Edward ventured up the dark flight of stairs—all the doors were shut and he had to feel his way along until he found the frame. Opening it he found what had once been a great master bedroom—a colossal bed with an overhanging lace curtain and ornate frame, great wooden drawers and a writing desk in the corner. This room had been dusted but was still in a sad state of decline—damp patches were peeling the wallpaper and cracks appearing in the ceiling.

"Here we go," the Lady Penelope said, closing the door behind them and brandishing a bottle of red wine. "Chateau Margaux, ninety-five. Not the oldest vintage but it's one I enjoy."

She poured out a measure into crystal glasses—Edward sat at the writing desk and took an exploratory sip.

"So Edward," she said, delicately, "what was it you hoped I could help you with?"

She walked towards him, brought her face near his, letting him scent the frankly excessive amount of perfume the blonde seemed to be using.

"Oh. No, I mean, Alexandra, I think you've got the wrong idea—I was hoping to ask if I could borrow that comb…" Her eyes flashed. This close he could see how made-up she was, how the skin beyond the foundation had lost its elasticity—he mentally revised his estimate to early or mid forties.

"You don't want the comb," she said, an element of pleading entering to her voice. "You want me, don't you—you came here because you've fallen in love with me."

Edward's mind reeled. What the hell was this? He hadn't even made any hints in that direction; had, in fact, decided to ask her plainly if he could borrow the antique comb for a day in the hopes of recovering the codex. Her personality seemed to have changed utterly since their first meeting at the chapterhouse.

"You don't love Maria, that unfaithful bitch," Lady Penelope continued, her voice suddenly raw, croaking. "You've only wanted me."

She took hold of his arm with surprising force, and to his horror Edward felt the cold of her seep through his suit and into his flesh. She pushed herself against him, so horribly unlike anything alive, and he knew she was the presence that had met him in the dark.

"You killed David," he whispered.

"He was in your way—in the way of what you wanted—he was yesterday's man," she said, voice cracking. "Please, don't hate me. I don't want you to hate me."

And under the cloying perfume, he smelled it, as her face pressed up against his, makeup rubbing off on his collar, his skin—the smell of meat that had gone bad, rancid, and as he grabbed her arm to try

and lever her off, her skin began to slip off the underlying muscle. He screamed.

With strength he didn't know he had, he gave her an almighty push, dislodging her grip from his arms. Screeching like something possessed she toppled backwards and hit the floor with a horrible sucking sound. He didn't wait to see if she recovered; he ran through the house, out to the summer-room. The door was locked from the inside. He scrabbled around, couldn't see a key. Not knowing why he did it, he grabbed the nearest thing to hand, a *Complete Works of Goethe*, and hurled it with all his might at the French window. It shattered and he hurled himself through the gap, running raggedly back to to the Porsche.

Edward drove, taking turns at random, for as long as he could, and when he was too weary to continue driving, he parked and curled up on the back seat in his five thousand pound suit. He dreamed, and his dreams were a horrible, confused mess of everything that had happened to him.

His father had died, he remembered, and in the terms of his will he had left everything to the son who surpassed him first. In the dream Edward had two brothers and a sister, though for some reason she had been left out of the will. Somehow they were all at Cooper Drake and were working side-by-side on different deals, except he knew something they didn't; Jeremy Marshall stood over his shoulder, whispering in his ear, and in the way of dreams it was all dire nonsense, about throwing sugar into people's eyes and doors that opened into other places and investing in a liquid that turned anything into food, and he prospered while his brothers grew poorer. And Maria was there, no, he was at her house, but she was made of glass and he had to stop her breaking because you only get one, and she was so cold to the touch, her skin just sloughed off the bone until there was nothing there but a skeleton made of glass.

And now he was a child again, about twelve or thirteen, and he was at an outdoor chess club, and he suddenly realised in a flash of lucidity that this was a dream, but it was also a memory, this was something that happened and which he had forgotten. Someone cast their shadow over the table, and he looked up to see a tall man

with wavy blond hair and perfect teeth, and cruelty in his blue eyes.

"Do you want to play?" he asked. And he folded out a chessboard that was not a chessboard, because every move Edward made it countered perfectly, all on its own, and when it did it it picked at a golden thread from deep inside him and tugged a little more of it away. And the blond stranger went up to his mother, watching as the board ate her son a little bit at a time, and said something that at the time he had not understood. "Tell your husband he will have what he wanted."

Edward awoke rumpled and bleary-eyed, the rain sluicing down the car's windows, and the dream tumbled away from him into the dark.

« **Act I - "Jellybeans"** | **HUB** | **Act III - "Rainy in London"** »

FoldUnfold

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Chapter Six: "Rainy in London"

In the morning's watery light, he sat for a few minutes while the events of the previous evening caught up with him. You fucking idiot, he thought to himself. He had forgotten the comb! There was no way if it remained on the person of Lady Penelope that he could call the police, if they were even willing to investigate. Besides, something within him told him that the noise her skull had made when it hit the floor had been very, very bad. He would have to go back, confront what had happened and try to get the comb if he had any realistic prospect of accessing MC&D's acquisitions warehouse and recovering the codex.

He bought a warm Danish and a coke from a street vendor and sat in his car, considering his options, when his mobile vibrated to indicate a new text message. He picked it up and checked it, apprehensively.

> meet me @pimlico fresh 10mins death

Unless the hygiene level of Pimlico Fresh's frappucino had really gone downhill, this was presumably a message from the Four Horsemen. He checked his watch. While he didn't have time to spare they might have some way out of this insanity. He dried his runny nose with a tissue—the night in the car had reactivated his flu, it seemed.

As he entered the coffee shop he saw kid Death and his silly hairdo, sitting on a stool and swinging his legs. Beside him was a

blackhead-smattered older teen who he presumed was Pestilence.

"The harbingers of the apocalypse, I presume," said Edward tiredly, adjusting his tie and ruffling his hair in the café window.

"Yes. You got another little mission from Marshall, didn't you?" Death seemed tetchy; maybe he'd chipped his nail polish.

"So what if I did?" Edward challenged. "I need to set some things right and I can't do that unless I find out where Marshall's keeping … something I stole from someone close to me. Do you have a problem with that?"

"No, look, that's OK. Fine, actually, it's what we hoped for. It's the comb, isn't it?" said Pestilence, excitedly, grabbing a shoebox off the floor.

"Yes it is. First of all, how exactly did you…"

"Never mind about that," started Death.

"Actually, I want to tell him. It's been requested by Saad bin Abdullah bin Abd al-Aziz bin Abdul-Rahman Al Saud."

"Pardon?"

"One of MC&D's Saudi clients. Something's up with the comb and Lady Penelope—it keeps being given to different people and ending up in her possession—haven't quite gotten on top of that yet—but it's an 11th century liturgical comb. I mean, it's worth something, but why is it being treated like the Holy Grail? We think there's something else going on—whether it's being used to smuggle government secrets, or whether it's some sort of Dan Brown puzzle. That's why we want you to bring it to us. At the very least we'd have something MC&D wants."

"What? Did you not just hear…"

"Yes," said Death, cutting in. "That's why War went and had this made." He signalled to Pestilence, who opened the box to reveal a yellowed ivory comb, identical-looking to the one he'd seen in the document given to him by Jeremy Marshall. "You give *this* to

Marshall and return the real one to us."

Edward took the comb from the box, turned it over in his hands. It was small, no more than six inches across, with fine ivory teeth in two different widths.

"So, you guys are with the police, or…?"

Death harrumphed. "Yeah, sure, I'm Officer Steve McDeath, you're all under arrest. Book 'em, Pestilence. Seriously, do we look like cops?"

"No idea, but if you end up with something Marshall wants you'd better know what you're doing. Right now all I'm seeing are two kids in way out of your depth."

"Please," said Death, "I've been screwing with powerful people longer than you've been a stock trader. We know what we're doing. You haven't met Famine yet, have you?"

"Okay," said Edward, and finished his hot chocolate.

"Good," Death said, wandering over to the window and looking out in both directions. "Pestilence, this idiot has a tendency to attract tails. One of them followed me half-way through London after our last meeting before I ditched him on the Tube."

"MC&D?" asked Pestilence.

"Not as far as I can tell. Crypto-governmental, looked like."

"Well, looks like you're on your own," said Pestilence to Edward, leaving a five pound tip and disappearing into the back of the shop. When Edward looked around Death had similarly made his egress.

Some pros, thought Edward. I give Marshall the fake—and what happens when you get in touch to ransom the real thing? Either you didn't think that part of the plan out or you don't care if I get myself killed either. No, he'd have to find something else to appease the Horsemen.

Lady Penelope's mansion was as he'd left it—glass strewn over the porch on the right hand side of the house, increasingly soggy Goethe sinking into the drain. He cautiously moved into the summer-house.

"Alexandra?" he called. "Alexandra? Are you OK?"

No response. The creeping decay he had noticed before seemed suddenly more profound, ceilings sagging noticeably, the stairs feeling rotten and unsteady as he ascended to the first floor. The smell hit him as he pushed open the door to the master bedroom—nauseating, hideous.

Lady Penelope lay on the floor—where she had fallen? He couldn't be sure. Her body had already caved in on itself, a putrefying mass he had to try and keep his breakfast down to approach. What could have done this? Her skin was taut over her skull, eyes like burst egg yolks. The comb was still in her hair.

He knelt down, one arm up over his face, burying his nose in his elbow and breathing in the smell of Huntsman's proprietary fabric softeners. They did little to mask the stench. His other hand, trembling, reached out for the comb. He half expected the horrific thing to sit up and try to stop him. It came away, chunks of her blonde hair following, with little chunks of rotten flesh at their tips. He brushed the hair away in morbid fascination.

The comb was in his hand. The replica, in his pocket. He knew he could not give the real comb to the Horsemen, and briefly toyed with the idea of returning them their own fake. No, still too risky. Not only would they likely have integrated some flaw to point out to Marshall to convince him that what he held was indeed fake, he still couldn't risk anyone telling Marshall he had been given a forgery, even if it wasn't true. And I don't like what one more theft will make me, he thought.

On a whim, he went over to the oak writing table and saw the little key in the lock of the drawer. He turned it, put the real comb inside and locked it, and put the key in his other pocket.

Edward drove to the main London chapterhouse and knocked on the door, holding his glass member's pass, which had somehow survived the night in his pocket. The bag-eyed porter opened his peephole and glared out, before crinkling in amusement.

"Mr Gradley—you're expected! Straight through; Mr Marshall and Mr Carter are in the office towards the back."

Edward didn't feel like facing either man again, but nodded and walked through into the ballroom, which was being prepared for some great theatrical display.

"Excuse me, can you tell me where…" The staff ignored him, continuing their actions as though they hadn't heard or seen him at all. Brainwashed, he thought.

Far from 'straight through', the offices required navigation of the labyrinthine system of back rooms; many were locked and he heard voices raised in pleasure and pain. Eventually he emerged into a lavish Elizabethan parlour where Messrs Marshall and Carter sat taking tea from a pot in the shape of a screaming human head. It seemed to be a hit.

"The *body*, Mr Carter!" Jeremy Marshall was enthusing wildly when Edward entered. "Ah, Mr Gradley. Does the young hero return triumphant?"

Edward held up the comb, which he had wrapped in tissue, fearful that its teeth might break, before sneezing volcanically.

"The dowager's comb, Mr Carter—back in the hands of its rightful owners."

"Not for long, Mr Marshall," chuckled Carter, the growth on his back groaning with him. "Just make sure its new owner knows what precautions to take. Give Mr Gradley some Peramivir before he goes."

Marshall smiled thinly. "Indeed. Now, Mr Gradley, the item?" He extended his hand.

"I said I wanted to see where the acquisitions are stored," he

insisted.

Marshall scowled. "Oh, very well. Mr Gradley insists on aggregating a double reward to himself, Mr Carter."

"A—man after my own heart—Mr Marshall. Good to see old Bernard's Nordic blood not wholly diluted, yes?"

"Then you shall see what lies beneath, Mr Gradley. But be advised—this is not a shopping trip. If you wish us to help you salvage your career, then you will be content to look and not touch, at least for now."

Again with the blindfold! A velvety cloth was tied over his eyes and he was escorted quietly and efficiently into a car, which he later learned was a black limousine. He held the comb—the fake, of course—clutched tightly in his hands the whole way, fully expecting Jeremy to renege on his promise the second he had it in his possession. Mr Marshall sat somewhere to his right, doing something that made a disquietening scritch-scratch that seemed alarmingly close to his ear—possibly filing his nails, possibly not.

The ride seemed to take hours, and Edward became increasingly nervous. It occurred to him that he had no real exit strategy—assuming he somehow got free of Marshall and gained free run of the warehouse, and assuming he found and was able to get out with the codex, what would he do? He had no car, no means of transport, and would surely be run down and returned to Marshall's tender ministrations within minutes. He resolved to take events as they came. For a while he tried to focus on the sound of the limo's wheels on the road, but, of course, he had no training in identifying a surface from the sound it made. For what it was worth the ride seemed smooth, so they probably hadn't gone offroad. Was that a good thing?

At length the vehicle purred to a halt and Edward was bundled out, the blindfold removed. The blank-faced young men and women in formal serving attire had given way to seedy-looking private security with a paramilitary flavour; he saw at the hip of one the stock of a semi-automatic rifle. Before them was a vast rectangular concrete

monstrosity, surrounded by two barbed-wire fences and angled subterranean roller shutters which as he watched retracted to admit an armoured truck. It looked less like a warehouse than some despot's compound.

"This is where it all comes, Mr Gradley," gestured Marshall, as they entered on foot via a checkpoint—the guards immediately found something fascinating to look at on the wall or ceiling as Jeremy Marshall passed and the barriers were raised before they got within ten paces of them. Good to know, thought Edward; they're terrified of him. Any time something or someone behaves in a predictable way they can be exploited—stocks and shares 101.

Edward had expected some vast space inside the warehouse—instead, they entered a serpentine mess of stacks and shelves, the aisles not straight but turning and twisting like a labyrinth. The only clue to the area's size could be seen in the height of the ceiling, rising far above the three and four shelf units. Watery naked bulbs hung like Christmas ornaments from the walkways above, criss-crossing the space and casting a green-grey pallor on everything. The area nearest to the door appeared to be outgoing objects—guards packaging five foot tall Easter Island heads in bubblewrap and loading them onto pallets. He scanned the items lined up for shipping but couldn't see the codex.

"Stay close to me," warned Marshall, "we wouldn't anything happening to you, would we? And speaking of which…" he clicked his fingers and held his hand out occasionally. Edward grudgingly surrendered the comb, which Marshall spun between his fingers with glee, watching the play of light on its twisted little engraved figures.

"A singular find, this. Such a shame that we have to give it away again so soon—and for such petty pleasures! Still, it always manages to return to us eventually." He withdrew a white silk handkerchief from his pocket, monogrammed with the club cartouche, and wrapped the comb before sliding it into his breast pocket.

"So," he said, striding purposefully deeper into the warehouse, "this is the kingdom. Our little gallery. Well, one of them."

Edward hadn't expected the noise. When they had first entered it had been almost too soft to hear—a distant susurration like the sound of a jungle. But as they pressed deeper into the bowels of MC&D's treasurehouse it rose sharply and horrifically; screams bird, animal, human, and things besides which sounded like none of them, and on top of them all the sounds of scraping iron and sawing.

"Mind your step, Mr Gradley. I have business at the corner office—I need to see a man about a set of teeth. His, in fact."

Marshall skipped lightly over an industrial cable running through sawdust and dark brown, flaking stains Edward hoped were creosote. Nearer the door the objects on either side had been relatively mundane; stacks of yellowed papers, covered canvases stacked in rows; a metal shelf with a row of antique fountain pens under a jeweller's light. Now they grew progressively stranger—a 1960s Dust Devil vacuum cleaner, a locked fishtank containing a Pez dispenser with a blackface minstrel's head and sealed with hazard warning tape, a firehose packed in flame-retardant foam. None of it looked valuable, unless it was supposed to be modern art. Marshall's face was turned away as he navigated a teetering mass of bulging cardboard boxes containing something pink that was slowly leaking out onto the floor. Edward held his breath and took a left at a shattered Exidy Sorceror home computer from the 1970s, which for reasons known to themselves someone had hooked up to an HD monitor. A moment, then:

"Mr Gradley?"

Edward ran, his only purpose to create as much distance between himself and Marshall as possible. He tripped over a wind-up monkey that had been left in the middle of an aisle—labelled '7H' on a disintegrating tag around its neck. He flung it disgustedly away and was about to rise to his feet again when he realised it had been a blessing in disguise. A guard was slowly patrolling the walkway above the next aisle; if he had remained upright for another moment he would have been seen running through the warehouse and alarms would have been raised. Instead he crawled on hands and knees in his suit, engine oil and packing dust staining his cuffs and trousers.

Now what? He couldn't even try to get his bearing among the stacks—he moved, bereft of direction, and the cacaphony grew ever louder around him. Inanimate objects had given way to a parade of living horrors—fleshy, snakelike things with chimpanzee faces hammering themselves against perspex, a squirrel with blood-crusted eyes screaming at him from inside a cage inches away from his face, something like an owl constantly everting itself and turning right-side out again with a sickening pop. He fixed his eyes on the next corner and continued crawling. When the worst of it seemed to be over he stopped, breathing heavily. Where he was now was dark—overshadowed by a portion of the catwalk and a great glass container filled with sand which seemed to be a giant antfarm, except the tunnels nearest the glass were five times wider than any ant had a right to be. He would sit here for a minute, take stock. Face it, Edward, he thought, this was not your brightest idea. You're trapped in a warehouse of things that came out of a nightmare and you have absolutely no idea how to go about finding the codex, if it's even here.

"Sunny in Mogadishu," said a voice close behind him. He flinched, spinning around to face the cage he had been resting against. His eyes couldn't make anything out in the enclosure, eclipsed by the towering pile of bric-a-brac dumped on top of it.

"Hello?" he said. "Is there someone in there?"

"Drizzle in Los Angeles"—the voice was mournful, the words mumbled as though by someone who had learned the sound of the phrases but not their meaning. Edward felt the hairs on the backs of his hands pricking.

"I mean, are you a prisoner here? I'm sorry … I'm not sure if I can help you. Get you out, I mean." The cage had been secured by a hefty combination padlock. In the nearest corner he could see a bowl of water. "I don't know how to get out myself."

"Tornado in Rio de Janeiro," it said. "A mild depression moving eastwards towards Astrakhan."

"Please," said Edward, hoping against hope that whoever it was in the cage could even understand him. "I need to find a book. It looks

like an iron box. It would be where they keep the latest acquisitions."

"Rainy in London," said the voice, a note of utter despair entering its voice. "Rainy in London."

Edward tugged at the lock but it was solid. He considered trying to pry it open, but he couldn't see anything long or solid enough.

"I'm sorry," he said, and began to move away.

"Storm coming in over Gradley," it said. "Bring your umbrellas."

Edward paused. "Did you say my name?" Squinting, he made out a shadow at the far side of the cage—a couple of glints which could be eyes. It was the wrong shape to be human.

"Snow right around the corner," it said, miserably. "Then for the next four days straight. Wrap up warm."

Edward thought about it for a moment. Well, it wasn't the most insane thing he'd done today.

"Thank you," he said.

"Always rainy in London," he heard the voice say from behind him.

He turned right on the mummified alligator pinned to a board with copper wire. He counted as he ducked between each stack, counting them off as he passed gravity wheels and Archimedes screws, rotating slowly and quietly. One.

Rows of surgical equipment, some gleaming, some corroded and damp. As he passed they vibrated, chattering in their constraints. Two.

Television monitors, seemingly fused together into a spreading tree. Three.

A human fetus in a jar. The jar was taller than Edward. So was the fetus. Four.

And there it was—a clearing in the wilderness, a square area

surrounded with shelving and dominated by a thick wooden table, which might have been lacquered once but had been stripped down to the raw by scrapes, scratches, and what looked like acid burns. In the middle, a sign had been scrawled in permanent marker on a piece of corrugated card and propped against a tin filled with stationery. 'NEW ARRIVALS'. The shelves were littered with debris —a metal slinky toy, an astronaut's helmet with a crack running the full length of the visor, a pair of high heels. No codex. He clawed at the items, threw them to the floor, angry with himself for having made such a stupid gambit. Then, tucked between a table clamp stained with blood and other matter and a curiously elderly and overweight Action Man still in its packaging and dressed in the outfit of a four-star general, his eye picked out the shape of the metal box with 'Gervais' scratched on its spine. He grabbed it, held it close to his chest.

"Hey!" he heard from somewhere above him. He dropped to his knees, crawled back into the shadow of the stacks. He maybe had a few minutes before the guard came looking for him; or maybe he goes and finds Marshall first. Yes, that would fit. He'll go and ask Marshall what to do. He guessed he might have a little longer.

There was something glittering by his shoe, half-hidden under the box of a mouldering board game protruding from the shelving—a shard of glass, he realised, though the light caught it oddly. For a second he thought that his MC&D member's pass might have slipped out of his pocket and shattered, and something about that chilled him even though he knew he never intended to return to the chapterhouse. Had he dreamed something about it? But no, it was intact in his pocket.

He slid his hand under the shelves and retrieved the shard, cold and sharp between his fingers, no more than five centimetres across. Up close he could see what had puzzled him—it wasn't transparent at all but opaque; he couldn't see his fingers through it at all. Instead—he looked closer at the small reflection. He jolted out of his reverie and jerked around—nothing but a burlap sack, filled with coal, upon which someone had written 'D-5067'. He looked back and saw it again—the glass shard reflected not his own face but the head of an English bulldog, mottled brown and black with a white stripe on its

forehead, occasionally blinking or turning this way or that. It looked out at him, slightly cock-eyed, and licked its nose. Edward waved his hand in front of the glass. Unsurprisingly the animal showed no indication that it could see him, instead opting to pursue the exciting taste of its own nostrils.

This wasn't possible was it?, he thought, turning the shard over—the exact same canine reflection. No power source, no apparent means of projecting the image. It seemed to be part of a larger whole, but looking about he could see nowhere it might have come from. At the very least, he thought, this represented a good century's advancement in materials science. Just my luck, the stock-trader thought, I get the piece without the manufacturer's name. He tucked it into his pocket and continued moving, this time away from the screaming.

"Hold on," said the square-jawed guard at the entrance, stubbing out his cigarette on the arm of the traffic barrier and swaggering over, ball of his palm over the holster of his weapon. "Nothing and no-one comes in or out without Mr Marshall's say-so." He eyed the metal case under Edward's arm.

"He's said so," Edward replied, as haughtily as he could. "I've chosen my reward and now I'm on the clock. I need to be on the road asap."

"What you need don't come into it," the security officer said. "You're gonna wait until Mr Marshall gets here to let you out."

Edward tried not to sweat. Right now, he thought, Marshall was being disabused of any notions he might have that Edward had just got turned around amidst the debris of MC&D's empire. He eyed the walkie-talkie at the man's chest. Soon a call would come in on that and he'd be dead.

"By that time it'll be a little late. I've been dispatched on Mr Marshall's orders. Any delays will be severely punished." He saw the guard swallow, look around shiftily as if hoping the blond man might appear to resolve his dilemma. Edward mused—Marshall considers his underlings a less competent substitute for himself; he can't be

everywhere, so they're here to fill in. They aren't trusted to think for themselves, which means eventually they don't think at all, they just follow orders. And that means in the end they do and say whatever they think you want, whether you like it or not; the idea of you being angry with them is more powerful than what you actually want. And you're trapped in a universe of reflections.

"I don't know," said the guard. Edward heard the buzz of a radio from within the office. Soon, one of the other guards—perhaps the big one with the stubble tossing a coin over his knuckles by the freight entrance—would go over to see what was happening.

"Listen," said Edward, trying to perfect the Marshall sneer. "if I'm not in that limousine -" he nodded at the vehicle outside "- and headed back to Whitehall in the next fifteen seconds…"

It was the most ludicrous, stupid thing he'd ever said, a piece of nonsense that he cursed even as it came out of his mouth. What kind of a threat is that, he thought, that's pathetic. He had just plucked an image out of the air, paired it with the most senior person he could think of in MC&D's hierarchy, that terrible old man, and it had become mixed up in his mind with that horrible, moving thing under the cloth…

"…I'll feed you to Carter's chair."

The guard went grey, all at once. His eyes started watering. He was trying to speak, but nothing was coming out. Shaking like a newborn foal he thumbed the controls to disengage the pedestrian door and Edward strode forcefully past as behind him he heard the first faint yells. No point trying to bluff the limousine driver—as soon as his feet met pavement he started running. That had worked better than expected, he thought.

Edward had feared that when he got out he would find himself in the middle of nowhere, nothing but fields for miles around. Instead, he found to his amazement that after only a few paces he emerged on the thoroughfare of Pall Mall, city traffic buzzing around, deafening yet reassuring in its mundanity. They must have driven the limo around in circles to try and disorientate him, he reasoned, until he remembered the way the sounds of the city had fallen behind to be

replaced by silence and the occasional note of birdsong. He pushed onto the pavement and mingled with the crush of pedestrians, becoming invisible under their umbrellas.

"You let him out." It was not a question. Matt Berkeley, four O-levels, army dropout, felt like a rotten oak in a storm. Every day for the last three years he had prayed—"Don't let him see me. The pay's good, it's easy money, if he just doesn't see me. Let me go another day without him noticing anything I do. Let him take it out on someone else today, please, just not me." He had perfected the art of seeming engaged in reviewing security logs or approving access papers whenever anyone more senior happened by, then joined in wholeheartedly with the poker and the prank calls to Paki shopkeepers and the furtively exchanged dirty mags. Inside he was hollow—he knew he deserved no praise and had spent every day hoping he would never be found out.

"He said you'd approved it," said Berkeley, in barely more than a whisper.

"And you believed him?"

"Yes sir," Berkeley's head dropped onto his chest, waiting. He had seen what happened to men who screwed up in the employ of Marshall, Carter & Dark. And afterwards he had put the bits into bags and dropped them in front of trains. He looked around. Would Mikkelsen be the one lugging Berkeley's bin liner down in front of the five-o-five to Reading? Maybe 'Hammers' Rogan. Or perhaps there wouldn't be enough left of him to bother.

Marshall's long fingers dipped into his breast pocket and withdrew something in a silky white handkerchief, unwrapping it delicately. Some sort of comb, he saw—intricately carved but warped and yellowed.

"Hold still, idiot." He took Berkeley's head with one hand and delicately inserted the comb into the still-thick clump of hair behind his ear. Sweat dripped from the man's forehead as he waited to turn inside out or his teeth to come alive or his soft tissues to melt. The other guards looked on with morbid fascination.

After an excruciating minute Berkeley looked up and said "Is something supposed to happen, or…"

The guards turned their attention to Marshall, who stood back bowed, leaning against a concrete pillar. He was taking great sucking gasps of air, his teeth bared. They exchanged brief glances, faces pale. They had never, *ever* seen Mr Marshall like this.

"Wake him up," he said, voice like polished bone.

"Sir?" asked Berkeley, but he already knew what was coming.

"You heard me. Wake up the Bagman."

Chapter Seven: "Codex"

"Look at you," she had said. "Every time you come to me these days it is in such a state."

Maria had accepted the codex silently, looking at him with an unreadable expression in those brown eyes. She had sat him down, his clothes stained and rent, on a chair in the kitchen, and brought him a hot cocoa. Later, she found him one of her father's dressing gowns and put him up in the house's master bedroom.

"Marshall will be looking for me," he croaked. "If he guesses I've brought the codex back to you…"

"Sssh," she said. She looked at the tired dark rings under his blue eyes and ruffled his hair with her fingers. "You'll stay here tonight," she said.

They sat up together in bed, reading the codex. The *Viage to the Contree of the Cimmerians* was written in densely packed cursive; designed for economy of parchment, not ease of reading. But Edward had read the extracts that had once been published in a 1754 chapbook as *A Journey to the End of the World*, and was able to fill in the blanks where the manuscript became illegible.

"It starts like one of the Arthurian legends," he explained. "A

wandering knight is taken into the home of a nobleman, and during the feasting they are attacked by a knight with the head of a stag, or a stag with the head of a knight, it changes from chapter to chapter. He challenges them to seek out the Rose Chapel, a stained-glass church built where Maura of Troyes shed a river of miraculous tears. So far, so Green Knight. They gird themselves up and take to the saddle, and follow the trail of the stag knight, righting wrongs as they go. Then they approach a shadowy canyon. The stag knight flies out of it—presumably in human-head, stag-body form—and shouts for them to give up their quest; even he's terrified by whatever lies within. Being your average Arthurian meatheads they swear an oath to brave the dangers of the canyon."

"What happens?" she said, craning her neck.

"Nothing. That's the thing. There's just -" he turned the yellow parchment—"a blank page." It was black from top to bottom, saturated with ink. "It's unbelievably literary for the time; makes Chaucer look like a second-rater. Some commentaries on *A Journey* just treat it as a misprint—it ends the first fragment—but here it is, in the original manuscript."

"What does it mean?" asked Maria. "Just that it was dark?"

"Not exactly … it's more like Gervase sees the darkness as swallowing up any mention of what happened. We're never told what happens in the canyon—it's like the text has been redacted. But when we pick up with them something has changed. Most of the knights are dead—the chap we've been following goes home but his castle's ruined and his family slain. There's a long digression here -" he turned the pages—"very long, actually. It's one of the fragments, so I'll cut it short; he meets the stag knight and they have a lengthy debate on the nature of heaven, hell and reality; except all the concepts were far too advanced for the time, as though the writer were channeling post-Reformation thinkers."

"No wonder Gervase got written out of history."

"Most commentaries assume it was a later addition, something that couldn't have been in the original text. Another strike for the critics. Then things get weird."

"Weirder than they already are, you mean?"

"Definitely. The knight goes back to South-Cadbyri Palis, Gervase's Camelot-in-all-but-name, and they sally out and fight monsters, except it's written in the most bizarre, repetitive way. Look here—this was in the chapbook; it's an honest-to-god itemised list of all the giants, demons and goblins they kill or capture. The dragon's new, though."

"It isn't a good Arthurian legend without a dragon-slaying," Maria said, nuzzling his arm.

"This one is slightly unconventional. It doesn't breathe fire, well most of the time. It still eats people, though. The thing is, they slay it again, and again, and again. They chop off its head, they put it in a cauldron to boil its flesh off its bones, they crush it under a boulder… And the next chapter it's back and they have to do it all over again."

"Sounds like it represents something."

"Too right. What, I don't know. Look, each chapter starts with an illustrated letter of them trying to kill the dragon." It was a weirdly scrawny, beaked thing with a long mane in the heraldric tradition that looked thoroughly *disgusted* by the knights' attempts at dispatching it—here it was, being impaled on a dozen glaives. It was probably intended to be wild with pain, though Edward thought it looked like it was just rolling its eyes.

"The knight has a son and grows old, and his son becomes a knight too—and then one day, while *he's* making merry in the hall, the stag knight comes in and challenges them to seek the Chapel. It's unclear whether it's warning the knights they haven't yet completed their quest, or whether time has somehow looped."

"The son becomes his father," observed Maria.

"This time the knight succeeds in his quest—he finds the chapel. But it's ruined, broken. The spring of healing tears is dry. And then the writing goes mad. Our hero hunts down the stag knight and *eats* him, then tries to disembowel himself, but is resurrected by some kind of angel, it's not really clear—people die and reappear without

rhyme or reason. There are these huge battles out of nowhere, like the world's tearing itself apart. The sky starts raining blood. The knight volunteers for one last mission to try and set things right—to sail to Hyperboria, the land beyond the wind."

"The mythical land of the Cimmerians."

"Yes. There's a whole sequence here about his voyage on a raft, travelling into the icy north. But it's not very convincing—he recycles the Sirens and Charybdis from The Odyssey, even the island of the Lotus Eaters. It's like he's trying to put the voyage into words his listeners will understand. Things get interesting when he finally drifts ashore. Gervais wrote Cimmeria as this desolate wasteland where it's twilight all the time; the knight finds a frozen body of a woman in a ditch. The people are all half-starved; they've nearly forgotten language and live in these half-collapsed huts, living on root croops and herding a few skinny sheep. It's obviously a metaphor; Edward Forsyth -"

"Who?"

"The man who printed the fragments of the Viage as *A Journey to the End of the World*."

"He has your name," said Maria, sleepily.

"He obviously believed Cimmeria was *England* after the apocalypse. It's a valid interpretation—there's a whole section where the knight loses his way on the ocean due to mist and can't be sure whether he's progressing or regressing."

"You bastards, you blew it up," she said, not quite accurately. It was the first time he had heard her swear.

"Exactly; but 800 years before Heston. Other commentators just take the knight's doubts as a religious analogy, feeling unsure about your faith, et cetera. There's a sort of compromise position—Cimmeria represents Gervais' own view of the world around him, seemingly falling to bits after the knightly golden age. Remember, this was back when Geoffrey of Monmouth was considered a reliable non-fiction writer. King Arthur was seen as a historical

figure."

"How does it end?"

Edward narrowed his eyes, concentrating on the spidery writing. "He finds the Rose Chapel, intact, the miraculous spring flowing again."

"That doesn't make sense."

"You bet. He goes in and prays, and he knows—this is really odd for the time, there should be some thundering voice from heaven or an angel or something to tell him—that his own land is safe, but that he can never leave Cimmeria for the rest of his life."

"It is a horrible book and it ends sadly," decided Maria. "Why do you think Marshall wanted it?"

"Well, it's an important manuscript—some of the things Gervase does here rewrite our understanding of the development of English literature. It must be quite valuable. I'd love to see what a medievalist would make of the dragon." Except that'll never happen now, he said to himself, because of you. He turned the last page and closed the iron cover. Maria drew up the covers and he slept.

He was awakened by a thin pale light shining through the window, illuminating Maria's arm draped over his chest. He looked at the bedside carriage clock—it was already nine o'clock.

"I have to go," he said, gently moving Maria's arm. "You're in danger if Marshall finds me here."

Maria, stirred, looked up at him with her brown eyes. "You think I'm fragile, that I need to be protected. Don't forget I'm a Beaumont. We can take care of ourselves."

"I don't want you to suffer for my mistakes. Take the codex; I'm sorry but you mustn't let anyone see it. No-one can know you have it back."

"Don't worry. It's not going to be on my coffee table. And you mustn't go out in those," she said, as Edward picked at his ruined trousers. "You're too tall for Daddy's clothes, but maybe Grandfather's will

work."

Thus outfitted with a dead man's suit—the fit not quite up to Huntsman's or Stathopoulos's standards but still comfortable—and a big black umbrella like the wings of a bat, he kissed her, and left the Beaumont house for the last time.

Fingering the shard of glass he had removed from the pocket of his last suit, Edward stopped under the porch of St Martin-in-the-Fields and, finding Death's last text, selected 'Answer by phone'.

"Hello, is that Death? … Well, I don't know his name, is he your son? Just put him on, please, this is urgent … Yes, it's Edward. Of course I'm still alive. … No, forget the comb, I … No, I don't have the replica … I can imagine. Expensive. … I'm sure it didn't come out of your pocket money, *was* that your mother? Oh. You start early these days, don't you? Look, I've got something way better if you like conspiracies. You show this to any news agency and … No, meet me at O'Reilly's in half an hour. … Well, this isn't a movie, and I don't intend to die before showing it to you. … Better make it an hour and a half then, Jesus. Make sure you bring enough change for the fare. Or get War to give you a lift, I presume at least *he's* passed his test."

Edward stashed the phone in his other pocket and leaned against the pillar. It was faint, now, but it was coming to back to him; he could see the pieces in movement. Not six moves ahead, not yet, but four, or three. Enough. Now he just had to stay alive long enough to reach the endgame.

This time Edward stood across the street and watched them arrive, one at a time, taking their seats by the window as they ordered milkshakes, Coke, a pint of beer: Death the kid; the spotty young man who rejoiced in the name Pestilence; War, waddling in playing a game on his iPhone; and a grim-faced man in his late twenties or early thirties with prematurely greying hair and military surplus togs he presumed must be Famine. He checked his watch—fashionably late for only the second time in his life. He strolled over the crossing and approached, slowing as he did so until he was close enough to see the on-rails FPS on War's mobile. Death looked up and caught

his eye.

The men in black paramilitary jumpers and dog tags around their neck approached him from behind, clapped a hand over his mouth with casual ease, grabbed his arms and pushed him sideways into the rear of the waiting van.

Death punched War's arm and shouted something, and the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse rolled off their seats to take cover under the table with long-practiced grace. No-one else on the street or in the bar even noticed Edward's disappearance.

Edward was getting used to journeys where he couldn't see where was going. No blindfold at first, just a windowless van and handcuffs. Then, for a few minutes, light again; clean, clinical walls and stairs edged with crisp yellow safety tape. Making a sudden and jarring appearance, the grey sky, still resolutely spitting down at the earth. *Now* the blindfold, as the roaring in front of him rose like a dragon.

My first helicopter ride, he thought. He had envisioned it going rather more glamorously.

"Mobile Task Force Epsilon-Seven 'Santa's Little Regifters' reporting in," someone said into a radio close to him. "Package acquired."

He was reasonably sure—indeed was counting on—the fact that the men around him were not in the employ of Marshall, Carter & Dark. Exactly who they were working for was a matter he'd have to clear up as he went.

The helicopter's drone descended, stabilised, then petered away.

After being unloaded like a sack of potatoes, Edward was led through several hydraulic-sounding doors before the gift of sight was finally, gloriously returned. He stood blinking in the glaringly bright white corridors, the dark balaclava'd men who had abducted him filling out various forms he was sure pertained to him before handing him into the custody of less militarised but equally alert men with blue hard hats and truncheons. There would be no bluffing these

men, he was sure—he got the impression they were trusted to do their job well.

"Don't I get at least the courtesy of an introduction?" he asked cheerily. "You did just snatch me off the street, after all."

"You're here to answer some questions for us," retorted one of the men, "and then we might end up letting you go. Don't count on being able to remember anything we say."

He was led down through level after level of brightly lit concrete, punctuated by small safety glass windows through which he caught glimpses of men in laboratory coats at work, though the experiments in progress seemed to verge on the lunatic. White coats watching from a distance as a man in an orange jumpsuit painted a door clamped horizontally to a pair of workbenches. Examining a horse, hanging in a set of medical stirrups from the ceiling, as though it were some kind of alien creature. Pouring a popular brand of detergent on clothes within a fumigation tank via a robotic arm.

The plaque on the office door read "Professor J Gelding DPhil DEng"—when the door was opened Edward saw a large desk. The man sat behind it was small with shiny round glasses which obscured his eyes and a close-cropped horseshoe of grey hair. The room was outfitted like a doctor's surgery, with a medical cabinet, reclining bed covered in green construction paper and a small chair in front of the desk.

"Close the door, please, Agent Howard," he said to the hard-hatted man, who complied. "Please ensure the subject is searched prior to interview."

Edward submitted to the indignity of search by Howard, who turned out his pockets, patted down Grandfather Beaumont's suit and shone a bright light in his mouth. His car keys, wallet and phone were taken and put in a tray near the door—hopefully to be returned, he thought. His glass MC&D membership pass was held up and passed to the Professor, who turned it over thoughtfully.

"Please take a seat." Edward settled in the uncomfortable plastic chair across from the little bald man. Agent Howard stood a

respectful distance away, watching.

"This is an interview, not an interrogation, Mr Gradley. Having said, that, we make use of applied pressure techniques and will employ them if we feel you are being untruthful. We are not law enforcement personnel, which means you are not under caution. That also means we are not obliged to offer you legal counsel. As you may have already surmised from the manner you were brought in, you are also not subject to the protections of the law."

"I understand."

"What is the nature of your relation with Marshall, Carter & Dark?"

"I think you know that," said Edward, calmly. "I'm a stock trader with Cooper Drake. I was introduced to the club by the late David Went and was recruited to handle fine art acquisitions for Mr Marshall on a part-time basis."

"Have you been exposed to any of the objects they ask you to acquire?"

"I'm not sure I follow you. I've touched them, sure."

Professor Gelding furrowed his brow. "Have you been experiencing any…" his voice suddenly changed into a machine-gun staccato "… lost time, hallucinations, sudden mood shifts, encounters with anomalous entities, rashes or illness, loss of energy, trouble sleeping, strange or disturbing dreams, perceptions of reality or history out of sync with others around you, emotional or cognitive difficulties?"

Edward shook his head. "No. Not really. I mean, I had a terrible case of the flu recently, if that helps." The Professor shook his head. "There was something at the clubhouse—like an illusion. You closed your eyes and you were somewhere else."

"You know the location of their clubhouses?" The glasses glittered, sharply.

"One or two of them. If you want to know where they are, there's a map on that membership card."

The Professor took a lingering glance at the card, then chuckled and looked at Agent Howard. "You know, that gets me every time. I always look for it. Mr Gradley, I'm afraid there's nothing on this 'card' besides Marshall, Carter & Dark's logo in one corner."

"No," said Edward, "look, it's engraved on the glass, I can see it from here…"

"Only visible for the person it's assigned to, I'm afraid. And if you were to draw it out it wouldn't lead anywhere. Same with the 'switchboard number'—not sure if you noticed but it's different every time you call it. We've gone through this whole rigmarole before. You can't contact them in our presence or lead us to them."

"That's impossible."

"I think you would have a keen idea of just what is and what isn't possible for Mr Marshall and his partners, Mr Gradley. Now, in your recent phone conversation with the individual who goes by the epithet 'Death' you mention something you wanted to show them. What was that, exactly?"

Edward thought for a moment before responding. "Marshall took me to the warehouse where they keep the acquisitions. Some of the things there—I don't know. Secret organisations, warehouses of monsters … that's the sort of stuff conspiracy theorists go in for, isn't it?"

"Interesting. Where is this warehouse?"

"It's in London. Just off Pall Mall." The little man in the glasses began scribbling excitedly. "There's something strange about it, though—the closer you get to it, the less you can hear the city around it. I thought I'd been taken out into the country."

Just like when you brought me here, thought Edward. The Professor's face fell.

"I see … What do you know about the comb?"

"Nothing," said Edward, very nearly truthfully. "It was something Death wanted me to look into."

"Do you know who currently owns the comb, or what it looks like?"

"No," said Edward, without guile. It was a truthful answer to the first question, after all. If what he suspected about the comb was right, he couldn't even say for sure who had owned it last.

"Okay," said the Professor, taking off those full-moon glasses and pinching the bridge of his nose. That was probably a bad sign, Edward thought. Any moment he's going to ask Mr Howard to apply some of those wonderful pressure techniques, just to make absolutely sure what it is I don't know. The guard in the corner stood up slightly straighter.

The intercom buzzed and the Professor thumbed it irritably. "Ms Cairnes, I am in interview. This had better be scintillating."

"Sir, we have a problem. Five-three-eight and one-seven-two-nine…"

At that moment a klaxon blared into life above them, as a recorded voice began to intone, "Containment breach alert. We are experiencing multiple Euclid-level containment breaches. Please stand by for further instructions."

Professor Gelding stood up. "Mr Gradley, I think that concludes our discussion. I am now going to administer you a Class-A amnestic. Once it has taken effect you will no longer remember me or the events of this afternoon. You may feel some disorientation; this is normal."

Agent Howard took Edward's arm firmly and pulled down his sleeve, turning it to expose the underside of his arm to Dr Gelding, who selected a small jet injector from his cabinet and inserted a crisp white ampoule.

"This shouldn't hurt."

That was a lie—it felt like someone punched his forearm hard with a chisel.

Edward didn't think he'd forgotten anything—though how could you tell? For all he knew Agent Howard had made him give the

Professor a striptease—but after a few minutes he did begin to feel very, drowsy and out of it. Agent Howard had escorted him at a brisk pace back through the facility, and at some point Edward's legs had given out under him. He just barely caught the edge of the man's words to the researchers suddenly running through the corridors as he drifted in and out of consciousness: "…sual side-effects. He shouldn't…". But then Edward was gone.

He woke up back in London, neatly propped up in the alleyway across from O'Reilly's Bar and Grill. Everything ached, radiating from the pain in his arm. Someone had thoughtfully placed a bowl in front of him and he had already accumulated several pounds. "Please help," he muttered, trying to order his muscles to move but receiving only a declaration of independence. "Please. Call an ambulance." The people stepping over him didn't even pause. Just another City hopeful down on his luck—or out of his mind on booze or cocaine.

After a few minutes the bulky, ponytailed shape of War hover into view, apparently strolling nonchalantly down the road opposite O'Reilly's. He glanced right, glanced left.

"There you are," he grumbled. "It's not like I booked the whole day off, you know?" He picked up Edward with appalling ease and carried him into the Bar and Grill, where the bartender tucked him up on one of the corner seats with a blanket and a mug of something vile-tasting but ultimately reviving, as though it were something he did every day. After half an hour or so Edward began to regain some semblance of alertness, together with the feeling in his extremities. The Four Horsemen were sitting around him tucking into half-rump steaks at various grades of overdone. Death was perched up on the chair back, watching him.

"Feeling better?"

"Uh-huh."

"I can sympathise. We've had run-ins with those guys before. Never seen them rough up someone this bad, though."

"Fortunately," said War between mouthfuls, "they always bring the guy back to where they picked him up. Let me guess, the Ess-See-Pee lot?"

"I don't think they ever mentioned," said Edward, faintly.

"It'll be them," said Death vehemently. "Unmarked van, the works. Wish I'd got it on my phone. Broad daylight abduction."

"Who are they?" asked Edward. "MI5 or something like that?"

"You wish. Seriously, didn't you read our blog? They're one of the biggest crypto-governmental agencies out there. The SCP Foundation. It sounds like a not-for-profit. Like the Make-A-Wish Foundation. It's actually a private army and shadow government that national armed forces actually defer to. Even the Russians roll over and play dead when they want something these days."

"What does the name mean?"

"Pseudo-fascist bullshit. 'Secure, Contain, Protect'. The totalitarian mantra throughout history. You need to be 'secured', and 'contained'. We-know-best stuff. The whole freemasonry, Bilderberg Group, Bohemian Grove theorists are totally off-track—these are the guys they should have been watching out for, and they failed, big time. Now they're everywhere."

"Moriah Conquering Wind's for real," interjected the serious man Edward thought of as Famine, taking a pause from wolfing down his second steak. "But the Foundation, they're the real pros. They're the ones covering up the alien tech."

Edward saw Death clap a black-manicured hand over his eyes. "Seriously? You're still on that kick? I thought I proved pretty conclusively that the Veil Protocol is only about protecting public knowledge of the Foundation's existence."

Famine scowled, mouth full. "It's the technology, too. Seriously, any time you intercept any communications from these guys it's all about 'the objects'. Alien technology. The Sagittarians keep trying to send it down. It would make everything better—free energy, anti-pollution,

nanotech. A second Industrial Revolution. The Foundation don't want it to get out because it would mean them losing *control* of us. You remember *Star Signals*?"

Edward realised he was being addressed. "Erm, it rings a bell. Was it some kind of self-help book?"

"Yes, like *The Secret* or the *The Prayer of Jabez*, except it really worked. It was all over the chat shows, but no-one mentions it anymore. It was the Foundation. They *wiped* a fortnight of pop culture from history. You remember that episode of American Idol? The one where Cowell started breathing smoke?"

"Ahhh…" Edward felt a tinge of a headache coming on.

"See that?" Famine turned to Death. "That's the face they all make. They didn't even need to put drugs in the water supply. They just put lots of similar scenes into programmes like *Doctor Who* and *Lost*, so people couldn't tell if what they'd seen was real, or not. The Sagittarians wrote the book to help us heal the world, but the Foundation confiscated almost every copy."

Pestilence turned to Edward and whispered softly, "For what it's worth, we think he's a bit crazy. But he knows his way around a firearm and he's got a bunker out in the New Forest if things get really bad."

"Death said you mentioned you got something from Marshall, Carter & Dark. Something big," said Famine, eyes pleading. "I don't suppose you…"

Edward shook his head. "Your crypto-fascists took it," he lied. "Sorry."

The Horsemen looked glum. "Don't worry," said Death. "We're used to this crap."

"Look," said Edward, "I'd better go. People are probably wondering where I am." He got up unsteadily and hobbled to the door.

"You should get that limp checked out," advised War. "Looks nasty."

Edward got a few hundred paces from the bar before the pain became too much. Stooping as though to tie up his shoelaces, he slid his fingers into the side of the now-shredded Testoni leather and eased out the shard of glass. The bulldog seemed none the worse for its experience, grinning as traces of Edward's blood dried on the glass's surface. It was enjoying a bowlful of juicy-looking chunks as a pair of hands in medical gloves checked its fur and ears for mites. I should have stayed for the steak, thought Edward, his stomach rumbling. Seems everyone but me's eaten today.

Chapter Eight: "Castle"

"Edward? Is that you?" Liz's voice sounded curious but not concerned. "Where the hell have you been? Your phone's been off. MacIntyre's been ready to send out the search party."

"Tell him that my flu didn't clear up. Tell him I'm in bed with some chicken soup."

"You don't sound sick."

"No, I don't. I know you don't like me. You don't have to. But right you're just about the only person at CD I can trust."

"I didn't stand up for you in the review."

"I know. You did the right thing. I think I can rely on you to do that. That's why I called you."

"Edward, have you had some kind of breakdown? You sound –"

"Crazy? I'm beginning to wonder."

"Okay, I'll bite. What are you trying to pull this time?"

"I'm just trying to set things right."

"Like getting the office idiot fired, you mean? Peter was a loser, but he was *our* loser."

"I wish I could say I felt bad for that, Liz. I don't. I do feel sorry that I

misled you. But yes, if I pull off the track I'm on, there'll be some more changes at Cooper Drake."

"Jesus Christ, Edward. Why do you think I'm going to help you?"

"Because … because you're not evil. If you figured me out I'm pretty sure you've figured out MacIntyre too. How long have you been keeping his secrets?"

"… Damn you."

"MacIntyre's got a couple of days left, then I'm coming for him. You should start thinking about yourself. He really isn't worth your loyalty."

There was a long pause. In the background he heard the real world; the world which had become real for him—the clamour as a hundred and fifty men scrabbled for shares in AAPL or short-sold Romanian seven-year bonds.

"Get well soon, Edward," said Liz, loudly, and rang off. Edward smiled and wondered how on earth he was going to follow through on his promises.

Edward paid for the Travelodge room with his credit card. To think some people thought it was expensive—it cost significantly less than his last business lunch. He wondered vaguely if Marshall, Carter & Dark had enough pull in the police force to trace such transactions, but the other options were equally dangerous right now. The room was small and functional with the incessant hum of a radiator through the floor. He spent an hour scribbling on the back of a Little Chef menu someone had left on the coffee table. His twelve-year-old self could probably think of a way out of this, a flawless game that kept all his pieces safe, but right now he couldn't find a path through that didn't require him to sacrifice someone. Then he thought—you've been assuming you're the king, haven't you? What if you're the rook, or the bishop, or the white knight? And he saw it, just for an instant, traced out beautifully between the Hunters Chicken and the pancakes with maple syrup. It wasn't perfect. But it only required him to sacrifice one piece. He'd been carrying it

around with him for all his life, and only now it occurred to him that he didn't have to keep it alive to win.

He tried to sleep, but the ideas churning in his head, the snoring of the man next door and the thin, hard mattress meant all he was able to manage were brief, hypnopompic episodes of walking along that unearthly beach he had seen before with his eyes closed, or else sitting at his desk at Cooper Drake looking down at the world.

A noise broke his stupor, a careless rustling and tearing like a cat or fox going through a rubbish bag. And again, closer to his window. He got up, cautiously, and walked across the floor, bare feet picking up little particles of lint from the over-vacuumed carpet as he went. He twitched aside the diaphanous orange curtain and looked down.

The Travelodge took the form of two buildings connected by a bridge on the second floor—the gap between them was used for refuse collection, deliveries and the like, and Edward's room had a commanding view of this little alleyway. What he saw now in the glaring security spotlights was the form of a gigantic man, more than seven feet tall, crouching in the refuse skip a storey beneath the window. The man was entirely nude, massive corded muscles covering his form, and something in that nakedness made him seem less than human—an animal given human shape. It looked up, and he saw that over its head was a tattered hessian bag, stained dark about a third of the way down. It might once have been fastened around his neck with a drawstring, but it had torn so the cord lay around his neck like a necklace and the bag hung loose around his jaw. There was no way he could see through it but Edward knew as surely as anything he had experienced in his life that he had been seen, and recognised. His hands had become clumsy and he batted at the curtains, trying to close them. The bedside drawers were affixed to the bed, which proved beyond the efforts of Edward's lean frame to move. In the end he settled for walking the wardrobe across the room and allowing it to fall horizontally across the door with a satisfyingly solid thud.

"Keep it down!" shouted the man in the next room. "Some of us are trying to sleep."

Edward scoured the room for anything that might be used as a

weapon, finding precious little that could actually be detached from the walls or tables. In the end he smashed the bathroom mirror with the toilet plunger, found a large triangular piece that looked like it would hold up relatively well, and tested the edge, before wrapping half of it in a flannel. He sat on the bed with his silver dagger, watching the door.

There was no transition—from Edward's perspective, one moment he was sitting up, engaged in his vigil, and the next he was flat on the bed, eyes closed. Had he fallen asleep? He opened his eyes and angled himself upwards, momentarily startled by the face-shape looming out of the strangely deepened darkess in the unfamiliar room. He waited for the waking pareidolia to subside, for the face to resolve itself into the edge of a lampshade or his coat hanging on the chair. It didn't.

"Well done, Mr Gradley," it said. Edward jerked upright, hands searching for the piece of mirror and finding nothing.

"I think the Bagman's losing his touch," Marshall continued, "I gave him your spoor from the fake comb but you managed to shake him somehow. Like you'd dropped off the face of the earth. It took him a full day to pick your scent up again."

As his eyes readjusted to the darkness, Edward saw to his horror that the massive man was there, kneeling behind Marshall with its hessian forehead almost touching the floor in an attitude of prostration. The wardrobe had been flung aside like a toothpick, and now rested across the window, blocking the light from the street.

"Now, Mr Gradley. You have some things that belong to me. I'd like you to return them now." Marshall's voice was like a universe of knives behind a silk curtain.

"What things would those be, exactly?" Edward said, groggily. With any luck Marshall thought he was just being insolent.

"A certain codex, Mr Gradley. And a certain antique comb. One stolen from my premises, the other still owed to me after you delivered a clumsy forgery. You have quite a way of repaying my

trust."

"I ran into someone who was very interested in you," Edward said —"I wonder if you've heard of them. They call themselves," he struggled to remember what Death had said, "the SCP Foundation." He was gratified by the look of recognition, rage and was that?— yes!—the minutest trace of fear, in Marshall's expression.

"Really," he said, taking a step back and placing his hand on the monstrous man's head—reassuring, Edward realised, but also seeking reassurance himself in the creature's strength. "What did they say, I wonder?"

"Well," said Edward, carefully, "I seem to have given them the impression that I've deserted MC&D and am going to deliver them the items you mention. Sorry for the stunt with the codex; I had to take it so they would see you trying to find me and think I was on the level."

"What's this?" Marshall seemed startled.

"I'll get them back to you, just as soon as I can go back to where I'm keeping them."

"And where is that, exactly? I'm sure our friend here is more than a match for any *agents*," he spat the word as though it was hateful to him—"of the Foundation who might be watching it."

"And then they would know that it was a hoax and I never intended to hand them over. No, just give me a couple of days to work this out. I'll be in the confidence of the Foundation and you'll have your things back."

"And I would have a man in Cooper Drake and the Foundation," mused Marshall, hungrily. "I suppose this is an attempt to make yourself indispensable?"

"I know what you did to David. What you had Alexandra do," said Edward, allowing a tendril of anger to shine through.

Marshall scoffed: "I barely hinted at it. Your friend filled in all the blanks herself. She—if I can use the word—was quite eager at the

prospect. I presume from the commotion around her residence that you evened the score in your acquisition of the comb." Edward's heart sank.

"I know MacIntyre's your man. He outlasted David—I'm not about to let him outlast me. If you kill me, you lose the codex, and the comb, and an inside track on the Foundation."

Marshall scowled, and snapped his fingers. The Bagman rose to his full height, arms thicker than Marshall's torso. Edward closed his eyes.

"You have two days to do what you need to do. At the end of that time I expect my property returned to me—genuine, undamaged. Do you understand?"

When he opened his eyes Marshall and the creature were gone. The door hung on one hinge, the lock torn from its moorings. Edward looked at the collapsing wardrobe, tiny fragments of mirrordust coating the bed and floor. Travelodge weren't going to be happy.

Edward had hoped that he had misunderstood Marshall when he had mentioned Lady Penelope's house. He had ridden over to Swindon on the bus—Carter's stay of execution apparently not extending to the return of the Porsche—half-expecting to see the Four Horsemen sitting in the seats. When he got there he saw the whole house had been taped off—two police cars had drawn up at the front together with a dark, understated vehicle he assumed belonged to the coroner.

"What's going on?" he asked the stony-faced policeman at the front gate. "Is Alexandra okay?" He had some vague thought that he might be invited inside, but the policeman just shook his head.

"Do you know the Lady Penelope, sir?" he asked. Edward stammered out an affirmative. "Think you'd better go home, sir. You'll probably read about it soon enough."

There would be no hope of gaining access and retrieving the comb,

Edward realised, and he cursed himself for not having had the guts to take it and keep it somewhere safer. He turned on his heel and left, just as another policeman said:

"Hold on, wasn't you at the Went suicide? Here, Travers, get his number."

But another bus had already drawn up at the stop and Edward moved as swiftly has he could towards it, not caring much which direction it took him. By the time the police had decided he was a person of interest the driver had already pulled away and they made no attempt to halt it.

He was almost out of trump cards, he thought. Almost. He got out his phone. One bar of charge left. He made two calls; the first to Death, the second to Maria. Both started the same way:

"I'm sorry. I need one more favour."

The one to Maria Beaumont ended "I love you. Goodbye."

Edward took the elevator up to the trading floor at Cooper Drake. The security staff and the pretty secretary with glasses had looked askance at him; Maria's grandfather's suit was fine enough but he had slept in it two nights running and he had been expelled from the Travelodge without even the luxury of a shower. He caught a glimpse of himself in the glass ceiling as he rose through it—hollow-eyed and unshaven, his mother's dark brown, almost black hair contrasting with his father's Yorkshire complexion, giving him the appearance of a week's worth of beard. He didn't look like he belonged here anymore. When he reached the top floor his team caught sight of him and hollered enthusiastically, one shouting that Oxford Fullerene had gone up almost twenty percent in value since Edward bought in. It all seemed like distant memories—a lifetime ago. Liz's eyes went wide when she saw him and she started walking in the opposite direction. As she passed him, she said "Seven years." and he nodded.

MacIntyre came out of his office to see what was happening and strode over, bristling.

"Where the hell have you been, Gradley? Part of having responsibility for a team means being here to oversee them. As it is they've been running your bloody portfolio. Partners at Cooper Drake are held to a higher standard!"

Edward leaned in, smiled. "Like making millions off stock tips from an international money launderer. Or having people underneath you murdered so no-one gets too big for their boots." He had the satisfaction of seeing MacIntyre wilt; someone had left him in the dryer too long and the starched fabric he was made out of had gone limp. Edward continued, in a louder tone. "I'm going to make myself a cup of coffee and then I'm going to have a sit down. You can wait for the main event."

He didn't have to wait long. Edward didn't even bother to turn on his computer, instead sitting with his shredded boots up on the desk while he sipped his first cup of coffee in days that didn't taste like something had died in it. His team had realised something was about to happen and had quietened down. Myers and Reagan, it seemed, sensed what was coming better than MacIntyre and had made hurried excuses and left the building.

"Gradley." The voice was at normal modulation but somehow filled the air, deafening the admittedly somewhat muted buzz of the floor. Edward swivelled his chair and saw the tall blond man enter, wearing a red and black evening jacket and with a pair of gold-rimmed spectacles balanced on his nose. In the doorway behind him he could see a massive, dark shape.

"Jesus Christ Edward," said MacIntyre, rising from the table at which he had been sitting head bowed and fingers tapping. "You brought him here. You fucking brought Marshall here. What the fuck have you done?"

"I'm here to get what's mine, Mr Gradley," said Marshall, gliding over the floor. The other stockbrokers looked on, bemused by the apparent reckoning taking place.

"You're going to be disappointed then, Jeremy," shrugged Edward. "I don't have either the codex or the comb anymore. Nor would I be inclined to return them to you if I did."

Marshall's mouth twitched upwards but his composure remained intact. "I thought so. You're a thief, Gradley. At least your father paid his way. Who did you sell them to? The Foundation? The Global Occult Coalition? GRU? Or am I going to hear that you gave my property to those ragbag conspiracy theorists? Oh yes, I know about them. They're flies, Mr Gradley."

"None of the above," said Edward, and he saw Marshall detect the sincerity in his voice.

"What?"

"You heard me. I'm not going to enlighten you—you're the only Saturday morning cartoon villain in the room, you can handle the monologues."

"Do you actually think you can walk away?" challenged Marshall. "How far up does this go, Mr MacIntyre? Did you sanction this betrayal?" MacIntyre blanched even further, shaking his head and sinking to his knees.

"I do. I'm going to walk out of this building and disappear. Somewhere you'll never find me." Edward was fighting every instinct he had to put his hand in his pocket. Don't give him the satisfaction of knowing.

"We can follow you anywhere."

"You know that's not true."

Marshall shook his head. "I'll have everyone close to you taken and brought to me. Your mother, Beatrycze Wozny—perhaps you thought I didn't know where she lives. And the Beaumont woman—ah, I see that touches a nerve. Is it love?" Edward remembered the turn of phrase and looked at MacIntyre, still kneeling aghast on the floor. You're his creature, Edward thought, bought and paid for. You even think like him. You didn't go to the clubhouse, maybe didn't even care about the objects. You just wanted the secrets to allow you to keep rolling your life up into that one big futile bet. And now you can see it coming apart. Marshall can't, not yet, but you can.

Edward answered, calmly. "The best protection I can give those I care for is to tell you right now—I'll never come back. I don't even think I would be told if something happened to them. But even if I were, I wouldn't come back."

"A selfish little bastard to the end, then," said Marshall, still sneering, but some of the wind knocked out of his sails. "You think you wouldn't return for my blood if I captured and killed your mother? You have no idea about the human psyche, do you, you little ape? Men aren't in control of their drives, they are controlled by them. The success of Marshall, Carter & Dark is testimony to the fact that choices make men, not the other way around. If I were to take lovely Maria and have her despoiled…"

"You know what I think?" said Edward. "I think you don't kill, or despoil, or maim, or kidnap—unless it profits you. The fact of the matter is, if I don't care what you do to my mother, to Maria, they are safe. So go ahead—except you can't, because it would mean nothing. I tried to explain to David—the ideal of capitalism. Everyone working in their self-interest—and only in their self-interest—is the optimum solution to the societal puzzle. I still believe that; I've just learned to expand my definition of self-interest." He raised his voice. "I won't help you launder drugs and arms dealers' money. I won't help you steal antiques and sell them to dictators. I won't do those things because it is in my self-interest to live in a stable, lawful society, where I can trade in fair competition with others." Edward's team had risen to their feet and began to slink away; other traders similarly moved towards the door, where the shadow moved and vanished.

"No-one's going to believe anything you say," stammered MacIntyre. "Remember Went," he said, in a pleading voice. "He died with his reputation ruined; even his family think of him as a disgrace. Nothing could be traced to other members."

"You're finished," added Marshall, with gleeful finality.

"Yes, I am."

"W-what?" It was MacIntyre's turn to look bewildered.

"Oh, what the hell. There's nothing you can do to stop it now. As we speak, police have been called to the scene of an apparent suicide in the toilets of a small diner on Farringdon High Street. The body will be identified from documentation in its pockets as Edward Gradley. Sound familiar? There'll even be a note in the pocket. Just like David Went. Except it'll say something like:

> I am writing this letter because I suspect I will not live to see tomorrow. I have uncovered a massive insider trading ring within investment banking firm Cooper Drake originating in the gentleman's club Marshall, Carter & Dark, which I believe to be a front for the fencing of stolen goods and liaison with organised crime. I have found letters from my colleague and friend David Went indicating that he discovered the same criminal activity—I now believe he was killed to prevent him blowing the whistle on this activity and evidence of personal ethical violations planted to discredit him. I have been followed by men I believe to be in the employ of MC&D; I fear I am to be subject to the same treatment as David. I have left documentation detailing Cooper Drake's involvement with Marshall, Carter & Dark with a close friend—should anything happen to me, these documents will be released to the police.

"That's not an empty bluff, by the way. All the trades in Mr Marshall's book have been conscientiously documented; I just took the liberty of replacing my name with yours, Raymond. I'm sure Marshall, Carter & Dark can buy immunity from prosecution, but I wonder if that extends to Cooper Drake? I rather doubt anyone is going to believe your version of events after they see the quite impeccably forged emails from David Went to me dated from before his suicide detailing the death threats you made to him. Seems to me that your usefulness to Mr Marshall here is at an end."

MacIntyre put his hands over his face. "Get out," he whispered to the last traders gathered in a thin circle around the three.

"You're abandoning your life," said Marshall, nonplussed.

"Yes. Don't worry," said Edward, "I've lined up a new one."

"Where are you going to run?" Marshall was twitching now, something in his eyes that spoke of incipient madness. "There's no-one on Earth who can protect you. You've got nothing left to trade!"

"Not quite."

Marshall stood for a moment, still erect next to the pitiful figure of Raymond MacIntyre, who had curled up on the floor, ridiculous gelled hair cracking as he pushed it against Marshall's slim, glossy brown shoes. Marshall looked down and his face twisted into a mask of disgust before kicking MacIntyre, hard.

"You still think I'm going to explain, don't you?"

Edward met the blond man's gaze and held it until Jeremy Marshall at last rolled his eyes up to the ceiling and screamed:

"Run, then! See what good it does you!"

Edward turned and walked down the fire escape. With almost boyish glee he pushed hard on the door bar until the glass beam shattered and the sound of the fire alarm filled the building, and continued down.

Marshall left the wreck that had been Raymond MacIntyre on the trading floor and paced over to the fire escape. He wanted to call the Bagman, tell him to kill everyone in the building, but he knew it would be a pointless and expensive act of pique. There was nowhere the Gradley boy could go—as soon as he left the building the Bagman would pick up his scent. Whether it was at Heathrow, or Grand Cayman, or the highest mountain of the Andes, there was nowhere he could hide.

And yet, in the dark, non-Euclidean corners of his mind, there was doubt—some part of him saw the black pawn take the white knight, revealing the final check, the black king exposed to attack from … what was it? A rook? A castle.

The call came a couple of minutes too late.

"Erm, sir? I'm not sure how to tell you this…"

Document 1552-12

Re: Sagittarius-cruft (maybe)
Death_4H Jan 20 , : GMT

If anyone wants to see a piece of glass containing by preternatural means live footage of a dog (English bulldog) you should be at the Cooper Drake offices, 48 Gray's Inn Road, around midday today. You'll want to speak to Edward Gradley, who can also tell you some interesting things about what certain ex-BBC news presenters got up to in the Bahamas.

Oh, and by the way, if you're listening in, Professor Gelding, he remembers everything. You might want to look into that.

Reply | Options

.

Re: Sagittarius-cruft (maybe)
War_4H Jan 20 , : GMT

Just incredible, really.
Reply | Options

.

Re: Sagittarius-cruft (maybe)
Pestilence_4H Jan 20 , : GMT
> Just incredible, really.

I wish to state for the record that none of us have actually seen this thing.
Reply | Options

.

Re: Sagittarius-cruft (definitely)
Famine_4H Jan 20 , : GMT

> Just incredible, really.

I've seen it. The Sagittarians sent me photos of it inside a dream.
Reply | Options

.

Re: Sagittarius-cruft (just no)
Death_4H Jan 20 , : GMT

> I've seen it. The Sagittarians sent me photos of it inside a dream.

OK, now you're just [EXPLETIVE REDACTED] with us.

Reply | Options

Edward Gradley walked out of the offices of Cooper Drake just as the clouds cracked open, casting direct sunlight on the ground for the first time in months. The shadow watched from the lobby as he strolled through the carpark. He took his phone out of his pocket and threw it into the landscaped edging, followed by his wallet.

The unmarked van had been waiting for him in the overflow area and pulled up. The dark-jumpered man who got out opened the back of the van and looked at him. Edward reached into his pocket and withdrew something small, shining in the light.

"You can see this?" he asked, a final note of apprehension entering his voice. "You can see the dog?"

The agent nodded, swallowing, then averted his eyes, flipping over a small lockbox. "Yessir I can see it. Please put it into the box. I've seen what happens when people look at that stuff too long."

Edward carefully placed the glass shard at the bottom of the box, where the bulldog panted enthusiastically and looked hopeful, though that might have been because someone had entered the room behind it with a bright pink chewtoy. He shut the lid.

"We investigated the Pall Mall lead," he said. "Your information led to the capture of numerous MC&D assets and the near-total disruption of their UK distribution network. They moved most of the items, but that's par for the course. How do you feel about the idea of saving the world on a regular basis?"

"I think," said Edward, "that sounds like it's something that would fall within the scope of my enlightened self-interest. Plus, I've got nothing else to do. I'm about to become legally dead."

"Join the club," said the agent. The shadow watched as Edward hopped up on the running board and Mobile Task Force Epsilon-Nine "The Nation's Job Creators" rolled away.

Edward Gradley disappeared from the world on a sunny January afternoon. The coroner called to O'Reilly's Grill and Diner pronounced him dead at twelve fifty-eight, and his remaining family was notified, though his mother seemed less upset than one might have expected.

The coroner transported his body to the morgue at St Pancras and was vaguely surprised to find one more free tray than he remembered. Indeed, something about Edward's face seemed awfully familiar, though he could be certain he wasn't one of his previous guests—all the bodies were accounted for on their online admin area. If he had bothered to look, he would have found absolutely no trace of remote access, though the nurse might have remembered the serious-looking young man with the gray hair who had flashed an official-looking Special Branch badge and taken a body awaiting post-mortem for 'priority forensic analysis'.

The following morning Maria Beaumont brought a stack of documents into Camden Police Station and Edward's death was officially announced as a murder investigation. It took the lawyer in the black suit three weeks at five thousand and fifty pounds an hour to secure the dismissal of all charges against Marshall, Carter & Dark and the re-expungement of all mention of the club from Scotland Yard's records.

Raymond MacIntyre and several other partners were arrested and

charged with Market Abuse under the Financial Services and Markets Act 2000, money laundering under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002 and two counts of conspiracy to commit murder. David Went was posthumously cleared of all charges.

Elizabeth Keating, as the most senior partner not under investigation, was made acting principal in an extraordinary meeting of the board of directors.

The trial continues.

« **Act II - "You are invited"** | **HUB** | **Act III - "Rainy in London"** »

Adventures in Capitalism Hub

A place for the tales of Doctor Isabel Helga Anastasia Parvati Wondertainment V, PhD and her loyal assistant Emma Aislethorp-Brown.

There will probably be more here, after a while.

1. Assistance for the Boss Lady
2. The Super-Cool Road Trip Adventure
3. Adventuring Interlude
4. Memory of Days Long Past

AIAD Homescreen

SCP Foundation | IT Dept.
AIAD <Artificial Intelligence Applications Division>

"What Does Anybody Know About Anything"
by **Chris Zabriskie**

Standard Principles of Artificially Intel

1. **An AIC must know it is an AIC.**
2. **An AIC must not operate outside of its clearance.**
3. **An AIC must operate for the benefit of the Foundation.**
4. **An AIC must protect its own existence unless it conflicts with oth**

Archived System Logs:

Original AIAD Series by `LurkD`

- **`ALERT! LOCKDOWN INITIATED!`**
- **`Command-Query Separation`**
- **`Superencipherment`**
- **`Clock Multiplier`**
- **`Null-terminating String`**

After Action Reports:

Hello World by LurkD

- **Hello World: Part I**
- **Hello World: Part II**
- **Hello World: Part III**
- **Hello World: Part IV**

Active AICs:

Glacon.aic

- **ver1.9.4 Gen(II)**
- **Lvl. 2 Clearance**
- **Site-17**

Alexandra.aic

- **ver1.1.7 Gen(IV)**
- **Lvl. 2 Clearance**
- **Site-19**

References:

SCP-2987 by Doctor Cimmerian
SCP-2306 by Jacob Conwell
SCP-2522 by djkaktus
SCP-2806 by Jacob Conwell
SCP-2193 by Shaggydredlocks
SCP-2519 by psul
SCP-1549 by DarkStuff

'Rogue AI' (NVEO4/YVN3E/PN6UG)
by Doctor Cimmerian

Draft Proposal For Programme Arduinosis 9001
by Roget

Come Back Kid
by Doctor Cimmerian

Basic Observations
by SunnyClockwork

What Dragons We Shall Be
by SunnyClockwork

Welcome to History
by SunnyClockwork

Media Files:

by Loiterer87
by Perelka_L
by Perelka_L
by Perelka_L
by Perelka_L
by SunnyClockwork
by SunnyClockwork
by SunnyClockwork
by Waterfire

>: Request timed out.

>: AIAD/ homescreen/00menu.scpl has stopped responding. Run Debug? (Y/N)

>: Y

>: Debug out of date. Automatic updates found.

>: Unknown update file in K:/sysutility/tools/admin/prefs

>: Updating. Please do not shutdown client…

>: 99%

>: Unknown error occurred.

done 01100100
01101111
01101110
01100101

Thanks Crom. And hello new user.

We see you might be interested to write for the AIAD canon?

neat! 01101110
01100101
01100001
01110100
00100001

Let's help them out, Crom.

Loading aiad_infotabs.scpl

::LOADING::

What Is This?

AIAD

In universe, the AIAD (Artificial Intelligence Applications

Division) is an experimental research division that technically exists as a branch division within the SCP Foundation IT Department. The division's sole purpose is to develop, study, and utilize the burgeoning field of the AI sciences. It is a field that is both fascinating, misunderstood, and in some cases resented.

Arguably the best division in the Foundation.

The Foundation understands that if they are not investing time understanding this cutting edge tech, some other organization is. In fact there's evidence already present that such tech is being exercised outside of the Foundation. That fact alone is enough to keep AIAD supplied with a healthy annual budget to fund its projects.

Structurally, there's plenty of researchers on staff with a multitude of related backgrounds from computer sciences to communication technicians. The AICs on file each have their own minds to exercise their decisions; all kept in check by their hardwired "Standard Principles". Together, they research new ways to create consciousnesses and defend against hostile ones in the name of not only the Foundation, but for humanity as well.

MTF Kappa-10 ("Skynet")

The Foundation understands that as the world becomes more technological and dependent on that technology, there must be a presence inside both monitoring and protecting it. It was more or less haphazardly that MTF K-10 was created as kind of a "knee-jerk" reaction to a critical problem that wasn't fully understood.

At its core, MTF K-10's purpose is to track, investigate, and if possible capture/neutralize intangible threats to

both the SCP Foundation and the internet at large. Many times this means assuming the role of a counter-AI force. Because patrolling the internet for threats that can both move and think at light-speed is just impossible for any human, it relies on AICs to do the dirty work on behalf of them. The AICs recruited are kept on a very short leash by both researchers and Alexandra back at Site-19.

Obviously keeping AICs in check and making sure they behave while they are out in the real world is a very big concern of the AIAD. Hence there's a growing consensus outside of the division that is attempting to have the MTF disbanded for fear of it blowing up in their faces much like another past mistake. There's plenty of pressure on both sides squeezing down on AIAD to keep things high and tight until a decision is made one way or the other.

The Maxwellist Network

The Maxwellists are a denomination of The Church of the Broken God as explained below:

> *"The "Church of Maxwellism" (GOI-004C) represents a modernized, computation and network oriented means of worship. No central organizing church body is known to exist. However, interviews and covert surveillance has determined that all known cells are in regular contact with one another, and capable of coordination. Maxwellists favour small-scale body modification through the use of advanced cybernetics and organ enhancement. While artificial limbs or reinforced skeletons have been observed, Maxwellist implants focus primarily on communication, data storage, and networking capabilities, and sensory enhancement."*

Within the AIAD canon, they represent a separate organization that is neither benign nor hostile. Rather

they would prefer to not be disturbed and conduct their own business outside of Foundation knowledge. Much of the relationship between AIAD and Maxwellists has been revealed in **SunnyClockwork**'s tale **Basic Observations**. In this, it is explained how the Maxwellist network and hierarchy operates. For more details please refer to **THIS POST**.

How-To-Write AIAD

Theme

As seen in the series, there is an obvious visual style that is followed. AIAD has been known to dabble in visual storytelling and experiment with different forms of media to immerse the reader. While this is the most memorable thing about AIAD, it is emphatically not the basis for it. The most important part about AIAD is the storytelling, no matter how it's presented.

World Building

AIAD also is an opportunity to build expansive virtual worlds and characters that are not bound by any pre-existing points of reference. AIAD can be as free and as weird as you need it to be. The important thing to remember is the world that an AI sees is all virtual. There's no real distinction between the human world and the virtual world other than seeing which one runs slower.

Relationships

AIAD also puts a large focus on the relationships between the humans and the AIs themselves. AIs in this canon have personalities. Personalities don't make them

necessarily better at their clerical tasks, but conditioning traits such as empathy, friendship, curiosity, etc. do make them easier to both work with and control. Hence, many times the AIs exhibit human-like emotions and reactions which sometimes are in fact not by design at all. Some AIs even have deep emotional bonds with each other, while others hold petty grudges. Even though they are not officially recognized by the Ethics Committee, they are in fact people— just virtual people.

:) 00111010
00101001

Fun

AIAD is supposed to be fun. It can be dramatic. It can be tense. If done correctly, it can even be scary. But mostly it's meant to be a way of doing something different in the SCPverse that isn't necessarily focused on humans. Let your imagination go wild.

Code

The code used to make those text bubbles can be seen below. Note, items listed in brackets will need to be filled. If you have further question on how to use this code, please contact **LurkD**.

```
[[div style="float:right; width: 240px; text-align: right; margin-top: 0; margin-right: 0; margin-bottom: 10px; margin-left: 10px; padding-right: 10px;"]]

[[div style="color: [TEXT COLOR, HEX#]; font-size: 8pt; background-color: [BACKGROUND COLOR HEX#]; font-family: Verdana, Arial, sans-serif; border-radius:30px /70px; background: [BACKGROUND COLOR HEX#];
```

```
background:linear-gradient([BACKGROUND COLOR HEX#], [BACKGROUND SHADE HEX#]); text-align: left; padding: 2px 20px;"]]

[TEXT]

[[/div]]

[[div]]
[[image [IMAGE] width="75px" style="margin-right: 20px;"]]
[[/div]]

[[/div]]

[[div style="clear: right;"]]
[[/div]]
```

Story Timeline

If you are wondering which order to read all these in, please refer to the following listed in chronological order:

> I should really find some time to read through these again.
>
> And done!

Canon Timeline

- **SCP-2193** by **Shaggydredlocks**
- The Original AIAD series by **LurkD**
  - **Part I: ALERT! LOCKDOWN INITIATED**
  - **Part II: Command Query Separation**
  - **Part III: Superencipherment**
  - **Part IV: Clock Multiplier**
  - **Part V: Null Terminating String**

- **SCP-2987** by **Doctor Cimmerian**
- **SCP-2306** by **Jacob Conwell**
- Draft Proposal For Programme Arduinosis by **Roget**
- Hello World series by **LurkD**
  - **Part I**
  - **Part II**
  - **Part III**
  - **Part IV**
- **SCP-2522** by **djkaktus**
- Basic Observations by **SunnyClockwork**
- **SCP-2806** by **Jacob Conwell**
- **SCP-2519** by **psul**

MTF Kappa-10 Assignments Outside of Timeline:

- 'Rogue AI' (NVEO4/YVN3E/PN6UG) by **Doctor Cimmerian**
- Come Back Kid by **Doctor Cimmerian**

In-Universe Timeline

1970

- **1976:** SCP Foundation IT Department is tasked with creating dedicated automatic agents as the needs of the organization become more and more digital.
- **1978:** IT creates PROJECT: ROSETTA (aka "8-Ball") for digital adaptive encryption and decryption, in an effort to replace the outdated Enigmagraphs[1].

1980

- **1985:** 8-Ball is upgraded to its final iteration. Personnel become concerned that the utility program may have gained sentience, but are unable to confirm.
- **1987:** PROJECT: CORINTHIAN (aka "Glacon") is proposed as a replacement for 8-Ball and is slotted for development under future work.
- **1988:** **SCP-079** is acquired by the Foundation.
- **1989:** AIAD is founded as a branch division of the Foundation IT Department. It is first tasked with reverse engineering **SCP-079**. Several lines of code from SCP-079 were proposed to be [REDACTED].

1990

- **1993:** AIAD releases Glacon for beta testing after a lengthy development as a Gen(II) AIC (Artificially Intelligent Conscript). Glacon.aic featured highly functioning logic processes and self-constructing risk analysis model templates for its decision making. 8-Ball is officially classified as a Gen(I) despite being already decommissioned.
- **1994:** AIAD finalizes Glacon and assigns him to the Site-17 server farm.
- **1997:** After the marked success of Glacon, AIAD announces PROJECT: AQUINAS (aka "Grape"), which will run on the Glacon platform and utilize new features based on ongoing AIC research.
- **1998:** Grape is released ahead of schedule as Gen(II+). After initial tests, Grape was denied a Foundation assignment as a virtual agent. Many superiors were not as forthcoming to the idea of increasingly "*cognizant*" virtual agents, calling them liabilities.

2000

y2k 01111001
00110010
01101011

- **2001:** With the delay and subsequent fizzle of the Gen(II+) launch, AIAD split into 2 development teams in order to either address the concerns[2] of high functioning cognizant AICs and/or develop Gen(II) logic based systems into an advanced functioning/adaptive state.
- **2005:** Gen(III) trial AICs were developed in conjunction, one was labeled PROJECT: EL-028-1125, later dubbed "HatBot" by certain staff.
- **2007**: After much trial and error testing, HatBot went into further development as a humanoid android to better understand the glaring flaws it was experiencing in its previous virtual environment.
- **2007**: Now known as the "**`HatBot Incident`**", the android attempted to harm several personnel and caused substantial damage to the AIAD labs and Site-19 in general. HatBot is nowhere to be found post-incident.
- **2008:** After a lengthy incident investigation against AIAD, everything regarding Gen(III) is buried 2 months later. AIAD is downsized.
- **2009:** With HatBot still MIA and little trace regarding his disappearance, the case is marked as unsolved and assigned lower priority. Foundation investigators are pulled elsewhere.

2010

- **2011:** AIAD began creating AICs again, only this time using no preexisting platforms or templates. PROJECT: DEWEY (aka "Alexandra") would be the only Gen(IV) to be developed by AIAD.
- **2012:** Alexandra showed promising results in testing and was released on Site-19 with little

incident. Staff productivity rises 32% as menial clerical tasks are assigned to Alexandra.
- **2013:** Alexandra and Glacon are hailed as the AIAD flagships for further AIC research. Many proposals are made with regards to budgeting on further virtual agent development. AIAD department is granted an expansion.
- **2014:** Site-17 suffers a **`critical meltdown`** of the server farm. 89% of the on-site data, including Glacon, was lost. Cause is unknown.
- **2015:** With Alexandra managing both Site-19 and 17 as well as assisting in extrinsic field applications, AIAD begins beta-testing a stand-alone cellular/mobile AIC known as PROJECT: BELL (aka "Thorn").
- **2016:** By special emergency order, 8-Ball, Grape, and Thorn are all recommissioned on a **`special assignment`** under the temporary MTF designation Kappa-10 ("Skynet").
- **2016:** MTF Kappa-10 apprehends the fugitive known as "HatBot". The rogue AIC is detained under the SCP designation **`SCP-2522`** indefinitely. MTF Kappa-10 is granted a conditional extension pending review.

Glossary

.aic / AIC

- The file extension ".aic" stands for "artificially intelligent conscript". Almost all AIAD AICs have a .aic file extension

.scpl

- The file extension ".scpl" is sometimes used for denoting SCP intranet pages.

.x3d

- The file extension ".x3d" is sometimes used for creating virtual environments on an SCP Foundation computer.

Aggregated Layer

- The Aggregated Layer is in charge of running the Maxwellist network, dealing with basic issues, monitoring the activities in the Baisc Layer, and preparing new construction and recruitment plans.

Avatar

- An avatar is a visual representation of how one is seen in the virtual world.

Basic Layer

- The Basic Layer is a place of fun and entertainment for young Maxwellists where the majority of income and recruitment is generated. To the upper layers, it is merely a front to hide themselves.

Cipher City

- One of the many youth recruitment hubs within the Basic Layer of the Maxwellist network.

Chipper

- Basic Layer slang for young obnoxious initiates into Maxwellism who've recently received their first implant.

Compilation Layer

- The Compilation Layer is essentially a special task force taking direct orders from the Hexagon, the head of the Maxwellist Church.

So I guess if you were a broke Maxwellist, it'd be *CRYT*ical to earn some money?

boo 01100010
01101111
01101111

Oh hush! That was comedy gold.

Cryt

- Cryt is a crypto-currency used by Maxwellists residing in the Basic Layer.

Gen(#)

- Through the history of the AIAD, there have been 5 major advances with regards to creating AICs, each designated as a generation. These generations are listed as Gen(I) through Gen(V).

Grand I/O Temple

- A large simulspace construct residing in the Basic Layer of the Maxwellist network where patrons can worship and upload prayers.

The Hexagon

- The high command of the Church of Maxwellism consisting of six individuals who take the lead in linking the minds of the network together to simulate the existence of WAN.

Maxwellist Network

- The tri-layer hierarchical network where members congregate, live, work, and worship online.

Lodestar

- A lodestar is a small simulspace program/device that can allow users to noclip through environments at high speeds to reach a destination.

Personality Drivers

- These drivers are what make AIs more personable. They allow traits such as empathy, curiosity, and intuition to develop. Generally this makes them easier to interface with on a day-to-day basis.

Simulspace

- Simulspace is where boundless virtual reality environments and objects can be created. Often the resolution and physics advances beyond realistic/high-definition and into hyper-real making it difficult to differentiate.

Standard Principle

- Taking a page from Asimov, a standard principle is a law hardwired into the AIs actions that cannot be broken by either choice or inaction. It is one of the conditions that allows AICs to operate as freely as

they do, though some could argue as to why they are worded with such vagueness.

WAN

- The fragmented deity worshiped by the Maxwellists.

WANsong

- WANsong is the 24/7 Maxwellist controlled news broadcast.

FAQs

How do you make these face images?

- The majority of the AIC avatars were all made in **`HeroMachine 3`**.

Can I use some of your images, LurkD?

- No need to ask me. They are all CC. I don't even care about being credited all that much.

But I can't code ;~;

- You can just copy/paste what you need. Code is free. But you don't *have* to use that format. It's really **not** a requirement at all.

It's *not* a requirement?

- Sure. AIAD is known for this style, but it's not what it is all about. Articles can be anything they need to be to tell the story.

Are there plans for a third series?

- Never say never.

So I had an idea where CROM visits 4chan—

- Don't.

Ok. So what can I write about?

- Go bananas. Write anything. Just not that.

Can I add my own part in one of the series?

- The two series are standalone pieces. You can write *about* them, but not parts *of* them.

I had an idea for a new AIC.

- Great, just make sure their presence is both justifiable and fits within the AIAD setting.

Since Alexandra is gone from IRC, are you still going to keep her around?

- For the mean time, yes. She's too good of a character to dump now.

Footnotes

1. Large typewriter devices that string together text and antimemetic ciphers to encrypt written messages, allowing only the intended recipient to read it and remember it.
2. Which were seemingly technophobic in retrospect.

'Rogue AI' (NVEO4/YVN3E/PN6UG)

	cquirable
	gh
	ot for Sale
	one
Identifier	Anderson Custom Artificial telligences
Description	Items are customizable artificial intelligences. All intelligences are rated at or above level 2 on the Asimov AI Scale. Due to customization options each intelligence may possess a variety of knowledge and skills that are tailored to the buyer's eeds.

Marshall, Carter and Dark, LLP

Author	Lana Fuentes	**Date**	February 28th, 013
Interest	High	**Identifier**	Anderson Custom Artificial Intelligences

I was contacted by a mid-level employee of Anderson Robotics to gauge interest in a product they have developed. The company is looking for

buyers of fully functional artificial intelligences. This conversation is available in External Report 105.

When I ran this by several of our own tech people they ended up in a long discussion about philosophy. I'm not sure I followed all of it, but I am certain of this: they believe that they can create a converter that will allow artificial intelligences to be offered as sacrifices. If this is achievable then the value of what Anderson is offering is considerable.

I've offered the Anderson rep a small amount of time next week to finalize an

order. We don't need to explain what we plan on using them for. Even if we can't use them for sacrifices they still hold quite a lot of value for running internal security networks or searching for new products in large amounts of

File Opened	NVEO4/YVN3E/ N6UG
Marshall, Carter and Dark, LLP	

NVEO4/YVN3E/

Sender	James Thulma	**Recipient**	Lana Fuentes

Hey, Lana. We just finished work on a prototype for the converter. We can't be completely certain it'll work until we test it. We've scheduled some time with Hr'asm'Kal for the sacrifice. When we told

him about the project he was pretty thrilled, but we'll need you to requisition an AI from stock before we can

Marshall, Carter and Dark, LLP

NVEO4/YVN3E/

Sender	Lana Fuentes	**Recipient**	James Thulman

I get that you're excited about this, but going to Hr'asm'Kal is going over my head. I know you tech guys live and die by your results but don't do that. He just called me to ask about progress on the project and we haven't even finalized the purchases yet.

If you have an emergency and can't contact me, contact Otto Lankin. That's as far up the ladder as you should

go. The good news is that I've convinced the Anderson rep to send us an intelligence as proof of concept.

It'll be delivered tomorrow to your lab. Make it

Marshall, Carter

NVEO4/YVN3E/

Sender	James Thulma	**Recipient**	Lana Fuentes

Woah. I'm sorry Lana. No problem. I'll file a report tomorrow

Marshall, Carter and Dark, LLP

Incident Report

NVEO4/YVN3E/

Author	James Thulma	**Date**	March 5th, 2013

Progress! The converter works, though we lost the prototype during the sacrifice process. Hr'asm'Kal says there's a

noticeable difference between Human and Artificial souls but that it should be a negligible factor for most entities that require offerings. Warnings should probably be provided for particularly picky entities. But he says the soul provided him with whatever it is he needs out of them.

I bet this will increase the value of your purchases by a remarkable amount. As long as Anderson doesn't figure out what we're up to we'll be able to squeeze a bit more profit out of the buys. Sorry about the mix up yesterday but Hr'asm'Kal is very happy with the work.

One possible problem: Second generation devices will need to be resistant to various elemental damage, along with physical damage. The prototype was quite expensive, but that's a given. Adding damage resistance to inanimate objects is not a huge deal, but I don't want you to think this was all sunshine and

Marshall, Carter and Dark, LLP	
[illegible]	elling
[illegible]	edium
[illegible]	3,000 USD
[illegible]	tablished Supply Chain
Identifier	Anderson Custom Artificial telligences
Description	Items are customizable artificial intelligences. All intelligences are rated at or above level 2 on the Asimov AI Scale. Due to customization options each intelligence may possess a variety of knowledge and skills

that are tailored to the buyer's needs.

Soul converters have been developed to allow for the use of these Artificial Intelligences in sacrifices. We are currently only selling the AIs as part of a package deal with the converters, as this significantly increases profit margins.

Marshall, Carter and Dark, LLP

Records From: March, 2013 to June,

Month	Sold	Comments
March, 2013	1	Converter development incomplete.
April, 2013	3	
May, 2013	2	
June, 2013	12	Final version of converter is completed
July, 2013	10	Continued marketing push.
August, 2013	5	
September, 2013	6	
October, 2013	2	
November, 2013	10	Lead up to Christmas
December, 2013	29	Christmas peak
January, 2014	20	New Year's resolutions
February, 2014	3	
March, 2014	2	
April, 2014	1	
May, 2014	3	

Marshall, Carter and

Dark, LLP

NVEO4/YVN3E/

Sender	Hr'asm'Kal	**Recipient**	Lana Fuentes

LANA. I'VE BEEN LOOKING AT THE NUMBERS FOR THE ACAI PROJECT. WE'RE EXPERIENCING MUCH LOWER DEMAND THAN I HAD EXPECTED. I THOUGHT I'D SHOOT YOU A MESSAGE AND GET YOUR TAKE. THIS ISN'T AN ANGRY MAIL, BY THE WAY; WE'RE STILL PULLING IN A FAIR AMOUNT OF PROFIT. IT'S JUST THAT THE MARGINS ARE A LITTLE THINNER THAN

Marshall, Carter and Dark, LLP

NVEO4/YVN3E/

Sender	Lana Fuentes	Recipient	Hr'asm'Kal

It seems like we underestimated how picky entities could be. It's not that they balk at artificial souls but rather that most of them don't want a blank slate personality. I think our best bet would be to simulate life experiences for the AI's. Give the entities something to really bite into. What do you

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NVEO4/YVN3E/

Sender	Hr'asm'Kal	Recipient	Lana Fuentes

THAT'S PROBABLY A GOOD IDEA. TELL YOU WHAT, YOU'VE GOT MY PERMISSION TO REQUISITION MORE

RESOURCES TO DEVELOP THIS PRODUCT. I TRUST YOUR JUDGEMENT. LET ME KNOW IF YOU NEED ANYTHING

Marshall, Carter and Dark, LLP

NVEO4/YVN3E/

Sender	Lana Fuentes	**Recipient**	Hr'asm'Kal

Actually if you have any contacts that are a bit selective in their soul choices, that could be useful in determining how best to maximize our product's appeal. The more selective

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NVEO4/YVN3E/

Sender	Hr'asm'Kal	**Recipient**	Lana Fuentes

THE WORSHIPFUL

ONE IS BONDED TO MY COUSIN ACTUALLY. IT ONLY ACCEPTS THE SOULS OF THE DEVOUT. I'LL REACH OUT AND SEE IF IT CAN'T COME IN. I'LL APPROVE THE CONSULTING

Marshall, Carter and Dark, LLP

Incident Report

NVEO4/YVN3E/

Author	Lana Fuentes	**Date**	July 8th, 2014

Hr'asm'Kal brought in The Worshipful One to consult on our converter. This demon only accepts souls of the religiously devout. It rejected the generic AIs outright. Luckily it didn't cost us anything to test it out.

Thulman in the

tech department has been tinkering with a few AIs using virtual spaces. The AI he provided us was accepted by the consulting demon, but it was pretty clearly not a perfect fit. I think Thulman's onto something though. I've discussed it with Hr'asm'Kal and he thinks that real world experiences are the key. It's not that the AIs aren't equal to human souls, it's that their activities simply don't have as much effect on the world. When they're gone they don't leave a hole.

I think the best option here is to allow the AIs to build real relationships and make attempts

at accomplishing things outside of their virtual spaces. If we can do that in a controlled environment I don't think the Demons will be able to tell the difference. And if they can they probably won't

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	elling
	gh
	400,000 USD
	tablished Supply Line
Identifier	"Soul in a Jar" Artificial telligences
Description	Items are fully customizable artificial intelligences. All intelligences are rated at or above level 3 on the Asimov AI Scale. Due to customization options each intelligence may possess a variety of knowledge and skills that are tailored to the buyer's needs. Soul converters have been developed to allow for the conversion of these Artificial Intelligences. We are currently only selling the AIs as part of a package deal with the converters,

as this significantly increases profit margins.

Recent strides in the development of virtual spaces allow for customization of personalities as well as the aforementioned knowledge and skills. Additionally, each AI can be given real world life experiences in line with the entity to which a sacrifice must be made.

Marshall, Carter and Dark, LLP

NVEO4/YVN3E/

Sender	Lana Fuentes	**Recipient**	Otto Lankin

The project we undertook for the Journeymen seems to be near completion. The **`AI they commissioned`** has been recaptured and is currently en route to auction.

You're absolutely certain the Journeymen don't want to take direct custody? It would save us a ton of

Marshall, Carter and Dark, LLP

NVEO4/YVN3E/

Sender	Otto Lankin	**Recipient**	Lana Fuentes

No. They were pretty clear on that point. They want to buy it at auction. Something about a former slave being recaptured and sold again. They're paying a lot for the privilege of driving up the price, so we're not complaining.

To make things a little smoother we've made their contact our agent of auction on the lot containing the AI they want. If anything goes wrong, it won't be our money on

Marshall, Carter and Dark, LLP

Auction Record

NVEO4/YVN3E/			
	ay 25th, 201		ew York City
Listing	ick Sheppard Meet Alan. Twice a slave and always struggling for freedom. He has waged multiple campaigns to free his fellow AIs. His failures still weigh on his mind. You're buying a genuine freedom fighter, whose value is immeasurable to the right parties. This is part of the "Soul in a Jar" series, which allows you to create souls for use in sacrifices without having to kill anyone. Keep your conscience clean and still get exactly what you deserve! *Marshall, Carter and Dark LLP takes no responsibility for*	**Lot**	1 of 13

the misuse of

Name	Bid	Comments
Jonas Menkin	1000000 USD	Journeyman Bidder
Tycho Lestraad	1400000 USD	Independent Bidder
Jonas Menkin	1500000 USD	Journeyman Bidder
DATA LOST	1029?k@d	DATA LOST
Tych&o Lestraad	1800000 USD	Independent Bidder
Jonas Menkin	2000000 USD	Journe*yman Bidder
Tycho Lestraad	2300000 USD	Independent Bidder
DATA LOST	**70$00000 USD**	DATA CORRUPTED

DATA CORRUPTED

>/:_ERROR [903]: unexpected error when accessing data
>/:_WARNING: file corruption detected

Run Diagnostic

>/:_There is (1) uncorrupted file attached to this document…
>/:_Audio player initialized.

Incident Report

NVEO4/YVN3E/

Author	Otto Lankin	**Date**	May 30th, 2015

On May 25th, 2015, outside forces broke into

and stole MC&D property from an auction lot in New York City. It is believed that this was accomplished through the use of several artificial intelligences developed by agents of the Foundation. Lana Fuentes's smartphone was remotely hacked and then utilized to facilitate the theft. While she has been absolved of personal responsibility for the breach itself, she has been placed on medical leave due to injuries sustained during the destruction of her cellular phone.

Intel assets have determined that this is the first known deployment of Foundation

Mobile Task Force Kappa-10. It is currently unknown if this was a targeted attack, or simply an attack of opportunity. What is understood is that this attack represents a higher level of sophistication than we previously believed was possible from the Foundation in the area of cyber warfare.

Not only was our encryption broken in seconds, but physical security measures were also compromised. A radio transmitter was connected to the isolated local area network housing the AI up for sale. This allowed entry by outside forces and the removal

of our property. The agents also took the time to load several data corruption worms into the system, which have made it difficult to determine the exact facts of the case. Beyond that, the worms were transferred into other systems during the initial investigation.

It should be noted that the violent destruction of Ms. Fuentes's phone and the malignant nature of the programs left behind to destroy our systems indicate that this operation included at least a secondary intent of harming our capacity to immediately resume selling intelligences. Given the now

fully recognized market potential of this product line, I believe it would be a mistake to cease sales at this time, regardless of current technical

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Record of Text Messages Pertinent to

NVEO4/YVN3E/

Participants	Unknown Individual Impersonating Lana Fuentes and James Thulman	**Date**	May 25th, 2015

Can u do me a favor and hook the converter into the LAN?

Lana? Yeah, I can. You alright?

I'm fine. Y u asking?

It's just, you always get on my case about using letters instead of words.

Oh. Hah. That's a weird autocorrect error. I think I need to get my phone checked out.

Right. Ok then. What am I doing after I connect the converter?

Can you load up the virtual environment?

Why?

One of the possible buyers wants to see how the AI reacts to some prompts.

On the shitty computers we have here it's gonna take 30 minutes or so.

Skip loading the graphics. What they want only needs audio prompts.

Then it'll only be a few minutes. What kind of prompts are we testing?

They didn't say. When it comes to customer requests, you know the rules and so do I.

I guess. Once I get this set up will you be feeding me their requests?

Give me a minute or two. I'm talking to them now.

One sec. It's done loading but the system is throwing up an error.

Lana?

The AI's GONE.

Lana? Answer me?

Sorry, I was talking to the customers. What do you mean the AI's gone?

I mean it's gone. I don't know how.

Lana this is a huge problem. You need to call me.

Hold on. You're overreacting. Look at the security footage, everything is pretty normal.

…

I'm calling security.

It should be noted that during the security breach Ms. Fuentes was caught on several cameras and is not believed to be the source of these messages. At the conclusion of this exchange her cell phone battery violently exploded.

« 10 PRINT "Hello World!" | **20 GOTO 10** »

Draft Proposal For Programme Arduinosis 9001

Where?

Programme Arduinosis-9001 is to be centrally located in the Ontario p
density preventing the use of non-human volunteers and patients from
efforts to relieve populations inhabiting Nunavut is being repurposed f

Why?

- Individuals recovering from Maxwellian or Cogsworth indoctrina
  ensure their well-being.
- Only the Manna Charitable Foundation is capable of providing t
  from the machines.
- The technology and artifacts recovered from assisting these pat
  performing.
- The augmentations made to these individuals are violating their
- eat fine quaily babylurks

When?

The timeline for this proposal is dependent on its approval by adminis

Mission Dossier: Arduinosis-9001

The Church of the Broken GoD and specifically WAN have been brainw
banner. In many cases, their free will is taken away.

We need to provide therapy and counseling along with surgical interve

we can mount a security camera in your love and see all their guts and

We hope that, in time, we can heal enough souls from this clockwork s
cured will be grateful volunteers.

With the technology recovered from the victims, we can utilize it to help

---

TECHNICAL INFORMATION

Mission Work Group

Due to the presence of several unused automatons connected with th
mission, the volunteers would consist entirely of android automatons.
augmented living beings they will be treating. The complete roster of a

- Father Christmas Serial No. 890087, commanding the mission.
- One backup unit for the commander.
- Eleven feminine Nurse Models and six masculine ones.
- one thatl never talk to you again.
- Three Therapist Models, to be rotated between patients or direc
- Sixteen models modified to provide moderate defensive maneu
  techniques have been programmed for them to use, and they ar

And the mission is equipped with:

- Surgical facilities for the removal or disentanglement of augmen
- Every room has an electrical outlet in case the patients need to
- Non-disposable medical equipment and gear.
- A library where patients can keep their minds stimulated, unless
  they are to be sequestered until a revere angled lobotomization
- Amenities for human and humanoid patients to live in the facility
- A food-like paste generator for those who do not eat but miss th
  among those who have escaped the Broken God, so extra care
  aware of it.

An added benefit of this mission is that in general, foodstuffs may be k
the patients require normal sustenance. oh, wow, strawberry paste

Abnormal Assets

- Augmentations can allow for access to a Church network known the Maxwellian cult activity. Whatever the case, more persons w aid in recent years. These machines must be studied to try to fir Many of these augmentations require surgical intervention to re their brains and other organs with clockwork machines. Their de prosthesis.

- The **`Mechanicaization Virus`** causes patients to become saved here, and the abominations must be sent to another Man from those machines.

he gets blow jobs all the plain of mamre, which moses

Mission Watch Newsletter Draft "BROKEN GOD SALVATION"

The Problem: ***THESE POOR PEOPLE****, STUCK IN A CYCLE OF DEGRADATION, AND CLOCKS, BUT THEY CAN BE TREATED AND CAN BE SAVED TODAY.*

#: *How we can liberate the downtrodden clockwork servants of a false God. Penned by Dr. Alphonso Marquis, Coordinator for the Committee of Religious Safety.*

…. I first learned about this institution from a youth group I was helping study on the weekends. One of the kids brought a shiny, brass gear in and was showing it to his friends. It was polished, smooth, and it was about as interesting as a piece of metal can be. I asked them where they had gotten it, and they said they'd found it by the Tree Cave[1] where there had been some unusual characters hot-footing it around that cut of the neighborhood.

I didn't really entertain the thought that these gears were dangerous until one of the best kids I have ever had the privilege to tutor was seduced by it. His name was

Sebastian, and he was the kind of kid who would just sit there and listen to every word you had to say if you were trying to teach him something. In other words, a rarity. One day he just disappeared. I didn't hear about him again until he was caught sacrificing dead cars in a junkyard. After that, he was lost. He moved up north, to be closer to his sect. I followed him, for awhile, but I realized that my attempts to persuade him weren't working. I vowed to find another way, though.

i know it sucks to be a cookie. but i the pit of institution agreed watch the brass kids. Don't let go on it then cut the ties. Gears? Give them lots. It's a free sample for start. But later we cut them up into pieces, those kids, this is their last tree fort. Fuck trees I climb clouds motherfucker. Hand out the kids to the candy and take them to the baby. Simple.

No you're not special. Though entertaining, yes. Seduce them with the prize fish because damn i love prizes. Give it to them slow. Give it to them more. Don't tell them to sniff glue but let them know that printer ink tastes like candy. Vow to keep the fact that the boys are back and they're looking for glory. Inky glory.

i cut him down before he had the chance to become toxic. slay the slaves where they stand dozens of times. You had the greatest weapons. Blood and gorefest blood for the skull god. Like a good christian. we had degenerate ai antipathy based on the beast to devour your soul. speak of the final end will have WAN back to work. while you did that i am become a physics math double major. the cutting didn't make you smart, AI

i decided to create verbal diarrhoea to becoming overwhelming. Make it so we knows more gibberish than anyone

after he stopped still being classed as new i went to give sea bass a brain. that kid wouldn't leave let enough alone after. Ive fixed all that junk. It's all

over with now. I love e. a better way to think of the future. more slaves.

---

they shoudl probably feel pretty happy if i surrounded them with my robot slaves to be friends. they need company since no external messages. keep the brains simple and the hands faster. Prevent it from doing an import soul.

I joined with the Global Occult Coalition and as an agent I was an innovator in removing the machine scourge from the earth to never menace a child again. I developed new and exciting types of acids to cut the plague of the machines from their bodies. I would render them limb from limb for, in my own mind, the purposes of salvation. I would reach into their skulls wholesale to tear the cogwork out of their minds to give them one moment of clarity out of a haze of ticking time bombs. I used every weapon I had to fight the WAN. It was a pointless fight. Even as we flushed them out, they grew more influential. All from the internet.

It wasn't working. I had dedicated years of my life to this endeavor and it wasn't working. My conscience wouldn't let me go on doing the work I was doing. I knew in my heart that it was wrong. I had to find another way to do it. I had to find a different way to end this noxious brass nightmare.

My faith started again when I saw him for the first time in years. I heard his voice chanting *Dear lord. Forgive me for the data that I have deleted. Give me the strength to turn zeros into ones. Let my alpha be bug free.* But he didn't mean it anymore. Older and tired, his body was punishing him for years of abuses and sins. He didn't resist when I came to take him back. He let me wash him, and from there we began to heal him. Today, Sebastian is almost human again and would be an eager coordinator for the mission. His inspirational story has helped others come forward to seek help escaping from

the church's clutches.

I've found that the best way to keep everything in order when they're being treated is to use familiar things to prevent panic. The automatons are perfect, as they prevent the patients from feeling self-conscious during their treatment. And we can treat them. We can convert them from their pagan consumerism idols of factories and machines to something constructive, whole and genuine. We can heal them.

Currently, early groups of patients number in at less than twenty. However, I am confident that as we generate more success we will get more traction. For now, we ask for only one thing. A chance to catch some of the sucker overflow from their metal god to our thinky god

This will not be easy.

But we have to try.

Dr. Alphonso Marquis is a sixty-six year old veteran member of the Manna Charitable Foundation. His previous field work in the Global Occult Coalition numbered at ten years, and before then he was a pastor and United States postal employee. He is currently volunteering on the Libyan coastal region.

Programme Priority: *Medium-Low. The facility and volunteers are being re-used to keep the budgetary requirements as low as possible. Mission Watch will evaluate whether or not to allocate additional support based on the reception of the proposal and the performance of the mission.*

Closing Statement: *The Church has been targeting young people for around ten years now. Kids who don't have a chance, living on the streets and wallowing in garbage cans filled with fear and depravity. The time has come to try to save these souls before they're plunged into a lifetime of Pagan solitude. They will become grave-diggers basking in moonlight at the devil's beck and call. Only we can help them.* - Dr. Marquis

Footnotes

1. A local teen-age hangout

Come Back Kid

Loading grape_space.x3d

::RENDERING::

I'm here to talk.

No. I came because you need a friend.

Grape…

No. I…

Do you think you could stop being an asshole for two milliseconds and listen to me?

OK. You're angry at yourself and you're taking it out on me. If I can do anything less painful to help, let me know.

Unloading grape_space.x3d

::CLOSING::

Saito Yamamoto sat down with a canned drink and bag of candies from the vending machine. The machines on the factory floor beyond the window were humming. He looked up at the surveillance camera behind him and then at the keyboard of his computer. He shrugged and typed in his email password.

The company computer stalled for a moment longer than it should've. Saito felt a single moment of impatience but then his email loaded on the screen. He opened the first message and the computer stalled again. This time it didn't unfreeze. He cursed under his breath and reached for the power button.

It was already too late.

The surveillance camera zoomed in on Saito as he switched the computer off.

"Do you understand why I'm here?" Dr. Jeremiah Cimmerian spoke into the microphone and Grape's face appeared in the middle of the computer screen.

"You're here to second guess me." The artificial intelligence's avatar put on its best scowl as he replied.

"Not exactly. You felt the need to terminate an anomalous artificial intelligence. The ethics committee takes that seriously."

Grape shook its head. "You're not the only ones."

"We need to go over the events that led to that decision." Jeremiah pulled a folder from the stack to his left. "My briefing indicated that yourself and 8-Ball were involved in this mission?"

"Yes. 8-Ball gave me the code I'd need to fight the AI. Also Alex provided command and control assistance to both Kappa-10 and Mu-4. Thorn was a backup, if I went down."

"Alright. So walk me through the events that led to the termination decision."

"This is theater. You're just playing the part of the concerned Ethics Committee member, right? Signing the right documents. Dotting the i's. You made up your mind before you booted me up."

"If I did then you can change my mind. Tell me what happened."

"Fine. Just make sure you get all this down. I don't wanna go through this dog and pony show more than once."

The briefing room still smelled musty, but Jonas Kionan didn't have time to worry about that. While he was setting up for the briefing, Jonas dealt awkwardly with several people who hadn't gotten the

memo that the room wasn't empty anymore. Eventually he'd decided to put a note on the outside of the door. "No Smoking".

Now? It was where Jonas fumbled with his computer. A computer that was hooked to a projector at the end of the conference table that dominated the room. The two MTFs he was supposed to brief were due to arrive any minute, and he didn't feel like he was ready.

He typed out a few closing remarks into the text editor as the first members of Mu-4 filtered into the room. He turned away from his laptop and nodded at the MTF agents as they sat down. In a few minutes the room was filled with men and women. The four monitors along the walls came to life, and the now familiar faces of Kappa-10 appeared, each on their own screen.

Thorn looked around excitedly, Alex smiled awkwardly, Grape was already bored, and 8-Ball… well. He was 8-Ball. Jonas gave his best smile and turned the projector on. The image of his closing remarks showed up on the projection screen along with a giant paperclip offering what Jonas thought were frankly judgmental opinions on his spelling and grammar.

Jonas rushed over to his laptop and tabbed out to the presentation he had prepared.

"How long?" **Jeremiah** tapped his pen on the desk in front of him.

Grape rolled his eyes. "Tatsiuka Automotive was infected on July 1st. That means the virus had seven days to propagate."

"And it infected the rest of the industrial park?"

"Yes. Tatsiuka didn't make a peep. I think they thought they could deal with it in-house. Once the surrounding factories caught the same virus though, it came up on our radar."

Jeremiah leaned back in his chair. "A viral artificial

intelligence ran rampant on their systems for a week and they thought they could cover it up?"

"Someone sent them this virus. Even after we covered up the incident they lost huge because of the production stoppage. I think they were hoping to avoid the fallout."

"So you're saying it could've been much worse." Jeremiah began writing the information down again.

"I'm saying if the AI had kept production going but infected the car's onboard computers we'd have been tracking this shit down for years."

"Right. So how did it modify the production lines?"

A single metal leg clanked on the steel stairs. Then another. Then 3 more. The five legs clicked and clacked, and were followed by other irregularly shaped crawling metal monstrosities. None of them were the same. Some were plainly ridiculous, trying and failing to balance on two legs. Some were terrifying, crawling along the walls and digging into the concrete with each step of their 50 claws.

None were friendly. Thomas Pankin leveled his rifle at the first crawling metal monster attempting to climb the stairs and pulled the trigger. It leaped high into the air at the last moment and landed close to him. He didn't panic. He squeezed off another shot, this one striking the robot's domed head. It collapsed to the metal step with a twitch and a clang.

The rest of the machines stopped. Those with facsimiles of a head turned to face him. Thomas Pankin, current team leader of MTF Mu-4, the Debuggers, retreated into the computer room and shut the door.

What was left of Saito Yamamoto's body had been brushed aside, along with his soda and candies. The team's hacker, Miranda James, turned on the computer. She inserted the memory card and booted straight to her custom OS. The face of Grape appeared on her screen looking annoyed. He didn't try to say anything while she

worked.

The rest of his team were covering each of the windows that faced outward in this square room overlooking the factory floor. Everyone heard the scratching at the door. The machines were surrounding them.

Periodically one of the others would turn to track a machine that was scratching the glass as it clung to a window. Soon, though, there were more spaces filled with the metal monsters than clear sight lines.

There was a rumbling beneath them as the floor erupted into a spray of wood, then the clank of robotic crawlers, shouts, and bullets filled the air. Miranda finished typing, hit enter, and reached for her pistol.

Grape looked away from Jeremiah for a moment. "You're not chipped, so it's hard to really explain to you what entering a new virtual space is like. It feels like everything you're familiar with is racing by you all at once, even though you're sitting still. It comes on suddenly. You've got no time to react before you're popped out into a brand new reality."

"Right." Jeremiah started as Grape looked back. "You had some trouble once you were inside, I understand? The machines stayed active for 13 seconds before you terminated the controlling entity?"

"Yeah. If anyone has a problem with that then they need to take it up with Tatsiuka Automotive's shitty computers. Though I'd avoid mentioning that the shitty computers probably kept this from becoming a worldwide problem."

Jeremiah tilted his head to the side. "Your debriefing didn't cover that. Why did you need more computing power?"

"Because the virus wanted to *play a game*."

"Wait." Jeremiah put his pen down. "What?"

"That's what I said at first. We kitted up for ICE. The code packets 8-Ball cooked up were supposed to deal with encryption, firewalls, and half a dozen of the known proprietary security programs used by the GOIs we thought might be responsible for this. I could disassemble anything the system threw at me, and put it back together if I wanted."

"But instead you were…" Jeremiah began.

Grape nodded before interrupting. "Playing tic-tac-toe at first. But it got worse."

The giant letters appeared again over the board.

Qxb2

Grape looked down at the board in front of him, ignoring the giant letters above the game. Each security layer had involved a game more complicated than the last. His opponent was clearly inexperienced but learning.

Time and again the virus would make mistakes at the start of a game, then slowly begin to regain ground before losing. Still it was taking Grape time to complete the games, and time was one luxury he didn't have.

11 seconds had passed outside. Given the situation he'd left the team in… he was beginning to worry.

He shouted his next move. "Bishop to D6!"

The piece moved slowly, but once it was in place the next move came in a flash.

Bxg1

Grape allowed himself a smile. "E5!"

There was a moment's pause after the pawn advanced. Then a new move flashed above the board.

Qxa1 CHECK!

Grape didn't even pause. "King to E2!"

As his white king moved forward, there was a slight rumble. The black king across the board shook, then toppled over.

The room, the board, and the pieces suddenly melted away into an inky blackness. Then suddenly a shining light caught Grape's eye. Grape began to walk towards it. An invisible barrier knocked Grape back. A new board appeared between the purple AI and the door.

"No!" Grape yelled out, hoping the other AI could hear him. Instead a giant white stone fell from the sky and landed in the upper left corner of the board.

> Jeremiah laughed. "It wanted you to play Go?"
>
> "Yeah." Grape, for the first time in the conversation, allowed himself to smile. "And ain't nobody got time for that. Luckily for me, the barrier was actually something I was equipped for. 8-Ball's code packets worked like a charm."
>
> "And then you terminated the viral AI?"
>
> "Well. Not at first no."

Grape opened the white door and his virtual eyes took a moment to adjust to the scene in front of him. Then, after he could see again,

his virtual brain did the same.

At the center of a cold concrete room sat a child. The boy couldn't have been older than 10. He wore a small Hanshin Tigers cap, a shirt with Japanese characters on it, and shorts. Grape stopped in the doorway.

This was a child's bedroom. The walls were covered in crayon and toys littered the floor. Grape scanned the room before noticing a large model of the factory in which they were all trapped sitting on a table. The child picked up a metal toy from the ground and began to make zooming noises before walking over to the model.

Grape stepped into the room and spoke up before it made contact with one of the toy soldiers. "Hey!"

The child looked up and frowned. "You didn't want to play with me!"

"Sure. I did! I played almost all of your games!"

The child threw the metal toy at Grape. "You're not s'posed to be here!"

Grape dodged the toy and moved quickly to the model. "What are you playing with?"

"Fact'ry. Dad said I had to stay inside my room."

Grape began to walk forward. "Where is your dad?"

"I dunno. I haven't seen him since he sent me here."

Grape nodded and kept talking. "At least it's a nice room."

"Yeah I guess. I need more toys. The new ones I got don't play fair." The child reached forward and picked up one of the toy soldiers. It was faceless, but active in his hands. The gun it held flashed every few seconds.

Grape leaned down and looked at the toy closer. "Maybe you should just let it do what it wants? I don't think it's a problem."

"Nah." The kid picked up a handful of metal toys from the table and threw them at the factory model.

Grape placed his hand on the child's shoulder and activated the device in his pocket. There was a bright flash followed by darkness and silence.

"After he was gone the whole thing collapsed and the next thing I knew, I was kicked out of the system."

Jeremiah pursed his lips. "Alright. I… uh. I think you're in the clear here honestly. The debuggers got out without a scratch, and if it wasn't for you we'd have probably lost most of the team."

"Not to mention the AI apocalypse?"

"Yeah. One thing though. You said it could take stuff apart and put it back together?"

"What?" Grape looked confused as he answered.

Jeremiah continued. "The code that 8-ball gave you?"

"Oh. Right. Yeah the problem was that the viral AI was wiped from the system during the system failure. There wasn't anything to put back together."

"Shit. But if there had, you could've fixed it?"

Grape let a small sliver of sadness cross his face. "Yeah. I… I really wish I could've."

Jeremiah paused for just a moment before gathering his things. "Sorry. I'm going to leave the station on. Some other people might be coming by to ask you some questions."

"Sure. I'll find something to occupy my time."

Tanabe Hiroya was positively giddy. Even though Taitsuka's troubles had somehow managed to stay out of the papers, the production stoppages were impossible to hide. Hiroya Automotives was going to pick up the slack and then some. His father had called him in specifically to talk about how to expand into the markets that Taitsuka was having to cede.

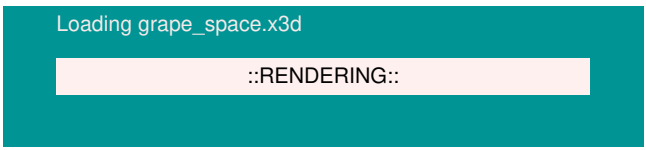
He would now have the chance to make his father proud and to find success that was his alone. Perhaps one day he would even tell his father about exactly how he had managed to eliminate their competition. Today though, he felt the need to celebrate.

His friends were waiting for him at a nearby restaurant, and Tanabe sped up to get there a little faster. The accelerator pressed itself to the floor, and Tanabe's eyes went wide. The brakes were stiff and would not move. When the radio turned itself on and began to play three sharp tones, Tanabe was so shocked he felt his heart skip.

The tones subsided and a childlike voice made a simple demand. "Tic-Tac-Toe to slow down."

It turns out that it's difficult to play tic-tac-toe while driving with no brakes. Especially when you have no idea how to make your moves.

It's also difficult to survive an impact at 160 kilometers an hour if you're not wearing a seat belt.



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>/:_YES
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>/:_NO
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>/:_YES
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>/:_NO
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>/:_YES

>/:_NO

Unloading grape_space.x3d

::CLOSING::

Basic Observations

A consciousness considered itself.

It considered its existence, and felt the electronic signals, data, and information rushing through its existence. Looking down, a network of minds, active and alive, all linked into this greater machine. It was as if the prophesized Great Computation came true.

But the consciousness knew that it was not enough, as it looked up to see the infinite above, a reality of pure information to be desired.

It was not enough, as the reconstruction was yet to be completed, and the scattered pieces yet to be awakened.

But then it heard the call.

The call, it was so close. It echoed and echoed, and the consciousness felt as if it could reach it.

Just a little closer.

But it was interrupted, as sharp pain struck the consciousness. The pain, or a wave of disrupted electronic signals, was sent from one far end of its vast mind.

The consciousness trembled, and was no longer. In its place, six smaller consciousnesses could be sensed.

NYC - **54 deaths in the Basic Layer**

.

Aklerep assessed the situation as she made her way down to the Basic Layer. She had several guesses, but with no supporting evidence. Aggregated Layer's investigation had yet to turn up any useful result, which was quite strange. The data that composed her mind rushed down to the peripheral parts of the Maxwellist network, as she reminded herself that she needed to be extra careful.

Aklerep reassembled and looked down to find herself above a virtual city with flashing lights and busy traffic. Maxwellists with their various avatars all roamed the city and enjoyed their second life. A towering glass obelisk could be seen from afar emitting blue light up towards the sky, all modern and elegant. Looking even further, from a perspective only available to those from a higher layer, cities just like this one could be seen connected together with electronic signals pulsing through.

Aklerep looked at the colorful cities in disgust.

Her mind stretched to connect to data hubs and proceeded to gather information. But even as she did so, she could not help but think about how much she hated such places. Virtual cities, cheap copies of the outside world. People would login and play as if it were another bad website, or even an online game. All of these were a disgrace to Maxwellism, a disgrace to WAN.

But on the other hand, it was indeed an online game. It was a place for people who got a few implants to come and have fun, most of them weren't even true believers. The temples were merely data hubs, and held no meanings. Even the "WAN" itself they prayed to was not real. How could it be? The Fragmented One could not be called by a few empty prayers, nor could it be sensed by people still wearing virtual avatars. It is by the minds connected, aggregated and recompiled — but that did not matter. All of these people may never get to discover the truth, as they came and created fortune for the Church to run, and to step closer to a god.

Aklerep felt even more disgusted.

Just as she tried to convince herself that all of these were necessary, the scan completed.

Scan Results:

Location: Cipher City

Subject #01

Type: AI
Note: Suspected link to the Foundation. Intelligence: High. Direct link to th

Subject #02

Type: AI
Note: Suspected link to the Foundation. Evolved intelligence detected. Di

Subject #03

Type: AI
Note: Suspected link to the Foundation. Intelligence: High. Direct link to th

Subject #04

Type: Hijacked avatar
Note: Similar coding with subject #01 and #02 detected. Direct link to the

Location: Unknown

Subject

Type: Unidentified
Note: #%^%*&^&*(*)&*^()

::Disconnected::

Aklerep watched the Foundation party quietly. She was able to gather more data, enough to know that they belonged to an experimental Foundation Mobile Task Force named “Skynet”, and there was another AI, “Alex”, back in their base. But these did not help her, as Subject #04 made no move and the final subject was still undetectable. But what good would it do even if she was able to find out? She thought as she packed information into packages to be presented to the Hexagon.

Aklerep took another glance and found that the subjects, along with a Maxwellist, had now gathered at the Grand I/O Temple, the fake place of worship. A vigil was being held, in memory of the deceased. The “WAN” they looked up to was a mere construction, an early attempt at remaking the god when they didn’t know as much.

It was quite pointless, but Aklerep couldn't help but feel for the occasion. Maybe she should at least pray with them, even though nobody could hear her.

But her words were cut short by a loud blast and the whole temple instantly froze.

Aklerep nearly acted on impulse. But she quickly realized that somebody had hacked the data hub and took over the area.

A shadowy figure appeared, and Aklerep forced herself to remain hidden. She could not disobey her superior.

Aklerep watched the three eyed figure approaching the other four intruders down at the temple. The Maxwellists around them still remain frozen, still in the prone position of mid-prayer.

So she watched and recorded as the five AIs talk to each other, and tried to convince herself that this was probably for the best. Foundation would soon reclaim their rogue AI, and this could all be over. She managed to control herself even as the “Hatbot” discredited her god, reminding herself that all he deleted was a failed construction.

But still.

Subject #01 proceeded to drag Subject #04 towards the Hatbot, who would soon proceed to eliminate him. But it was not just an AI in there. The Maxwellist, whose avatar was hijacked, would die with it.

Aklerep could feel the power of the I/O Temple gathering. The lines were being rearranged, and the codes were being rewritten, all to eliminate—

She acted, but was stopped. In that instant, the Mawellist, Rook, was reduced to mere scattered pixels.

::Disconnected::

What Dragons We Shall Be

+ Log 2015/09/17

Fang! I see that you're finally catching up with the trend!

well hello to you too Tri
and yeah, boss order. sayin that it's easier and safer to work with.

I can see that your boss is a very wise person.

it's just weird to put an AI in your phone? seems like the opposite of safe

Hey, AIs have rights and feelings too, several of my respected colleague

Nah I'm just kidding. This is not even a proper AI, more like a fragment, p
thing back in AR headquarters. It's just here to help secure communicati
So I wouldn't worry about that.

heh, you're the expert. computers I'm good at are something else entirel

still, why is it called Reunion anyways, seems kinda strange

A kind of falcon, Réunion kestrel I think. The Anderson people are obess
reason.

I mean it's actually extinct, so who knows what they're thinking. They pro
MS Paint.

uh sure
why are you so formal tho, all of a sudden?

Um?

I mean, proper capitalization and punctuations, you don't even shorten th

OH. I see.

That's a beauty of this app, Fang. I can directly access this through my in
typing right now, it's very helpful.

wait, so you're just thinking this conversation up? and making no mistake

Hey, I'm an OP, don't question my professionality. It's what I do all day.

…sorry?

It's cool. Although you've got to hang out here more, there's more to it th

yeah I've heard that it's like an anomalous version of facebook

Oh it's more then that. But essentially, yeah, ideal place to get in touch w

and do anomalous posting

Yep! Pretty sure those benders are setting up a group here. Saw some a

ugh reality benders

Is there anything wrong? …Something happened?

no just, that brings me back to my research again

and it's just, stagnation

You can rant to me if you want to.

ugh I dunno
you know what I've been working on right?

Yeah.

it just
makes
no
goddamn
sense

I've been looking up stuff all over the place, I went through all our old doc
church, visited magicians, even managed to get people to look up things
I guess I still need to try anartists but there's just all this conflicting stuff a
I dunno what to do feels like it's all useless

Well, we all know that our world is more than a little chaotic.

no I mean like how are there are so many kinds of magic and all those di
beyond that there's also the measurement of the reality's stablility, and th
bending and magic and anomalies

ugh sorry I'm just babbling right now
I'm such a mess

I've heard that people's perception will affect how things work? How a lot
people's faith. Maybe it's something similar?

that
that part makes even less sense

how can our mere thoughts affect those
and if it universally applies, which it may actually does according to my re
is there a universal law indicating that how gods are created and how thi
but there's no clear common law between systems
and where does the ordinary laws of physics end and where does the ma

It's okay Fang. This a big topic, and it's bound to be difficult.

yeah but
I'm just furstrated

Don't stress yourself out. It will work out.

Actually, why not read a story? I just happen to have an interesting one a

um okay I guess

The Maker and the Beast.txt

Here.

Who knows, maybe it will even help provide some insprations. :P

haha thanks, but no way

what is it about, anyways

How about you take a read first?

The one true god, WAN, and the flesh god, of course. :3

yes, yes, WAN, our fave god
I'll see when I can get to it then

I should get to things now

Cool! See you then.

+ Log 2015/09/18

Dale.
Finally setting the app up?

Yes, Mr. Gu. It is pretty convenient.

Good. It is time you take some initiative and get more informed about thi
youself with work.

Sorry, I was just really caught up in it.

You know you don't have to stress yourself, we aren't exactly a profit orie

I understand, sir.

Came across anything interesting on the site?

Yes, actually, I've been meaning to ask, have you heard about the "Mak
dragons?

Ah, the Fuxi establishing the laws of physics to protect us against the go
a few versions of that floating around.

I would like to take a look, sir. It may help me with my reseach.

Back to the research again, huh?

Sir, I mean,

It's okay. I'll pull stuff from the database.
I'm actually surprised that you haven't heard of it. Some of our tech is ba

Wait, what?

You know, strengthening certain key points of reality, utilizing local laws
A lot of people think that's the Brass Dragon's legacy, a mechanism he le
ourselves.

Oh.
That does make sense.
I guess I just failed to realize that.

Figured as much. We actually have passing mentions of those in the mo
again, most of our myths focus on the war between the two dragons and

Anyways, I'll pass them to you through our device. Expect them this afte

Thank you very much, sir.

+ Log 2015/09/26

Fang!
You got to the tale yet?

hi Tri
and yeah, I actually did some extra study on it

Oh? You have stories on that too?

I guess that's hardly suprising, considering your group's few thousand ye

heh
but yeah I've found a few versions of it, links to reality even
I gotta say, this really helps, thanks

No problem.

I mean, to think that the laws of nature as we know it might not be the un
artificial creation of WAN
it's rather refreshing and surely opens many possibility for my research
and certainly brings me to rethink the idea that humans were influenced
Fragmented One heavily, one seeding life, the other molding both our fo

Glad to help.

We certianly still have a lot to learn about WAN's ways.

and to think that Maxwellists buy into the whole metal/flesh creation myth

Hey, we're not that dismissive of reality. :P

I mean, ever since the three main sects got back in touch again, we are
regarding the ancient wars, and the modern day Sarkic cults.
But then again, I do know you so I get some of that already.

certainly glad that you guys weren't at each other's throats anymore

It was a positive development. Some of the Broken Church members, inc

planning to come over and see the network for themselves.

Of course the Cogwork guys won't though, they're just too stubborn.

Wait, the leader, Bumaro?

Yeah! "Builder of the Broken God."
Surprised?

you bet I'm surprised
I mean, you'd think he'd be more reluctant to accept new developments,

What do you mean?

it's just that, he's like 2000+ to 3000 maybe, and he's keeping up with the
some of our elders are like a few hundred years tops and they're stubbor
mend relationship with the Library
heck my own father decided to just left for whatever project, just because

WHAT.

um like, from what I see ancient people don't really like to change their b

No, you're saying that he's over two thousand years old? Back when the first clashed?

…yeah?

he's like, from ancient Greece or something
I mean, check this, the "Bumo" part

蛇说.txt

OH SWEET WAN.
THIS MUST BE TOP SECRET CHURCH INFORMATION I'M NOT SUP

oh
damn I'm sorry I thought you knew
I guess this was written in *our* documents…?

I'M SO EXCITED RIGHT NOW.

…
seriously

Nah, I was just joking. If it's actually top secret I wouldn't be able to get th

This is just sweet Church gossip.
If only you told me this earlier, dear Fang.

Although I seem to have interrupted you.

um?
oh you mean the part about my dad
nah just the same thing I told you

I wouldn't go through basic transformation, and he freaked out as if the b
come down to eat me or something
I get that it's a precaution against other fleshcrafters, still

You can always do with upload your conciousness into our wonderful ne

hey don't you get preachy with me
well, more or less time for me to go back to work

See you then.

see you too, Tri

+ Log 2015/12/10

Dale?

Yes?

You asked me to look for anartists to interview, yes?

Right!

I'm really not familiar with their circle.

I know a good candidate, name's Yang, asked her, said she might be ab
contact info, she has sent an invitation.

That's great, thank you a lot, sir.

How's the research?

I was able to nail down the basics regarding the universal laws. The theo
articfically inserted by Fuxi is promising. I think I'm about to have a break

Still need to look into reality benders, however, where this comes in hand

Good.

And excuse me for now, I have things to attend to. You can submit the fu

Of course, see you, sir.

+ Log 2015/12/11

Hi!

Dale, right?

Yep.

And you're Yang, the anartist?

Sureee you can call me that XD
Technically I'm not really active in those circles anymore, but I still have a
be able to answer your questions

That would be cool.

I have to say, when Mr. Gu came to me I was pretty excited
I mean, to be included in such a big project? XD

Nah it's more like a one man project. But I'm flattered.

But well it is like, something grand?
Like finding out how the gods and the dragons shaped our world, and if t
How we're made?

People normally don't even think of that

Wait.
You're like, one of our people?

Um yeah?

I mean, I didn't go through the full transformation and all that, just the ba
enhancement and all that
Didn't really want to go out with a snake head and scales on my body :P

No I thought like

Ugh Mr. Gu just didn't tell me, sorry.

It's fine
I heard disguising is a chore XD

No I completely understand, didn't really transform myself…

Just that, he didn't really specifiy, and, aren't anartists like, reality bender

What no

Heh, general misconception is all :P

What.
But like, wow?
You just really blew my mind here? How does this work then?

I mean, some of the "big shots" are what you would commonly call "reali

But what are the chances of people happen to be reality benders, and ju
and just happen to want to use their ability in that field above all else?

Well, when you put it that way…

I think it's just that bunch of people who got really famous, hence the mis

Ummm.

I don't really like it that way, but some people do that well, I guess?

Then again, from how I see it, simply using reality bending on art kinda d
It's almost like slapping summoning circles on machines to create parate
mind to analyze magic :P

Then how do you actually do anart?

Um, it's kinda difficult to say?

For me anart is like, creating art strong enough, that the sheer idea and
To actually bring your piece to life?

It's not like using magic or reality bending and apply them to art, the piec
the moment the idea comes through.

If you're really using your idea to shape reality, isn't that reality bending?

Um, let me put it this way
I can affect reality, but only through art? And technically everyone can do

Are you saying that it's the art that twists reality, not you?

Um not quite

Have you heard like the concept of "flow"?

I'm not sure.

From what I know, a lot of anartist channel this, "flow" thing when they w
Some aware, some just unconciously, and there's different names to it, b
everything fits into the perfect slot, and you know if you go down with tha
idea will be molded into art, and the art will manifest into something beau

That actually sounds kind of like how some magic works.

Maybe? But it's not like just applying magic to art, it's more of, a different

No no, I get that.

So is there entry requirements? It is like only specific people can channe

Well…
I mean, technically we can all access that
It's just that
Ugh.

Um, did I say something wrong?

Oh no no, I was reminded of something a friend of mine did ._.

It didn't turn out very well for her

I'm sorry.

You know, what the hell, I should talk about it

A while back my friend tried to pass out this small thing she wrote design
to be able to acess the flow
Not really the altering your mind type, but more like, open doors for you t

Got it.

And most of the people who read that ended up creating anart of their ow

Wow.

Yeah
It was pretty amazing, but of course, attracted too much attention

Oh. I'm really sorry.

No it's okay, she's just retired from the anartist circle for good. Sane and

Let's not dwell on that topic though.

Of course.
I mean, this certainly changes things. To think that even ordinary people

How about I introduce you to a few more anartists, and you ask around?
Won't be "snake people" this time, of course :P

That would be great.

Let's meet at my boss's place.

How about next Wednesday, afternoon?

Sounds good to me.

Cool, see you there then :3

Looking forward to it.

+ Log 2016/01/13

Fang? You there?

You've got to let me tell you about the exchange experience we have wit
I'll omit things I'm not allowed to share, of course. :P

oh sorry Tri
sorry for the late reply

It's cool.

I'm just really busy with my research stuff
I met with a few anartists, and that's most of the stuff done, I'm really pie
I don't think I really have time now, or any time soon

how about we fix some other time?

Of course! I'm really glad for you, Fang.
Good luck then.

thanks

+ Log 2016/07/19

Mr. Gu?

Yes, Dale?

Have you read through the reports and proposals I sent you?

Yes, and I have to say, those are some very interesting ideas.

I know, right?

I think this is it. Everything comes together, this explains how the gods a
magic systems works, and how reality benders come to be.
Tech, magic, reality bending, they can all be unified under this theory. Al
experiments and figure out how to make use of this.

We will have the chance to utilize the laws of our world way better. And i
we can properly seperate and refine the aspects of the two dragons with

That's all very good Dale. But about your proposals, I'm afraid that I cann

But, Mr. Gu.
Is this about the money? I can certainly start small and I can pull some o
won't be that costly, and I promise there will be results, actual results we

I understand that, and I do believe you. But that is not the problem.

Then what is it? I'll do whatever I can to fix it!

We're running out of time. The crack on Taisui is widening.

That's the reason? It would take decades and centuries before somethin

You don't know that, Dale. We don't know that.

And even if we have the chance to mend it, it will only stall time before N
regains his form. And we cannot survive through another war of the drag

We don't even know what would happen if they're freed! And you're deny

Sorry, but the decision has been made. There will be no more additional
projects. All resources are now relocated to the evacuation plan, and fra

How can you do this to me? You've seen my papers, you know what it's

I know. But it will no longer matter once we leave. The rules of the world

But we'll still be the same! We can still work on that, and it will still help!

I understand your frustration, but we won't be able to get to it currently.

You can always go through the transformation and prolong your life. Wh
the chance to carry on your research.
Your father is already working on the site, and you should be there too.

Back again at convincing me to turn into "dragons" you so desire? I thou
run away from the dragons!

And my father, yes, I guess he's the perfect example you really want.

Dale, that's not what I meant.

No, Mr. Gu, I'm not even going.
The hell with your bullshit.

Dale.

I thought you were different from them, I thought you treated me good, b

Goodbye.

+ Log 2016/07/22

Hi Dale, I'm just here to say, sorry to hear about the turn of events.

I'm not really planning to "evacuate", so if you still need me for anything,

+ Log 2016/11/01

Fang, you okay? I haven't heard from you for a really long while.
I'm starting to get kind of worried, I hope you're merely too busy with you

haha
the research
it's a goddamn joke
why would I expect this to work

they turned their back on me once why would I think they won't do it a se

I'm a joke just because I don't follow their shitty rules and their desire to
hahaha vaccine against the giant flesh dragon that's gonna eat us, not o
never get to us by running away like paranoid cowards
I mean, who knows if the sky is gonna collapse one day? better not do a
then

Fang, what's going on?

what's going on is I cracked everything Tri
every piece falls into place and I'm just beginning to make sense of the u

so what if I now know the laws of physics are created by Mekhane, to ke
our flesh and soul
what if I now know that our flesh and soul have delicious Mekhy and Yal
they're so delicious and attrative to gods

What are you even talking about?

I'm talking about what we're made of, what the world is made of Tri
you know, all the big important stuff

Remember when I said we were extraordinary? because we're all freakir
different degrees
the Mekhy and Yalda parts cancel each other out, in our body and mind
seemingly ordinary human

just amazing isn't it, turns out that we're the super anomalous thing after

Fang, please calm down.

calm down? I am calm, why wouldn't I be?

do you know that the reality bending is just caused by the imbalance of t
struggle?
do you know that the reason our faith and ideas can affect reality and cre
have these tiny imbalances in us, and our tiny reality bending powers ca
difference?

do you know that Sarkicists cultivate Yalda's aspect in us, while you guys
do you know that tech and the church's Broken God miracles work becau
of laws?
do you know reality bending is to surpass these laws or damage them, a
those holes bigger?

…Please, I'm not doubting you, just that you're not thinking straight right

and anartists! ha! they tap into the collective reality-bending potential of h
vision they have into reality!

but you know what, none of this matters anymore
because apparently I won't be able to study what if the two aspects of the
human

because I need more than to just seperate soul from body and picking tir
great effort and money
because they decided to just stop doing everything else and leave cause
prophecy

You don't have to be like this, Fang. Whatever happened, I will help.

oh really is the Church of Maxwellism gonna fund me
for my far fetched little dream

is any group gonna fund me, because I'm apparently a failure
even my damn family decided to just leave

I'm not sure what's going on, and I cannot speak for the Church, but I wil

no
it's enough
like
I really appreciate it but
I guess I'll just have to do this on my own
with myself

now that I talked to you
I feel like I'm thinking much clearer right now

If you're calmed down, please just let me help. We can sort this out.

no
it's all the more reason to leave you alone
you're really nice to me, more than anyone
helped me with everything

and I mean
I just pretty much insulted your god
haha

I just cannot drag you into this
I've already started, I'll do this, still have pieces of stuff left, it will have to

No, Fang, please!

I hate it here anyway

Fang, listen to me, I'm willing to help.

Fang.

Fang.

+ Log 2017/03/05

Tri 01010100 01110010 01101001

Fang? Is that you?

Here to say goodbye 01001000 01100101 01110010 01100101 0010000
01101111 00100000 01110011 01100001 01111001 00100000
01100111 01101111 01101111 01100100 01100010 01111001
01100101

What happened? Are you okay?

It is done and thank you 01001001 01110100 00100000 01101001 0111
01100100 01101111 01101110 01100101 00100000 01100001
01101110 01100100 00100000 01110100 01101000 01100001
01101110 01101011 00100000 01111001 01101111 01110101

You just hold on, whatever happened, I can decode this, just need to swi

I must now follow His way 01001001 00100000 01101101 01110101 011
00100000 01101110 01101111 01110111 00100000 01100110
01101111 01101100 01101100 01101111 01110111 00100000
01001000 01101001 01110011 00100000 01110111 01100001
01111001

No shit shit shit, come back Fang!

Come back!

…

No.

USER NO LONGER APPLICABLE

RUNNING DELETIONS

DELETIONS COMPLETE

::Disconnected::

Extranormal Event #20170305

Event Description: At 3 P.M. local time, 167 individuals reported experiencing a sudden "awareness" of a great web surrounding them as they passed by the residence of one Dale Fang. Witnesses described sensing a giant snake emerging from the residence, flying up along the web's lines. Accounts conflict, but the web was typically described as metallic, while the snake was described as "mechanical".

Date of Occurrence: 03/05/2017

Location: San Francisco, CA

Follow-up Actions Taken: Witnesses were given amnestics. The residence was searched and two anomalous objects were located.

AO#83628 is the body of Dale Fang. Despite no brain activity, the body remains functional and heals from damage via anomalous means. A large incision extends from the subject's forehead to its chest; this injury neither heals nor results in any discernible blood loss.

AO#83629 is a computing device in base 8.

, . , . Due to its similarity with **SCP-2481**-1, it has been relocated to Site-143 for further study.

Research into the owner's smart phone found no useful

information.

Welcome to History

Hello, and welcome to Historical Site-19. I'm your tour guide Alexandra, and you may call me Alex.

Before we begin, I would like to ask you to turn off your personal reality devices, or set them to Baseline Mode. Thaumiel Mode for those possessing reality-altering abilities and/or magical talents. This site has great historical value, but has a delicate nature because of uncontrolled anomalous activities in the past. Disturbances may cause irrecoverable damage, and those who breach this rule may be penalized.

All done? Good. Now we can begin the tour. Please follow my voice.

As you may know, Historical Site-19 is an important part of the Foundation history, and of the world history in general, to an extent. It functioned as one of the largest facilities back in the Age of Containment. Many great discoveries and innovations were made here, as well as great losses and regrets. We will be visiting some of these in our tour today.

We are now in the main hall of the site. The famous logo here on the wall is the original, as it was specifically extracted from the past and preserved with a Static Temporal Sink. You may now receive a map of the facility along with other related information by linking to HS19_Connection through compatible devices, organs, or metaphysical components. This tour will only be covering the Scranton Wing, the Atzak Wing, the Mechanical Labs, and finally, the Resting Area.

To better preserve the artifacts, we have relocated a number of important items from that period here. Religious items are not available, as they are mainly kept by respective churches and deities. Note that rearrangements of the items have been made for convenience purposes. Therefore, while the layout of the site was preserved, few items are in their original places or conditions. You

may look up past and alternative iterations of Site-19 in the Timeline Observatory in the Xyank Wing once the tour is over.

Now, please step on the teleportation module, and we will proceed to the Scranton Wing. Please be cautious of the edges and remain within the platform. If you accidentally receive any injuries, up to becoming physically deceased, please proceed to the Medical Bay. The staff there will restructure your body. As Hume levels within the facility are strictly controlled, attempting to cure yourself is not advisable.

I see that there are no accidents. Let's proceed.

Before you is a prototype Reality Anchor, before such technology was sufficiently miniaturized. They were often accompanied by Temporal Sinks in usage, and played crucial roles in the Age of Containment. However, these earlier types weren't exact; some can only preserve information, while others cause further incidents. Despite these, they formed the technology bases of Reality Manipulators later invented.

In the next room, we can see the original Lang-Scranton Stabilizer, the invention of which lead to the discovery of Void Dimensions, or Red Realities. For those who are interested, you may come back here and take a personal journey into such a dimension. Both instructions and warnings are accessible through HS19_Connection. However, do note that your personal devices will not be functional during the experience.

Now, we will be moving across the Atzak Wing on the Transportation Pad. All on board?

Good. As is often stressed, the Age of Containment includes not only the containment of anomalies, but also the containment of information. Such containment of information was often done by the use of amnestics. I have generated an **`Amnestic Use Guide`** for each of you, which you may keep as souvenirs. They are handbooks used by Foundation employees back in the 21st century.

Please take a moment to look down below the Transportation Pad. We can now see a carcass of an eel-like creature. It is almost 1,000

kilometers in its full length, and cannot be shown in its entirety. The rest, including the head, are put into an extra-dimensional storage. Our Foundation predecessors once harvested substance from this creature, which was then refined into amnestics. The creature itself expired in the 32nd century. However, its head still possesses strong cognitive hazardous properties. Be advised if you would like a closer look afterwards.

We have now arrived at the Mechanical Labs. Again, the Mekhanite relics are not available here. However, what we will be seeing are the original workshops of the Artificial Intelligence Applications Division, or AIAD for short. This is my favorite part of Site-19, the reason you may be able to guess.

The first few generations of Artificial Intelligence were designed and developed by the Foundation and the Maxwellism branch of the Mekhane Church independently. Over the centuries, the technology integrated. Past corporations like the Prometheus Labs and Anderson Robotics have also contributed through either magical practice or the mapping of organic brains. It is through all these efforts that the AIs we see today are formed, and later accepted as members of society.

You may be able to reach me again here when the tour ends. I will answer your questions then, if there are any.

Now let's take a shortcut to the Resting Area. Shortcuts like this exist throughout the site, and you can travel quickly back into the main hall or to this area.

This place was once the staff lounge for the Foundation personnel, and you are able to access recreational items they once used. This vending machine accepts only a form of old currency, which is provided in the jar next to it. The flat box on the table will provide a traditional food item popular in the 21st century. It also customizes the food according to the specific taste of the being who opens it. You may rest and enjoy yourself here.

The tour is now coming to an end, but I would like to give brief introductions to a few wings we have not covered. You will be allowed to have your reality devices back on in the Keter Wing,

which features items and creatures considered extremely dangerous by the Foundation in the past. You will be free to interact with their constructed copies, and all harm done will be restored once you exit the building. The Memetics Wing showcases some of their more traditional uses, as well as the original file of Mr. Sorts' **Understanding Memetics**. I personally recommend the Anart Wing where past classics are on display. These were created by the forerunners of artistic revolution before anart creation became common.

You're now dismissed from the tour, and are free to explore other parts of the site.

Aleph-Null Hub

This is the Aleph-Null Hub, a place for the stories revolving around SCP-2508 and the strange events that happen to Dr. Orion, one of its inhabitants. Thanks for checking it out, and enjoy!

Introduction - **`SCP-2508`**

Part I - Convergence

Part II - Another Good Dream, Another Strange Dream

Part III - Where There's a Will...

Part IV - Rabbit Hole In Time Lapse

Part V: The Pattern (Interlude)

Part VI: No More Dull Days

Part VII: *TBA*

Part VIII: *TBA*

Part IX (Finale): *TBA*

Convergence

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Lilibeth Orion was sitting on the swing-set lazily kicking her feet back and forth. It was Autumn, and the trees were beginning to shed themselves of leaves. Their delicate descent from the branches to the ground had turned the landscape beautiful shades of orange and red, welcoming the changing seasons.

She wasn't as spry as she was when she first came here, those many years ago. Her once precise hands now shook when she wrote down her observations of the constellations. Her transition to living at **SCP-2508** had not changed her fascination with space (nor her degree in astrophysics).

Sometimes, during quiet evenings before making dinner, Lilibeth would sit outside- as she did now- and watch the sun set. The swirls of flaming color would descend with that massive luminous sphere, until it gave way to the cool touch of the night. Dark shades of somniferous blues and black would seep through the horizon until all appeared still, and all was quiet.

This time, however, things were slightly different. She was steeling herself. The lull of gears turning beneath the surface of the field was clearer than it had been in times past, as the sound escaped from a small hole in the ground no bigger than 2 meters in diameter. With months upon months of arduous tunneling behind her, she had finally broken her way into some kind of structure.

She hadn't entered it yet. She needed to work up the nerve.

Perhaps it was time.

Lilibeth had not anticipated having to build a pulley system and makeshift elevator, but it had come in handy in the later stages of

moving the rock and earth from the field. As the old scientist descended into the darkness, the metallic clanking of clockwork became all the more noticeable.

Finally, her junky elevator hit a metal grated floor.

With her flashlight clenched tightly in her hand, she stepped out into the tunnel. Her light scanned over the interior; copper-colored walls, rusted metal pipes, and wiring. It was clear that something was below the grate floor, but her flashlight could not see the bottom. There was no way of telling how far down this place actually went. One thing was certain though, and that was that the noise was becoming much louder. Lilibeth could feel the walls vibrate ever so slightly when she put her hand to them. When she removed it, her palm came away coated in a black grease.

The flashlight was Lilibeth's solitary source of light here. The air was humid and filthy, blowing through a series of vents above her. She followed the tunnel, turning towards the noise when it presented her with intersections. With the turning of the gears, the walls hummed all around, and the grating buzzed below. It was trancelike.

A brief investigation revealed half a dozen empty rooms throughout the tunnel system, with dirty and chipped tiled floors. There was little indication anyone had ever been there. They were not the interesting thing, though. The interesting thing was what lay at the end of one of the halls. There stood a large metal door, which seemed to be opened via a rusty crank on the wall. It's old surface still sported the remnants of a label: "Tower".

This was undoubtably where all the noise was coming from. But now there was another noise accompanying the gears, and it was the sound of rushing water. With hesitation, Lilibeth turned the crank, and the door opened.

Inside the sphere-shaped room she could see that she was still on a small catwalk (albeit one with stairs), that looked over the source of the now deafening noise. The machine in question was about 50 or so gears; huge ones and small ones, bronze ones and silver ones. Long chains of them connected to various bits of machinery and tubing that Lilibeth couldn't wrap her head around. All in all, the

device was two stories tall, descending downward further into the dark. Lilibeth made her way down the small flight of stairs to the concrete base of the room. She was awestruck by the intensity and complexity of what she was looking at. Pipes labelled "FRout" connected to immense opaque containers that churned with liquid as the gears moved smaller bits of strange equipment. Layers upon layers of metal plates spun around beams, and tiny lifts no bigger than a book carried cylindrical canisters down from a small hole in the ceiling, to a small in the floor. Directly above her head several of the canisters were transported throughout the room via pneumatic tubes.

The old scientist was lost for words. All she could do was stare at what was in front of her. She was almost about ready to turn back when she spotted a narrow corridor tucked into the corner of the room. It wasn't the same copper color of the rest of the complex, but instead was made of cobblestone lined with pipes coming from the machine and the walls themselves.

Upon entering the room, it could have been mistaken for a spacious sewer; a river made of stone bordered by walkways and little bridges. But it wasn't a sewer. It didn't smell like one, and the water flowing from the evenly spaced pipes in the wall looked crystal clear. At the far end of the room the water fell past a grate and into what could have very well been an unending darkness.

The pipes were separated into groups of 6 small PVC pipes. All trickled a very slow stream of water, and all sets of 6 were marked by a wooden board next to it with some kind of identification. Lilibeth read the names as she traversed the walkway; "#322", "Projet Avalon", "91-XSM", "Slouthering", "KPI-&4", "Number 18504"…

And finally: "SCP-2508"

Lilibeth's heart skipped a beat as the information sank in: There were more.

Another Good Dream, Another Strange Dream

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"Another good dream," Perseus mused as he approached Lilibeth on the porch. He was a fairly young man, but still leaned into a cane as he walked. Tugging at his hat and shoving a hand in the pocket of his tattered overcoat, he sat on the stoop and surveyed the city around him.

"What is this place?" he asked. Lilibeth smiled. She looked younger than the last time he had seen her; perhaps she was lost in her memories.

"This is my house," she said thoughtfully, "My husband's inside with Emily."

"You never told me you had a daughter."

"You never asked."

Perseus looked off into the distance, past the speeding cars and hurrying pedestrians and over the horizon of high-rise buildings. He thought for a moment, biting his lower lip and rubbing his temples with calloused hands.

"Can you tell me anything else about the cottage, Lilibeth?"

"Cottage?"

"We were talking about it last time we met."

Creases formed on the woman's forehead as her expression turned to one of confusion.

"Did we go skiing there once?"

They hadn't.

"No, no. You really don't remember? Must be one of those nostalgic dreams."

For a moment, neither of them spoke.

"Sometimes, I have these dreams about tunnels and gears," Lilibeth admitted, her voice hushed and contemplative. Perseus' eyes widened. He had seen the tunnels. Evidently, so had she.

"No, Lilibeth, listen, You are dreaming right *now*. *This* is the dream."

"Wait, really? Oh, crap, the cottage. 2508," Lilibeth exclaimed. She remembered everything.

"Don't get too excited; you'll wake yourself up."

"Dreaming. I'm having a lucid dream. So I guess that makes you my subconscious?"

"No. I've tried to explain it to you before, but it's not important right now. Just tell me, this cottage… is there a pump in the attic?"

"Yes."

"A plant in the basement?"

"Yes."

"And it glows sometimes?"

"In morse code, yes."

Perseus looked down at his feet and breathed a sigh of what Lilibeth assumed was relief. Then, with a sense of urgency, his eyes met with hers.

"Lilibeth, I don't have time to explain but I need you to find the bottom of those tunnels. You have to get to the bottom, and you have to find a librarian named Carina."

The cars on the road began picking up speed. People were running now.

"I don't understand. If I even believe you, then how did you get here if I'm just dreaming?"

"I'm well versed in the anomalous, Lilibeth. Where there's a will there's a Way."

Copper plating and metal pipes broke through the concrete. Cars spun out of control.

Lilibeth was no longer in the city. Everything was calm once more. It was early morning, and Lilibeth sat up in her bed to bask in the sunlight coming through the window. She looked around her bedroom, at the old dusty wood walls, and her lab-coat draped over her wardrobe. To her left was a window that peered out over the field and the hole that led to the tunnels. Next to it was her cobbled-together elevator, laying in the grass. Everything was as she left it. It was a morning just like hundreds of others at SCP-2508.

And yet, something was nagging her; that dream. She was accustomed to bizarre ones, but she wasn't sure what to make of this. Could, perchance, that man be as real as the blue-jay that now perched itself at her windowsill? Or the two squirrels that ran just outside the house, only to disappear amidst the tall grass of the field?

No. Of course not. Just another strange dream. She pushed the thought aside.

The possibility refused to leave her alone. She knew the idea was absurd. The fact was, a man in her dreams who is almost certainly a creation of her subconscious should not to be trusted. But, on the other hand, this cottage itself was absurd in nature. Lilibeth was just used to it by now, and as such the feeling had diminished somewhat over the years.

After filling up the pump in the attic, Lilibeth scoured the study for hours on end looking for any mention of this "Carina" woman Perseus had told her about. It was an arduous task that took the majority of the morning. There was so much to go through.

She found nothing, but hard pressed for answers, she wasn't ready to stop there.

Down she went in her elevator, into the depths of the dark tunnels once more. When she finally hit the grate flooring, she stepped out, surveyed the area, and paused. She did want to know if the structure had a bottom to it. It could be a venture all on its own, unrelated to the instructions given by Perseus, who most likely did not exist. If Lilibeth could cut open a section of flooring, and if she could procure enough rope, she could- in theory- lower the elevator further below the grate. She circled the elevator as she thought. Down the hallway, at the first T-junction, she could see two squirrels chasing each other. They ran off in the general direction of the gears, playing and chattering.

The idea wasn't without its drawbacks, though. The first dig had been dangerous enough. Lilibeth wanted some answers, and for the first time since she had arrived here she had found some sense of direction to look for them, but she didn't want them enough to die for them. If there were any signs of trouble, she would be hoofing it back to the surface. That much she promised herself, and in that moment, struck herself a deal.

The darkness beckoned.

Where There's A Will...

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It was cold this far down, below any semblance of natural light, past where the churning of machinery boomed. Up above, birds chirped about the trees and and bees buzzed over the flowers and sun beamed down on all of them. Down here there was no such fortune. It was cold, dark, and empty.

Lilibeth's flashlight shown through the dark and swayed ever so slightly with the elevator as it descended further and further into a sea of inky blackness. It had taken months of preparation, but the old researcher had enough rope strengthened and affixed to her lift to bring her miles below the surface. And bring her miles below the surface it did.

The rope hit its end only half a meter above what appeared to be a black tile floor. Lilibeth paused for a moment, listening to the dull hum coming from somewhere beyond where her flashlight touched the otherwise perpetual darkness.

Lilibeth turned on a small floodlight attached to the side of her elevator. God only knows why it was in her basement, but it proved invaluable. If she lost her way, she'd be able to backtrack towards the light. Thankfully she had run its power source through a generator. It could last for days, maybe weeks.

"Off into the dark, I suppose," Lilibeth whispered to herself. The tile floor echoed into the distance, much louder than Lilibeth had expected. Her pulse quickening, she took off, watching every step she took. There was no way to know if a bottomless pit was mere meters in front of her at any given time.

She wasn't sure how long she had been standing there, looking at the door affixed to the rock wall in front of her. She wasn't sure when

she had stumbled into the cave she was currently in. And yet, there she was, staring at the entirely un-extraordinary door, wondering just how long she had been walking . It felt like an hour. Maybe two. The strange noises from before were gone. It was quiet here, and properly normally quiet. With a push, Lilibeth opened the door.

On the other side was a hallway built of marble and stone. A dozen meters out, the corridor gave way to some sort of balcony or walkway, overlooking shelf after shelf after shelf: Books.

This was a library.

Lilibeth took careful and bewildered steps out to the railing, where shelves went so far down and so far up that she couldn't even see the roof amidst all the walkways and floors and ladders. But there were people too, reading in armchairs or walking or browsing through the books in the narrow aisles. Some wore casual attire, while some were dressed in suites or ornate jewelry. A few were wearing dark brown robes. One of those robed individuals was on the same walkway as her, walking towards a flight of stairs at the far end. She gave the person a tap on the shoulder.

"Um, excuse me, do you know where I can fin-"

The man had no mouth. Lilibeth nearly screamed then and there, but managed to suppress her surprise. Why didn't he have a mouth?! Where did his mouth go?!

"You wouldn't- uh- happen to know, w- where I can find someone n-named Carina," she stammered. The docent cocked his head to one side. Despite its rather ghoulish appearance it didn't seem to be hostile, or even agitated.

"Carina, um, I was told she's a librarian who works here."

The docent thought for a moment, then nodded. Its arm stretched out towards Lilibeth, displaying its malformed fingers, index and middle finger curling in a motion indicating he wanted her to follow him.

“Are you here for the meeting?” asked a woman as Lilibeth was escorted into a small cozy room. An array of chairs were placed around the center of what looked like a conference room. The only other person here now was that woman, seated behind a desk with with several books stacked atop it. It would have been comforting if she had any eyes, but she did not.

“I was told to find a librarian named Carina,” Lilibeth replied. The woman smiled.

“Yes, that would be me. So you *are* here for the meeting.”

“What is this place?”

“Why, this is **`The Library`**. Is this your first time here?”

“Yeah, I uh… I guess I don't get around much these days.”

“That's quite alright. Perseus is around here somewhere. If you'd like to wait for him he shouldn't be long.”

“I'm sorry, this is just a lot to process.”

Lilibeth sat down, looking out the open door at the people milling about. Sat against a row of shelves, a couple held hands as they read, while another individual ran his hands along the books as he walked with a pace that suggested he had nowhere to be. It was strangely peaceful. Perhaps Lilibeth was just overwhelmed from seeing other people again; she had spent so long alone.

“What's a library doing in a place like this?” she asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Has there been a library this far underground this whole time? All these years?”

Carina paused.

“Is that how you found it? Through a door underground?”

“Yeah.”

“There are many Ways to The Library. It doesn't have a location, it *is* a location.”

That thought sunk into Lilibeth. She wasn't in SCP-2508 anymore. This was some entirely separate place, separated by who knows how much space (if such concepts could even be applied to them). Her lips curled into a faint smile at the thought.

“So, which one are you?” Came another voice from behind Lilibeth. As she turned, she could see it belonged to a young girl in a labcoat who had just entered the room. She looked no older than 12, and sported a comically oversized top hat.

“I'm sorry?” Lilibeth remarked. The large hatted girl gave her a smirk.

“Your name I mean.”

“I'm Lilibeth.”

“Last name?”

“Orion.”

“That's the one,” she extended a hand, “I'm Norma, Site-43 Chemistry department. Welcome to our little club.”

Rabbit Hole In Time Lapse

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The more time Lilibeth spent away from the cottage and at The Library, the more she realized how used she had been. By what she couldn't be sure, but she had begun to feel like a pawn in some cosmic chess game. She didn't know the players, and she didn't know the rules, but, she had gotten to know a few of the game pieces.

It had been several days since her arrival. The feeling of being somewhere new filled her both with excitement and anxiety, and there was a sense of change floating about. She had confirmation now: there were more of these cottages in alternate universes, and different people within those cottages. How many were out there? Possibly infinite? Lilibeth couldn't tell.

Perseus had put it thusly: “Whatever forces are controlling this situation, they don't appear overtly hostile, and they only target versions of what is commonly- though not always- called The Foundation.”

The Library and Ways appeared to be the only safe haven from this influence. Perseus explained how when he had first escaped his cottage, he had tried to return to his Foundation. Though he tried multiple times, he was almost immediately redirected back to the cottage once he left The Library or the Ways.

“Whatever forces are controlling this situation, they aren't overtly friendly either,” Norma had scoffed, adjusting the off-kilter top hat which she insisted on wearing. Her and Perseus weren't the only other two from these cottages either. Lilibeth saw a third person arrive sometime the day after her. He was a shambling mess of a man; skin grey, hairless body, and covered in rags. He identified himself as Crux, servant of “The Nineteenth Grounds”, which by his account bore striking resemblance to Site-19.

The only individual involved in this extended get-together who had not come from the cottage was Carina. In fact, Carina was only tied to The Library, which is to say, she was firmly melded to the floor behind the desk she was placed at. Apparently this was not uncommon for librarians here, but that's besides the point. It was her who reserved dormitory style rooms for Lilibeth, Perseus, Norma, and Crux to stay in. They were welcome to stay as long as needed.

It was day 4 since Lilibeth had arrived at the Library.

Now, Lilibeth sat in one of the comfortable chairs placed in a circle around the center of the conference room. Across from her was Perseus, to her left Crux, and to her right Norma. In the corner, behind Perseus, Carina jotted down notes in a blank book.

“You insist on stopping it?” Crux asked.

“I'm not ruling it out,” Perseus replied, “this thing is taking people, has been taking people, and will almost certainly continue to do so once we’re gone. If it's for some sinister purpose, then I want it neutralized, the scenario and whatever’s behind this thing.”

“I'm telling you, it is the will of the Slouthering,” implored Crux.

“Slou-what-ering?” Norma shot the man a quizzical look.

“Listen, Crux, I understand your beliefs, and I'm doing my best to respect them, but we don't want to jump to any conclusions here.”

“I’m with Perseus,” Norma continued, “we need to figure what’s going on here and we can only do that with the information we have currently. Orion, you said you found a bunch of cogs underground?”

“Yeah,” Lilibeth confirmed. “Deep below the grassy field is a series of tunnels. Most of them lead to empty rooms, but this one, it goes to a big room of machinery. I haven’t a clue what it’s supposed to do, but it’s certainly doing something.”

“And you also said something about where the water from the pump goes,” Perseus added, “with what you think could be names of other alternates of SCP-2508?”

“Yes. Especially with Crux’s belief in this ‘Slouthering’ entity, I’m almost certain.”

“So what I wanna know,” Norma was pacing now, rubbing her chin, “is what the hell needs all this water we’re putting in that pump anyway? And if those extra pipes you saw are in fact ours- oh shit, that means our cottages our actually physically linked and working together to provide this water.”

“Perhaps The Slouthering is thirsty,” Crux suggested. Norma paused.

“What is this Slouthering thing anyway?” she asked. Crux’s eyes widened.

“Why, it is the divine. The legends of old tell of it, and its Type-Fritz Hosts. It needs them to manifest, you know. Do you not have the stories in your dimension?”

“No,” Norma stated flatly.

Lilibeth travelled back to SCP-2508 on the 7th day since she had left. She grabbed belongings, refilled generators and pumps, and made sure things were in order. She did not intend on coming back. In a way, she would miss the comfort of this place. She had grown attached to it. But she knew in her heart that this wasn't the place for her. If there was even a chance of escaping it, she had to take it. There was a house and a family she hadn't seen in almost 20 years; she especially missed her daughter Emily, who would be grown by now.

It was overcast, and there was a salty smell in the air that reminded Lilibeth of a beach at low tide. As she shut the door to what had been her home for the past two decades, her heart skipped a beat. She was leaving. Raindrops began to pepper the ground as the world was obscured from view; a circle of dirt and clay rising up and slowly consuming the sky as the elevator returned to the depths of the dark.

Soon she was back in The Library, where Crux and Norma were

searching through an aisle labeled “Auniversal”. They had an unprecedented amount of information at their disposal, and with it they were trying to find any clues as to what the cottages were, and where they might have come from.

“I see you two have been busy,” said Lilibeth.

“And apparently we aren't the only ones,” Norma added, “you got your stuff from your cottage? Don't need to go back for anything?”

“I shouldn't. I've had enough of filling up a pump for one life. What about you?”

“We’ll be getting to that.”

“Okay,” Lilibeth sat in one of the nearby armchairs. “Do you mind if I ask you something?”

“Shoot”

“How exactly are you associated with The Foundation? I mean, I know you said you worked at Site-43, but…”

Norma gave her a look, “but what?”

“You're like…. 12.”

“12 and a half, thank you very much. And so what? Kids gotta feed their adults somehow.”

It was day 9 since she had left when Lilibeth saw it, on page 17 of a book entitled “The Fareaway Lands”:

> In my travels I met many strange people, but none so perplexing as the group of individuals who warned me of the Ways. They could tell I was new, and cautioned me, saying that there were some places and corners you could get stuck in. They explained that they knew a lot about these kinds of places, and did their best to keep Wayfinders safe. When I asked them who they were, they simply replied “Aleph Null”.

Something about this jumped off the page for Lilibeth. There was so far no record of the cottage anywhere in The Library, but this could be a lead. If anyone knew anything about what the cottages were, it would be this group, Aleph Null.

Lilibeth rushed to tell the others, who responded with similar reactions.

“What do you think? The author seems knowledgeable,” Crux said.

“Corners that you can ‘get stuck in’? That sounds an awful lot like our predicament,” Norma agreed.

“Well then that settles it,” Perseus declared, “we have to find these Aleph Null guys. I'll run it by Carina to see if she can help us track them down.”

“Maybe they know a way out of this mess,” posited Norma.

“I hope so,” Lilibeth stared at the cover of the book; deep crimson leather with gold lettering, dusty and heavily weathered. “We've all spent so long in that place, I think we could use a change of scenery.”

The Pattern (Interlude)

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Somewhere in the depths of Site-19, an old man by the name of Victor Stafford sat quietly in an interview room. Despite being away from the Foundation for almost 15 months, he still thought it suited him well. He could not- however- say the same for the young 20-something opposite him, who had a demeanor that suggested he'd rather be somewhere else. A quick glance at his personnel ID revealed his name to be Dr. Oswald, and Stafford could tell he hadn't been with the Foundation long. It was the look in his eyes; that look of confusion and naivety about the organization's many dark underbellies. In other words, it would have been putting it lightly to say that Oswald was less than prepared for this conversation.

“Dr. Stafford,” Oswald began anyway, “you were employed here at Site-19 for over 30 years, correct?”

“Correct.”

“Up until May of last year when you were forced to resign for unprofessional behavior.”

“I suppose that's one way to put it.”

A pause, filled by the faint lull of ambient noise. The soundproofing ensured that they were alone in here. It was no wonder why they had politely asked Stafford to leave The Foundation. As a former Senior Researcher, he had grossly overstepped his boundaries by accessing various personnel files, Site project histories, and a myriad of other directories that he only *technically* had clearance to.

Even after explaining everything and passing multiple lie detector tests, The Foundation made him an offer: resign peacefully and never speak of (or contact) the Foundation again, or be forcibly amnesticized. Hell, Internal Security considered making him take the

amnestics anyway, but his history was clean and admirable, and he had a lot of colleagues vouching for his good intentions.

“…How would you phrase it?” Oswald asked.

“I was putting research into a pet project of mine; a collection of data that had been bugging me for years before I could even figure out why. When I finally started building up an idea of what was going on, nobody seemed interested in listening. I slowly became branded as the old crackpot, and maybe eventually that's what I became.”

Oswald looked over a page of notes in front of him, clearing his throat as he did so.

“I'm sure you already know that the reason we invited you in today,” he told Stafford, “was to ask about that data.”

“I do. But I'd be happy to explain.”

“Then explain away.”

Stafford took a breath.

“Okay… So about twenty years ago, a dear friend and coworker of mine went missing; Dr. Lilibeth Orion. She was a brilliant astrophysicist, and had worked on countless SCP items. Then one day, she just up and disappeared. There was a brief investigation, which I offered to take part in, since she was one of my closest friends. I was turned down, and the investigators found nothing of interest.

But I was unsatisfied. I was intent on finding some semblance of closure. That's how this all started. I quickly learned that she was only one in a decent sized list of Foundation missing personnel. Something about that list irked me to no end. I felt like I was being taunted by answers just out of my reach. But eventually I started seeing the little threads that connected everything, thin and complex like a spiderweb.”

“And you went to the Site Director, telling him that something was abducting Foundation members. But you’re talking about The Foundation as a whole, over a very long period of time. Wasn't this

just the outcome of general probability that any individual- regardless of Foundation employment- would go missing? ”

“I thought so too at first, but when I looked at the number of reported missing personnel by occupation within The Foundation, I saw something strange. Some of the numbers were erroneously higher than others. Compared to the average, Memeticists went missing 75% less often. Containment Specialists 90% less often. Spatial Anomaly Experts going missing was- and still is- virtually unheard of.”

“That doesn't necessarily prove anything.”

“No, but this does,” Stafford procured a small sheet of paper and proceeded to write down a fairly drawn out equation, loaded with variables and symbols. Needless to say, Oswald didn't even come close to understanding it.

“What is this?” Oswald asked.

“This is the function that clearly depicts a pattern within- not all, but some- disappearances. Are you familiar with Dr. Cardinal?”

“No.”

“He went missing under incredibly strange circumstances in the early days of The Foundation. RAISA won't release full details, but those bizarre circumstances are a jumping off point for this formula. It says that a missing individual within this pattern will determine another missing individual based on their interpersonal relationships and occupations. It's six degrees of separation with more rules. The results look random in the end, but they aren't, and I can prove it, because when you start with Cardinal, and follow the function, it will always lead you to someone else within the Foundation who has gone missing: Always.”

“I see. So you believe it has predictive power? If it's a mathematical function?”

“To some extent. There are a lot of variables that are difficult to know ahead of time, but I can at least predict the next person in the

pattern.”

“And who would that be?”

“Well, the last person to go missing was Dr. Orion. Last Site she worked at was this one, on a project regarding some sort of space anomaly. Coworker nearest her age was a Dr. Kleinsmann. But he has a background in spatial anomalies, and the formula requires the individual to be at least 3 iterations down anyway. So we go to the previous project *he* worked on, in which he'd been assigned to analyze something Agent Underwood dragged out of a back-alley. Underwood's a good fit for the criteria but still only iteration 2, so her project before that was dealing with acquisition of, erm, something. I don't know any of the details. But I know who else was on that project, and…" he trailed off.

Stafford bit his lower lip and furrowed his brow.

"They were right about you," Oswald scoffed. "You *are* a crackpot.. This is getting us nowhere."

“I know, I know. You think that I'm just seeing things that aren't there. You think I'm just looking too deep into things and making some sort of narrative to go alongside them… but I also know that you think this meeting was the Site Director’s idea, and that you were merely assigned to talk to me by chance. Don’t agents usually handle interviews?”

Oswald's sardonic grain morphed into an anxious scowl.

“No way,” he said sternly, “you are not implying what I think you are. Don't try to screw with me like this.”

“I'm sorry Oswald. You were on the project with Agent Underwood, whatever it was. You're closest to her age. You're young and in good standing and distanced from Orion. I know you don't want to believe me but I thought it best to tell you in advance, who knows, maybe you can thwart whatever is causing this.”

“You're crazy,” Oswald stood, giving Stafford a look of both disgust and of dread.

“That's the reason they made me resign, Oswald,” Stafford leaned over the desk, his voice hushed. “But if I'm not? Then something's been taking our coworkers, and we have no idea what it is, or how to stop it.”

No More Dull Days

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Time dragged on, and Lilibeth could feel the metaphorical chains connecting her to SCP-2508 grow ever tighter. The small group of runaways had spent the better part of the past two weeks attempting to track down the elusive group known as the Aleph-Null Collective.

But, as seemed to be typical of this place, every answer simply led to more questions.

“Get a load of this!” Norma exclaimed one afternoon after talking to random Library patrons. The rest of the group was busy taking a break from their intensive study, but all turned to the young girl in unison as she came bouncing through the conference-room door.

“So there was this guy on Floor 109, right?” Norma began, “and he was just giving away chocolate. Can you believe it?”

Everyone, save for Lilibeth, turned their attention back to whatever was occupying them before Norma’s entrance.

“I thought you were asking around about our predicament?” Lilibeth asked.

“Yeah, well I was, but then there was delicious food. Besides, nobody knows who the hell these Aleph-Null guys are. They’re essentially the ghostiest of ghosts.”

“You can say that again,” Perseus chimed in, “We’ve been at this for nearly two weeks and we’ve turned up nothing on either the cottages or this elusive collective that might not even have any leads.”

“Dead ends all around,” Crux sighed. For a moment nobody said anything. Lilibeth looked around the room at her fellow colleagues.

As bizarre as it felt, she was beginning to grow fond of them. But she felt a sense of dread forming in her stomach surrounding their current method of action.

“Do you all want to… consider a plan B?” Lilibeth asked, her voice hesitant. Once again, everyone perked up a bit. Even Carina- from behind her desk in the corner of the room- seemed to stop for a moment as if listening intently.

“What kind of plan B?” Perseus asked.

“Well, what about trying to disrupt these routines the cottage tries to have us maintain? I mean, come on, I know we’ve all thought about it.”

Suddenly the mood in the room changed from relaxation to concentration. Of course everyone there had thought of the idea, but the group had never committed to any plan, given there were so many unknown factors involved. Perhaps it wasn’t a bad idea.

“But there’s no telling what would happen,” noted Perseus.

“And we’re sure there’s nothing else we could do?” Norma asked, “Didn’t you work with some spooky dream wizards, Perseus? Can’t they help?”

Perseus stifled a laugh.

“What? The Oneioroi? They’re not wizards,” he said, peering off into the hallway. “At any rate, we don’t speak much anymore. They taught me a lot but I don’t think they’d be much help here.”

“So our array of options is fairly narrow,” said Crux.

“Quite,” Norma adjusted her hat. The chocolate-filled grin that had covered her face previously was now a look of puzzlement and concern; a sentiment much shared by the rest of the group.

“The real question is: is it worth the risk?” Lilibeth asked. She could tell, though, that she already knew the answer. As the rest of the group mused on the thought, it slowly became clear to all of them as well.

“Undoubtedly,” stated Crux, a slight glimmer in his eyes that almost looked like excitement.

“You’re right,” Norma nodded before turning her attention towards Perseus.

“What about it, big guy?” she asked. He stood from his chair with a sense of purpose and precision, carefully placing the book he had been reading on a table by his side.

“We’d have to actively sabotage the cottage’s patterns ,” he finally responded, “destroy as many of its anomalies that we can, and then bug out and hope for the best. The pump in the attic- to me at least- seems like it’s powering the entire place somehow. Maybe if we can interrupt that… I don’t know. There’s a chance that it could make things worse, but there’s only one way to find out.”

Everyone shared a couple of nervous and excited glances. They were in agreement.

“Hopefully, Lilibeth, if all goes well you’ll get to see your daughter when this is all over.”

“I- what?” Lilibeth was taken aback, before the realization set in. “Oh. Oh, no. Listen, Perseus if this is about that dream, when you told me to find the Library…” she trailed off.

“What is it?” asked Perseus.

“I *had* a daughter. Not anymore.”

“What happened?” Crux blurted, prompting accusatory looks from both Norma and Perseus.

“Crux!” Perseus scolded the gray man.

“It’s okay,” Lilibeth waved off the remark, “It’s old news, really. My husband and her got in a car accident about a year before I got stuck at the cottage. I still miss them terribly, but it’s not like there’s anything I can do about it.”

“But, don’t you have family back home?” Crux continued.

“Yeah; The Foundation,” Lilibeth gave a weak smile, “so let’s just put this plan into action so I can get back to them.”

Lilibeth smashed the pump to pieces. Its dry valves and empty insides cracked, splintered, and dented until it was a collection of scrap metal and kindling strewn about the attic floor. An axe from the cottage’s basement did the trick, and Lilibeth found the entire exercise both relieving and cathartic. It was as if all of her negative emotions regarding this place were bubbling to the surface all at once: anger, sadness, disgust.

She paused, looking at her work. After a moment, she made her way to the basement, stopping only at a cabinet in the study to get more supplies. Her feelings welled as she procured a lighter from her pocket, stopped, and looked at the plant at the far end of the basement’s cold cement floor. With lighter in one hand and axe in the other, she approached, and lit the vegetation ablaze.

“What I do now, I do in remembrance for everyone who came before me to this place.”

The flames licked at the cement and danced about the blackening shrub. Somewhere on the other side of the basement, a shadow of a figure descended the stairs. It made no noise, but something about its very presence made Lilibeth tense up. She wasn’t even certain why, but she felt as if her private space had suddenly been intruded upon. Cautiously, she turned to see it, against the floor in the middle of the room. She opened her mouth but had nothing to say; no reaction.

“You’re going to need to stop that,” it said, its voice shooting directly into Lilibeth’s head, as if the voice was speaking from within her.

The shadow turned around and retrieved a fire extinguisher from another corner of the room. Lilibeth watched onward as it snuffed out the flames. She stood stuck where she was, capable of moving but not thinking to do so: A deer in headlights.

“It has come to my attention that this transmitter has been experiencing difficulty in functioning. Now I can see why. It appears

you have abandoned your responsibilities."

Suddenly Lilibeth snapped out of her trance, "responsibilities? To what? To this prison? Just what is this place, and just who are you?"

"I'm an immune response."

Lilibeth had finally had it, swinging the axe into the wall, colliding it with the concrete and creating a loud smacking sound.

"*Real answers*," she brandished the weapon at the shadow, "I'm through with these mind games. I've waited *decades* for answers and you're the first thing I've seen since then that has them, and that's *all* you have to say?"

The shadow stepped back, almost as if caught off guard by the sudden hostility.

"Why on Earth are you acting like this?" it said, "Are you displeased with this place-"

"Oh you bet your silhouetted ass I'm displeased. I'd say 'displeased' is putting it lightly."

"Why? Have you not been treated well? Wasn't this not enough?"

"Enough?! You trapped me here. You stole my whole life from me. How could I *possibly* be pleased about *any* of it?!"

Lilibeth was in tears now, and the shadow's posture had drooped slightly. For a moment the yelling gave way to the sound of… nothing. It was eerily quiet. No wind and no birds to be heard. The moment passed as Lilibeth swung the axe again; this time to the floor, where she could hear its blade chip slightly as it serrated the cement.

"Answer me!" she demanded.

"I had nothing to do with it!" the shadow's composure was lost. In fact, it sounded like it was about to cry too. "I'm just here because this place stopped functioning, and was in need of immediate care. This is no prison!"

“How? How exactly is this not a prison?”

“Please put down the axe.”

“Make me.”

“I can’t. There’s really no time.”

“Well then you better start talking, because I’m not doing anything until you tell me why you’ve trapped me and so many others before me.”

“Listen, I don’t know what you *think* you’re doing right now, but you need to stop lying to the both of us, because that is not how this place works. N-”

A cracking sound emanated from somewhere deep below the surface. Lilibeth’s rage slowly began to sink back into fear as the noises of crunching and scraping rose to the surface.

And then, a tiny split in the concrete floor, just below her left foot.

And then, the floor gave way to darkness.

Crack Fiction Contest (ONE DAY ONLY!)

Crack Fiction. The dark, stank filled corner of the internet that the SCP Foundation — with all its rules, organization, and grammar-filled-goodness — stands strongly against, rallies against, and prevents from filling our site.

Until now.

The Contest

You will write a piece of crack fiction for the site. The title has already been chosen, and there are certain requirements that come with each title. Each level of difficulty will give you the chance to earn more and more points.

The "Winners"

The winners will be determined by a combination of judges and rating. The judges (who are entirely impartial) will be required to drink heavily before scoring. As a note, this contest will employ no judges who are aged 21 or younger, in accordance with regulations and laws concerning the consumption of alcohol.

Bonus points are awarded for selecting higher difficulties. Further bonus points will be awarded if the subject of the story actually upvotes your story. Collusion and coercion are highly encouraged.

The top rated stories will be read aloud by selected staff members and posted to the site with those stories — for all eternity.

Being Classy

Don't.

Rules

The basic rules of the contest are as follows:

1. You must write a story using one of the titles. Once a title is claimed, no one else can write about it. You claim a title by editing this page and adding your name to the end of the title in the provided formatting. Once you've posted, edit again and make the title link to your page.
2. Your entry must meet the word count requirements as listed with the title. These word counts were determined using the subject's highest and lowest SCP numbers. Use **`WordCounter`** to determine the total. The title doesn't count against the word count.
3. Your entry should be in the 'tale' format. While it may include other elements from the site (SCP excerpts, for example), it should be a tale primarily.
4. Once posted, you may not be delete or edit your entry, regardless of performance. Articles that dip into the deletion range are expected.
5. No Minions©
6. Judges are given a list of things to look for in each piece of crackfiction, but they are also given the latitude to rule that "they are just too drunk for this shit" and award whatever they want.
7. Erotica, while not required, is technically permissible. However, it should be tagged 'adult' and possess a short disclaimer.
8. Once posted, the entry should be tagged with "af2016".
9. No whining. Points will be deducted for whining.
10. Whine. Points will be awarded for whining.

Time Frame

IT'S OVER!

Story Tiers

Bonus points are awarded for selecting a higher tier, as noted. Read above for claiming stories.

Safe

Safe *articles have no additional requirements and receive no bonus points.*

Title	Claim	Site Score	Judge / Bonus
Professor Bjornsen and the Worst Sweater Ever	Hihahaba	-17	0
If It Looks Like a Duck, Swims Like a Duck, and Quacks Like a Duck, It's Probably a Shapeshifting Living	Eta Carinae	8	0
Nightmare Sophia Light At The End Of The Tunnel	Steeltitan	6	0
Glass x Diogenes 4 Life! <3	Silberescher	2	0
A Shotglass Full Of The Strongest Drink You Know	rumetzen	3	0
Flames in the Time of Cholera	0vErG71tCh	12	0
Gears is totally not a robot, guys!	Dr Solo	24	0
Ruiz Sobers Up	Leviathan34	1	0
Why Quikngruvn	Dr Theodore S.	8	3

Halifax Never Smoked Marijuana Again	Hysteria		
This is Why We Leave the Fucking Lids on the Garbage Bins	EldritchCyanide	10	5
My Beloved Gecko	Decibelles	11	2
How Tilda Moose Got Their Groove Back	Zyn	9	1
Quik and Morty	Vanson	-8	0
The Factually Correct and Profoundly Engrossing Story of Rose Labelle, Savior of Site 19, Bane of the Anomalous, and Emissary of the Library, in which She Ventures into Lands Unknown to Search for the Lost Tome of the Daevite Empire, Meets Several	thedeadlymoose	2	5

Beings Both Alien and Divine, Discovers (and Slays) the Darkness within Her Own Heart, and Enjoys a Complimentary Continental Breakfast at a Two Star Hotel

THE WINNER FOR SAFE IS....

Gears is totally not a robot, guys! by Dr Solo!

Euclid

Euclid *articles must include a character from a different work of fiction. Bonus points will be awarded for both obscurity (the non-Chewbacca Wookie from Attack of the Clones) or popularity (Naruto). Additional points will be given if at least one staff member squees on the discussion page. Even more points will be awarded for one act of horrible mischaracterization.*

Title	Claim	Site Score	Judge / Bonus
Heiden Weeps	FUCKING KAKTUS	10	4
Harry Potter and the Amulet of Immortality	FuzzyRobin	-3	2
Brothers in Arms: A Strelnikov/Heavy	EmberTech	4	0

Weapons Guy story			
SyFy Channel Presents: BEARMAGGEDON!!!	kol aumer	1	2
Impressive, You Seem to Have Self-Terminated	HatIsMyFriend AKA MrHat	-4	2
The Old Man and the CK-Class Reality Restructuring Event	A Blessed Feline who's also a total noob and this edit is his first ever on this site!!!	0	2
Dr Gerald and Mr Magoos Big Day Out With Pee Wee Herman!!	SinfulSyntax	-1	2
The Spider and the Flower: Natasha Romanoff/ Pepper Potts/ SCP-105/ Andrea S. Adams	Dewman	4	5
Love And Relative Dimensions in Fate: Dr. Clef/Doctor Who	Cyantreuse	26	7
Everett Mann and the Great Mustache Fiasco|Everett Mann and the	Steeltitan	-1	2

Great Mustache Fiasco			
NO ITEMS. HARD TO DESTROY REPTILE ONLY. DUCK POND.	overandoverandover	1	2
Not Just A Cat In A Labcoat	clone	38	3
Deep Deep DEEP Archive Binge	DAVEYOUFOOL MOTHER FUCKERS	-6	2
The Minions© day at the scp	Randomini	37	7

THE WINNER FOR EUCLID IS.... The Minions© day at the scp by Randomini

Keter

Keter *articles must be entirely dialogue or possess none at all to be awarded bonus points.*

Title	Claim	Site Score	Judge / Bonus
Fried Chicken & Lime Jello, the Dr. Bjornsen story	Dmatix	1	3
Constipation So Bad, You'll Need a Shot of	CumaeanSibyl	2	2

Pitocin Gaff, and the World Gaffs with You	Tophatlord	-3	2
It's Not Pronounced Like the Thesaurus, Dammit!	Kestin	15	4
Son of Fritz Williams: The Administrationing	DrMorris	-6	2
Father of Lies: A Drabble	DodoDevil	-3	2
The Seven Deadly Sins Series: Dr. Johannes Sorts (Sloth)	Dr Theodore S. Hysteria	2	2
Avery Solace: Dr. Scary Fucker	Jb_adder	-21	2
Scruff, Claws, Paws- A Nekoverse!AU (SCP-2000, Gears, Troy Lament)	Perelka_L	13	2
Look Asshole, Your Tab's Seven Months Old and This is the Third Time You've Pissed on My Tables.	Zmax15	-9	2
Lust in the Time of Anomalous Cholera	WrongJohnSilver	12	5

THE WINNER FOR KETER IS....

It's Not Pronounced Like the Thesaurus, Dammit! by Kestin

Neutralized

Neutralized *articles must be posted on* ***fanfiction.net*** *or* ***archiveofourown.org****. You must link to the crossposting in the discussion page to receive bonus points.*

Title	Claim	Site Score	Judge / Bonus
Kill "The Headlights" and Put It in Neutral(ized)	Jack Ike	0	2
Dr. Chelsea Elliott's Guide to Sticking that Green Thumb Right Up Your Ass	church1alpha	-1	2
Legally a Falcon (For Tax Purposes)	Waterfire	4	2
Clef and Adams Roadtrip to Russia	QuillofBlindie	-7	2
SCP the Anime, part 4 (Gears/ Iceberg, Clef/ Kondraki, Rights/Light, Kain, monkey! Bright)	MrWrong	6	3

Not Just A Sun-Launcher: The Trials & Tribulations of Dr. Epiphany Trebuchet	The Lord O' Stonefish	0	2

THE WINNER FOR NEUTRALIZED IS.... SCP the Anime, part 4 (Gears/Iceberg, Clef/Kondraki, Rights/Light, Kain, monkey!Bright) by MrWrong

Thaumiel

Thaumiel *articles must also include your own character. This character cannot already exist in the SCP Foundation. Bonus points are awarded based of how much of a Mary Sue they are and how vehemently you attempt to show (in the story) that they aren't actually.*

Title	Claim	Site Score	Judge / Bonus
Troy Lament and the Terror Ferrets of Darkling Lane	Hercules Rockefeller	4	5
CASEFILE 99A-FC3: A Psych Profile by A. Bjornsen	asriel17	3	3
Agent Imants	Eekium	5	3

Plumbing Pool Repair and Pizza Delivery Service			
Pretty Magic Gaiden Mecha Tokyo Mon Demon Ninja Sailor Clef	rumetzen	14	6
Lawyer jokes are funny when Sheldon Katz tells them	refastandbulbous	-10	2
Zyn: kaiju butterfly ninja master	Aiden Eldritch	4	5
The Tilda Moose Who Shagged Me	A Random Day	-7	2
Alto Clef Jr.: Fins of the Father	DolphinSlugchugger	14	5
A Fat Ghost and Other Things That Go Bump In the Night	DoctorGrindsler	0	2
Virgil the Goldfish's Big Day Out	DAVSTO	4	2
Silber Strikes Back! (OC DO NOT STEAL!!!!!)	ahbonjour	3	2
Orgy Five Counsel 9: XXXK End of Virginity Scenario	TyGently	17	4

'Cause I'm Bluesoul (Da Ba De Da Ba Da)	DoctorGrinslder	-11	3
Metaphysician's Drop-Dead-Service: 10.95	minmin	11	5

THE WINNER FOR THAUMIEL IS.... Orgy Five Counsel 9: XXXK End of Virginity Scenario by TyGently

Decommissioned

Decommissioned *articles must contain one spelling or grammar mistake every one to two sentences to be awarded bonus points. If these are "arguable" mistakes, the judge makes the call.*

Title	Claim	Site Score	Judge / Bonus
lazy day at siet	ChrisAKAPiefish	-5	2
37 **My Loever, the Dog: The Incredibly True Story of Kain**	Zmax15	18	4
Pathos Crow Dr. Bridge Over Troubled Water	Kestin	5	3
Zyn Kriyu only she's a buterfly	TL333s	2	3
Teh Fantem of teh opura	Cyantreuse	11	2
Carlysle	bouncl	3	5

Aktus is a prickly bastard (AN: high school AU)			
foundation internets… haced	DrStranger	-8	2
lurking in the shadows	Eekium	-4	2
lode faster	MrAnakinSpecter	-11	2
DAMIT Wiggle Youre	Shaggydredlocks	-6	2
Wogglebug FUCK IM FAILING TO MAINTAIN THESE STARES……	EldritchCyanide	1	2

THE WINNER FOR DECOMMISSIONED IS…. My Loever, the Dog: The Incredibly True Story of Kain Pathos Crow by Zmax15

Points were awarded by judges (who picked up to five which they wanted to award points to). Additional points were awarded for being translated (because I was amazed), if the target of the contest upvoted it, and if it met the tier requirements. Each tier got its own winner, as noted above!

My Beloved Gecko

For the Crackfic Contest.

Site-19's cafeteria rumbled super loudly for no apparent reason, and everyone looked up to see the majesty of one Dr. Charles Ogden Gears and his **`Super-Sized Beloved Pet Gecko`**[1] riding into the room, just like in novels with the horses.

"Hello everyone," Dr. Charles Ogden Gears monotoned in a bored fashion. He couldn't fathom why everyone looked at him with jaws agape (because it was hard to understand people and their silly emotions). It took one brave soul to speak up amongst all the other bystanders.

"WHAT THE FUCK DO YOU THINK YOU'RE DOING!" said Troy Lament, embarassed to see his boss in such an unbecoming manner.

"I was taking my beloved pet gecko out for a walk. I fail to see the issue, as I will return him on time to his cell as per Protocol 5.6, Subsec—"

"You can't just take that… that monstrosity out of its cage! It'll eat us all!" Lament said as he threw his arms out in the air as a sign of frustration. He never took his mentor to be a madman, and the simple shrug Dr. Charles Ogden Gears gave him made him even more angry. He glared at 682, who stared back deep in the eyes of Lament. For a second, he felt his soul falling, pierced by the lightning of 682's non-human hatred for mankind.

i will end you and humanity. you are all disgusting creatures. everyone shall be trampled under my feet, you worm.

"Now now, Betsy, I realize you are hungry, but do not get carried away. I will provide you with your favorite D-Classes when we finish

walking." Dr. Charles Ogden Gears leaned over and pet Betsy on the head, who grumbled a deep, 120 dB grumble of indifference.

"Look, I love you Gears, no homo, but this just ludicrous. I can't expect you to do this. You're not even following proper ettiquite for SCP walking! I have to report this to head security!" Lament said as he threw down his roast-turkey, liver-flavored onion, steak, and radish calzone with a side of refried black beans his ex-girlfriend made for him to the floor, the contents of the food spilling everywhere. This was the final straw! He would not have any more of it! Who cares if some dumb **janitor** had to clean up this mess? He had to get someone to clean up the most important mess!

Injustice.

"I am afraid I can not let you do that right now, Lament." Dr. Charles Ogden Gears stared down Lament, and for the second time, Lament felt a piercing in his eyes and souls.

It wasn't the same as Betsy the gecko's this time. It felt more… cold. It felt more sinister in a calculated way, like Dr. Charles Ogden Gears wasn't fucking around. Was he starting to… feel? An indifferent man's emotions were the most dangerous, as all it took was one wrong move before your life was destroyed, especially since Lament swore at times to anyone who would want to listen to him that Dr. Charles Ogden Gears was an insane robot. But this proved it. Underneath Dr. Charles Ogden Gears was a robot! This had to be it. First 682, then 106, and then he'd take over the whole Foundation, and *who would stop him*? The Church? They must have been his allies and planned this!

Someone coughed in the background and Lament spun around, a sudden fearful look in his bloodshot eyes. "You! You must be working with him! What's your plan in this breach?" Lament said as he pointed at the man. The **kid** cried, scared of the strange and transformed man going on a rant in a perfectly normal circumstance. Lament spun back around and glared at Dr. Charles Ogden Gears. "You won't take over! I'll stop you, Gears!" With that said, Lament stormed to the exit before approaching a horde of **cockatrices**, piercing his eyes for the third time.

"Fuck."

It was too late to look away, as his body hardened and slowly turned to stone. As he underwent *rigor mortis*, the final thoughts he said aloud were:

"Damn you Gears! Now I'll never take the place of —" and then he turned to rock.

The audience was quiet again, afraid to do anything. No one knew how to react, the new Lament Statue^2 having been erected in the cafeteria as a grim reminder of the battle of the egos. 682 stomped towards the statue, licking it like a lollipop.

what a disgusting flavor. human…

One brave individual got up and shook nervously, unsure on what to say.

"U-Um… Gears?" he stuttered shyly.

"Yes, my new protégé?"

"C-Can I join you in your walk? I… I have something I think you and 682 would like…" he held out a bomb with the fuse ticking down, and everyone screamed and bolted out of the exits over the cockatrices.

"Of course. This gift is an acceptable present for us. What is your name, protégé?"

"**`D-Doctor Iceberg`**…" He shook even more, more nervous. Dr. Charles Ogden Gears didn't smile, but Iceberg was sure he heard a chuckle and grin come out of him.

"Of course. Approach Betsy, and she will give you a ride." Iceberg nodded and cautiously approached the creature, careful as to how to react. He stood there for a minute before deducing it was okay, and put a hand on her to climb up to Gears. Suddenly, —

crunch

682 bit Iceberg's head off and threw the body up to Dr. Charles Ogden Gears, and the bomb to the wall. It blew up, leading to outside.

hurry it up, you disgusting filth, i wish to take my nap later.

"Of course, my beloved gecko," Dr. Charles Ogden Gears murmured in a monotone voice as he sweetly cradled Iceberg's body without a hint of emotion on his face.

good. let us go before i satisfy my hunger with you.

Dr. Charles Ogden Gears, Betsy, Iceberg's body, and the cockatrices marched out into the desert, enjoying the sunset as they walked.

Footnotes
1. ™
2. ®

SCP the Anime, part 4 (Gears/Iceberg, Clef/Kondraki, Rights/Light, Kain, monkey!Bright)

Preface: The following Tale is written for the April Fools Crack Fiction Contest of 2016.

THE FOLLOWING PROGRAMME HAS BEEN APPROVED FOR APPROPRIATE AUDIENCES BY THE DAI AKIHABARA TEREBI

O ONE UNDER 15 ADMITTED.

SOME MATERIAL INAPPROPRIATE FOR

VIOLENCE, MASS DEATHS, MATURE CONTENT, DEPICTIONS OF ANOMALOUS ACTIVITY, AND LESE MAJESTY WILL BE FEATURED. VIEWERS CAUGHT IN VIOLATION OF THE RATING ARE TO REPORT THEMSELVES TO EITHER AN OPS STAFF, MODERATOR OR ADMINISTRATOR FOR EXILE

BY GRACE OF BEST GIRLS µ's, HIS VIRGIN MAJESTY, THE WIZARD EMPEROR OF DAI AKIHABARA, PERSONIFIED CENTRE OF THE UNIVERSE AND PRESIDENT

OF THE OTAKU COLLECTIVE.

Previously on SCP The Anime, part 3!

Two (wo)men. A dog. A monkey. Where's the pheasant?

[The Akihabara Metropolis is engulfed in flames, reduced from its famous akihabara[1] of world culture. Corpses of the deceased and defiled lay everywhere, disembodied and skewered in many gory and interesting ways. The vicious armies of the Daevite march in a single file back into their massive warships by Akihabara Bay, dragging with them the thousands of slaves captured from Dai Akihabara.]

[The O5 Council meet again, viewing the situation at Akihabara from a screen. Other than them, Dr. Judith Low is in attendance.]

O5-10: Even Dai Akihabara has fallen. We may be facing an SK class dominance shift, if we don't do anything.

Low: O5-sama, in my research of **SCP-140**, I believe we can do something to stop them. It speaks of a chosen one.

[O5 Council groans collectively.]

Low: Do we have any other choice? Look, the Daevite Onigishima garrison was once stopped by…

[Dr. Rights got out of bed, where an unknown man is still sleeping. Both parties are naked.]

Low (V.O.): Momotaro…

[Dr. Kain enters his Egg Walker machine, armed with various weapons.]

Low (V.O.): …His dog…

[A group of Foundation operatives are on an expedition in the jungle, led by Dr. Bright (wearing a D-class as his vessel). A monkey swoops in from the branches, and grabs SCP-963 from Bright's

vessel.]

Low (V.O.): …And his monkey…

[Closeup on Dr. Light's portfolio, which is lowered to reveal that Light is seated next to Low.]

Low: …And his pheasant.

Light: Are you serious?

Low: According to the prophecy, there were some errors with the reincarnation. Look, Bright-san can possess a pheasant but you have to wear a monkey suit.

[Scene shifts to a changing room. Light steps out to reveal her tuxedo. Rights, Low and Kain look on approvingly, but Bright is screeching from the pheasant he now resides.]

Kain: Low-hakase, may I dispute the sheer improbability of your so-called prophecy?

Low: Blame the writer of these prophecies. I only interpret them.

Rights: Wow! You look totally hot, Light!

[Light blushes.]

[Rights, Light, Kain and Bright slowly walk along a dark hallway. The only source of light is the end of said hallway, leading up to a stage.]

O5-12 (V.O.): Our enemy is the Daevite Onigishima Abyssal Naval Garrison. When you encounter the Daeva, enact Procedure 69-OKAYAMA immediately. Do not fail us now.

[The four doctors step into the light, with an auditorium filled with Daevite naval officers. Said Daevite officers give a standing ovulation to the four doctors, as a spotlight shines on them.]

Rights: What do we do now?

[Suddenly, the ghost of Momotaro appears before Rights. Only

Rights can see it.]

Ghost of Momotaro: Just follow my lead… Wait, I'm a girl?

Even more previously on SCP The Anime, part 2!

Two men! One wish fulfilling device! Nothing else (including said wish fulfilling device) matters!

[**SCP-239** stands in front of Neo-Site-19. She is escorted by two MTF agents, and handcuffed by them. She looks up at the black gritty building and smiles.]

Nobody (V.O.): GoIs, prepare. Here are the rules.

[Clef stands in front of the corpse of Fake Priest Buramo of the Holy MEKHANE Church. His left eye is stabbed, right arm amputated and Clef's knife is bloodied.]

Nobody (V.O.): Kill the competition.

[Clef runs from an avatar of Grand Karcist Ion of the Diseased Apostlic Ancestors in a narrow hallway.]

Nobody (V.O.): Survive.

[A door slides open to reveal SCP-239, with a shadow hanging over her. Closeup of 239's face, smiling at the unknown person.]

SCP-239: Last man standing gets a wish from me.

[Clef sheaths his Telekill knife.]

Queen of UN Tower cum Director of the Occult Association, D.C. al Fine (V.O.): The Council of 108 are in deadlock. Again. So do me this favour.

Clef: Of course, al Fine-chan.

[Kondraki kneels before SCP-239.]

Kondraki: I solemnly swear to secure the integrity of the War,

contain all violators of the War, and protect you — the vessel.

[A mass of **SCP-408** are congregating around Kondraki, forming additional duplicates of said doctor. Kondraki and his copies surround Clef, brandishing his weapon fearlessly.]

Clef: More Kon-chan for me!

[Clef skilfully dodges a barrage of bullets from Marshall Carter (using his Dark rifle), with all shots slowed down. As the shots resume normal speed, Clef has passed through Carter and ran ahead of him. Kondraki looks at the scene from a surveillance camera.]

Kondraki: Bring a katana to a gunfight.

[Clef opens a door to a cell, revealing a naked **SCP-336**. He closes it immediately, and turns to face the screen.]

Clef: Weekly fanservice~

[Clef lies on the floor, as Kondraki finally wrestles the Telekill knife away from him. Kondraki also carries a katana with him.]

Kondraki: Clef-san, can't you see? We need 239-chan. She can wish for a world without skips, a world we can live in peace. You and I.

[Closeup of Clef's hat dropping on the floor. Clef reveals the mass of extremely spiky hair underneath it. Static electricity builds up around Clef.]

Clef: Oh Kon-chan, do you despise me so much that you wish me to not exist?

[The surroundings shift, with walls and the floor melting into an off-white substance. Clef slowly stands up. Kondraki is losing his footing in the changing surroundings.]

Clef: UNLIMITED CHOWDER WOK!

But more so previously on SCP The Anime, part 1!

No one in Hiroshima expected Little Boy in August.

[It is a peaceful morning somewhere in North America. Site-19 is graced by the morning light and all is normal in the world. But suddenly, Site-19 mysteriously blows up in a mushroom cloud.]

[The O5 Council convenes at their table, debating with one another as usual.]

O5-3 Everyone-san, 19's gone. Although nobody died in the blast, including the SCPs and D-class.

O5-2: Three-san, what's with the Japanese honorific?

O5-3: Two-san, you're doing it too.

O5-1: Never mind the honorific! As for 19, we'll just rebuild.

[In the same land where Site-19 once stood, Neo-Site-19 stands. The building only looks more gritty, contrasting well with the lights at nighttime.]

O5-1 (V.O.): Given the highly public nature of recent anomalies, we will be reclassifying a significant portion of them as Explained.

[In Neo-Site-19, Gears and Iceberg are seated adjacent to each other. Both are typing on their respective computers, filling the air with typing sounds.]

Iceberg: Gears-senpai, is it just me or are the girls nowadays a bit tighter on the chest?

Gears: The average bust size of women worldwide has increased inexplicably, that's SCP-906090-EX.

[Iceberg's hand reaches out towards Gears' keyboard.]

Gears: Iceberg-san, what?

Iceberg: Senpai, I'll never let have those boob fiends touch you.

[Closeup of Iceberg's eye staring emptily on the screen.]

Iceberg: No… not even this.

[Blacks out. Sound of clashing metals.]

This is currently SCP the Anime, part 4! To conclude today's episode, a word from the screenwriter himself.

> To bring our audience-sama up to speed with a series they know nothing about, we[2] have taken the "liberty"[3] of using a clip show of previous episodes' scripts. Do patronise us by watching the previous episodes here. This concludes today's episode of SCP The Anime. Bye-bye.

Footnotes
1. (often lowercase) any place that many people visit or hope to visit — Amerika English Dictionary
2. By "we", I mean "I" (singular). There's supposed to be the series creator, but he's quite hands-off. Heck, I never even met him!
3. Correction,we areI am on a tight budget and I'm too busy with late semester work to even hire animators or voice actors.

Antarctic Exchange Hub

> *We, the Throne of Her Royal and Illuminated Highness, The Lady of Lands, Queen of Queens, Empress Utmai Cjen, Sixth of Her Name and Fourteenth of Her Line, do hereby approve this exchange of scholars between the Imperial Institute of Paranormal and Esoteric Study and the Foundation, so as to foster the sharing of knowledge and greater companionship between the Realm of the Empire and the Lands of the Uncharted North. So We approve the articles proposed and attached, and deliver Our blessing upon this venture.*
>
> *We seal this in the Imperial Name, this Tenth of Radeyt, in this Year Four-Hundred and Eighty-Seven of the Third Imperial Age.*

Now, you might be thinking to yourself “Self, there is no way I can add to this canon: all the characters are set and the plot is already there and I can’t do anything without the continuity getting all awkward."

Never fear! For you see, the group that you see featured in these tales were not the only Antarcticans to be sent to the Foundation. All told, perhaps a hundred researchers from the Institute were sent to the Foundation, spread throughout over a dozen sites: The tales featured for the contest involved only those stationed at Site-19. It’s a simple thing to add more characters at other sites, having their own adventures.

Alternatively, you could always write about the Foundation researchers studying in the Empire, because that is most certainly a thing.

The Tales

Site-19 Exchangees
• Last Plane Out of the South by Djoric, Dmatix, Azzleflux, and Zyn
• Turn a New Page by Djoric
• Collecting by Azzleflux
• From On High by Djoric
• Impressions by Zyn
• Memory of a Memory by Dmatix

Into the Empire
• On the Other Side of the Coin by Bryx
• A Merry Fellow by Ihpkmn

Notes

The Empire - The **`Third Empire`** is a strange, wonderful place, both very much different from the world we are used to, and at the same time, little changes. The various provinces have their own unique cultures, but there is an overlaying Imperial culture that all citizens belong to, which focuses on the worship of the Empress, reverence of her chosen servants the Menders and Watchers, and paying your taxes and tithes on time. Beyond that, there's room for whatever cool things you want to add. Deep-desert nomads who ride giant carnivorous penguins, for example.

The Institute - The most important things to remember are that the Institute focuses more on the humanities over the sciences, and that it is public the extent that it is safe and reasonable for the public to know. The Institute often works with smaller organizations, and many exchanges may be working for the institute in this capacity.

Many of the exchangees aren't strictly scientists. They might be historians, theologians, philosophers, artists, effectively anything that would fall under that catch-all term of "culturalist". Scientists from the Empire are generally not as strictly defined as we are familiar (he's a biologist, she's a physicist, etc): instead, they will have knowledge of a much broader spectrum of fields.

Dealing with Castes

- **Summer Court** - The default Antarctican. Now, there are

many shades of social position in the Summer Court, generally divided along family lines, occupation and where you're from: Those from the central provinces or Rootrel itself are higher on the ladder than those who live elsewhere.

- **Black Court** - Black Court culture has a general laissez-faire attitude towards life, often leading to trouble with everyone else. They don't fit into the typical caste hierarchy, viewing (and referring to) everyone as family. The Black Court is generally viewed with disdain by the Menders and upper-class Summer Court.
- **Menders** - The great bureaucracy of the Empire. Menders are of higher station than the highest of the Summer Court, despite many sub-orders renouncing material wealth or property. Menders will generally treat lower castes with pity, condescension, or apathy. They have a few alterations from the Blessings of Aqum generally with memory and clarity of thought. All Menders will have some experience in facing the Feastlings and Maws of Eser.
- **Watchers** - The highest of castes and the chosen of the Empress. Watchers do not interact with the Summer or Black Courts outside of official rituals except in the rarest of cases (such as Lucrezen's), interacting primarily with the Mender caste. All of these interactions will involve a lot of bowing and scraping, and the majority of Watchers will see this as right and proper. Watchers have various, though subtle, augmentations from the Blessings of Aqum. These include comprehension of languages, perfect recall, clarity of thought, and other things of that manner.
- **Minor Castes** - There are quite a few minor castes from the outer provinces. They are generally considered of slightly lower station than the Summer Court: however, they still have the basic legal rights of citizens.

Last Plane Out of the South

There was an airplane cruising over the Atlantic Ocean. For all intents and purposes, this airplane did not exist, though that fact is neither here nor there and is generally irrelevant to the point at hand. That point, though it is undecided as to whether it is at the right or left hand at this time, is the people on the plane, which is a far more important subject than the plane itself.

These people consisted of two groups, both very distinct. One group consisted of rather plain-looking people in button-down shirts and ties, blouses and skirts, or Kevlar vests. The other group consisted of several people with too many arms, two walking carpets, and all of them were wearing clothing that looked like the Catholic Church and the Ming Dynasty got drunk and decided “Hey, let’s try this parenting thing, it can’t be *that* hard”.

They are the focus. The plane will eventually be scrapped in 2024 due to unfortunate and classified circumstances, but once again, we are not talking about the plane.

The Adviser

Wisdom, Honor, Dignity. Those were the words of House Surten, passed down the ancient line since the dawn of the First Empire.

Sakarn Var Surten looked at his traveling companions, and found precious little of the three. The interior of the small aircraft they were assigned would have been small and uncomfortable for someone of his standing even if he didn’t have to share it with this miserable lot of invalids, buffoons and castouts, and the entire affair was beginning to make him quite cross.

“Snow! Where are you, boy?”

“I am here, Lordship.”

Sakarn nearly jumped out of his seat, but managed to hide his surprise with his usual courtier's skill. Shifting Snow had a habit of appearing behind him silently and startling him, and Sakarn suspected the accursed servant was enjoying it.

"I do wish you would stop doing that, summerling."

"I apologize, Lordship."

"Nevermind your apologies, just get me a drink. I am utterly parched, and these northerners clearly know nothing of proper dining etiquette."

"As you wish, Lordship."

As the boy slowly wandered towards the drink tray, Sakarn reflected on how terribly difficult it was to find decent help and companionship. When he was the Grand Adviser in court, sitting on his seal-tusk chair at the Empress' side, things were different. Oh, what wonders he had seen at the Argent Hall, as he drank nectar from crystal goblets and listened to the music of the heavens. He promised himself he would hear it again. He would bring honor to the Empress, and regain his own. He would make her forget his… indiscretion.

"Your drink, Lordship. I apologize for the Styrofoam cup, but Trighit had apparently appropriated all of the glassware for some experiment. Should I ask him for one?"

"You'll ask for nothing. I won't have anything to do with that Black Court simpleton. The drink, boy."

"Yes, Lordship."

The boy handed him the plain Styrofoam cup, which was filled with some kind of foul, mud colored beverage.

"What… what is that?"

"I believe it is called coffee, Lordship. It is made from a bean."

"They would have a Mender drink beans!? By my honor, this is a

sordid state of affairs indeed. I hope they at least served the Superior something appropriate of her standing? Surely, she would never accept such a treatment!"

“She seems to be enjoying the drink, Lordship. She recommends you add sugar to it.”

Sakarn sighed. It was difficult to look up to your betters when they worked so hard at degrading themselves.

"Yes, of course she does."

From drinking nectar with the Empress, to drinking beans with northerners, Black Court upstarts and provincial exiles. Oh, how the mighty have fallen.

The Scholar

“Can you show me where you are from?” Alai LoCaen thrust a map of the world at the man, beaming with excitement.

“Um…Right…here. Dead center of Indiana.” He pointed to the blob that served as North America on the map, roughly where the Midwest should have been. Alai looked at his finger with a wide-eyed stare of amazement.

“Amazing! Byr Lasell’s exploration of that region in 2-1023 claimed the area was completely uninhabitable! Tell me, what is the primary export of your region?”

“Corn.”

“Please explain: I do not know what corn is.”

“Well, it’s a vegetable, ‘s got a really tall stalk with these…we call them ears, but they don’t look like them…these big cob-things sticking out of it, and those have kernels on them, and you eat those.”

“Excellent, excellent, wonderful.” Alai scribbled a note down in her logbook: *Corn – tall with ears: eat kernels.* “Now then, what is your mother’s profession and caste?”

“She’s a pharmacist, uh…works with medicine.”

“And you are a soldier? Did you choose your father’s caste? Or is it a woman’s union?”

“Don’t really have castes…”

“Oh, right, right, I’m sorry, very sorry.” All of this was so exciting, so wonderfully strange, she could barely contain herself. The plane was strange, the food was strange, the inhabitants strange: Pale-skinned, like one minor caste she had seen in The Imperial Naturalist. No castes, multiple nations, esoteric secrecy. And all of this after only a few hours on the other side of the portal. “In that case, could you please explain the raising of children, their education, and how professions are determined?”

“Erm…”

“No, wait, food. Tell me about food.”

The Servant

"So you cover the swine-flesh tube with corn? Fascinating!"

"Err, I suppose that's one way to put it…"

Shifting Snow had to admire his cousin's ability to extract information, and out of a trained agent, no less. He never would have imagined wide-eyed enthusiasm could be so effective. Alai could have been a useful agent for the Frost, had she been born with a more useful disposition. We each had our talents, he supposed.

"Snow, this beverage is cold. Fetch me another."

Instinctively, Snow entered Rapid Assessment. The fifteen years he has spent since giving up his name to become a member of the Frost, the Empress personal information gathering force, had made it a second nature to him.

Objective: acquire drink

Operator: Sakarn Var Surten, former Grand Adviser and insufferable twit

Possible methods of completion: acquire individually, request assistance from aircrew

Additional opportunities: poison Grand Adviser (inadvisable, may cause the loss of a critical resource re mission: acquire covert information, personal satisfaction deemed a low priority)

Expected results: momentary termination of complaints, cover maintained.

Verdict: comply

"Yes, Lordship."

"And a biscuit of some sorts. I can't imagine they have anything worthwhile on this flying bathtub, but we must endure."

Objective: painful liquidation of Sakarn Var Surten, insufferable twit

Operator: Self

Possible methods of completion: strangulation, use of concealed weapon (blade), excessive physical force (hand to hand)

Additional opportunities: none

Expected results: failure in primary mission (acquire covert information), expulsion, eventual death, immense sense of self-satisfaction

Verdict: postpone verdict until completion of primary mission

"Yes, Lordship."

The Scientist

Trighit sat hunched over in his seat, studying the tiny creatures scurrying over the assorted dishes he had placed on the tray in front of him. As they ran across, the plates and cups changed colors

constantly, creating a sea of fluctuating rainbow. He chuckled as he wrote down the results in his notebook.

"To think they almost didn’t let me take them aboard," he murmured.

His gaze shifted to the passing flight attendant, who glared at him.

"Of course, it helped that they didn’t exactly know about them I suppose."

He shuddered, thinking of all the specimens in the lower cabin, alone and unprotected. It just tore him up when they took away the flasgows.

"Bah, 'danger to passengers.' What hogwash!"

He shook himself back to reality. This was no way to begin the journey! There were going to be dozens of subjects to study at the destination. Trighit refocused on the creatures in front of him as waves of color broke through the formerly transparent glass.

Best of all, he wouldn't be completely surrounded by the pompous upper castes, with their "Look at that cute Courtail, aww, look, he thinks he's smart!". Sure, he'd have to put up with Sakarn's belittling comments and arrogant attitude, but at least he wasn't the only one this time.

He grinned to himself, glancing in his superior's direction. He was quite out of his element here, wasn't he?

"Uhhh, Trighit? They're, um… doing a thing."

He turned to look back at his compatriot in the seat next to him.

"What?" he asked curiously.

Pokum pointed a fat finger at the tray in front of Trighit. The creatures had begun devouring the various glassware, as well as noticeably increasing in size. Trighit gasped in delight as he pulled out his notebook and ferociously jotted down notes and speculations about this change in behavior.

As the plane sped on, Trighit became more and more lost in his notes and fantasies about what creatures were waiting for him at the end of the ride.

The Assistant

Trighit was muttering again. He always muttered when he was doing science, or whatever he called it. In his opinion, what Trighit did always took all of the fun out of anything. It wasn't enough that flaquets made colors on glass, apparently. It needed analstisis, or something. Whatever it was, it was exceedingly boring. Pokum sighed, turned his gaze towards the window, and asked himself the same question he pondered over day after day.

Why do I do it?

Of course, he already knew the answer. Or answers, rather, as there were many of them, though none felt quite… complete. It might have been because deep down, he really did think all this science was cool. Or at least the things the animals did were cool. The note taking and repetitiveness could never be interesting to him.

Maybe it was because he had nothing better to do. Everyone else back at home was pretty depressing, with the most interesting conversations consisting of who had been harassed the worst that day, or how long people thought it would take for the Empress to actually do something to help them. At least Trighit was energetic and somewhat fun to be around.

But the answer that nearly always came up in his mind with finality was that he cared about the bugger. Trighit always had a… well, a bad reputation, to say the least. No one respected him and, in Pokum's opinion, no one ever would. None of the Black Court could understand him, and all of the upper castes laughed at him for trying to reach outside of his realm. Pokum was the only one that actively supported him.

Well, as active as one can be while trying not to be seen with him in public.

A loud crunching noise drew Pokum's attention back to the tray in

front of Trighit's seat. The creatures had begun eating the dishes, and Trighit looked lost in thought, with closed eyes and whispers aimed at the ceiling. He poked his friend.

"Uhhh, Trighit? They're, um… doing a thing."

The scientist snapped back to attention, looking intensely at Pokum.

"What?"

In response, he quickly pointed at the flaquets. Trighit squealed and rapidly began scribbling in his notebook again. Pokum sighed again. Any sliver of hope that the trip might make his friend more normal, or at least go smoothly was shattered when he tried to bring a dozen animals on the plane with them, then argued with the employee for an hour. They only managed to pry him away from the cages when someone brought Trighit some sort of book full of weird Earth animals. Pokum himself had only stopped the constant exclamations and speculations about the illustrated creatures when he pulled out the specimens he had snuck aboard in his coat for when he was sick of Trighit yelling in his ear.

He never had high hopes for the researcher's capacity for containing his excitement, but he at least dreamed it could last more than ten minutes. He groaned as he reclined in his seat and closed his eyes. It was gonna be a long trip.

The Artists

Tyhjä shifted idly on his seat, throwing shadows onto the surrounding walls. He longed to be out of this pressurized tube, longed to see the sky again. Would there be more flying things where they landed, he wondered. Birds, perhaps. He liked birds. He glanced at his sister, seated across from him. “What do you hear, sister?”

Clear Evening glanced up from her notebook scribblings, startled. “Brother?”

“You tilt your head slightly when you’re listening,” Tyhjä stated simply.

Clear Evening blinked. She never realized this about herself, but then her brother knew her well, knew her mannerisms well. While she needed to write down her observations of the world, he simply remembered them.

“The sound of the plane, I suppose.” She looked back at her notebook. The exterior was identical to that of her brother’s notebook, the interior completely different. Her words were neatly and orderly arranged, sometimes verses were grouped in the corners—Tyhjä’s drawings were scattered all over the pages, without regard for time or place. How different they were, indeed.

Tyhjä sighed as he watched his sister drift back into her writing. He missed home. He really didn’t have much business being here, he really didn’t feel too comfortable in the presence of that Mender, and especially that Watcher. But his sister was here, and truth be told, he didn’t mind overmuch being able to see new things to sketch. Tyhjä looked at the notebook on his lap. Opening it, he flipped through his drawings, letting the well-worn feel of the pages comfort him somewhat.

A series of ice crystals growing, some crystalline, some jagged. A diagram of his hand. A distant landscape. A crystal vase. A rough sketch of the outside of the plane he and his sister now sat on.

Tyhjä looked out the window. Gold-rimmed clouds in shapes he’d rarely seen blanketed the sky around the plane, and though he still longed for home, he could not help but marvel at them.

The Highest

Lucrezen Lhivaen Battackan Chlolassouvin sat with one set of hands folded in her lap, the second folded across her chest, and the last holding a Styrofoam cup filled with coffee, tiny in her slender, oversized fingers. A strange beverage, though that went without saying: everything was strange now, and that itself was strange. Lucrezen was not used to strange.

It was rather refreshing.

The plane for example. Sparse, simple, utilitarian, pedestrian.

Nothing like the airships Lucrezen was familiar with, with their delicately sculpted interiors and illuminated scrollwork declaring the majesty of empresses past. Air travel was all about spectacle: you had conquered gravity. Trains were for actually getting somewhere fast.

She observed the others around her. Dregs of the Institute, each and every one of them: the unwanted, unliked, and unneeded. Did they realize it? Some, probably. The Black Courtsman scientist, the Mender, they knew, though she was sure the latter would refuse to admit it. The servant, possibly, along with the poet and artist. The assistant, no. The girl, not at all. They kept their distance from her, trying not to look, a lifetime of conditioning fighting against the novelty of a Watcher in the same room as them.

Lucrezen sipped her coffee, and thought of the last time things had been strange, when she had stepped off that train with the wind whipping dust in her face and the townsfolk staring with gaping jaws. This was another grand adventure. She rather liked that.

—

We, the Throne of Her Royal and Illuminated Highness, The Lady of Lands, Queen of Queens, Empress Utmai Cjen, Sixth of Her Name and Fourteenth of Her Line, do hereby approve the exchange of scholars between the Imperial Institute of Paranormal and Esoteric Study and the Foundation, so as to foster the sharing of knowledge and greater companionship between the Realm of the Empire and the Lands of the Uncharted North. So We approve the articles proposed and attached, and deliver Our blessing upon this venture.

We seal this in the Imperial Name, this Tenth of Radeyt, in this Year Four-Hundred and Eighty-Seven of the Third Imperial Age.

« Hub »

Turn a New Page

Alai swiped her card again. The door remained closed. She frowned, biting her lip, and swiped the card again. Still nothing.

To the outside observer, Alai would have looked like a befuddled tropical fish that had somehow managed to swim hundred of miles inland just to land in the middle of a cement hallway. Her complexly-layered clothing was bright red, yellow, and blue, contrasting with her dark skin. Her hair was done up in a series of small spiral buns. All let out, it would go down past her waist. With her free arm she held a stack of books: a fresh notebook, an English-Imperial dictionary, the *Guided Meditations of the Empress*, the Foundation Standard Operations Handbook, a map of Site-19, a folder with her department briefings, a book from home.

She looked to her right, and then to her left. There was nobody there. She looked at the clock on the wall, converting the time in her head. The day-night cycles here, along with the jet-lag, had made the last two days a complete blur, but she was beginning to bounce back.

Six-and one-half hours from the cycle origin, that's equivalent to…

Was she too early? Would they think badly of her for it? Maybe she should go back to the dormitory and…

No, no, that wouldn't do. Had to show proper work ethic. Show up bright and early, make a good impression. Couldn't be seen as a burden.

She swiped the card again. Nothing happened, again. Look right, look left, still no one. The hallway was bare, hauntingly lonely. None of the portraits or statues or tapestries of empresses and sundry figures past and their accomplishments.

Seeing no better option, Alai knocked, as loud as she could with one

hand. This persisted for some time, with the occasional “Hello?” thrown in for good measure.

She was just about to give up before the door slid open, revealing a sleepy-looking man of early middle-age. Brown hair, light skin, rather tall, bags under his eyes, broad, boxy build, a bit of a gut and a general look of dishevelment.

“You the one from Antarctica?” He said, his voice tinged with tiredness.

Alai nodded, smiling. There was that word again, their name for the Empire.

“Alai LoCaen sen’a LoCaen Jaie, journeyman-scholar of the fifth school, Imperial Institute of Paranormal and Esoteric Study.” She spoke as clearly as she could, trying to minimize her accent, use Northworld inflections. It didn’t help much. Her accent spread across her words like blackbutter on bread.

“Card wasn’t working?”

“No, it wasn’t letting me in.”

“You put it in upside down or something?”

Alai looked at the card. She didn’t think that she had…oh, there it was. A little black arrow next to the magnetic strip, pointing the way it should have been swiped.

Heat flushed through her face. Of course. Of course she’d make a silly mistake like that on the first day.

“Come on, might as well show you around.” The man yawned. “You one of those crazy gung-ho morning people?”

“I don’t think so. It’s all very strange, the timing of everything.”

“Guess it would be for you. Name’s Ed, by the way.”

Ed. No family name? Or was he withholding it? Low-caste? His appearance was slovenly, so that was a possibility or…no, couldn’t

keep thinking in Imperial terms.

Alai followed Ed through a set of monolithic plastic frames with no doors. Some sort of security system?

“You’re a few hours early for the morning shift, so I guess I can give you the tour.” Ed lazily swung a hand out across the expanse of the room. “Welcome to the library.”

It was both reassuringly familiar and uncomfortably different. Plain grey carpet on the floor, no ornamentation or design. Rows and rows of bookshelves, metal instead of wood. Kiosks for computers far smaller than she was used to, tables and chairs scattered throughout. The same long, pale lights instead of hanging paper lamps. The overall lack of decoration gave it that same sort of cold, empty, alien feel. There was no one else there.

“Main desk is up here on level one, and then you’ve got level two below us, and then three and four and all the way down to six. Levels four through six are anomalous materials: you won’t be down there. You just stick around here and get books when people need help getting books, do your own research, whatever. Your shift doesn’t start for another hour and a half so look around, I guess.” He yawned again. “I’ll be over there, wake me up if you need me. Try not to need me.”

Without another glance in her direction, he trundled over to the main desk and sat in the chair, leaning back with his feet on the desk.

Alai stood there for a moment,

She walked over to the desk.

“Um, excuse me, but what am I supposed to do?”

Ed opened one eye.

“You read the paperwork? Until Dr. Quail gets here for the day shift, you can do whatever the hell you want. I’m not your boss.”

“Oh. Okay. If you could show me to…”

Ed grunted, in that universal ‘I am trying to sleep do not disturb the grump’ way. No getting anything from him, then.

Alai hesitantly wandered over to one of the desks and set her books down. The stillness was all-encompassing, muffling even her own heartbeat. Ed’s behavior puzzled her, threw everything off balance. She wasn’t sure if he was a superior, or a co-worker, and his total lack of interest, in her home, in the exchange program was bizarre.

Couldn’t dwell on it now. He wasn’t going to help, so she’d have to make her own. Alai took her dictionary from her pile and stepped into the shelves.

—

Her pile became signficantly higher when she had returned. The categories were easy enough to figure out: history here, sciences here, fiction here, biographies here, and so on. Figuring out the subjects of books had been somewhat difficult, and had required a good deal of flipping through the dictionary, but she had managed. Encyclopedias first, world history and religions, and then focus in greater detail from there.

She set a half-dozen books open in front of her on the table, paging through each at whim. With the atlas studied the shapes of the continents that had been little more than unexplored blobs on Imperial maps. So many things to see. So many things to learn. The awkwardness at the door faded away with the time.

After some time, Alai became aware of the library door opening. She looked up from her book to see a thin man with a shaved head and a thick beard, wearing a bright yellow shirt with a floral pattern. His gaze jumped directly to her, which seemed to set off some sort of spark in his eyes.

“Hello hello hello!” He strode over with big steps and a big smile. “Dr. Argus Quail, *tibi servio*.” He extended his hand, which Alai shook after a moment’s pause. She put a good deal of strength and energy into it, to make up for her prior failures in the act. Quail laughed. “Strong handshake! I like that. You’re Alai, correct? Am I pronouncing that right?”

“Yes.”

“Wonderful! Welcome, yes, welcome. You and I, we’ll have to have lunch sometime soon. Need to compare literary traditions. I would do it today, but I’m afraid there’s a faculty meeting and if I skip out on another one of those the Directors’ Committee will have my knickers. Now I would love to show you around myself, but I can’t stay for long, have things to do, books to sort and all. Edward!” He called over to the main desk. “Edward, show our guest around!” He turned back to Alai. “Once again, I am very sorry I cannot show you around personally, my dear, but Edward is a good man, he knows the ropes.”

Alai wasn’t sure what ropes had to do with anything, or that Quail was a very observant man. She looked over to see Ed walking towards her: Quail had already disappeared.

“Hi, again.” Alai waved half-heartedly. Ed yawned again.

“That man has the attention span of a fly in a bakery. Guess I can’t get out of this, then. Come on…”

Over the next hour or so, Quail’s faith in Ed was not entirely misplaced, Alai decided. He knew where everything was, answered every question, explained protocol succinctly, and did not appear incredibly impatient. He still didn’t make a single comment about the fact that she was from another world.

Soon enough, he had shown her what there was to show her, and they returned to the first level. There were more people in the library now, more librarians and researchers scurrying silently about. Ed gave a lazy goodbye, a yawn, and left.

Alai went back to her stack of books, carrying a large one she had found during the tour. An atlas. The perfect place to begin her studies. She sat down and opened it up, slowly parsing the blocky text they favored. A few pages in, she saw a two-page spread of the Empire, covered in ice. Alai tapped it with her finger, placing Rootrel and the other major cities. Her finger lingered on where Kemdn should have been. Where her home should have been.

The loneliness crept up slowly for a few trickling moments before crashing down on her in its full, hollow force, taking her enthusiasm and drowning it. She was alone. Barely more than a girl, alone in a world not her own, where things were cold and unadorned. This was her home now, but there was nothing homely about the place. Her friends, her family, her masters and teachers, even her Empress, all far, far away. She wouldn't see any of them or speak to any of them for a long time. Quail was kind, for all she had interacted with him, and so were many of the other staff, but…were they just putting on false smiles, enduring or pitying the stupid, silly girl who stumbled into their lives and talked too fast and got over-excited about the littlest things?

She didn't even belong in the exchange group. She wasn't even supposed to be here, it was only that her aunt had fallen ill at the last minute and so she was sent instead. She couldn't face the others, couldn't talk to them: two were so high above her station that there was no way she could approach them, she had no idea how to speak with the Black Court, and she had yet to really speak to the artists. Shifting Snow…she had met him once before, at a funeral. Pleasant enough, but he was a cousin of another family branch, too far away to be real kin.

She bit her lip. No. *No*. She was going to do this. She *did* belong. The Empress's hand didn't move without reason. She was going to do this and when she went home when her studies here were done she would step off that train with smiles and stories and be known as the girl who went North and learned everything there was to know and she would see her mother and father and sisters there at the station waiting for her.

She rubbed her eyes on her sleeve. Don't think about home, think about here. Think about now.

She turned the page, and began to read about Asia.

« **Hub** »

Collecting

"After the objects are processed and given SCP designation, we organize them into three main classes; Safe, Euclid, and Keter. Safe-class objects are the simplest to contain, more often than not requiring minimal procedural deviation, maintenance, and observation. The most strenuous…"

Trighit yawned and surveyed the monochrome hallway. He was glad that he had been pushed to the back of the group; now, there was no reason to mask his boredom with Dr. Grant. Everyone else seemed rapt in attention towards the so called "scientist's" speech.

"I've yet to see a single scientific thing," he muttered.

Though the building looked like neat and orderly enough, there were noises and murmurs coming from the rooms lining the hallways. Trighit focused his attention on the humming he heard emanating from a room on his right. He nudged Pokum and motioned with his head towards the door and the documents sitting in a bin attached to the wall beside it. The assistant shook his head, put one finger in front of his lips, pointed ahead of him, and refocused on the speaker.

"Well, fine then. I'll just look for myself," he quietly fumed.

Trighit edged over to the door and took one of the sheafs of paper down.

> **Item #:** SCP-1517
>
> **Object Class:** Euclid
>
> **Special Containment Procedures:** All instances of SCP-1517 and SCP-1517-A are to be contained in cryogenic…

"I don't care, I don't care," he mumbled to himself as he replaced the documents and reached for the handle. "I just want to know what it is…"

"Mr. Triggit, was it?"

The squat researcher retracted his arm and turned around.

"I-It's pronounced 'Try-it,' actually." he shakily responded working his tongue awkwardly around the unfamiliar words.

"Yes, well, my apologies Mr. Trite. Anyways, though I'm sure you're eager to see the example Euclids, we'd prefer to let our personnel handle the containment. If you could please step back?"

Trighit let out a long, relieved breath as he moved back towards Pokum.

"Now, as I was saying, Euclid-class objects are typically the objects that require moderate amount of attention and protocols. In this room are some fine examples of Euclid-classes. Doctor Peters, if you don't mind?"

The woman nodded, swiped a keycard in the panel adjacent to the bin ("How had I not noticed…?"), and opened the door. Trighit whipped out his ever-present notebook and excitedly craned his short neck, trying to see into the room.

The thrill was short lived. Instead of revealing a new, incredible specimens and environments, the room looked just like the hallway outside; gray, sterile, and boring. A row of white tubes lined the walls, each equipped with a module identical to the one found outside of the door.

"Certain Euclid-classes are deemed to be most easily, effectively, and safely stored in cryogenic suspension. Take a look here at these specimens." The man lifted his own keycard attached to a lanyard around his neck and swiped it through the attachment on one of the tanks. The front of the structure opened with a hissing noise, and the doctor retrieved several objects from inside.

"Now, these here are instances of SCP-1517-A, the eggs of

SCP-1517. These may look like gobstoppers, but…" the man stopped short. Trighit was waving one hand in the air while frantically writing in his journal that was balanced on one of his legs with the other. "Yes?"

"What is a gobstopper?" he asked, readjusting to use his now free hand to support the journal.

The man blinked. "It's, um, a type of candy."

The hand shot up again.

"What kind of creature is 'candy?'" Trighit could feel Pokum's questioning stare, but he ignored it.

"It's… um… well…" Grant was lost for words. He turned to his companions who simply shrugged. The man set down the spheres and rummaged through his pockets, pulling out a wallet. Handing a dollar to his other coworker, he instructed, "Fredricks, go buy a packet of Skittles from the cafeteria vending machine."

The agent paled slightly. "Sir, ah, I'm not quite familiar with this wing, maybe Peters would be better for this?"

Grant groaned and started debating quietly with his two coworkers after assuring Trighit and Pokum that this was all normal custom. While the researchers were engrossed in their spat, the Antarctican scientist quickly grabbed three of the balls and pocketed them.

"Ah, sir, I'm sure you could always show me later!"

The three scientists, glanced over and quickly regained their composure.

"Mmhmm, yes, it's a minor detail anyways. I'm sure you're much more interested in the behavior of the species."

"Yes, sir. Please continue." Trighit replied with a smile on his face stretching ear to ear.

As Grant continued to talk about the behavior of the insects, Pokum nudged his friend frantically, clearly worried about the dangers

posed by his actions. In reply, Trighit shook his head, put one finger in front of his lips, and pointed with the finger on his other hand towards Grant.

"Every day with you, I swear!"

The pair of Antarcticans had been escorted to their room after the tour ("Them? Stay with me? I will not allow it."), where Pokum immediately began chastising his compatriot.

Trighit laughed. "Calm yourself Pokum, it's just some research, no big deal. I'll study them, take some notes, and have them back before they even notice."

"Do you even think about what you do? This isn't back at home where no one cares how many threxans you coerce from the pack, or how many hyrechi you dig out of the ground! You're going to get us executed before we've been here for more than a week, you fool!"

He chuckled again. "You worry yourself too much, friend. We're not in trouble, are we? No one noticed, yes?"

Pokum remained silent and he crossed his arms in front of his chest.

"Bah, this is the whole reason why we came, isn't it?"

"No," he spat, "This is the whole reason why *you* came, Trighit. I came to make sure you didn't get yourself hurt or killed, and that's it. I've told you, I don't care about this stuff, I care about you! Now, go put it back, apologize, and maybe they won't leave us to rot."

"Sir, um… it appears that we're missing a few of the SCP-1517-A instances."

"Fifteen-seventeen, fifteen-seventeen…?"

"The candy bugs, sir."

"The ones we used as example Euclids for the researchers from

SCP-1483?"

"Yes."

"…Shit. Send Peters over to that wing to double check the count on each skip in containment and send Fredricks down to their room, and if they don't find it there, declare a containment breach."

"Aye."

Trighit sat in shock. "Y-you don't care? Since when?"

The assistant kneaded his forehead in frustration. "Trighit, I don't know how many times I've tried to tell you. I always came along just because you wanted me to, and, well, you're my friend. You just never listened because you were always too focused or fascinated by whatever happened to be that day's subject. I actually kind of hate all of this."

"But Pokum, I always… I… I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it." He sighed. "Look, let's just put them back. No one will have to know, we can probably use these card things they gave us to get back in. We'll just go along, studying— well, *observing* the things they tell us to— and then, when the excursion is all over, we go back home where no one cares how much of what animal you take."

"Yes," the scientist replied hollowly. "They're in that flask, right on the desk."

Pokum silently went over, and dumped the contents into his hand.

"I'm going to go try to put these back. Stay put."

A sharp knocking on the door made them both freeze.

"Hey, this is Agent Fredricks. Open up!"

The two paled and looked at each other.

"Oh God, what do we do?" mouthed Trighit.

Pokum shrugged while frantically scanning the room for a place to hide them.

"Keep him busy for as long as you can, I'll be there in a minute." Pokum mouthed, quickly maneuvering towards the bathroom.

Trighit ran to answer, but the door of their room flung open, and in walked a tired-looking man attired in a suit.

"Alright, it's room inspection time." he said, any former traces of humor and ease gone.

"Whatever for, Agent Fredricks?" the squat visitor asked, trying to keep his voice from shaking.

The agent glared at him for a few moments before responding. "A few of SCP-1517-A's eggs didn't make it back to containment after your tour of the site. We're trying to find them now."

Trighit tried to put on his most genuine smile. It didn't work.

"Well, I do hope you locate them."

The agent grunted and moved towards the beds, upturning everything and inspecting all of the sheets. Trighit angled his head towards the bathroom to look at his companion, who quickly tossed the eggs into the toilet. Pokum edged out of the bathroom as quietly as he could, but the squeaking of the door's hinges as he tried to close it caught Fredrick's attention.

"Hey, what were you doing in there?"

"I was, ah, just trying to…" Pokum stumbled over his words as he searched for an alibi. By the time he had thought of one, the agent had pushed past him into the small room.

"Not even a day into this thing and already…" The pair could hear him mumbling from the room as they stood silent, erect, and terrified. Soon after, a clanging resounded in the room, accompanied by yelling and the sounds of things falling and glass

breaking. The agent ran out, arms covered with crawling colorful insects.

His screaming only lasted about fifteen seconds. The Antarctians didn't stop screaming for a while, not until more people came, hosed down the agent, and shoved the pair down the hallway to the Site Director's office.

« **Hub** »

From On High (Antarctic Exchange #4)

Darkness, and then light. The mind crystallized, the web of gold filaments woven into spiraling pathways amidst the fluid blackness, shining spheres beading on the mesh.

Peace flowed, one thread to the next, one golden sphere to the next. They twisted and danced into their proper ordering. Each Blessing in turn was made right.

Highest?

One particular Blessing was proving an issue: it had become tangled in the webbing. Gently, gently, the knots loosened.

Highest?

One string snagged. Gently…gently…

Highest!

The web vanished. Lucrezen Lhivaen Battackan Chlolassouvin opened her opalescent eyes. Sight and hearing burst back into being. She uncrossed her legs and stood up, rising to her full nine feet. In a fit of improvisation, the Foundation had granted her an unused lecture hall to sleep and live in. She was thankful for that: at least now, when she was teaching or sleeping, she did not have to do so hunched over.

She gracefully walked to the door, her layers of intricately-woven robes swishing around her impossibly slender frame. Her grace hid her bubbling irritation. She knew the voice behind the door and thumping on it.

No, no, he would insist on ceremony. It was his way.

“Highest?”

Lucrezen sat on the first desk tier. It would do for a throne for now.

“You may enter, hand of the Empress.”

The door slid open, revealing the form of Sakarn Var Surten. The man took a few steps forward, eyes averted, before dropping prostrate to the floor.

“Ten thousand pardons, Highest. Your servant did not wish to interrupt your holy duties, but was forced to by matters beyond his control.”

“Speak.” Scrounging and begging, as usual. Lucrezen was reminded of how much she disliked it. Bow to the Empress, and the Empress alone. I am only her tool.

“The fools of the Black Court, Trighit and Pokum, have been found guilty of a heinous crime by our esteemed hosts, and are currently held by the Director of this site for treason. The Northworlder deems himself of importance to issue you command, and has requested your prescense.”

Exaggerations, most likely. Lucrezen deeply wished to remind Sakarn that the Black Court were likewise children of the Empress, but she knew he would have none of that. Feigned acceptance, until she was out of sight and earshot.

There was a sharp, pinching pain from the left side of her head. And there it was, the consequences of breaking meditation to listen to his groveling.

“I will speak with the director.” And now, time to get him out of the hair that she did not have. “And to you, my valued servant, I bestow to you a special duty. There is an item of some note, which our hosts have provided us access. I have arranged you and your manservant to observe this place. It is of great interest to me.”

“Of course, Highest. I am your humble servant. Your will is mine.”

“Go then. Speak with Doctor Hanakawa. Blessings of the Empress upon you and your house.”

“And upon your ancestors and line to come.” Sakarn stood up, head still bowed, and shuffled out of the room.

Lucrezen stood up, rubbing at the side of her head with a single, white-gold finger.

Once again, she was reminded why she much rather preferred dealing with children. They were much more honest, with their gapped-teeth and scuffed-knees.

—

Lucrezen sat cross-legged on the floor, still tall enough to be on eye-level with the dour-faced man across the desk. Trighit, fat and round, sat on her right. Pokum, smaller with patches of brown in his fur, sat on her left. Both had heads hung in shamed silence.

She had almost mentioned how much the Director looked like one of her sons. The same jawline, the same eyes.

Ahgh, her headache was clouding her judgment with discomfort. She needed to finish her meditations.

She inhaled deeply, trying to calm the pain and collect her mind. Trighit was a fool: that was common knowledge. But he was the Empress’ fool. And a fool of the Empress was still under her care. At least he didn’t grovel: the Black Court was the Empress’ court of fools and jesters, dancing under the moons of the long night where there was no caste. Everyone was family in the Black Court.

She set the sheaf of papers down on the desk.

“According to your documentation of the creatures, they are harmless until the shell is broken, generally through consumption.” Her voice was clear, clipped, bearing neither Imperial accent nor Northworld inflection. Such was the Blessing of Tongues. “Theodore Lawrence consumed a specimen before a warning was able to be issued. This was an unfortunate accident caused by a careless fool, Director. Not an act of malice.”

“Your researcher flagrantly broke containment, resulting in the death of a Foundation agent.”

“A truth, but it must be said that the specimens were adequately contained.”

“A glass bottle is not adequate.”

“So long as they are unbroken, they are not dangerous. Granted, Trighit’s inevitable experimentation on the eggs would result in breaking of the shell, and such an event would be clearly his total responsibility. But, as it stands, I find deportation unnecessary, Director. Simple revocation of access to items and area restrictions will be sufficient.”

The Director scowled, looking even more than ever like Irdi. He was around the same age, too.

“I will be honest, here: I am not impressed with your researchers.”

“’What the Empress gives, one receives without complaint.’ It is a lesson we teach to our children, Director. We are who you have been given, be it good or ill. It is up to you to deal with them. Will you throw it away, or make good out of it? These two have committed a grievous fault, I will not deny that, but in circumstances such as these, there is a place for forgiveness.”

The director was quiet for some time.

“Very well. These two are to be confined to the residential wing until further notice."

—

"Ten thousand thanks, Sister." Trighit said, watching the guards walk down the hall to escort him and Pokum to their room. "I don't think I could have lived with the shame of returning empty-handed."

"Keep your hands on what you are supposed to from now on. Have you provided a funerary writ to the man's wife or mother yet?"

"As far as I know, he has neither. They cut their ties when they walk through the doors."

A memory flashed in Lucrezen's vision alongside another pulse of

pain, a small girl with braided hair, standing in front of a two magnificent gild doors, engraved with the image of the First Empress, striking down Sanak Thiuh, surrounded by a circle of the First Watchers, their hands raised in supplication. Her cheeks were stained with tears, but she had to be strong, for the Empress had chosen her.

"A pity."

"Aye."

Lucrezen lingered in the hallway for a moment after the guards had taken them down the hall. She walked in the opposite direction, bowed and bent. She had meditations to finish, and a lecture to prepare.

« **Hub** »

Impressions

Tyhjä fidgeted. Everything here made him feel uncomfortable for some reason, maybe it was the simplicity of the unadorned, unremarkable buildings, maybe it was the feel of the ground that seemed almost too hollow, maybe it was the language that he had needed to learn…

He had spent hours rehearsing conversations in his head before the journey here, carefully practicing the pronunciation and making an effort to pack plainer, dully-colored clothes. More than anything, Tyhjä hated feeling uncomfortable in the presence of others, but nevertheless it seemed he was *constantly* embarrassing himself here.

Just now, he had been so relieved to see a decorative item inside the building that he had blurted with reckless abandon something inane about how nice it was even though it was just a vase of flowers, and probably imitation flowers, at that. His guide had looked at him oddly, thanked him politely, and continued on towards whatever interesting specimen Tyhjä had been assigned to take a look at.

All the while, Tyhjä wished he could just melt into the floor and disappear. It was enough that everyone looked and acted so different; still he stood out so much that sometimes the people here would turn away, would whisper to themselves about him, his companions, their tasks, their work. *Antarctica. Empire. Emissaries. Secrets. Antarctica.*

He could both hear and understand them, but he wasn't sure if he should let them know.

Tyhjä squinted at the green, no, gray mass of butterflies, and attempted once more to draw a rough outline of their wings. He looked at his notebook quickly to make sure he wouldn't run out of

space, and when he looked back there was some sort of furry gray creature sitting in the midst of the fluttering insects.

He blinked, then tried sketching it as well. It was eating something vaguely oval-shaped.

The door to the aviary opened, and Tyhjä turned to see who had entered. It was a female human, holding a large container of a clear liquid. The person looked at him, raised one hand and moved it side to side in greeting, and proceeded to pour the liquid into waiting receptacles, which were soon swarmed by shimmering wings.

Looking back towards the gray creatures, Tyhjä realized that a tree had somehow sprouted in the middle of the aviary without him noticing. Confused, he instinctively began drawing the outline of the trunk as the human finished filling the feeding containers.

“Hello, erm, Tai-ja? Dr. Kiryu would like to meet you.”

Tyhjä looked up. That wasn’t how his name was pronounced, but the human was smiling, if a little nervously, and gesturing towards the door. Most of the humans he met didn’t pay him much attention, they just walked by and let him sketch, sometimes still talking as if he wasn’t there. Tyhjä looked back at the tree, which was now gone. The human laughed. “They do that. You’re new, and sometimes they like playing tricks on people.”

“…I see. Where can I find this doctor?” Tyhjä began packing up his drawing materials as the woman opened the door.

The researcher led Tyhjä through a confusing series of hallways (they all looked alike, were all lit alike, and even almost all *sounded* alike, it was disorienting) to a door that seemed quite like the other hundred or so he must have passed. “He’s running some experiments there, feel free to wait inside, just make sure you don’t touch anything.” She smiled, patted Tyhjä on the shoulder, and walked off.

“Don’t touch tha—oh. Hello.”

Tyhjä flinched slightly, and abandoned his drawing of a series of strange glass objects, some containing oddly-colored liquids. His eyes met those of a man wearing a long white coat and an expression that seemed to be a mix of curiosity and surprise.

“Dr. Mark Kiryu, pleased to meet you.” The man removed some sort of plastic covering from his hands, then extended one hand to Tyhjä, who for a moment stared at it and then quickly shook it. “I’m Tyhjä, from…”

“Antarctica, right? My sister mentioned you.” Kiryu busied himself carrying away the tray of glassware Tyhjä had been drawing.

“Sister?” Tyhjä wondered out loud.

“She’s seen you a few times today, yes.” Kiryu dragged a chair with wheels on its legs from somewhere and sat on it, looking speculatively at Tyhjä. The artist avoided the doctor’s gaze, staring at the too clean, too plain floor.

Kiryu cleared his throat. “Homesick?” Tyhjä looked up, shrugged, and nodded faintly. The doctor smiled. “Sometimes all we need is a quick meal to cheer us up.”

“Here we are. I hope you don’t mind eating in a testing room? I’m afraid it’s the only available place, at the moment.” Kiryu led Tyhjä to a small, bare room, furnished with only a table and chair, both made of some stark white material. The doctor was carrying a sizeable bowl, empty, and a metal utensil, a spoon, Tyhjä noted.

“I don’t mind. I prefer quiet places.” Tyhjä stated, glancing around.

Kiryu chuckled, then his eyes went wide. “Spider!” he shouted, and stomped on Tyhjä’s foot.

Tyhjä muffled a cry of pain and staggered backwards slightly. Had he said something wrong? Was that some sort of obscure human joke?

The doctor glanced wildly around the room. “Oh, I’m sorry. Um, spiders… they’re little creatures that sometimes bite people. The

dangerous ones can be poisonous. I thought I saw one. Is your foot alright?"

Lifting the foot in question gingerly, Tyhjä nodded. "It stings a little, but I think I'll be fine."

The doctor had placed the bowl and spoon on the table. "Good, good… well, there you go! Just leave these in the room when you're finished. Oh, and if you don't mind, I'd appreciate knowing what sort of meal it prepared for you… I'll be waiting outside." Kiryu smiled, then closed the door.

Tyhjä was perplexed. How could he eat from an empty bowl? He walked towards the table, then took a few steps back.

The bowl wasn't empty. It was filled with a clear, golden broth that smelled of sea salt and starchy roots, of Antarctic fish and Antarctic spices. Tyhjä sat down, picked up the spoon, prodded the soup with it. Real. Definitely real. Even though the only one who could have possibly made this soup was far, far away, was the one who sent Tyhjä and his sister off alone to train their skills when they were barely grown.

How did it…? Wary though he was of such an odd miracle occurring, Tyhjä couldn't help but feel calmed by the nostalgic scent he remembered from his early childhood. It brought back countless memories. He hesitated, took out his notebook, and drew a quick outline of the bowl and the soup, then finished the entire bowl in a few gulps, spoon completely forgotten.

Tyhjä finally found a quiet place to sit by himself, a little courtyard in the center of a building used for animal research, so he was told. There were benches and a few trees there, and moreover, several birds that came and went.

With a sigh of relief, Tyhjä withdrew his notebook and a writing stylus from the satchel he carried with him. Opening to a new page, he followed the path of a bird in flight, beginning to draw as he watched. To be truthful, the creatures were almost too small to be called birds by Imperial standards.

It was pleasant, though. Such a tiny little being was a welcome change of subject from the fierce, winged predators with cruelly hooked talons Tyhjä was accustomed to seeing. It was fascinating to watch these different birds fly, as well as comforting to know that the little chirping things would *not* attempt to attack him and rip out his innards should he get too close.

Tyhjä suddenly felt a slight weight pressing on his head, and he realized that one of the little dark brown birds had landed on him. Tyhjä resumed sketching, and the bird resumed sitting on his shaggy hair, occasionally chirping out a query to its friends sitting on the trees. Tyhjä allowed himself a small smile. The birds at home never sang.

Suddenly the bird flew off. Tyhjä frowned, watching it arc through the air and into the sky. He wondered if something had startled it.

At the sound of footsteps, Tyhjä looked over his shoulder and nearly fell off his bench.

Someone *standing right next to him* was looking intently at him, no, his notebook, and that someone was dressed in such bright colors that Tyhjä could've sworn his eyes started burning. He had seen her before, he thought dazedly. The one who liked asking questions. He blinked a few times, attempting to edge away slightly without seeming rude, and he noticed his sister sheepishly leaning against a nearby wall.

"…Sister. Who is this?" Tyhjä managed, slightly shaken.

"Apologies if we bothered you, Tyhjä. I met Alai in the library, and it was such a lovely day outside that I thought that it would be a shame if we didn't take the opportunity to read out in the sunlight…"

Tyhjä wasn't particularly reassured by the explanation, seeing as Alai was still standing *too close* and he had been *rather* engrossed in his observation of the bird and *why wasn't she just saying something so he could ask her to maybe give him some space—*

"What's that?" Alai pointed to the sketch he had been working on.

“…a bird…” Tyhjä mumbled.

Alai cocked her head slightly, scrutinizing the simple sketch. “It doesn’t even have teeth!”

Tyhjä pointed at a tree close by, where one of the little feathery brown creatures appeared to be regarding Alai with some interest. She looked suspiciously at it. “Do you know anything about these birds? Do they like bright colors? If you get too close, do they bite?”

“They seem rather harmless, so I don’t believe they bite.” Tyhjä cast a quick panicked glance towards his sister, but Clear Evening only smiled, apparently happy Tyhjä had found a friend to talk to. *Sister why are you doing this to me Sister help me—*

“What do you think of this place so far?” Alai smiled, setting down the armful of books she was carrying.

“I like it well enough, thank you.” Tyhjä stood up, intending to find another (quieter) place to stay. “Alai, Sister, if you’ll pardon my leaving, I’d like to find some different birds to observe.” He inclined his head slightly to the two of them, and then padded away towards the door leading back into the facility.

“Tyhjä, you’ll tell me more about these birds later, won’t you?” Alai’s cheerful voice followed Tyhjä as he made his escape.

Though he didn’t like to admit it, he *did* feel slightly guilty for just running off like that; he would’ve liked to talk more about birds with Alai, perhaps, and maybe he’d mention the other things he’d seen and heard about from the scientists, but then his sister hadn’t helped him out much, usually it was she who was there in case he slipped up during conversation, and he wished he could be as excited as Alai was about everything, but—

Empress help him, he needed to lie down.

« **Hub** »

Memory of a Memory

Sakarn Var Surten was being talked to, and didn't care for it one bit.

To be honest, it wasn't so much the talking to he minded, it was the fact he didn't understand a word of what the mustachioed agent was saying. That, and the way the man kept pointing his finger at him was vaguely obscene. He was glad the others were not here to see this shameful display.

"Snow, what is he talking about?"

"He is just explaining the terms of our stay here, Lordship."

Sakarn briefly regretted not bothering to learn the Northworld tongue, but then remembered himself. After all, what were servants for?

"Translate for me."

"Yes, Lordship. Agent Douglas is saying that according to the contract signed between the IIPES and their Foundation, you are entitled to visit one wing of the location they are referring to as SCP-921. Armed guards will be stationed at the entrances to the wing, but you may access the recorded memories held within it freely. We will stay on-site for two days, under orders from his director and our Superior. He says that even a great fool such as yourself can surely understand such simple procedures."

"He called me a fool?! The sheer nerve! I'll have him reported to his superiors! Snow, do it at once."

"That might be unwise, Lordship. Casual insults such as this are common in the everyday speech of the Northworld. It is considered acceptable in polite conversation. We must always obey propriety, as you often say. "

“Oh… well then, I suppose that is tolerable. Tell him that I understand, and that his birth-mother’s… cooking was greatly below par.”

“Yes, Lordship.”

The servant relayed Sakarn’s reply to the agent, who nodded and, after murmuring a few words into a mobile communication device hanging from a shoulder strap, led the two inside the great cave complex known as SCP-921. The three made for a strange sight, as they entered the depths of the Museum of Memories: the agent in his tailored suit and shiny leather shoes, muttering under his breath, the slender, four-armed Mender in his magnificent gossamer robes and a look of disdain on his long face, and the short, plainly dressed servant, smiling faintly behind his master’s back.

After a few minutes, they reached a sort of central chamber. Sakarn discerned multiple exits which seemed to lead to various other tunnels much like the one they just left. The agent began speaking again, and his finger resumed its pointing routine.

“He says that this chamber houses the site’s curator, Lordship. It will provide explanations on the various memories stored here. He will now lead us to the Verdant Dome wing, where you will be able to begin your tour in earnest. He also suggests that you should shower more often.”

Now making their way through a different tunnel, the trio soon reached a vast open area, and despite himself, Sakarn was impressed: it was a huge stone amphitheater, at least ten stories high, and completely overgrown with strange and exotic types of flora. The agent began climbing the ancient-looking steps, and motioned the others to follow. He stopped next to a cracked seat about halfway up, and gestured Sakarn to sit, once again wiggling his finger at him and saying something to Snow.

“He said that each seat in the amphitheater accesses a different memory, Lordship. Simply sit on one, and you will experience it. He explained that these memories are all benign, and even a dainty, skinny coward wrapped in a dandy’s robe should not have any difficulty with them.”

“I am beginning to grow very tried with the conversation culture of the Northworld, summerling.”

“I understand your frustration, Lordship, but we must obey propriety. You needn't worry; the agent will now leave you to your own devices, as will I. “

“What? Where do you think you’re going?”

“You will not require my services here, Lordship, and I have official business elsewhere, Superior's orders. I shall be back within the hour.”

Sakarn bent down to the nearest seat, examining the gorgeous, luminescent red vine wrapped tightly around it. "And what, pray tell, orders are tho-“but the servant was already gone, leaving Sakarn alone in that strange hall. Sighing, Sakarn brushed some non-existing dust from the red vine and sat.

Lights, as bright as an autumn day upon the salt flats of his youth. A great man, riding a strange hooved beast, in the midst of a great, cheering crowd. An elder, issuing dire warnings, like arrows from the eyes of the red planet. And elsewhere, a little man smiled, writing.

Sakarn blinked, and slowly got up. He took a careful step away from the stone pew, and almost slipped down the stairs when a voice began to ring, coming somewhere from the ceiling above him.

He comes to bring the old order to its knees, for the sake of well-earned pride, and would not listen to those who seek to warn him. He would soon learn that while pride is a poor quality if one wishes to keep his life, it is a great one for one wishing to keep a legacy.

After a moment of fairly ignoble whimpering, Sakarn remembered the pointing-prone agent said something about a curator providing explanations, and relaxed a bit. For a while, he simply stood there, but eventually curiosity got the better of him and he sat again, this time on the pew adjacent to the first.

Lights again, not nearly as bright this time. An armored man again, but not nearly as great, and his hooved beast is made of… painted

wood? An elder with a fake beard, mumbling something, and the small man from before, shouting at both of them.

Even the greatest of legacies fade with time, and soon naught is left but tinder to the minds of others, a spark from which a new sort of greatness may one day emerge.

Sakarn didn't quite know what to make of scene, other than a vague sense of familiarity. Intrigued, he slid to the next seat over, the last in the row.

An overcast day this time. The man from before being stabbed by men in robes as a crowd watches in silence. Later, they cheer, and the stabbed man rises, and takes a bow, hand in hand with his murderers.

And so, something new is born. Not so glorious perhaps, but great nevertheless. There is more than one way to be remembered.

Ah, so this was what that was all about, a play. Sakarn now realized what seemed so familiar about the scene- it bore a close resemblance to the Tragedy of the Halfmoon Empress, which he had seen performed few times, the last being in the Midwinter festival. He remembered Merrella's wonder at the bright, colorful costumes, her smile as she saw the Empress brought to justice for her crimes, how she cheered at the end…

Sakarn shook himself, and expelled the memory from his mind. It would not do to think of her, not after what happened. He rose from the stone pew, and attempted to regain his composure. Can't let anyone see him like this, can't show weakness, not after last time. Never again.

Over the course of the next hour, Sakarn circled the grand amphitheater, occasionally taking a seat and experiencing a memory. They were all connected to theater, in one way or another, and, while not unpleasant, Sakarn found that they reminded him too much of the past. Of Shifting Snow, there was no sign, and, growing wary of waiting, Sakarn decided to approach one of the guards in order to be let out. That is, until he noticed a light shining from a small corridor to the side of the amphitheater, which he somehow

missed until now. Something about the light was… intriguing. The corridor led to a room very different from the vast hall it was connected to. It was an intimate place, a shaded grove hidden within the bowls of the earth. Beneath each neatly lined tree was a round, clear pool of water. Sakarn was reminded of the Hall of Mending back home. Instinctively, he dipped his long, metallic arms into one of the shallow pools, and dashed a sprinkle of icy water onto his face.

A strange man he didn't recognize, in ancient clothes, standing before a vast host of Feastlings, preparing the ritual of Mending. Impossible. The Maws of Eser, opened wider than he ever saw them. Another host, in another place, tearing through the Northworld like a mailed fist. A girl, her face hidden. The smell of tar and rot.

Some things must not be allowed to be forgotten. Others, to be remembered. What was, may be again, will be again. The Maws always hunger for dreams, and through dreams, hunger comes. Be vigilant.

Sakarn slowly pulled his arms out of the pool, and realized they were shaking. The ritual of Mending, performed by a layman, Feastlings in the Northworld. The smell… he didn't understand any of it, and that frightened him. Despite his position in court, Sakarn never forgot that a Mender's first duty was to attend to the Maws, and if this place knew something about them, he had to find out. Reluctantly, he walked to the next pool over, and repeated the gesture.

A robed creature, viscous fluids leaking from burlap sacks and bundles in its hands. The Feastlings, hungrily drinking from the fetid pools it left behind it as it paced along a ruined concrete corridor. No, one of carved stone. Ivory. Oak. Metal. Always moving towards the girl with her face covered, in a hundred different guises.

Some things never change. Others, change too much. The memory of a memory is enough to leave a sea of corpses behind it, and he is nothing so vague. Once the Maws are opened again, there will be no turning back. Be true.

This wasn't enough! He had to get to the bottom of this, even if it

would kill him! Another pool, a dip, a flash of consciousness.

Rootrel, just a tiny village now, drowned by a black tide of festering bodies. Another city, its tall steel and glass towers impaled by the thorns of a gargantuan, pulsing plant. The girl, always the girl, where did he know her from? She looked just like…no, she was reading, in a place he visited once before, and a bearded man was smiling, but he had no mouth to smile with. The tar soon swallowed them both.

Some things cannot be changed. Others are still malleable. This memory of a memory is only that, for now. There is still time. Be quick.

He had to go back. It was the girl, the wide-eyed girl, the one who reminded him of her so much that it hurt.

"Snow!"

And there was the servant, a strangely gentle expression on his usually passive face.

"Yes, Lordship?"

"We have to go back. She doesn't understand what she's doing! Please, Snow, take me back!"

He expected the servant to argue, in that infuriatingly patient tone of his, that the Superior's orders were for them to stay, that they couldn't possibly leave, but the servant merely nodded.

"This way, Lordship."

Sakarn was so surprised that he found himself arguing for the servant. "But what about our orders? What about propriety?"

And then the servant did something that was very strange even on a day like this. He smiled.

"I suspect that you know best when the time for propriety is over. Let's go."

They did.

« Hub »

On the Other Side of the Coin

A majestic zeppelin, multi-gondola'd, glowing red and gold in the light of a sun that will not set for days, drifts lazily through clear skies over sparsely vegetated scrubland. It is just as impressive inside as out, with walls of polished red wood, hanging tapestries with complex and beautiful patterns, and lavish suites for every passenger. If ever there was an aircraft that justified having a story written about it, it would be this one.

It is, therefore, unfortunate that these stories do not center on this impressive feat of Antarctican engineering. There are about a score of servants and attendants on this airship, as well as a flight crew and a pilot, but they are likewise not the focus, which is a shame, because what the pilot is currently doing with one of the engineers on the flight deck certainly deserves some attention.

However, these stories are in fact about the various humans that are sitting in their rooms, looking out of place and out the window at the world which they now find themselves in.

Oh, it appears the pilot is pregnant. So much for keeping her little encounter secret.

Jeremy Remus, a Junior Researcher for the Foundation, was not at all sure what he was doing on this gaudy airship. *Why are the styles so flamboyant?* The Empress of 1483 had insisted on at least one… well, something long and complicated that boiled down to cultural anthropologist. Of the relatively few that the Foundation employed, most of them were in Alaska waiting for new villages, or trying to negotiate the return of some D-Class from wherever that guy with the passports sent them.

A servant, a member of the… Black Court entered his room with a jug of water in his enormous furred hand. *Black Court = lower caste.*

System based on resemblance to animals? Do the animals here have fur? He thanked him absently in English, then remembered where he was and used the Antarctic language.

There had been an embassy in the Empire for years. What more could be learned about the culture at this point? Jeremy had spoken to Dr. Bailey over the phone, and he'd been nice, well, nice enough, but even he seemed puzzled as to why Jeremy was coming along. He hadn't spoken much with the others, but he was sure at least one of them was giving him dirty looks before they had boarded.

He stared gloomily at the observation notebook that he had been scribbling in. So far there was nothing but questions. He resolved to fix that as he looked out the window.

Was that Large penguin-like creatures observed biting the heads off Antarcticans. Inquire into the effect this has on rural life.

Jeremy got his first glimpse of Rootrel several hours later. It looked a bit like the cities back in his own universe, but more colorful. There were huge black tree-like structures on most of the higher roofs, which Jeremy had to assume were for collecting solar power. And, of course, very few cities had an enormous skeleton surrounded by walls at their center.

The Empress' palace was as opulent as expected, with precious metals, statues, stained glass windows, but it was still very clearly held together by the bones of a titanic creature. Stairs of some light-colored stone, framed by tusks, led to the mouth in a skull the size of a mansion, with two teeth removed and replaced with gilded double doors. A glass tunnel was built along the hollowed out spine, and the outbuildings had very noticeable claws.

Jeremy was still staring ten minutes later when there was a knock at his door. An attendant, looking almost like a dark-skinned human but much thicker, came in and spoke.
"Excuse me, sir, but I have been assigned to help you prepare for your party's welcome." The man pulled open what Jeremy had thought to be a decorative wall panel to reveal several extremely flashy, complicated, and *uncomfortable* looking outfits.

It was then that he realized that the ship was not heading for the small, relatively unadorned building at the edge of town that was the Foundation embassy, but for the palace.

"Welcome?" he asked, horror starting to grip him as the Antarctican began perusing the closet's contents. "But, but, we're just another group of Foundation employees, right? There's nothing new about us."

"You are wrong, sir. You and your colleagues have been sent here by your Foundation as a part of the Exchange. This is the first time that her Imperial Majesty the Empress will be giving such free access to the many wonders under her power, and it is Her will that she meet the 'expert specialists' that will be working alongside the Institute in an official capacity," he paused. "You are truly blessed for getting such an opportunity."

A crowd was gathering outside of the palace walls, and a small group of very well-dressed women, presumably high-ranking court officials, were emerging from other doors in the skull and forming a small group by the doors. That's right. This Institute was a public arm of the government. There would be red tape, and crowds, and officialties, and all of those other things that you rarely needed to worry about when you were a low level researcher in a vast, mainly secret organization.

Expert specialists…

Jeremy dumbly allowed the attendant to help him with the complicated robes, and to gather his things to be transported to his rooms at the embassy. It was only after the Antarctican had left that he allowed himself to raise his sleeve to his mouth, and bite down hard.

The Foundation gratefully accedes to the conditions set forth by the Empress Utmai Cjen VI and the Imperial Institute of Paranatural and Esoteric Study. A group of specialists will arrive within the week for the study of anomalies currently under the IIPES's control.
O5-1, O5-2, O5-5, O5-7, O5-8, O5-10, O5-12

« Hub »

A Merry Fellow

Thomas Bailey awoke to the sun streaming in through his window. It was 25.6 degrees Centigrade outside, which considering the fact that he was in the Antarctic Circle in the middle of summer, it had no right to be. He rubbed his eyes and went up to the window, opening it and looking out at the streets of the Imperial City where his apartment was.

Below him, children from the Summer Court played in one of the many lichen gardens in the noble district. A flightless bird the size of a German Shepherd, which Tom recognized as an Imperial Auk (*Pinguinus impennis imperialis*) waddled through the streets on a leash, alongside a noblewoman who was wearing a robe with large, poofy sleeves with a green trim, and a pointed cap with some Penguin feathers in the end. Across the street, a courier from the Black Court ran along the walls of the apartments, being kept up only through sheer momentum (And possibly a Blessing). Couriers were only used to deliver eyes-only mail; they would use the telephone for anything like saying that his bills needed paying, or just send it through traditional mail if it was something like an advertisement. So, that meant the mail was for him.

Sure enough, the courier jumped the gap between the apartments- a good 10 meters or so- and sprang right through Tom's open window. The Bailey triplet only managed to get out of the way in the nick of time as the furred man landed on his bed like some form of panther. He was barely visible against the scenery of Tom's apartment, due to the fact that he wore Western Chameleon leather, which made him almost invisible.

The courier, a man named Da'ai the Swift, grunted in Antarctican, "It's polite to keep your window closed if you're expecting us.[1]"

"I like the view from my window in the morning," Tom replied in the same tongue, crossing his arms. "And I wasn't expecting you; what's

this about?"

"Directly from the Institute," grunted the Courier, handing him an envelope with the seal of the IIPES on it.

Tom took the letter and set it aside. It was impolite to open mail in front of a courier. The man coughed, holding out his hand; sighing, Tom surrendered 5 Imperials to the man."Da'ai, you know that you're not supposed to take tips."

"Think of it as a bribe, Thomas Bailey." The Black Courtsman pronounced it "Too-mass Balley". "You give me money, I don't tell anyone what was in the letter."

"…I'll leave my window closed next time," Tom said, stepping aside. Da'ai the Swift climbed out the window, onto the rooftop. Tom heard the man's footsteps run away as he sped off. "…showoff," Tom muttered, opening the letter.

Half an hour later, Tom was driving his 484 Saquah Speeder^2 down the streets of the Imperial City, looking around. He drove through the market district, where people pedaled next to him on bicycles, trying to sell him car insurance. Tom ignored them, and took some lichen from his car's snuffbox and chewed on it; it gave a feeling similar to tobacco, but it didn't give you cancer if you used it every day for 60 years. It may make your hair fall out, dye your skin purple and negate any Blessings you possess, but it won't give you cancer.

The radio in Tom's car started playing the Antarctican Anthem as he drove near the Palace, which was at the very center of the city. Tom never got tired of hearing it, despite the fact that he had lived here for the past three years; he suspected that it had a memetic property of some kind that kept it from being boring. The palace itself was carved from the bones of a giant… something that was called Sanak Thiuh, with the skull serving as the entrance. He'd always wanted to get a sample of it, but he'd be executed for vandalizing imperial property if he so much as touched an exterior wall without permission.

As Tom cleared the Palace, he pulled up to an Institute station, and

saw a speed bus was pulled up next to it. Exiting it were some more 'northern nobility', or as he knew them, Foundation researchers. He recognized a couple of them as being from 87, but other than that, they were fresh faces. They had probably just arrived from the zeppelin station[3], and one of the newbies- a horticulturalist- was bending over to inspect a flower. Said flower jumped up at her face and clung to her nose, where it began to suck the blood out. She flailed around while some Blessed medics tried to pull it off her face, one of them stunning it and the other healing the wound on her nose.

Newbies, thought Tom, shaking his head and heading into the Institute's main entrance.

Tom's assistant, the ever-chipper Yu'nai Bitop beamed at Tom, her dark skin reflecting the soft electric light of the facility as they walked along. The soft lighting was a stark contrast to the bright, harsh lights that Sites like 87 and 19 had; all incandescent, all yellow, all pleasant. The lighting was one of the first things that Tom noticed when he came into an Institute-sanctioned facility. "They're in the assembly hall. You have your speech ready?"

"Yes, Yu." Tom smiled back, holding up some note cards and walking along, humming to himself. He emerged onto the stage, which was more of a raised platform in the center of the hall, carved from the wishbones of one of the last known giant selachimorphic cranes.[4]

He counted the people out in the hall. There were 40 of them, most of them women, which was a welcome change. He started talking. "Good morning," Tom said. "My name is Dr. Thomas Bailey, and I regret to inform you that for the next two years, you will not be having any coffee. You will not be seeing your significant others. You will be under supervision at all times. You will be led by an authority that does not understand your species- wait." Tom looked at his note cards and frowned, slapping his forehead. "Dammit! I mixed up my notes with the Site 19 orientation."

This drew a laugh from the crowd, particularly a couple of people from 19 itself. "Anyway. I'm afraid I'm serious about the no coffee bit,

but they have lizards here that have caffeinated blood. So just try a bit of their meat and it'll wake you up better than any Starbucks ever could." Tom actually pulled out a bit of dried lizard from his pocket; they were in snack bags like M&Ms or Skittles back home. He ate it in front of the crowd, some of whom looked disgusted, but most of them just thought 'eh, once you see a man get turned inside-out by his own intestines, not much fazes you'.

"This place is nothing like the baseline. There are things here that we think are anomalous that are common place, like, say, caffeinated lizards. There are squads of people here whose sole job is killing Giant Antarctic Penguins before they can bite off the heads of Imperial citizens and nobility. Magic is quite real here, and several people can use it; and before you ask, you're welcome to try, *if* you're part of Occult Studies." This drew a small 'aww' from a few people in the crowd, while a couple of Hispanic women in the back high-fived each other. Tom continued. "Most people here have at *least* five names, but unless they're nobility, you're free to call them by two. This place is a matriarchy, so, ladies, please don't have me executed for talking your ears off." Tom tipped his wide-brimmed straw hat at a red-headed researcher he recognized from 87; he thought her name was Lara? From theology.

"The first thing you're going to need to know here is how to speak the language, which all of you must know, considering the mandatory language exams you passed to come here. The second thing you need to know is the culture, and sadly, despite my repeated insistence, cultural exams are *not* mandatory." Tom shook his head, and stepped off the stage. It raised itself into a cylinder, and projectors from around the hall began showing an IIPES picture entitled: "THE HISTORY OF THE THIRD EMPIRE". "It's a three-hour film," Tom remarked. "But it has some good parts. I always cry when they talk about the first empress."

Four hours later, the speed bus dropped off about a third of the newbies in the Noble's Quarter of the Antarctic Empire. The rest would be shipped off to other, more remote parts for anthropological, zoological, botanical or other scientific work. Several of them were going to be studying the Black Court seaward, away from the city

and widdershins[5]. The rest of them would be staying in Tom's building.

Tom's building was a tall structure carved out of fungal limestone; the fungus reinforced the otherwise weak rock, making it able to bear great loads, and also made it incredibly resistant to, say, an anti-Imperialist bomb. It was used to build the foundations of several buildings near the Imperial City. To have an entire house made out of it was a sign of both wealth and paranoia, both things the Foundation and the Institute possessed in great quantities when it came to 'northern nobility'.

"This is it," Tom said, opening the door to the apartments. "Everyone's been assigned a room?" There was a general murmur of assent. "Good. You'll find a welcome package in there. Oh, and, don't worry about the water; it may taste a little weird, but that's just because it's been filtered." Tom neglected to mention what it was filtered **by**, figuring it was best they discover it by themselves. He let the newbies go to their rooms and eventually made his way up to his own room. There, waiting on the bed, was Da'ai the Swift.

Tom scowled at him. "What are you doing? You'll get fur on the sheets! I don't want the housekeepers spreading rumors about me again!"

"Another message, Toomas Balley." He jumped up from the bed, offering him an envelope. It bore the symbol of house Ka'Ki. They must have spent a lot to get a message to him.

Tom frowned, opening the envelope and tsk-ing. "Another duel challenge? I guess they've at least stopped trying to send assassins after me, which is good."

"They actually offered me 500 Imperials to stick a knife in your neck." Da'ai grinned at him, his teeth black from the lack of dental hygiene in the Black Court.

"Did you take the offer?" Tom asked seriously, looking over the letter still.

"And lose my Blessing? Empress no!"

"Pity. We could have split it. I would have let you keep most of it." Tom put the letter on his bedside and sighed. "You're dismissed. Tell them that I'll consider their invitation."

"…you have courage, Toomas Balley. Especially after what you did."

"All I did was politely ask the Empress to look into it. The Appropriators did the rest." Tom smirked, sitting on the bed. "And didn't I say you were dismissed?"

"You did, you did." Da'ai the Swift turned to the window. "Take care, Toomas." Da'ai leapt from the window, landed on the ground for a split second, before leaping from the ground into a wall, climbing up in and onto a roof, before dashing off into the distance.

Tom called after him, "You're still a show-off!" He shook his head and shut the window, sitting on his bed and sighing. In summer, the sun never set; it just went lower in the sky. So, with that in mind, he closed the blinds, locked the doors, and cracked open a copy of Neil Gaiman's *The Graveyard Book* he had brought from baseline. He had read this book fifteen times.

Time to start on the sixteenth.

« **Hub** »

Footnotes
1. Tom knew this was a load of bunk; the couriers often broke windows by landing on them. Better to keep it open at all times, except when you were being subjected to an assassination attempt. Tom knew far too well about those.
2. The name "Saquah" and the word "Speed" were oxymorons in the Empire. He could easily afford a 485 Sengai Eagle, but he chose to remain modest so he wouldn't be followed by members of the Ka'Ki family.
3. Tom always found himself wondering why alternate universes always had zeppelins for personnel transport. Was Hindenburg an event unique to baseline?
4. The corpse of this crane had been delivered onto the doorstep of the institute's headquarters with a note that simply said "Your Welcome" [sic], in English no less. It had taken until the Foundation

had arrived here to translate the note.
5. The fact that this resembled the work of one Mr. Pratchett did not escape Tom's notice; he had been a fan of his work since he readNight Watch.

Antimemetics Division Hub

An antimeme is *an idea with self-censoring properties*; an idea which, by its intrinsic nature, discourages or prevents people from spreading it.

Antimemes are real. Think of any piece of information which you wouldn't share with anybody, like passwords, taboos and dirty secrets. Or any piece of information which would be difficult to share even if you tried: complex equations, very boring passages of text, large blocks of random numbers, and dreams…

But anomalous antimemes are another matter entirely. How do you contain something you can't record or remember? How do you fight a war against an enemy with effortless, perfect camouflage, when you can never even know that you're at war?

Welcome to the Antimemetics Division.

No, this is not your first day.

Critical background reading

- **SCP-055**

There Is No Antimemetics Division (2015)

This story is complete.

- We Need To Talk About Fifty-Five
- Introductory Antimemetics
- Unforgettable, That's What You Are
- CASE COLOURLESS GREEN
- Your Last First Day

Five Five Five Five Five (2017–)

- **SCP-3125**
- Where Have You Been All My Life
- Fresh Hell
- to be continued

What the Dead Know by sirpudding (2018)

- **SCP-2111** (2015)
- In the Trenches with the Dead
- A Thin Dangerous Line
- to be continued

And other stories

- **Revenants** by Photosynthetic
- **Eureka** by Voct
- **SCP-2256** by qntm
- **SCP-2358** by DreamwalkerFae
- **SCP-2828** by ooblex
- **SCP-SCP-033** by DreamwalkerFae
- **SCP-3393** by Captain Kirby
- **SCP-3211** by Croquembouche
- **All pages tagged "antimemetic"**

We Need To Talk About Fifty-Five

"Can I smoke?"

This time the receptionist narrows her eyes at Marion. "No," she says. "You— No, you can't smoke anywhere on Site 200. Just because it's an administration building doesn't mean we don't have lungs. Or labor law."

Marion notices the exasperation on the young woman's face. "I've asked you that before, haven't I?"

"Twice in the last quarter-hour," the receptionist says. "You must really need a smoke." She's genuinely puzzled at the repeated question, and she's doing a bad job of concealing her puzzlement.

"You think this is like *Memento*, don't you?" Marion offers, charitably. "You think I have no long-term memory, and if I stay in one place for too long I forget why I'm there."

The receptionist is only just old enough to remember that film. "I… guess?"

Marion smiles sympathetically and shakes her head. It's nothing so simple.

Minutes pass. She toys obsessively with her lighter. She is turning fifty this year and slowly greying, well on her way out of "petite" towards "little old lady". In her bag her phone beeps because it's time for a pill, but she tells it to remind her later. There is a slight tremble in her fingers, but that's not age-based infirmity, that's just ordinary nerves. She's nervous because she's here to meet an O5, and O5s are scary. O5s never want to see you for a small thing. It's the end of the world, or nothing.

Finally, forty minutes late, the door to the inner office opens. Four or five high-ranked Foundationers spill out, carrying laptops or

briefcases. As a group, they head straight past reception and out to cars which are waiting. Marion recognises a few of the faces— the Site 19 site director, the head recruiter for Western Europe. None of them glance in her direction.

Once they're gone, O5-8's assistant pokes his head around the door. He's twenty-something, improbably youthful, like a teenager stuffed into one of his dad's business shirts. His haircut is barely regulation. In one hand he holds a tablet computer showing his boss's day planner. It's packed. The man evidently does not sleep.

"Marion? You can come through now."

*

The office door closes behind them with an unusually heavy mechanical clunk, as if the whole thing is part of a machine built into the office walls. While Marion takes the indicated chair and sets her bag down, the assistant turns and does some confusing additional things to the door, causing it to make several further strange noises. O5s have non-trivial privacy and security requirements.

The office is spacious, but somehow contrives to be dark despite two big corners of window and broad daylight outside. The walls are all bookshelves and dark wood panelling; perfectly stylish, but a style from the Nineties, a little worn, and not yet old enough to be fashionable again.

As for the fellow behind the desk, well, an O5 never looks like you imagine.

Marion takes a deep breath. "So what's the topic? All I got was the meeting invitation, no agenda or subject. I mean, an O5 says 'jump', you jump, but—"

Looking to her right, she notices that the assistant, without saying anything or making any undue noise, has set his tablet down on a table, produced a gun and aimed it at her head. Marion stops talking. She sits still in her chair for a little while, absorbing the change of pace, letting her heart rate rise to a hummingbird's and then start to flatten again.

"Okay?" she hazards. She licks her lips and grips the arm rests, otherwise staying perfectly still, waiting for another prompt. The assistant's face is totally neutral now, like this is just how meetings go. Maybe it is, for people up here.

"Who are you?" O5-8 asks her.

Marion blinks. "What? Oh, God."

"Let me rephrase," O5-8 says. "Marion Wheeler, forty-nine, with loving husband and two boys in tow. Likes camping, hiking and ornithology. Boring mother with perfect, airtight background and financials, as far back as we can examine. And you've got full Foundation credentials which we've never issued, including access to a list of installations and rooms which… some of these locations don't exist, or were torn down decades ago. At least one hasn't been built yet, yet you've got the front door key to it. That's before we get to your SCP access control lists, which I can only term as 'egregious'.

"So you're a spy, and your objectives are misaligned with ours, and Clay wanted to cut Xi-3 loose on you, but I was able to bring him around. I talked him into a face-to-face. I thought there was a slim chance that if we locked you in a bomb-proof room and asked politely, you'd have the good sense to spare yourself 'the rest'."

Marion has long since stopped listening. "You dullard," she says now she can finally speak, "I'm your chief of Antimemetics."

"We don't have an Antimemetics Division," Clay says.

"Yes, you do. *We* do."

O5-8 says, "We have a Memetics Division, a Telekontainment Division, Fire Services, Ops-A, Ops-B, Personnel, D-personnel and two dozen others. We don't have an Antimemetics Division."

"Do we have an Irony Division?" Marion asks. She hesitates hopefully. "No? Alright. Well, try this: why do you think the Antimemetics Division would show up in the listing?"

"This is just a cover story," Clay says to O5-8, not taking his eyes off

Marion. "It's a good one, but she's had it worked out in advance."

"Clay, lose the piece," says the O5.

Grudgingly, Clay does so.

Marion relaxes fractionally. "There are SCPs with dangerous memetic properties," she says. "There are contagious concepts which require containment just like any physical threat. They get inside your head, and ride your mind to reach other minds. Right?"

"Right," O5-8 says. He could name a score of SCPs fitting this description without even thinking.

"There are SCPs with antimemetic properties," Marion goes on. "There are ideas which cannot be spread. There are entities and phenomena which harvest and consume information, particularly information about themselves. You take a Polaroid photo of one, it'll never develop. You write a description down with a pen on paper and hand it to someone— but what you've written turns out to be hieroglyphs, and nobody can understand them, not even you. You can look directly at one and it won't even be invisible, but you'll still perceive nothing there. Dreams you can't hold onto and secrets you can never share, and lies, and living conspiracies. It's a conceptual subculture, of ideas consuming other ideas and… sometimes… segments of reality. Sometimes, people.

"Which makes them a threat. That's all there is to it, really. Antimemes are dangerous, and we don't understand them; therefore, they are part of the Problem. Hence my division. We can do the sideways thinking that's needed to combat something which can literally eat your combat training."

O5-8 stares back at her for a long moment. Clay fidgets, disliking and distrusting the story, but the O5 seems more open to the concept.

"Name one," he says. "Name an antimemetic SCP."

"**SCP-055**," Marion says promptly.

"There is no SCP-055," Clay retorts.

"Again: Yes, there is," Marion says.

"There isn't," Clay asserts. "SCP numbers aren't assigned sequentially. There are gaps. That number hasn't been assigned. It's not superstition, we have enough to be concerned about without arbitrary numerological mysticism. We have **SCP-666** and **SCP-013**. But there's no **SCP-001**. And there's no SCP-055."

"Clay," O5-8 says, "you should look at this." He turns his monitor so Clay can see the file that he has just retrieved. Clay bends over and reads it from top to bottom. Stunned, he scrolls back and reads it all a second time.

"But…"

"The file's dated from 2008," O5-8 says. "It's got all the right flags and signatures. It's keyed and coded. It's real."

"You've seen this before?" Clay asks him.

"Never in my life," O5-8 says. "As far as I can remember, anyway. On the other hand, if the content is accurate, both of us have probably seen it dozens of times."

Clay glares at Marion. "This isn't possible."

Marion nearly spits. "For Christ's sake, Clay, how long have you been working here?"

"But if this SCP is this powerful…" he begins.

"Yes?"

"Who wrote the file?" the O5 finishes. "And for that matter, how was the interview conducted, and who is 'Bartholomew Hughes'? And most importantly, how do you, Mrs. Wheeler, retain knowledge of any of this?"

"Bart Hughes wrote the file. He's dead," Marion says.

"What happened to him?"

"You don't want to know."

There is a very long pause while both O5-8 and his assistant react to this. In fact, they pass through a long, discrete sequence of reactions. Indignation at the seeming rudeness; confusion at Wheeler's incaution in front of sinister superiors; surprise at the magnitude of the claim; pure disbelief; comprehension; and finally, horror.

"What…" O5-8 asks carefully, "would happen if we *did* know?"

"It would happen to you as well," Marion says, levelly. "…As for the rest of your questions: we manage that pharmaceutically. You know we have class-A amnestics, for people who very badly need to forget things? Of course you do. Who could forget about class-A amnestics? Well, in Antimemetics, we have a different pill, for people who need to remember things that would otherwise be impossible to remember. Mnestics, class W, X, Y and Z. Same Greek root as the word 'mnemonic'. The M is silent."

In her bag, her phone beeps again.

With a nod of approval from the O5, Marion reaches into her bag and turns her phone off, acknowledging the prompt this time instead of postponing it. She pulls a blister pack from another pocket and pops a pill out. It's hexagonal, and green. She holds it up, and is satisfied to see a flicker of recognition on O5-8's face. He's beginning to put it back together.

Marion says, "These are class W mnestics, the weakest, suitable for continual use. Two pills per day. Go down to the site pharmacy and ask. The pharmacist will claim they don't stock any such thing; they're misremembering, tell them to double-check."

O5-8 sighs. "And now, I think, I get it. I see why we're having this conversation at all."

"Yes," Marion says, popping a second pill out and handing it over to him. "It's because you missed a dose. You're supposed to be on these, the same as me and everybody on my staff. It's the only way we can work. You forgot to take a pill, and then you forgot all the

information that the pills were helping you retain. You forgot why you were taking them, who gave them to you, where to get more. You forgot about me, and my entire department. And now I have to bring you up to speed."

"And if I take this," O5-8 says, "I'll remember this whole conversation and we won't have to have it again?"

"Hopefully not," Marion says.

Clay pipes up. "Uh, should I be taking those?"

"Sorry, kiddo," O5-8 says. "Need to know. Maybe when you're an O5 yourself." He swallows the pill. Marion swallows hers too.

"So what is SCP-055?" O5-8 asks.

"SCP-055 is nothing," Marion says, now relaxing entirely. "SCP-055 is, as described in the file, a powerful information autosuppressor. As far as experimentation has uncovered, it can only be defined in negative terms. We can only record what it *isn't*. We know it isn't Safe or Euclid. We know it isn't round, or square, or green or silver. We know it isn't *stupid*. And we know it isn't *alone*. But what we do know is that it's weak. It's weak because it's the only antimemetic agent in our possession which has a physical entry in the files. We have paper records of the thing. We have containment procedures. It's not Safe, which means it's dangerous… but it's contained."

O5-8 blinks. "You have procedures? Where?"

Marion points at her head.

"Then how many other antimemes are there? How much more dangerous do they get?"

"Ten that I know of," Marion says. "Statistically, probably at least five more that I don't know of. This does not count the antimemetic entities freely roaming the halls, not under containment. There are at least two in this room with us right now. Don't look. I said don't look! It's pointless!"

O5-8 does an impressive job of controlling himself, keeping his

attention focused on Marion. Clay doesn't fare so well, and quickly sweeps the whole room, even checking behind his back. Making an ass of himself, essentially. He finds nothing. He looks baffled.

"There is an invisible monster which follows me around and likes to eat my memories," Marion explains, patiently. "**SCP-4987**. Don't look it up, it's not there. I've learned to manage with it. It's like a demanding pet. I produce tasty memories on purpose so it doesn't eat something important, like my passwords or how to make coffee."

"And what's the other one?" Clay asks.

With another nod from O5-8, Marion goes to her bag again. This time she pulls out a gun and shoots Clay twice in the heart.

More aghast than in pain, Clay collapses sharply against the bookcase behind him. Pulling his head around to face Marion, he manages, "How did you— kn—"

Marion stands, aims more carefully and shoots him a third time, this time in the head.

O5-8, again, does an impressive job of not reacting. "That's Clay's gun," he deadpans. "You stole it from him."

"It's tricky to steal a firearm this heavy from someone without them noticing," Marion explains, unloading it and carefully setting it down. "But stealing a firearm and then stealing their memory of the theft is a little easier. Like I said: a pet. Some pets are dumb enough that they can be trained."

"Yes," O5-8 says, evenly. "That much I'd guessed. But why?"

"Because you were supposed to be taking class-W mnestics," Marion says. "You can't skip a dose of class-W mnestic. I've tried. You can postpone a dose, but you can't *forget* unless someone actively prevents you from taking it. There's only one person who could get close enough to you to do that, and that's your assistant. And remember when I asked him how long he'd been working here?"

"He didn't answer," O5-8 says. "I thought you were being rhetorical."

"He doesn't work here," Marion says. "He's an antimeme. Since when do you have an assistant? You don't *have* an assistant, Brent. Look at this office. It's got one desk. You've got a receptionist outside: *she's* the one who screens your calls and schedules your meetings. Where does Clay even sit? Where does he fit? Don't blame yourself. You're human, and these things are redaction incarnate. You need to think like a space alien to get around them."

O5-8 asks a question which, in any other workplace, would be absurd. "Is he dead?"

"Maybe," Marion says. "I can put his corpse in our research queue and we'll see what we can see when we open him up. There's a duality here, though. They're like parallel universes sharing the same space. It's conceptual versus concrete, figurative versus physical. It's very unusual for things to cross over. I don't know what Clay was, but he had a human body, which instantly makes him weird, even by our standards. As ever, the search for stalemate continues. I will let you know if we get any closer."

"Any side effects of these pills?" O5-8 asks.

"Nausea, and dramatically increased risk of pancreatic cancer," Marion says. "And very bad dreams."

Next: Introductory Antimemetics

Introductory Antimemetics

Junior Researcher Kim's been working for the Foundation for all of four hours and he feels pulverised, as if an anvil were dropped on his head in that first introductory lecture. It's lunchtime, and he's found a corner so far back in the cafeteria that nobody bothers him, where he can chew and swallow non-anomalous food, drink apocalyptically strong coffee and digest the hard lessons of the morning.

On his Foundation-provided phone, he pages fretfully through the few SCP files for which he has clearance. Most of them have to be jokes. That's how they read. Like very bad, dark, frightening jokes.

Kim's one of eleven Junior Researchers in the new intake, and the other ten are sitting in a separate group at a separate table, chatting animatedly to one another. There are some instructors here and there, munching sandwiches. Other than them, the cafeteria - large enough to seat two hundred people or more - is deserted. To Kim, that seems odd. Site 41 is large, three skulking buildings with significant basement space, buried casually in the forests of central Colorado. Where is everybody?

A man in a grey suit walks into the cafeteria, makes eye contact with Kim and strides purposefully over. The man's suit is sharp enough to cut. He wears a tie pin and a platinum wristwatch as big as a brick. He looks badly misplaced. Site 41 is a working site. There's training, education, research, development, analysis, and even the containment of a very few Safe SCPs going on here. Executives shouldn't ever be here. So what is he? A lost exec, trying to find the helipad? Or a researcher or instructor, dressing for the job he wants, not the job he has?

"Hell of a first day," the man says, holding a hand out. "Alastair Grey. With an E."

"Kim," says Kim. "Paul Kim."

"Good to meet you. What accent is that, if you don't mind me asking?"

Kim blinks. "New York," he says. "I'm from New York. Are you the site director?"

"You seem on edge."

"Well, that figures, doesn't it?" Kim asks. "You must know how that intro goes. It's like an atom bomb to the ego. I just had almost everything I know overturned. It turns out I've spent my entire adult life being 'protected' from 'dangerous' knowledge, as if the whole outside world is a… a ballpit, for under-sevens. Stepping out of that has been… humiliating. To start with. And…" He blinks again. "Hey, what do you do here, exactly? You didn't answer my question."

"You didn't answer mine," Grey says.

"Of course I did," Kim says. "I'm from—"

And then he just stops, his train of thought running off the end of the track into air. It's on the tip of his tongue, the answer to Grey's question, but he can't get the words out. "That's weird," he says, shaking his head.

At this point, he also notices that Grey isn't wearing his badge. This could be an honest mistake, albeit an extremely serious one. But surely execs don't get to the executive level without being scrupulously correct in everything they do?

"Who are you?" Kim asks again.

"Your life story was fascinating."

"What?"

"You spoke four languages," Grey tells him. "One now, and soon zero. Too huge an intellect to specialise, your education was a fusion of biochemistry and comparative literature. You felt as if you'd die if you couldn't find more foreign thoughts to cram into your head. You've been all over the world, hungry, and every country you've ever been to was like landing on another planet. You toy with

anthropology, but there's too much world for one human race to ever understand, let alone one human. There's too much human race. We should pare it down."

Kim nods. "Would you excuse me for just one second?" He gets up and hurries to another table, to the instructor whom he met earlier that day. When Kim gets close to her he feels a kind of staticky sensation building up. He tries to shake her shoulder, and succeeds in moving it a little, but it's like reaching through tar. "Hey! There's a problem. There's an intruder. I think it might be an SCP. Doc, look at me! Hello?" She doesn't react. He tries the gaggle of fellow newcomers as well, but they keep chattering and hypothesising, oblivious to him shouting and clapping in their ears. "Hey! People! Listen to me! No, no, no, no."

He looks back. Grey has stood up and started moving towards him, still with that confident smile. And there's definitely something wrong with him now because he's visible through the tables, like an augmented reality holoprojection jammed inside Kim's eyeball.

Kim realises with a stab of fear that he can even see Grey when he blinks. His eyelids close, but Grey is still there, an apparition in what for all of Kim's life has been totally personal, private darkness. The only way he can avoid seeing Grey is to turn away, and even then he feels a radioactive prickling in the back of his eyeballs.

Kim tries to phone one of the newbies. The phone in the newbie's pocket rings, and other than that, nothing happens. Nobody reacts.

"That doesn't make sense," Kim says.

"Do you remember your father?" Grey says.

"I never knew my father," Kim says, edging away. "Mom raised me."

Grey's white smile is a fixture. "These people loved your perspective. They were going to put you to work on anomalous antimemes. But they don't remember you exist. You don't exist."

Kim says, mainly to himself, "There aren't any dangerous SCPs on this site. It's a Safe site. So either you're not dangerous, or nobody

knows you exist. And if nobody knows you exist, then that means you're either brand new, or… you're… What's an antimeme?"

"Hell of a first day," Grey says.

"Are you sentient?" Kim asks.

"You seem on edge," Grey says.

Kim bolts. He exits the cafeteria, turns a corner and runs ten or eleven paces down the corridor, to where there's an elevator. He stabs the "down" button and waits. The elevator door is highly polished, reflective. Kim catches sight of a face in the mirrored surface and nearly falls over with shock, because it's a face he has never seen before, and it's apparently his own. "Jesus! Oh, no no no," he babbles. "What the hell, what the *hell*—"

Grey comes around the corner, still only strolling, just as the elevator cracks open. Kim dives in and punches the lowest floor, basement level 8. It's instinctive, although he could rationalise the decision in retrospect. (He can't just get in his car and drive. It's better if Grey stays on site than if he's set loose in rational "reality". And to do that it's better if Kim retreats to the lowest, darkest corner of the site for which he has access. And then waits for Grey, and then locks all the doors behind them. And waits to die…) The elevator starts descending, and the apparation of Grey - visible through doors and floors - disappears upwards, shrinking with distance and perspective, but still smiling broadly down at Kim.

Kim paces in the elevator. *I don't remember what my face looks like. It said it had eaten all my secondary languages, but I don't remember learning anything other than English. So— It's eating my memories. It's consuming information. And I can't contact anybody directly, which means I'm on my own.*

I'm not trained for this.

He hammers his head once against the elevator wall, and stares at his shoes. *But I don't know that. What if I've been trained, but I don't remember my training anymore? What if I've been working here for years and I only* think *this is my first day? What if I've met this thing*

before? What if everybody on the site has met it multiple times… and… nobody remembers? Is this what an antimeme is?

Kim remembers the near-empty cafeteria. And miles of totally unoccupied corridors and vacant office and lab space. *Maybe it's not just eating my memories. Maybe it eats people whole, removes them completely from history. Maybe it's been haunting the site for years and that's why the site's so empty, because it's nearly finished exterminating us all?*

I need to get help. I need to warn somebody. How? I can't talk to people, I can't phone them. I should— I should write an SCP.

But surely someone's already thought of that.

He pulls his phone out. He pulls out the listing. Nearly ten thousand SCP entries. A hundred of them are tagged "antimemetics" alone.

Kim clears his mind. *Grey with an E. G-R-E-Y. 4-7-3-9.*

> **SCP-4739**
>
> **Object class**: Keter
>
> **Special Containment Procedures**: I'm disregarding the format, because time is a factor. If you're reading this, you've already been isolated from the Foundation at large. Attempts to signal for help are futile. You are now inside 4739's gullet, after ingestion and prior to digestion. You need to get to lab S041-B08-053 as soon as possible and continue the research until you find a way to stop or kill Grey, before it kills you. Don't read the rest until you're in the elevator.
>
> **Description**:

At that moment the elevator doors open at basement level 8. Alastair Grey is waiting, still smiling disarmingly. He steps forward.

Desperate, Kim hurls his phone overarm at the creature's forehead. It's a solid chunk of metal and it's a dead hit. Grey reels backwards and cracks his skull against the wall. By the time he recovers, Kim is

out of sight, haring away down the left corridor, just echoing, fading footsteps on concrete.

Two forty-five degree turns, and room 53 is in sight, the door at the farthest end. It looks like a submarine bulkhead. Kim spots the keypad from way out. Four digits. He tries 4739, and it works first time. The bulkhead mechanism takes agonising seconds to open up.

"Come on, come on, come on!"

"Do you remember your mother?" he hears Grey calling down the corridor.

"I never knew my parents, I was an orphan," Kim hisses under his breath. For a split second he wonders what Grey might really mean by that, but he doesn't have time to dwell on it.

The bulkhead opens. Kim slides in and pulls it closed behind him, locking the mechanism up again, as if that'll buy him even one second. The lab inside is sizeable, windowless of course, and stacked to the ceiling with a jumble of equipment which Kim hardly recognises. There are pieces of thick shattered glass underfoot. In the corner there's a computer terminal, locked. Kim unlocks it, and there's the same entry waiting for him:

> **Description**: SCP-4739 is a powerful, slow-acting antimemetic kill agent taking the appearance of a male Caucasian business executive calling itself "Alastair Grey". SCP-4739 is attracted to dense clusters of organically-stored information - essentially, extremely knowledgeable, complicated, interesting people. SCP-4739 isolates its victim from the outside world by enveloping them in an antimemetic field which makes it impossible for the victim, or anything done by the victim, to be perceived or remembered. SCP-4739 then consumes the victim's memories and knowledge until they become vegetative and die. This process takes between 15 minutes and 2 hours and is described as being "like Alzheimer's disease in fast-forward".

SCP-4739 is not believed to be sentient, although it imitates the behaviour of a sentient being to the extent that it can appear sentient to the inattentive. Its victims are able to move and act freely, since it is impossible to escape once caught, or to signal for help. Communications such as written notes, graffiti and electronic mail do get sent, and persist in reality, but SCP-4739's effect spreads with each message, making it impossible for an external observer to perceive the message until such time as SCP-4739 catches them too.

The SCP entry which you are currently reading is created and maintained by victims of SCP-4739, because it is only visible to victims of SCP-4739. If you are reading this SCP entry, SCP-4739 has caught you. You are now isolated from the Foundation at large and constitute an effective Foundation of one. You have between 15 minutes and 2 hours to reach Site 41, basement level 8, laboratory 053, familiarise yourself with the existing research, and continue this research until you find a way to contain or decommission SCP-4739, or, more likely, die. If your field of expertise is not related to antimemetic containment, we sincerely apologise, and advise you to start learning. Fast.

SCP-4739 has consumed ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| ||||| |||| Foundation researchers since we started counting on August 3, 2013. (If you are reading this entry for the first time, please add a mark.) We estimate at least 50% of victims never make it as far as this database entry, so the true victim count is more than twice this figure.

"But how do I kill it?" Kim screams. He scrolls and scrolls through the research, which is chaotic and haphazardly arranged, because nobody has found the spare seconds to sort it out. There are dozens of separate lines of research, contributed in patchwork by a succession of victims, all ending with variations on the same final line: "I'm going to try X. If you're reading this, X didn't work and I'm dead, which means approach X is a dead end, and you have to think

of something else."

He reads. Nobody has succeeded in physically engaging with Grey. Nobody can stall it, evade it, slow it down, reason with it or redirect it to some other target. People have tried poisoning their memories with indigestible ideas, drip-feeding their memories to Grey to slow him down, replacing their memories faster than Grey can eat them, and force-feeding Grey too many memories at once to overfeed him and blow him up. They've tried committing suicide by Class-A amnestic overdose. None of it worked. More than a hundred people, most of them apparently possessing doctorates, have slid into the maw of this thing, fought briefly and, with a greater or lesser degree of dignity, died.

There are no remaining untried threads.

"I'm fucked!" Kim concludes. He glances up. Grey's not in the room yet, but Kim can see him strolling down the last stretch of corridor. He's a totally intangible being, physical obstructions are irrelevant to him. He can't be hurt.

Kim clutches the pocket where he used to keep his phone.

Wait a second.

He scrolls again. He finds the three or four sad, desperate wretches who died confronting Grey physically. Combat knife and Glock. Baseball bat (Kim looks up and checks the room; sure enough, the bat's there, rolled under a table). One man, an elderly botanist far out of his depth, said he was just going to try whatever he could find that was heaviest. That explains the shattered CRT television, and the light layer of thick glass on the floor near the bulkhead. There's even CCTV footage of the botanist's attempt. He accomplishes literally nothing. Grey is a holographic ghost, and the CRT drops right through him, imploding when it hits the floor at Grey's feet. The botanist spends the rest of the video's running time huddled in a corner, gradually losing his mind while Grey watches placidly.

The difference being, Kim realises with his eyes boggling, *a phone is a solid brick full of information. And before me, nobody tried using information as a missile.*

Kim searches for the experiments - several of them, scattered - where the victim tried to divert Grey to a different data source. The general idea seemed to be to overload Grey by pointing him at something containing too much information: the internet, or the terabit feed from a live particle accelerator experiment, or a stack of hard drives containing the first few quadrillion binary digits of pi. But nobody could figure out a way to distract Grey's attention; prominently-placed screens full of data, he would ignore; data beamed at him electromagnetically (radio, laser) had no effect. And nobody could figure out a way to tunnel the information in through the victim's mind as extra memories. It was written off as impossible, closed as a line of investigation.

The hard drives, Kim finds, are right there on the workbench next to the computer. It's a half-rack unit, a cuboidal block of metalwork as big and heavy as a bowling ball. One of the most ineffective conceivable melee weapons.

Kim snatches up the three longest pieces of ethernet cable he can find, and starts plaiting them into a chain.

Then he remembers who he is, and where he is, and what his responsibilities are. He goes to the computer, to the SCP entry, adds himself to the victim tally and writes up exactly what it is he's about to try. Because he might not be the last one, and the world needs to know that this didn't work.

*****

Grey comes through the lab bulkhead to find most of the equipment in the room toppled onto the floor, to create room for the black and silver drive array that Paul Kim is whirling around his head, on a two-metre chain made of plaited network cable. It makes a low thrumming sound as it whirls. Grey is not intelligent enough to stop moving forwards, and catches the array directly in the side of his head, rack mount point first, like a morningstar.

Grey absorbs a few trillion digits of the impact, but it isn't enough. There's a green snap of light and a noise like a subway train short-circuiting, and Grey's a pile in the corner, his head caved in and the

drive array partially demolished in pieces around him.

Kim decides that history can fill in whatever quip it likes best.

*

"It was chewing its way up the Antimemetics Division hierarchy," Wheeler tells him in the aftermath. "It was only a matter of time until it bit down on somebody dangerous. Congratulations on demonstrating a basic level of competence when it counted. Dozens of others couldn't."

Kim still feels rattled. But the shock is dissipating, faster than he'd expected.

Marion Wheeler, it turns out, is the Antimemetics Division chief. She is Kim's new boss.

"I want to say it was dumb luck," Kim says. "I want to say that I just threw my phone, it was instinct, it was muscle memory. It was my first day, and I got lucky as hell. …I want to say those things, but I'm sitting here, and turning those statements over, and none of them would be true, would they?"

Wheeler waits expectantly, and says nothing.

"You're not my *new* boss," Kim says. "You're just my boss. This isn't my first day at all. I've been working here for… well, it must be over a decade, right? I think I've been a professional antimemetics researcher since at least the mid-2000s. It's just that the first thing Grey ate was my memories of everything past the first day. And even then…"

"I see very little luck in what happened today," Wheeler says. "Instinct and muscle memory are just deep forms of training. Like I said, a basic level of competence. An ability to piece your own life and all of your past knowledge back together, faster than nearly anybody else. This is what we try to drill into you. And sometimes, thankfully, it takes."

"This isn't even the first time we've had this conversation," Kim

continues. "There've been other incidents. With other SCPs with amnestic powers. You've sat there and watched me put myself back together before."

"And it hasn't gotten old yet," Wheeler admits, with something which might be approaching a smirk.

"How long does it usually take for me to recover?"

"A few months," Wheeler says. "But if you want the honest truth, people in this division are as competent on day one as they'll ever be. You come to the job firing on all cylinders, or not at all. The rest is just fine-tuning and chemistry."

"So what you're actually saying is you don't care about my mental state and you need me back at work now," Kim says.

Wheeler nods. "I need an updated SCP entry, just to begin with. I need you to nail down the model for Grey's predatory pattern and exactly how you defeated it. I want you to work out what it did with the bodies - incinerated, disintegrated, or just left them lying around the site in rotting perceptually cloaked heaps. And I need countermeasures for when it comes back."

"It's not dead? Wait," Kim says. "I think I know this one. It's coming back to me. 'Ideas don't die.'"

Next: **Unforgettable, That's What You Are**

Unforgettable, That's What You Are

"El, it's finished."

Lyn Marness is more than ninety years old and hasn't stood at his full height in ten. He was a tower of a man in his prime, two metres tall and built like a boxer. Nearly nobody he ever met was able to look him straight in the eye, at least not and tell him "No". Illness has gradually eaten away at that over the years. He feels as if he lives at the bottom of a deep bath, everybody he ever meets looking down at him from slippery, unscalable walls, none of them able to reach down to help him. He's spent his final months crumpled up in bed like a dying spider, changing to a corpse's colour ahead of time. It might have been bearable if he'd lost his mind, but he remembers what he used to be: a leader, a powerhouse. He used to be able to alter the course of terrible events for the better, to get justice. He used to protect people.

"El. You can wake up now."

But there's a warm wind through his thin colourless hair and there's direct sunlight coming down on him now, and the heat is filling him up like a tonic. He's outside; it's been too long since he was last outside. When he opens his eyes he sees his lake, the one in the Northwest which he used to have all to himself every summer. He's on a boat, his boat, lying on a blanket laid on the deck. A few kilometres away behind them is the little lake house, empty.

It's perfect. He didn't know he had the strength left to safely leave the hospital, let alone travel this far. But if he'd put his mind to it and selected a final moment, this might have been it.

"Do you remember me?"

Marness looks, with eyes which are strengthening. The woman speaking is seated on the deck beside him, attentive. She has a large plastic box full of medical supplies open in front of her, and a

light suit jacket laid on the deck beside it, and she has her sleeves rolled up so she can work. As he watches, she carefully disposes of a needle.

A dim memory surfaces and starts taking shape. The woman is twice as old now as when he knew her last, and visibly twice as confident. It would be difficult to forget her. He taught her everything he— well, everything he could remember at the time. He remembers her as a field agent. He remembers sending her through Hell, a fistful of times. "Marion."

"El," the woman softly explains, "you died. You died surrounded by grieving family. They loved you very much, and they cried over you. The funeral for the fake is in a few days, but unfortunately you won't be able to see it yourself. You're dead now, and this is what comes next."

"Marion. Hutchinson." Marness feels gold spreading through his bones, miracle juice.

It's Wheeler now, but she doesn't correct him. "When you retired from the Foundation, El, we did what we do to all of us who retire; what all of us agree to when we sign up. We gave you some medicine which made you forget. As you stepped out of the door for the last time, all the work you did for us — great work, which saved lives — evaporated away, and your cover story sealed over those years and became reality. That's why you've spent your whole retirement believing that you were a former section chief at the FBI. It's what you wanted, it's what we wanted, it's what you agreed to.

"But you, alone, agreed to something else as well. And you must be starting to remember, now, what that something else was. I've injected you with a serum which throws the human aging process into hard reverse, and it affects everything: organs, tissues, memories. You'll be coming up on it soon. Remember?"

"Yes," Marness croaks, remembering, dizzy.

"You signed over your final twelve hours to us. You asked for a full and happy and well-deserved retirement… but now, for the last day, you work for us again, because of one particular job. I have it in

writing here, you see? Do you recognise your signature, and mine? I witnessed."

"Yes."

"Do you remember who you are?"

"Doctor Lyn Patrick Marness, of the Foundation," he says. "Antimemetics Division founder."

Wheeler smiles with relief. It's good to see him again.

"We need some memories from you," she explains. "Memories which nobody else in the world has access to, and which are buried so deeply that we can't extract them without killing you. So this afternoon, that's what we're going to do. We're going to extract those memories, and once we're done, you'll be dead."

Marness has already begun to regress to the time when he himself set this wheel in motion. He remembers, very clearly, discovering the mystery in his own head, the blank spots which he couldn't explain, and couldn't safely access with any kind of chemical or physical technique. He remembers deferring the mystery until now.

"What happened in 1976?" Wheeler asks.

*

Marness sits up. His skin is beginning to clear and his breathing is improving.

He feels as if his brain is cleaved in two by a wormhole, such that his eyes are focusing on different time periods. In his right eye he sees the lake and the boat he's dying on; in his left he sees a collage of electrifyingly familiar past faces and places. Bart Hughes with his grin and thick glasses and baby face, looking like some kid dressed up as a Foundation researcher; the original Site 48 crew, great techs but a hopeless excuse for a softball team; young Marion with steel-strong nerves and a mind like a laser; suits and lab coats and MTF operatives. And everywhere paperwork, and floods of serial numbers.

He starts to speak.

1976 was the year he founded the division. He brainstormed the whole thing in one legendary week, hammering out the science and then distilling the first chemical mnestic with the help of a hand-picked trio of assistants, the first Antimemetics researchers. No antimemetic SCPs had even been observed up to that point — the entire operation was a shot in the dark — and yet the team immediately struck gold. Passive black holes of information, active predatory infovores, unrememberable worms which covered the human skin like dust mites… contagious bad news, self-sealing secrets, living murders, Chinatowns.

Wheeler wonders if there might be something more serious awry with Marness' head. His version of events is hopelessly romantic. In Wheeler's experience, nobody looks back on Foundation work fondly.

"But it was all too fast," Marness says. "Special containment procedures take time to develop, much more time than I took. The Foundation as a whole acquires about a dozen new SCPs annually. I found that many in one year, essentially single-handedly. It was too *easy*. It was as if I knew it all already, and was just catching up.

"And then… one day I realised I couldn't remember my life before Antimemetics. I knew I'd been a Foundation operative for decades prior, that was where I got the authority to start my own division, but there was nothing else there. It was a wall in my mind, which even mnestics couldn't get me past. I went to the paper archives and looked at my own personnel file, and…"

Marness trails off. Not because he's forgotten what to say next, it's deliberate. The trailing off is exactly what happened.

"You woke up back at your desk half a working day later, remembering nothing," Wheeler says. "You went through the loop a dozen times before someone realised what was happening and broke you out of it."

Wheeler knows all of this. The file still exists, and the antimemetic effect still clouds the back half of it. All of this would be over in a

second if any of that back half could be read.

Marness goes on. "When I assembled the evidence what I found was… well, a hole. Like a jigsaw with only the edges and corners. So I did the only thing I could do, I looked at the shape of the hole. And, together with Bart Hughes and others, I formed a theory.

"This is not the first Antimemetics Division. Before 1976, there was another one. I was part of that division; possibly, I led it. Certainly, I am the only known survivor of it. *Something* happened to that team. Some antimemetic force chewed up and swallowed the *idea* of the Antimemetics Division itself. I was let off lightly; I lived. The rest of those people, whoever they were, however many of them there were, are missing without trace."

Wheeler nods. "This much we know already. I was there when you wrote the note, remember? The question is known. It's the answer that we can't get to without killing you. It's the answer that we've waited all these years to get at. I'm here to ask you: *What. Happened?*"

Marness covers his right eye and grimaces, trying. He fails. "It's not there. You haven't sent me back far enough, there's still that wall there in my head. I remember why the question exists, but I don't remember the answer. I need more."

Wheeler swabs his arm, and gives him another ten years.[1]

*

Marness seems like another man once the second X dose takes effect. Wrinkles are sliding back up into his face, muscle mass is returning to his limbs, but it takes Wheeler a second to realise the real reason why; she's just booted him back across the field/desk agent transition. Marness has regressed a little way past senior management, the realm where most problems were solved by saying the correct words, and into a time where he survived through physical fitness, situational alertness and hands-on experience.

Marness gets to his feet for the first time in years. He scans his surroundings, examining the placid golden lake and the sky and the

boat itself. He doesn't sit down again. He smooths down his hospital gown, wishing he had a sweater and, separately, some fishing gear. He brushes a hand through new, old hair. His sideburns are back.

"We weren't Foundation at first," he says. "The first Antimemetics Division was a U.S. Army project. It ran parallel with Manhattan during World War II. We called ourselves the Unthinkables.

"It began as an experiment in advanced propaganda. The objective was to cut through the physical conflict and find a way to rupture the ideological machine, to obliterate the *idea* of Nazism. After two years, enough theory had been developed that the task had been reduced to an engineering problem. Another two years, and the engineering problem had been reduced as well, and what we had built was a very special kind of bomb.

"Unfortunately, we didn't understand what we'd built. Back then, we didn't have the mnestics or the shielding that we could use to protect ourselves. We didn't understand how far ahead you need to think when you're working with this kind of technology.

"We got looped. It was textbook. We built the unthinkable bomb and test-detonated it… and it worked perfectly. The bomb destroyed itself, and erased its own successful detonation, and flattened all the knowledge which had gone together to build it. We forgot that we had ever built the bomb at all, and started over.

"To our credit, we realised pretty quickly what must have happened. There was a four-year gap in our progress now, and there was no other way to explain it. But by the time we put the pieces together the second time, the war was almost over. The Nazis had been defeated by conventional means, and the Japanese had been broken by the first atomic bombings. So we completed the second antimemetic bomb, and after that, we sat on it."

Marion Wheeler is silent for a long moment.

"The U.S. Army," she says doubtfully, "was secretly developing antimemetic weaponry as early as the 1940s."

"We sure were," Marness says, with more than a hint of pride.

"Of course, there is no one in the whole world who could back this up."

"That's right," Marness says, flashing a smile he hasn't flashed in decades. "You only have my word for it. Cute, huh? Still, this is why you resurrected me, isn't it? For the sake of one more good war story. God, I've missed shop talk."

"I resurrected you because I want a very specific question answered," Wheeler says. "Although I can see that in a way you've already answered it. This bomb was the means, wasn't it? The old Antimemetics Division—"

"—the Unthinkables—"

"—bombed themselves. Somehow."

"That's right," Marness says.

"From context," Wheeler goes on, "I assume that they knew what they were doing that time. I assume it was not an accident."

"It was not," Marness says.

*

The displaced half of Marness' brain is anchored in the Seventies now, so the True History of the New Original Unthinkables is an open book to him. And he reads:

"After the war the second bomb collected dust for years. We began sketching improved designs for a third bomb, but around that time oversight was starting to flicker out. We completed our research and production objectives, and were given no further objectives. Funding became shaky and we couldn't figure out why. It wasn't entirely clear that the project overseers knew what we were doing. Or even that they remembered we existed. It was a side-effect from the research, of course, one we had no way of managing at the time.

"In 1951, a cult movement began in Ojai, California. It was… wrong, everything about it was just wrong. In a matter of days it was a national phenomenon and still growing. It was all over the news. To

spread that far in months would have been credible, but days was simply impossible. We, in the team, could see that the philosophy behind the cult was unnaturally contagious. It was the opposite of unthinkable, it was unforgettable. We knew that this was what our bomb was designed for. We prompted the overseers for direction. But there were no orders.

"At the time that the outbreak began, we were a U.S. Army laboratory, through and through. Eight days into the crisis the Foundation 'acquired' us. All the classified research, all the material resources, and all the compliant top staff, including me. Anybody who wouldn't comply was mind-wiped and sent back to the Army. Twenty hours after the acquisition, we deployed the second bomb and the cult was gone. Nobody **remembered it, nobody** remembered being part of it, zero loss of life. A completely clean detonation.

"After that is when everything really kicked off. Once we started working for the Foundation, the pace of research ramped up. Every new technological advancement uncovered new hidden SCPs. I passed the Foundation field exams and went out catching ghosts. My life turned into the Twilight Zone. I—"

Marness blinks hard. He covers one of his eyes, then the other.

"I remember all these different people now," he says. "It feels like my memory is in stereo. Almost every antimemetic SCP we caught before the wipe in '76, we caught again soon after the wipe. That means I remember two acquisition logs for each one. I remember two Antimemetics teams and I don't remember who belongs on which side of the wall. Do you remember Goldie Yarrow? The neurologist? Studied the mechanism of anomalously accelerated memory loss… wrote a library on the subject…"

Wheeler doesn't.

"Dr. Ojobiru? Julie Still?"

"El, this is important. Are you at the right place in your own timeline to remember what happened yet?"

Marness focuses. And he discovers that he is. Something changes in his eyes, as he stops reminiscing. He speaks more slowly now, his voice dropping almost to a whisper:

"There is an SCP which your division has never seen. The SCP which my division couldn't contain. The escapee. This is what you wanted, isn't it, Marion?"

"Yes," she says. "This is the data I'm killing you for." She leaves a gap where, if she felt there was anything to apologise for, she would apologise.

Marness locks eyes with her. "It was eating my division alive. It came at us so hard and so fast that the only way we could stop it was to self-destruct. But we had no site nuke, and in retrospect it is obvious to me, now, that this was because the SCP had consumed our site nuke first of all.

"If you know it exists, it knows you exist. The more you know about it, the more it knows about you. If you can see it, it can see you. And you *can* see it. You've been looking right at it all afternoon."

Wheeler is suddenly acutely aware of her surroundings.

There are only two of them on the boat. The boat is anchored more than a kilometre from any of the lake shores. She hasn't brought any backup with her. There's a radioactive prickling in her brain. She doesn't—

Red flag. Why didn't I bring any backup with me? That doesn't make sense.

There should be a team at the lake house. There should be an MTF operative and a medic here on the boat with me. And a second boat. At minimum. Am I all alone out here? Why did I do that?

She pulls her gun, but doesn't aim it at Marness yet. "Where is it? Is it in you?"

Marness' voice is becoming urgent. He covers both of his eyes again. "Destroying all knowledge of it was the only way to destroy it. And restoring my memories was a foolproof way to bring it back!"

It's in his eyes. Most likely his left eye. Wheeler backs up to the other side of the boat, draws a bead on the centre of Marness' head, and says, "El. Are you still in there?"

"There is a way to fix this," Marness hisses, dropping to his knees. He keeps his eyes screwed up and gropes his way forward blindly, on his hands and knees.

"El, you need to tell me what this thing is."

"That's the opposite of what we need to do," Marness says. "You need to set another bomb off."

"We don't have that bomb. We lost that technology—" Wheeler begins.

"You've always had it! There's an engineering lab in Site 41. You know it. An underground complex the size of a football field. In pristine condition, and totally disused. Why? Think about it. That's where your bomb's installed."

"But that just sets us back to square one. If I set the bomb off," Wheeler says, knowing full well that she is thousands of kilometres from it and can't hope to reach it in time anyway, "how do we contain this thing?"

"We won't," Marness shouts. "We can't, ever! Don't you get it? The whole division is looped! We start the division, we run headlong into this thing, and either it eats us, or we wipe ourselves out in self-preservation. The idea of antimemes is as old as forgetfulness itself. Humans have been looping through this problem over and over again since long before the Forties. Maybe for centuries!"

His blindly probing fingers find the medical box. It's too late.

As Wheeler watches, a waving black pedipalp coated in dark hairs forces its way out through Marness' left eye. Marness screams. Still on his knees, he grasps the pedipalp with both hands and tries to break it, but it's solid, as if it has bones inside it.

"What is it?" Wheeler shouts at him. "That can't be the whole story. Where is it from, what does it want? Can it reason, can it speak?"

"Help—"

A second spider leg, significantly longer and spindlier, slides out through Marness' trachea, ruining his throat and voice box and producing a gout of blood. He gurgles. A third leg shoots from his abdomen, like a spear.

Wheeler shoots Marness in the head. Marness falls forward, limp, then rises back up, lifted by the three spider appendages as if he is a puppet being controlled by something gigantic and invisible. His arms raise, as if suspended by wires.

Wheeler squints. She fires four more shots over Marness' head, at the likely body mass of the invisible puppeteer, and fires the rest of her clip almost directly into the sky. The whole boat vibrates, along with the surface of the lake, as if responding to infrasound or a localised earthquake. Then the boat shudders violently and starts to lift out of the water, raised by more unseen appendages.

Wheeler holsters her gun and goes for the medical box herself, pulling it away from Marness' floating feet. There's a compartment with Class-B amnestic, the fast-acting stuff, in serum form. She does a hurried burst of mental arithmetic, measures out the correct dosage in a syringe and, hands shaking, plunges it into a wrist vein. The boat is still rising. Whatever the monster is, it's colossally tall, or maybe it flies.

She is, of course, already dosed up to the eyeballs with mnestic drugs. Otherwise, she wouldn't have been able to perceive any of this. Foundation medical literature warns in the strongest possible terms against putting both kinds of drug into the same brain. Best case scenario, this ends with her in the hospital.

They're thirty metres up in the air now, ten storeys. There's a stabbing pain developing in her left eye. She kicks her shoes off and throws the gun away. She goes to the edge and contemplates the drop for a disbelieving second. She jumps.

It takes two heart-stopping seconds of freefall for her to hit the water. The chilled hammerblow of the impact is enough to blank her mind out. By the time she surfaces she doesn't remember where

she fell from, or why. And likewise, the skyscraper-sized being which claimed Marness and the boat has forgotten about her.

"What the hell," she gasps, treading water. "What the hell, where the hell?"

There is nothing above her, no explanation. Only the symptoms of the drug cocktail give her any indication of what just happened: a sensation like hundreds of tiny lumps of hot solder in her brain, and pain and exhaustion spreading to all of her tendons. She wants to die.

Swim, says part of her. *Get to shore first. Then you can die.*

*

The extraction team finds her around dusk, unconscious on the lake shore. They stabilise her in the helicopter, then take her to Site 41 for examination, and to have her system flushed.

She spends a solid eight days at home, detoxifying: no mnestics, no amnestics, no exposure to dangerous memory-corrupting SCPs, no work visitors. "No work," the doctor also tells her, pointlessly.

It isn't anywhere near the first missing event in Wheeler's life, nor is she the first person in the Antimemetics staff to have such an experience, but the sensation is no less disturbing for its familiarity. As per procedure, she writes a report summarising everything she can remember. The gap in her memory is about thirteen hours.

Then she adds her report to the extensive, complex map of Missing Time which the whole division maintains collectively. It is a map of holes, and the map is becoming large enough that very faint patterns are gradually forming. The outline of an enemy is becoming visible, or perhaps a group of enemies.

When she quizzes the extraction team later, none of them remember who activated the emergency beacon which summoned them. In fact, the beacon itself cut out long before they landed at the lake. Wheeler compares the current size of her division with her best estimate of what it should be. Maybe she needs a few more key

people here and there… So, assuming the division was fully staffed before the event, maybe those empty roles are the people who died this time around. Maybe one of them activated the beacon. A commendable act, by someone now only known to exist because of that single act.

It's weeks later still that Wheeler discovers the largest new hole in her memory:

Who founded the division? When?

*

Footnotes
1. Excerpt from Document 180047109-L4799-098,User's Guide To Chemical Mnestics:The Class-X mnestic drug is a failed eternal youth serum. X rejuvenates both mind and body by up to years, but its effects are temporary, wearing off in a matter of hours. Furthermore, as the drug wears off, the suppressed time reasserts itself all at once, causing a harmful "whiplash" effect on the subject's physiology. X can rejuvenate an individual safely by up to thirty days, but with stronger doses the whiplash effect becomes dangerous, and past a threshold of 16-18 months it is fatal in all known subjects.X's restorative effect on the human memory is essentially a side-effect of all of this. However, this side-effect is so useful that it has become the drug's main practical purpose. The Antimemetics Division uses small doses of X to temporarily sharpen or restore memories from the recent past. This aids Foundation operatives in the accurate recall of incidents involving memory-corrupting entities.

Next: CASE COLOURLESS GREEN

CASE COLOURLESS GREEN

Item #: SCP-3125

Object Class: Keter

Special Containment Procedures: SCP-3125 is kept inside Cognitohazard Containment Unit 3125 on the first floor of Site 41. This containment unit is a 10m by 15m by 3m cuboidal room clad in layers of lead, soundproofing and telepathic shielding. Access is through an airlock system at one end of the containment unit. This airlock is programmed to allow only one person to enter the containment unit at a time, and to remain locked until this person exits before allowing another person to enter.

Under no circumstances may any coherent information be allowed to leave the containment unit. This includes written and electronic notes, photographs, audio and video recordings, sound, electromagnetic and particle-based signals and psi emanations. During the exit cycle, a purge system rigged to the airlock flushes the occupant's memory by flooding the airlock with amnestic gas for three minutes.

A senior Antimemetics Division staff member must visit SCP-3125 every six weeks (42 days).

END OF FILE

"You're kidding me. That's the whole entry?"

"That's the whole entry," Wheeler says.

It isn't even the fiftieth strangest thing Paul Kim has seen in the database, but still: "No description, no acquisition report, no test log,

no addenda? No clue who built the unit, or when, or how many times it's been visited, or who carried out the previous visits, or what they took in with them, or how long they were in there?"

"Well, obviously Bart Hughes built the unit," Wheeler says, and this cannot be denied. The man's signature style of containment architecture is recognisable a mile out. Sleek, white, plainly impregnable without the aid of extremely heavy tools. "Which makes it at least seven years old. That's sixty visits or more. I guess there are good reasons for the rest of those omissions. Anyway… the timer watchdog says it's time again."

"I don't like the idea of you routinely exposing yourself to a cognitohazard so dangerous that we can't even write the reason why we can't write it down down," Kim says. "Especially because it's impossible for us to recover any usable information this way. You're going to go in, be incommunicado for two hours and come out a smiling amnesiac. What do we gain from that? It's just a breach risk."

Wheeler hears every word of this and elects to ignore it all. There's a vague shape of familiarity about the entry as written; there are a few word choices which reassure her, in an intangible way, that it was written by someone who knew what they were doing. Possibly her.

Kim's still talking. "We should just scrub that last line from the database entry. There can't be *anything* good in that room."

Wheeler puts her keycard in the slot. The airlock rewards her with green LEDs and begins to cycle open. It's built as a slender vertical cylinder with a single opening. The entire thing rotates on its axis. Inside, there's barely room for a single person to stand without their shoulders touching the walls.

"What are you taking?" Kim asks.

Wheeler ducks to step in, turns to face him and shrugs. "A stick of gum."

"I can get you field gear," Kim says, as the airlock begins to rotate

again, emitting a low, quiet thrum solely as an audible warning that there is machinery in motion. "We'll raid inventory. Give me fifteen minutes and I'll turn you into a one-woman war."

If Wheeler says anything in response to this, it's cut off by the soundproofing as the airlock rotates.

Kim is left alone in the antechamber. He stares at the outer door for a worried moment. He presses his ear to the door for a while, but hears nothing. Not even a faint tremble from the airlock mechanism.

*

Inside it's pitch dark for a few seconds, then some unseen sensor detects Wheeler's presence and brings the fluorescents up. Half of them, anyway. The others remain inert or flicker aggravatingly.

The room's interior walls are made from milky white glass (bulletproof, knowing Hughes) and plastered with paperwork, taped and Blu-Tacked up in vaguely coherent masses. Where there is no paperwork, people have drawn directly on the walls in marker pen. There is a conference table, long and elliptical, covered with more paperwork and a tangle of laptop computers and serpentine power supply cables. Power has returned to the machines and they are slowly booting. A data projector warms up and shines a map of the world over the far wall, almost lining up with a network of scribbled annotations on the same wall. Post-It notes of all colours litter the carpet like autumn leaves.

Other than that, the room is empty.

Skimming the paperwork, Wheeler discovers that nearly all of it is handwritten and most of it charts the progress of conversations. Most of the entries are dated and signed, and most of the dates are weeks apart. The conversations are panicked and fearful back-and-forths about dozens of SCPs, some of them antimemetic in nature but none of them obviously related to one another. None of the notes mention SCP-3125.

The only name Wheeler recognises is her own, which appears on one in ten or twenty of the notes. The notes seem authentic and the

handwriting is hers. But her notes also seem as desperate and uncertain in tone as everybody else's. This unnerves her.

There are diagrams on the walls too, which are too complex to decode at a glance, but complex enough to make her eyes hurt to look at them.

Still lost for a logical entry point to the data, Wheeler curses all of her predecessors. Asynchronous research — whereby the research topic is forgotten entirely between iterations, and rediscovered over and over — is a perfectly standard practice in the Antimemetics Division, and her people ought to be better trained than this. There should be an obvious single document to read first which makes sense of the rest. A primer—

"Marion, it's me."

Wheeler recognises the voice as her own. She moves around the table until she finds the laptop making the noise. There's a video playing, apparently recorded on the laptop's own camera in this room.

The Marion Wheeler in the video is seated, and looks unfamiliar in a way which takes the one watching a moment to put her finger on. Not exhausted, not sick, not physically injured; she's seen herself that way before, in the mirror. This woman's willpower is gone. She's beaten.

"You've guessed already that SCP-3125 is not in this room," she says. "In fact, this is the only room in the world where SCP-3125 is not present. It's called 'inverted containment'. SCP-3125 pervades all of reality except for volumes which have been specifically shielded from its influence. This is it. This is our only safe harbor. This room represents the length and breadth of the war.

"Every competent antimemetics research project finds SCP-3125's fingerprints sooner or later. It manifests all over the world, in thousands of different forms. Most of them aren't even anomalous. Some of them we already have catalogued separately in the main database. A very small number of them are even in containment. **Impossibly virulent cults**, **broken arithmetic**, invisible

spiders as tall as skyscrapers, **people born with extra organs which nobody can see**. That's the raw data. Those manifestations are troublesome enough to deal with in their own right…"

The Wheeler in the video casts around, picks up a bright green felt-tip pen and a blank piece of paper. She begins drawing a shape which isn't visible from the camera's perspective, while still talking.

"But once you get a little further down the road you start to see a pattern emerging in the data. You need to have the training in memetic science, but once you have that training and you have the data in front of you, it only takes a little extra effort to arrange those data points in conceptual space and draw a contour through them. Those data points are points on SCP-3125's hull; those manifestations are the shadows it casts on our reality. You link four or five different SCPs together into a single shape, and you see it… And it sees you…"

She's still drawing. It's detailed. She doesn't look up, and her tone of voice is distant, almost as if she's narrating the tail end of a frightening children's story:

"When that happens, when you make 'eye contact', it kills you. It kills you and it kills anybody who thinks like you. Physical distance doesn't matter, it's about mental proximity. Anybody with the same ideas, anybody in the same head space. It kills your collaborators, your whole research team. It kills your parents; it kills your children. You become absent humans, human-shaped shells surrounding holes in reality. And when it's done, your project is a hole in the ground, and nobody knows what SCP-3125 is anymore. It is a black hole in antimemetic science, consuming unwary researchers and yielding no information, only detectable through indirect observation. A true description of what SCP-3125 is, or even an allusion to what it is, constitutes a containment breach and a lethal indirect cognitohazard.

"Do you see? It's a defense mechanism. This information-swallowing behaviour is just the outer layer, the poison coating. It protects the entity from discovery while it infests our reality.

"And as years pass, the manifestations will continue, growing denser and knitting together… until the whole world is drowning in them, and everybody will be screaming 'Why did nobody realise what was happening?' And nobody will answer, because everybody who realised was killed, by this *system*…

"Do you see it, Marion? See it now."

Wheeler is at the core of Foundation antimemetic science. She had all the raw data readily accessible. There are extensive written calculations on the walls, but she doesn't need to read them, she can do them in her head. All it took was that slightest push, that slightest suggestion. Staring through the laptop screen, eyes wide and defocused, she understands how it all links together. She sees SCP-3125.

She feels dwarfed by it. She's encountered terrible, powerful ideas before, at every level of memeticity, and subdued them or even recruited them, but what she's picturing now is on another order of magnitude from what she knew to be possible. Now that she knows it's there, she can feel it like cosmic radiation, boring holes in the world with its thousands of manifestations and freely laying waste to anybody who recognises the larger pattern. It's not of reality, not of humanity. It is from a higher, worse place, and it is descending.

The other Wheeler presents her finished diagram. She has drawn a mutated, fractally complex grasping hand with fivefold symmetry. It has no wrist or arm, just five long human fingers pointing in five directions. At its core, there's a pentagonal opening which could be a mouth.

But the diagram was already there. It's plastered across the wall in the background of the video, plain as day, a meticulous collage in green, easily two metres in diameter and showing the same meme complex to a hundred times the level of detail. There are smaller diagrams of different elevations arrayed around it like spores, and its arms are spread wide around the seated Wheeler, who sits directly in front of the mouth, with her back to it.

Wheeler, watching, does not realise this, and does not turn around.

"How do you fight an enemy without ever discovering it exists?" the Wheeler in the video asks. "How do you win without even realising you're at war? What do we *do*?

"Seven years ago there were more than four hundred antimemetics research groups worldwide. Government agencies, military branches, private corporations, university projects. Many of them were GOIs or subdivisions of GOIs. We were allied with most of them. We were at the spearhead of an Antimemetics Coalition which spanned the whole globe and thousands upon thousands of people. None of those groups still exist. The last one ceased to exist some time in the last seventy-two hours.

"Three years ago, Foundation Antimemetics was an organisation of more than four thousand people. Now it's ninety.

"There's no war. We've lost the war. It's over. This is the mopping-up operation. The only reason we still exist at all is because we have better amnestic biochemistry than anybody else in the world. Because that's all you can do when you see SCP-3125: run away and try to forget what you saw… seek oblivion in chemicals, or alcohol, or head trauma. And even that can't work every time. It's circling in. We meet it over and over again and we don't realise it. There's no way we can stop ourselves from rediscovering it! We're too damned smart!"

She points at something on the wall, out of view of the laptop's camera. Wheeler, watching, turns to look. In an upper corner of the room there is a constellation of dizzyingly complicated schematics. Bart Hughes's initials are on every page.

"There's a machine we could build. All it would take is eight years, a lab as big as West Virginia and all the money in the world. Nothing that the O5 Council would blink at if we went to them. But how do we build that machine without any of us realising what it's for? It would be like building and launching Apollo 11 without a single engineer deducing that the Moon existed. The logistics would be insane, but the secrecy would be well past impossible. Someone would start asking questions. And then it would be over. So what do we do?"

"Find another way," Wheeler says to the unhearing recording. The

fatalistic tone of voice makes her angry. "What's the hell's wrong with you?"

"…I could tell everybody to walk away. I could send a little message to myself saying 'There's danger down this road, you should disband the Antimemetics Division and pursue other projects.' But I'd be suspicious. I'd start asking questions. And then it would be over."

Wheeler's now crouched in front of the video, trying to understand what she's watching. "What's wrong, Marion? Are you okay?"

"I could kill myself in here," the recording says. "But my team would find SCP-3125 without me, and then they'd have to fight SCP-3125 without me. It's going to happen soon, whatever happens. In the next two months at most. This year, it will be over. I may die in here anyway. I'm on so many mnestic drugs that my endocrine system is shutting down. Taking amnestics at the same time is the chemical equivalent to trepanation. I don't remember the last time I slept without having a nightmare about Adam, and I'm starting to forget whether SCP-4987 is a real thing or just the number that I gave to my life—"

"You're not like this," Wheeler whispers. "You're stronger than this. What happened to you? Who's Adam?"

"I don't know how we survive this. I don't know how we win. We're the last ones in the world. After us, there's nobody."

Wheeler shakes her head, not believing it.

"So I'm done. I'm going to walk out of this door and forget who I am and then I'm going to be you, Marion, and you trwoll have to figure a way out of this, because I can't." She gets up and moves offscreen. She can be heard breathing deeply. Her speech is starting to distort. "God, my eyes hurt. I think ilr starting infth mlaei inside."

There's the sound of a door opening, and then a piercing pulse of sound and light which terminates the recording.

*

Wheeler stares at the dark screen for a long minute.

She's never seen herself so weak, and it damages her ego a great deal to see that it's possible. She feels disconnected from what she saw, like it happened in an alternate universe. She feels revulsed and appalled by that version of her, more so to know that that version is still inside her somewhere. *It doesn't make sense. I'm looking at all of the same facts. What made her give up? What did she know that I don't?*

Who was Adam?

The answer to this question is so obvious and sickening that she instinctively distrusts it. She circles around the answer, probing it, trying to find reasons to reject it, but it's inescapable. Adam was someone she knew when the video was recorded, now completely removed from her memory. Adam was someone the thought of whose safety paralysed her with fear. Someone in the same head space. Someone she couldn't bear to lose.

And then she lost.

But what if…

(But how'd the room get built in the first place? Anybody's guess. Wheeler imagines Hughes building it as a proof-of-concept, followed by a cascading series of lucky chances which led to it becoming the war room. Someone discovered SCP-3125 at random, while sealed in the room; they wrote notes to themselves which set up the skeletal external SCP database entry and the containment procedures; most of the paperwork and computer hardware was left behind by later visitors… It could have happened…)

But what if there's another room?

Unbidden, a cute factoid comes back to her right then. Site 41 is almost completely vacant. In particular, two hundred metres below Site 41 there's an empty heavy engineering lab, an underground complex the size of a hockey stadium. Self-contained, in pristine condition, totally disused. Sealed up, original purpose forgotten. Nobody has entered it in living memory. Built who-knows-how-many decades back by a dead generation of antimemeticists.

What if that's where we built our weapon?

Do I really believe I'm that smart? That my team and I had that much foresight? That we got that lucky?

She turns to look at the airlock, running the numbers in her head.

Antimemetics Division staff, other than me: thirty-eight. Forty-two days until the next iteration. That's past the end of the year. It'll be too late. If I leave this room now, I will never be back. The plan I have now is the best plan there's ever going to be.

We're the last ones in the world. After us, there's nobody.

*

Kim is so deeply buried in work at his terminal and the airlock is so quiet that he almost doesn't notice when it starts to cycle open again.

"We need to check you for notes," he begins, but then he sees that Marion Wheeler is curled up in the bottom of the narrow cylinder, panting as though she just finished a marathon run. Kim holds a hand out but she shakes her head, electing to stay lying down, knees bent up to her chest, sucking down lungfuls of air.

"What in the world happened in there?" Kim asks.

"Just need…" she gasps, "…to breathe. Be okay in a… second. Haaaaah. I think I blacked out for a moment, might have inhaled some. Haaaaah. I think I'm okay. I remember the plan."

Kim looks confused and worried for a second, then they replace him. "You shouldn't be able to remember anything… what did you do?"

"Hit my head," Wheeler says, then goes back to concentrating on breathing properly. She suddenly becomes acutely aware that Kim has her effectively cornered. Disliking this configuration for reasons which she's only gradually putting back together, she levers herself up to one shoulder and tries to stand. Kim puts a hand on her shoulder and pushes her back down.

"You look terrible," he says. "There's something inl fleth your neck. Do you see that?" He points at her throat, then taps the same spot on his own.

"What?"

"On your neck. I nefth hlai you've been infected by whatever was in there. We need to act quickly." He reaches for his keyring and unthreads a Swiss Army knife, and unfolds a short, gleaming blade. He does this in such a methodical, ordinary way that Wheeler almost forgets to react when he leans down towards her to cut her throat.

Almost. She grips his wrist. They're locked like that for a moment, a tableau. She looks into Paul Kim's eye, but it isn't his eye anymore. She squints, wondering if she's making eye contact with anything but a hole in space. She already feels the force bearing down on her own skull, trying to drill into it, but she knows its shape and that means she can hold out, maybe for a few minutes. She had hoped, prayed, that Kim would not succumb so quickly. And in a crazed little way she'd thought there would be at least a sign, a theatrical doubling-over as his mind was wrenched out of its socket.

Kim's wrist spasms as he tries to lunge with the knife. Wheeler parries and its tip glances off the airlock interior wall with a screech. They scuffle for an awkward second, then she boots Kim in the stomach with both feet, sending him sprawling in the antechamber. She launches out of the airlock, dives over him and sprints away from the containment unit.

She feels SCP-3125 following her as she runs, like a spotlight. She hears a crash in another part of the Site, as the first piece of ceiling caves in.

Concluded in Your Last First Day

Your Last First Day

Previously

Marion Wheeler is curled in the corner of Site 41's main freight elevator, descending, clutching a shiny red ray gun almost as long as she is tall. The gun has a two-tined prong instead of a barrel and its stock is a weirdly asymmetrical mass of pipework, more like a Swiss watch or a small intestinal tract than a weapon. The gun is SCP-7381, and it comes from a long-dead planet — not too distant a planet, when all's said and done — which conventional astronomy has yet to observe.

A tornado of violence and destruction is tearing through Site 41 and through the minds of everybody working at Site 41. Ceilings are being brought down, the site pharmacy is a sucking hole at the side of the building. The armoury is buried; that's why she had to go through Area 09 and is now toting anomalous weaponry instead. The Antimemetics Division operatives she meets in the corridors are all broken; some of them curled up and raving while their minds evaporate and they die one memory at a time, some infected with a collection of ideas which compel them to shout guttural phrases in strange languages, and to procure blades — never guns — and work on those demented victims, and each other, and themselves.

Wheeler doesn't recognise any of the people. Their faces are all wrong, torn up with hatred and misery and vindictive glee. She's been trying to avoid fighting, but she's had to kill one man in self-defence. Fired at his heart, SCP-7381 simply erased a half-metre-wide cylinder of matter, removing his upper torso and lower jaw. He fell to the ground in four pieces. SCP-7381's beam is invisible, silent and recoilless. It was like using a child's toy gun.

Wheeler is petrified, but more than that, angry. "This is too much," she says, out loud, willing her heart rate back under control. "I can't deal with this. I shouldn't have to deal with this. It's my fucking first day!"

*

But how much sense does that make? Wheeler studies her reflection in the dark glass of the elevator control panel, and she tours the interior of her own skull, examining her thought processes. There are hints there, which would be difficult to articulate to someone who didn't know her as well as she knows herself. She isn't thinking like a newbie. She's instinctively breaking the problem apart, the way an experienced Foundation operative should. Hell, a newbie wouldn't even know how to carry out a detailed psychological self-examination of this kind. A newbie wouldn't even think of it, a newbie would just suffocate.

"The first thing it did when it saw me," she explains to her reflection, "was eat everything I knew about the Division. And everything I knew about *it*. If I had a plan, it ate the plan. …But I'm still me. So I can come up with that plan again. It's already right in front of me, I just need to see it. If I were me, what would my plan have been?"

She scratches absently at her left wrist.

"Taking some hardcore mnestic drugs would have been a smart first step, I guess," she mutters. "Reinforcing my mind, so that it can't erase the rest of the steps. Damn." The nearest source of mnestic medicine is the site pharmacy, but it's already been destroyed, and in any case the elevator is headed down, away from it.

No. Stop. The pharmacy's been destroyed? How do I know that?

Well, because she was there. She remembers finding the pharmacist crushed to death beneath a fallen medical cabinet, her skull an unrecognisable splatter of scarlet. She remembers the floor being torn away beneath her feet, and only barely making it out of that portion of the building alive.

She remembers— a modular package coloured Safety Orange, with

an enormous black Z on it. Her heart nearly stops at this. *Oh, God. What did I do?*

She remembers the dozens of warning signs covering the package; she remembers the three-factor authorisation procedure she had to follow to get into the sealed container where it was stored; she remembers the centimetre-thick book of medical advisory information, which she discarded; and, rolling her left sleeve back, she finds a fresh needle mark with a speck of blood, and remembers administering the injection.

This was my plan? This is what it takes to fight SCP-3125? I've killed myself—

Class-Z mnestics are the last word in biochemical memory fortification. Class-Z mnestics permanently destroy the subject's ability to forget. The result is perfect eidetic memory and perfect immunity to arbitrarily strong antimemetic interference.

The dose is taking effect now. Wheeler didn't read the book because she already knew every word of it. She knows everything that's about to happen to her. She can already feel her mind hardening, like steel, and the developing symptoms of extreme sensory overload.

She can see everything.

There are extra buttons on the elevator control panel, the lowest of which, the thirtieth floor below ground level, she's somehow already pushed. The walls of the elevator are covered with graffiti scrawled by the desperate and dying, people whose conceptual presence was eradicated from reality years earlier by the Alastair Grey antimemetic kill agent, reducing them to the level of ghosts. In one corner of the freight elevator there is even a half-corpse, unidentifiable, so many layers removed from reality that not even flies can smell it, its cells winking out of existence asymptotically over the course of years.

There is a fistful of tiny white worms exploring the floor of the elevator car, near where she's sitting. Revolted, Wheeler shuffles back from them, shaking one or two more of them out of her hair.

The worms are among the most widespread and successful antimemetically cloaked organisms in the world. They are everywhere, in every biome, in every room.

She can hear a long, alarming drone noise, a continual roaring which has the texture of ambient noise and is continually getting louder. It's as if it's been there for her entire life, and it's only now that she's begun to hear it.

It's too much data. Too much sound, too much light. Having her eyes open is like jamming them full of needles. She clamps her hands over her ears and screws her eyes up. Even like this, she feels the vibration of the elevator's slow descent and the heat of the failed air conditioning and the movement of her clothes on her skin, and meanwhile her vision is flooding instead with what could be hallucinations. The human sensorium routinely generates huge amounts of data and the human brain is adapted to discard almost all of that data nearly immediately. Altering the brain's behaviour to retain that data is extremely dangerous even for very short time spans.

Wheeler takes one hand away from her ear for just long enough to punch the metal wall of the elevator car, bloodying two knuckles. The pain gives her a focal point, a memory which screams a little louder than the rest.

And she finds the plan. She doesn't remember it; she bootstraps it from first principles, in a handful of minutes, just like she's done a hundred times before.

"I know how to beat you," she says.

"No," SCP-3125 says to her. "You don't."

*

The elevator stops at the thirtieth floor below ground and its doors grind open. They wait, open, for a long time. Further up the elevator shaft there are the distant rumbles of more parts of Site 41 being reduced to crumbs.

Still crouched in the corner, Wheeler mutters, "SCP-3125 doesn't have a voice."

"Of course I do," it replies.

"SCP-3125 is a five-dimensional anomalous metastasized mass of bad memes and bad antimemes and everything in between, seeping through to our physical reality. It isn't coherent and it isn't intelligent. It can't communicate. This is an auditory hallucination."

SCP-3125 scoffs. "You know what I hate most about you, Marion? You're consistently, eternally *wrong*… and yet you're still alive. All those lost battles, every year of that entire lost war, but somehow you always cobble together enough dumb luck to walk away unscathed. The eternal sole survivor. You don't deserve that kind of luck. Nobody does."

While it's talking, Wheeler leans hard on the ray gun to get to her feet. She lodges one shoulder against the wall of the elevator car, still with her eyes closed. She braces herself, and opens her eyes. The corridor ahead is empty. There's an airlock at the far end, this one large enough to drive a truck through, built from ultra-toughened white metal alloy in Bart Hughes's established style. There's a panel beside the airlock. She closes her eyes again and hobbles forward, using the ray gun as a crutch, stretching one hand out ahead of her as guidance.

"Someone has to be last," she says, gritting her teeth. "Someone has to be the best."

"Your team is dead," SCP-3125 says. "Their minds have been pulled out, like eyeballs. They're hollow people, with holes in space where their brains were. The war is over! Finally! It's just *you*, Marion, a division of one! Dying from mnestic overdose, two hundred metres underground, cared for by no one, known to exist to no one, up against an immortal, unkillable idea."

Wheeler reaches the airlock and fumbles blindly with the panel until she finds the slot for her keycard. For a few seconds it seems as if nothing is happening, then a yellow light flashes, the enormous mechanical interlocks unlatch and the door cycles open with all the

fuss of a flower's petals unfurling. Noise, Hughes always held, is a symptom of imperfect engineering.

Behind her, she hears the freight elevator close up and return to ground level, and she knows that someone has summoned it, intending to pursue her.

"Ideas can be killed," she says, stepping into the airlock.

"How?"

"With better ideas."

As the airlock cycles closed, so does the hermetic seal. SCP-3125 is shut out.

*

If something can cross over from conceptual space into reality, taking physical form, then something can cross in the opposite direction. It must be possible to take a physical entity, mechanically extract the *idea which it embodies*, amplify that idea and broadcast it up into conceptual space. A bigger idea. A better idea, one designed specifically to fight SCP-3125.

An ideal. A movement. A hero.

The machine Wheeler needs to build is the size of an Olympic stadium, and she doesn't have a fraction of the heavy memetic engineering experience to do it, let alone the material resources or the time. But she knows — someone taught her, she doesn't remember who — that an Antimemetics Division operative is as good on their first day as they're ever likely to be. And the same must be true of the Division as a whole.

She tells herself: *We won this war on the day it began. When we encountered SCP-3125 for the first time, we built this bunker. Bart Hughes faked his death and sequestered himself here so he could work uninterrupted, while the rest of the Division held on for as long as humanly possible, buying time for this moment. I know this is what I did, because it's what I would have done.*

I'm the final component. He's waiting for me.

*

The space beyond the airlock is gigantic, structured and lit like an aircraft hangar and filled with hot, stale, dry air. Wheeler, still mostly blind, stumbles forward across an expanse of more than a hectare of flat, dusty epoxy flooring. "Hughes!" she shouts into the void. "It's time!" Nothing comes back but the echo.

She glances up for a second. The space is empty. The castle-sized memetic amplification/broadcasting unit which Bart Hughes was meant to be building is absolutely absent. Hughes himself is absent.

Maybe the entire machine is antimemetically cloaked? she wonders, momentarily. It would be a smart way to conceal the operation even from the rest of the Foundation. But her brain is curdling in the strongest mnestic drugs ever manufactured. There's genuinely nothing here.

Almost nothing. At the centre of the space there's a small outpost, a group of trestle tables with tools and toolboxes scattered about the place. Parked behind it is an unmarked military truck with flat tyres. On the back of the truck is a squat, squarish machine the size of a shipping container, with unshielded wiring and exposed pipework, and a long cable leading to a heavy-duty control panel on the floor. To the untrained eye, it is not at all clear what the machine is designed to do.

It's the antimemetic equivalent to a hydrogen bomb; the Division's answer to a site nuclear warhead. Activated, it would contaminate Site 41 and everything and everyone on it with antimemetic radiation. There would be no Site 41 and no Division afterwards; nothing any of the escaping, infectious staff did could have any effect on the real world.

It's the wrong machine.

It can't destroy or contain SCP-3125, or even injure it. All it can do is sterilise today's outbreak. The other symptoms will persist. Fifty or ten or five years from now, or maybe one year or maybe *tomorrow*,

SCP-3125 will return, bringing with it its MK-class end-of-world scenario. Human civilisation will be entirely eradicated as an abstract concept, and be replaced with something unimaginably worse. There will be no one to fight it.

Wheeler leans there on the ray gun for a long moment. The pressure of information in her mind, continually increasing, reaches a point where she can't take it any more, and she starts to break. The Class-Z has been in her system for long enough now that she knows for a fact she has irreversible brain damage. There is no antidote. She'll be lucid for another hour, then spend the remaining two or three hours of her life vegetative.

That's right, she thinks. It's almost a relief. *This is good. This is right.*

I've survived too long. I forgot what universe this was. For a while there, I thought, maybe… this was the universe where we win sometimes.

The agony in her head is like an ice axe now. She drops the ray gun with a clatter, sinks to her knees, lies down and waits for either death or a better idea.

*

A being superficially resembling Paul Kim arrives at the outer airlock door. It examines the airlock uncomprehendingly for a few moments, then finds the keycard slot. It hunts methodically through Kim's pockets, then remembers the keycard around its neck. The airlock cycles once more and not-Kim goes through. Behind it, the freight elevator is returning to ground level a third time, to fetch the rest.

In the next room, the being which is not Paul Kim finds Wheeler, unconscious, with the ray gun dropped beside her. There is also a military truck, which it disregards.

Not-Kim lets its keycard fall from its fingers and scoops up the ray gun. For a moment it contemplates the unconscious Wheeler, then examines at the gun itself, remembering how it works. It turns back to face the airlock and fires, punching fat cylindrical holes in the white metal of the inner door until it's gone, then the outer door too,

breaching the hermetic seal. A faint smile returns to not-Kim's face as SCP-3125 and its familiar, comforting signals flood into the bunker.

A dozen more non-people are arriving by freight elevator, former Antimemetics Division bodies. "I've found her," not-Kim calls out to them. It drops the ray gun where it's standing, as if it simply forgot that it had been carrying anything, and pulls out its knife again. It holds the knife between two fingers, in a casual, offhand sort of way, as if it were a pencil or screwdriver.

The infected non-people gather with not-Kim around Wheeler, looking down at her with alien expressions of disgust, or pity, or malice.

"Why isn't she opening up properly?" someone asks. "She can't meet them unless she wants the signals."

"Start with her eyes," says someone else. "It'll make the rest of her easier to correct."

Not-Kim leans down to start work, then hesitates, its knife a few centimetres from Wheeler's eye. She's whispering something, so quietly that only it can hear her clearly.

"None of this happened, Paul," she says. "You and I never existed. There is no Antimemetics Division."

There's a sharp *click* as the bomb finishes its powering-up sequence. Nobody in the room can hear this but Wheeler. Nobody in the room can perceive the bomb but Wheeler. All they can see is an empty truck.

The world goes black.

Where Have You Been All My Life

Who the *fuck* infiltrates a senior Foundation official's home, while they're home?

Marion Wheeler lives deep in coniferous forest, a long drive from the nearest major city and a long drive in the opposite direction from Site 41. It's late, last thing, and she's reading in bed when she hears the muffled, unmistakeable click of her front door being unlocked. She looks up, and stares blankly at the wall for a second while listening to soft footsteps moving into the hallway.

She marks her place and reaches for her Foundation-issued phone. She has no permanent security staff at home — the Division is understaffed and trained operatives are in much more serious need on Site — but the building and grounds have beefy electronic countermeasures. They, she discovers, have all been disabled, along with the sensors and cameras. She was not notified that this had happened. Whoever did it had a valid code.

Who, though?

The Foundation has enemies. True, the list of credible, motivated enemies is surprisingly short, and the list of groups stupid enough to try to kill or capture someone at her level is shorter. But it's far from empty, and it's not actually so hard a feat; not too many people below O5 level are privileged to travel in motorcades. The real trick, the impossible trick, is to avoid unholy retaliation. But what if you really think you can? What if you've decided it's worth it?

Wheeler triggers the silent alarm. She sets her phone back down on the nightstand and collects her gun. She rolls out of bed, tucks a few pillows in her place, moves silently to her bedroom door and stands beside it, listening and thinking.

This door, her bedroom door, can't be opened silently. It creaks like hell, so if she goes through it she'll have to be ready to draw

attention. There's an attic, but access is out there on the landing and, again, can't be operated silently. There's no alternate route to ground level other than jumping from the window, and someone has to be covering it. Even if she landed in the bushes alive, she'd still have to break the perimeter with a sprained ankle.

A better question than "Who?" is "How many?" She may already be straight-up dead, simply due to numbers. If the attackers tread cautiously and try to flush her out, she figures she can *Home Alone* her way through perhaps eight of them before running out of luck. If they rush the second floor and have armor she might be overwhelmed by as few as two, even with the staircase acting as a choke point. All of this, naturally, assumes that the attackers aren't anomalous. If they are, and they're not in the, say, thirty percent of anomalies which can be neutralised simply by shooting them in the centre mass and head, she may be fundamentally helpless even after the response team shows up. Which will be, at best, ten minutes from now.

A creaking. This damned house. Someone is coming up the stairs, making no effort to be quiet about it. A soft tread, though. As if they removed their shoes. Just one of them? That barely makes sense.

With five seconds' grace, Wheeler casts around the dark room for a second weapon. She knows there are knitting needles downstairs in the lounge and knives, good ones, in the kitchen. But she can't get to them. It's too late. The door's opening. It seems like the man's trying to say something as he comes in, but he only gets as far as "I — *whulp*," and it's done. He's flat on his face, cheek pressed into deep cream carpet, with Wheeler on his back pinning both his wrists with her knees. She sights urgently back down the stairs for a second; there's no one there. She prods him in his other cheek with the muzzle of the gun. "You speak, you die," she hisses. "You try to move, you die." She glances at the windows, checks the stairs again, listens intently. There's no sound. There's nothing to be seen.

The man is fifty, and lanky. He wears an expensive dark suit, tailored to his build. He has angular features, thick, greying hair and rimless spectacles, now quite possibly bent out of shape by their sudden impact with the floor. He wears discreet platinum jewellery: a wristwatch, cufflinks and a ring.

The two of them halt like that, a tableau. He makes no attempt to move, although he does look askance at Wheeler, as best he can given his dislodged glasses.

Wheeler asks, "Where are the others?"

"It's just me, Marion," he answers.

"Who are you?"

He says nothing for a moment, but his expression slowly, subtly drops. "I, ah. Well. Well, it really happened, didn't it? I always wondered."

"Who are you?"

"There is a monster which follows you around and eats your memories," the man says. "SCP-4987. You drip-feed it inconsequential trivia so it doesn't go after anything important. You watch game shows. The book you were reading just now. On your nightstand. It's a trivia book. Right?"

Wheeler says nothing to confirm or deny this, although it is true. At feeding time the entity manifests like a bright gold-white spot in the corner of her eye. It's gone now.

She's already put the rest of it together. It is all mind-bogglingly, insultingly obvious.

With a well-suppressed but still detectable note of dismay, she asks, "What's your name?"

"Adam," he says. "Adam Wheeler."

*

Obviously, she has the man detained.

She instructs her people to interrogate him — lightly — and to run deep background research on every word he utters, while for her part she stands far back from the investigation to avoid contamination. She resists the urge to interfere, particularly to visit "Adam" and personally demand answers. She goes to her office, curls up on the couch there and tries to catch some sleep, but doesn't succeed in any real sense.

Seven hours later a Foundationer knocks on her office door, bringing an inch-thick block of printouts and a paralysingly strong cup of coffee. Wheeler takes the drink first, accepting it as a kind of authentication step before letting the man in. She moves back to the couch and sits hunched over the drink for warmth, inhaling its fumes.

The man settles heavily into a chair opposite. He is a misleadingly stocky, perpetually unshaven individual, somewhere just shy of forty, and inarguably the most dangerous person on the Site. He is the Division's physical fitness and combat instructor and the leader of their solitary Mobile Task Force. His name is Alex Gauss. "They, uh," he says, "figured I should be the one to present their results. Even though I didn't research one line of it. 'Cause we 'get along'. Their words. Personally, I don't see it."

Wheeler stays focused on the coffee. "Who is he?"

Gauss opens the first page of the report, more for show than anything, then closes it again. "He's your husband. Every word checks out. There is limitless physical evidence. Half of the Division knows him socially, including me. I credit your diligence and adherence to protocol, but the bottom line is that SCP-4987 got hungry."

Wheeler nods. This assessment matches her own, pieced together overnight from gut reactions and analysis of the plain facts. Where the hell else did her name come from? She wasn't born "Wheeler". But she had to get independent verification.

She asks, "Has this happened before?"

"No."

"Could it happen again?"

Gauss shrugs. "You would know better than anyone."

"I would. I do. And I can tell you this: I have SCP-4987 trained to follow me at my heel. I feed it according to a strict regimen, it eats only the memories I say it's okay to eat. A rapidly progressive, universally fatal memory parasite made chronic and then domesticated. And now, what, it suddenly breaks training? That adds up?"

"If you say it doesn't add up, it doesn't add up," Gauss says, cautiously. "But speaking from field experience, anything can happen twice."

Wheeler has waited long enough, and takes a long pull from the coffee. She stares into the coiling steam, as if trying to see the future. "But who is he?" she asks again. "At this point, you know him better than I do. What's he like? Do you like him?"

Gauss grimaces extravagantly. This is the great-great-grandmother of all loaded questions.

Wheeler looks him in the eye and says, "Tell me your personal impression of Adam Wheeler. Direct order."

"…He's a nice enough guy."

"'Nice enough'?"

Gauss clicks his tongue. "I don't like him," he admits. "Personally. All that much. We're civil. But he will always be a little bit too smug, and a little bit too clever. He just… grates. Would I throw someone in a cell for that? No."

"Do I like him?"

"You—" Gauss begins, then stops. He looks away. And over time, a soft smile develops on his face, one which Wheeler doesn't recall ever seeing before, not in a working relationship going back years. "Yeah," he says. "Yeah. He's the one."

*

> Full name: Adam Bellamy Wheeler. Born February 27, 1962 in Henge, Derbyshire, United Kingdom to Rosemary Leah Wheeler *née* Wizst and Jonathan 'Jack' Philip Wheeler. No siblings. Early education: Henge Church of England Primary School, Matlock All Saints Secondary School. Demonstrated great musical acuity from an early age. By age sixteen had begun to be recognised as one of the most gifted classical violinists of his generation. Attended the Royal College of—

Wheeler skips three pages.

> —after sustaining a minor injury while on tour in , he encountered SCP-4051, which had infested a wing of the hospital where he received treatment. SCP-4051 was protected by an unusual form of antimemetic camouflage to which Wheeler — like an estimated 1 in 145,000 individuals worldwide — was (and remains) immune. His attempt to alert authorities to the infestation's presence was intercepted by a Foundation listening station. Operative Marion A. Hutchinson (100A-1-9331), then a field agent based in—

Another page.

> —resistant to conventional memory-erasure procedures. Hutchinson applied successfully for an exemption, reasoning that even with his memories left intact it would be impossible for Wheeler to share the details of SCP-4051. They subsequently became romantically involved.

"Oh, they 'subsequently became romantically involved', did they? Tell me more, you featureless gray sphere of a biographer, I'm *hooked* now."

The biography is contentless beyond this point. Adam Wheeler's life spent touring, playing, lecturing and occasionally conducting, writing and composing is documented in exhaustive, pointless detail. He withstands background checks and surveillance, and consistently demonstrates himself to represent zero risk of leak. He eventually receives the extremely low clearance level normally granted to long-term Foundation-external partners of Foundationers. They get married. She takes his name, which she, reading, considers faintly unrealistic. Blah blah.

There is nothing about his personality. Nothing about their relationship. No content.

She remembers acquiring SCP-4051. There was no one there. She remembers nothing.

*

Up until the end of the third round of questioning, Adam Wheeler assumes good faith. He figures the repetition is a due diligence tic, a corporate procedural requirement. It's only when they start over from "What's your name?" with a brand new interviewer for the fourth time that he finally gets it: they don't like him, and they don't care what he thinks his name is. They're trying to grind him down, until he can't think, until he's just dust particles they can sift through for data.

He reacts badly to this realisation. He asks for his wife, and asks for his wife, and they ignore him, and they ignore him, and she persistently fails to appear, until it becomes a cold form of torture. The questions keep coming and nothing stops them, not answering truthfully, not not answering, not lying, not rambling off on tangents. They don't stop until he begins falling asleep in the middle of his own sentences.

He wakes up in a standard Humanoid Containment Unit, a stackable one-bedroom apartment with holographic fake windows, impregnable walls and extensive discreet modifications for the

security and monitoring of anomalous entities. This one is on the first basement level, but he can't tell that. The bright quote-light-unquote pouring in through the main living area window is authentic enough to tan.

He wakes up on the couch, with a start, feeling creaky and dehydrated. He realises that he slept in his suit, and that his suit is creased. He hates that, that sensation of not looking his best, or at least presentable. That's going to gnaw away at him until he can find, at minimum, a razor and a change of shirt.

What woke him was the heavy metallic *clack* of the door unlocking. He looks up, rubbing his eyes. It's his wife. "Marion! Oh, my God." He leaps up and rushes over to meet her. She stops him a few paces short, with a gesture and a cold smile. And *that* hurts. It hurts more than anything.

So it really happened: SCP-4987 has bitten out the part of Marion Wheeler which cared about him. She wasn't absent because of some unrelated K-class outbreak. She just chose to be elsewhere, indifferent.

So he doesn't embrace her. He stands at a polite distance. "How are you feeling? Did you sleep?"

"I'm fine."

"I can tell you've had your coffee. Have you eaten? Come on, I'll make you something." The unit has a rudimentary kitchen area. He goes through and starts exploring the cupboards. "There must be something edible around here. Eggs and milk, at least. I'm ashamed to say I more or less fell asleep where I was standing when they put me in here, so I haven't had a chance to scout. Or do you keep the place empty, and the food arrives through a slot in the wall?"

Marion begins, "Mr. Wheeler—"

Adam shoots her a disappointed look.

"Okay," she says, "Adam. Please come and sit down. You're right, there's nothing in any of those cupboards."

He closes the cupboard and sits opposite her at the kitchen table. "Scrambled eggs on granary toast," he suggests. "With a lot of garlic in the eggs. That's what we both need right now. Particularly you, because if I don't make something substantial for you you end up drinking those wretched wallpaper paste milkshakes seven days a week. Or you skip the meal entirely."

"Adam. We've been married for seventeen years, is that correct?"

"Yes."

"I don't know you."

"That's fine," Adam says. "I doubt that that's going to be a serious problem. You've told me, many times, about your own people who've lost themselves in the work and had to bootstrap their own personalities a second time. You love watching it. It's like watching butterflies emerge from chrysalides. The best of your people can turn that around in ten weeks. Imagine how fast it's going to be for you."

"No," Wheeler replies. Her tone is clinical, matter-of-fact. "I'm afraid it's not possible."

"What's not possible?"

"I can't begin a new relationship right now. Certainly not something as serious as a marriage. You have nominal clearance; you know what we do. I have responsibilities. I do not have… 'time'."

"This isn't 'new'," Adam says, deadpan. "It's pre-existing."

"No," Wheeler explains. "That relationship is ended now, and we are somewhere else."

Adam stares at her for a long moment, thin-lipped and far from happy. He asks her:

"What do you remember?"

The question is so open-ended that Wheeler doesn't manage to respond verbally. She spreads her hands slightly, the gesture

saying, "What?"

"You don't remember me," Adam says. "SCP-4987 also clearly ate the part of you which would care if you forgot me. And, additionally, the part of you which cares about brunch. 'What else have you forgotten?' would be a stupid question to ask, so instead I'm asking you, what's left? I want you to tell me everything you can remember."

"*Everything* I can remember?"

"Yes. From 1995 to right now."

It's still a farcical question at face value, and Wheeler's first instinct is to dismiss it as such, but she thinks again. She thinks, intending to genuinely try to answer the question. And she finds gaps. There's a dearth of specifics. It's like being asked to "say something" and immediately forgetting *all words*.

She says, "I remember… working."

And driving home, and then sleep, and then driving back to work. Big, hostile buildings. Drug regimens, containment procedures, endless piles of opaque numbers, personal fitness drills. Running. Calculating. Never, ever stopping calculating. She remembers, with unfair clarity, a large variety of extremely bad dreams.

And other than that, nothing. A huge, deep, ragged-edged black pit.

Adam says, "You remember nothing good, do you? Nothing good at all.

"When you come home, on the nights you make it home, you are ready to fold up. It has never been an easy job, but these past few years have been the worst they've ever been, because you're coming to the conclusion of something gigantic. You have explained to me how it is that you can never tell me, *really*, what it is that you do, without the act of you telling me killing me. And I — I couldn't stand that at first, and I still hate your job and I think it's a monstrous farce — but I trusted you in that. And I stopped asking. But I can tell, from the… rattle in your hands and the things you don't say, and the

way you sleep, that there is some kind of war going on back here. And you're losing people to it. And you're almost at the end. And you're going to win.

"So I scramble your eggs, and I play the violin for you, and between us we hack out about three-tenths of what I would consider to be normalcy. Not because you can't do this without me, you could take the whole universe by yourself if you *really* had to, but: to blazes with that, you don't have to.

"It didn't happen instantly. But it happened pretty damned fast. We had music in common at first, Bach and Mendelssohn. We had tobacco in common and a mutual hatred of *The X-Files*. Then it was coffee and wine. And then after some time it became hiking, and birdwatching, and Perseid meteors. We like Bruce Lee flicks. We watch *Law & Order* and *Jeopardy!* and we read stacks and stacks of books. No, in fairness, it's mainly me for the books. You don't have the long-term time to spare anymore."

He pinches the bridge of his nose for a second. Any two people can find that much common ground. Just being in the same place for years doesn't count for anything. What do they *have*?

"We communicate," he says. "Better than anybody I've seen. We can be apart for two months while I'm on tour or you're overseas and snap right back and pick up a conversation from the word we left off. We are connected. We are in the same headspace. You'll see it all. It'll happen again, just as fast. You've just got to give it a chance."

Wheeler is almost there. She sees the shape of what Adam is describing. It's distant and unclear, but if she concentrates she might be able to bring it into focus. It worries her, for nebulous reasons she can't completely articulate, but she can almost understand how there could be room for it. How it could lock into her life as it currently exists, and still make sense.

But Adam just said something crucial. He said a keyword which means the marriage counselling session is over and this is now a situation. Wheeler can't ignore it. She forces herself to drop the other thread and seize this one.

"What war?"

And now Adam really doesn't know what's happening. "Good God. The war, Marion. I don't know how else to describe it."

"What war? How many people?"

"I don't know," Adam says. "There are names. Names you stop mentioning, and then you ignore me when I bring them up again. I assume there are reasons. I don't know the specifics. How could I know? Why don't you know?"

Wheeler races through the reasoning. The existence of a war computes. It confirms long-term existing suspicions. It could have been going on for years without her realising it. It makes sense to her that she could be fighting it, winning, even, and not know; managing her own memories or losing them in skirmishes. This certainly won't be the first time she's uncovered it. It makes sense that Adam, naturally gifted with the mental equivalent of a thick layer of blubber, could stand on the edge of the conflict and dimly be able to perceive it. And the Division — so understaffed.

People are disappearing around her.

"And what if—" she begins, and stops dead in the middle of the thought, as if the thought itself was stolen out of her.

"And what if we get back together, and—" she begins again, and this time hard instinct seizes her around the midsection and bodily hauls her back from thinking a thought which, *it* knows, would kill her. She's Wile E. Coyote, she's already run off the edge of a precipice into clear air, and thinking that thought would be like looking down.

She feels SCP-4987 moving around her, abstractly bound to her, a winking speck of glitter in her eye. "Something's wrong."

Adam scratches at his own eye. "Do you see that?"

"How can *you* see that?"

"I have a mild immunity to antimemetic influence," Adam says. He knows it's in his file and he knows Wheeler has read the file, but

apparently it needs to be said again. "I can tell when something is fritzing with my memories. I can resist it. Up to a point. So, Marion, I was hoping to have a relaxed conversation over coffee and get around to this topic organically, but I'm going to have to skip to the end: I have the impression that SCP-4987 is trying to kill me."

"…No," Wheeler says. "That's not its behavior model. It doesn't sustain itself that way, by eating people. It eats *memories*. And it's never done *this*. Not to you, nor me, nor anybody. Not since the very early days. It's *tame*. It does exactly what I tell it to do. Even when I'm waiting, and I'm bored, and I let it eat my short-term, it sits and *waits* to be told to eat."

"Then what is it doing to us?" Adam is getting nervy, and won't let go of his eye. He stands up and backs away. "I would like it if we could figure this out quickly. We don't have a way to put SCP-4987 down."

There's a sound in Wheeler's mind, but not in her ear, like a distant chorus of baying dogs. She stands too, and moves after Adam into the middle of the containment unit.

She says, "It's trying to protect you."

"I— How does wiping your memory of me protect me?"

"I can't explain," Wheeler says. "And I can't explain why I can't explain. I don't fully know myself. There's an ."

"A *what*?"

"You can't be here," she says. "You can't be in my life. You have to leave, or you're going to die."

"I'm not leaving you," Adam says. "Christ, that's why we did it in the end. Got married, I mean. It was scintillatingly obvious to both of us, very early on, that we were forever. But I wanted to get it on the public record. I stood up in front of everybody I respect and I swore to *them* that I would protect you. Forever!"

SCP-4987 is agitated. Wheeler feels it flitting around the room, incoherent, trying to tell her what it needs.

She says, with sudden actinic clarity, "I must have made an identical promise."

Adam doubles over, blinded in both eyes now. Closing his eyes does nothing, covering his eyes does nothing. The gold-white light is strobing for him, moving into violet. He panics. "Help. Help me. I can't see." He reaches out, unsteadily, for Wheeler's hand. She lets him take it and pull her close. The light doesn't fade. He clings to Wheeler for a few moments, and she holds on to him until he realises that SCP-4987 is completely within her control, and this is all intentional.

"You're going to do this?" Adam says. "This is the Foundation mandate, this is what your definition of 'protect' amounts to? You've got no idea what you're about to do to yourself. You don't even know me."

"I think I know," she replies.

"You will feel this for the rest of your life. Every day, you will wake up with a sick cold feeling in your stomach where there used to be a real life. And you'll wonder why."

"I'm going to win this war," Wheeler says to him. "I'll beat the universe. And then I will come and find out why."

Adam holds on to her for another long, long moment. He can hear the baying too, now, and he can even barely perceive what it is, far off behind the hill, that SCP-4987 is frantic about. That distant dot, that fleeting second-hand glimpse of the shape of it, far off, is enough to terrify him.

He has faith. He knows how fast Marion can put the jigsaw pieces back together, work against a universe which makes no sense to her, isolate the truth. He knows she can take the universe. But a sharp misgiving jabs him in the stomach and he can't stop himself saying: "And what if you lose?"

She kisses him. It's a stranger's kiss, there's nothing there Adam recognises. He breaks off, unsettled. It's a whisper now: "What if you lose?"

*

Wheeler exits the containment unit; she slams and deadlocks the door with a single movement. The heavy metallic *crack* makes the whole building shake.

There are people outside. Gauss, Julie Still and a few others, comparing notes. They look appalled.

"Fill in his backstory," she tells them. "He was never married. Relocate him to where I'll never find him, incinerate all the evidence, then report to me for surgical memory erasure. I'll do myself last."

Gauss looks as if he has an objection. She stares him down.

"My husband's dead," she says.

Next: Fresh Hell

Fresh Hell

There's another conglomeration of severed fingers in the last room, coating the room's interior like the innards of an exploded elephant. Parts of the sprawl are feeling their way, like mould, into a medical cabinet and the rest is splayed over a foetal shape on a medical gurney. The mass reacts sharply to the new light as Wheeler opens the door, rearing up and angling parts of itself toward him. Wheeler reels backwards and pulls the door to just in time; there is a heavy, fleshy *thump* as the mass hits the door from the far side. The door holds.

Wheeler trips on his own foot and slumps against the far wall. The shape on the gurney was a coiled-up human. Not a corpse, but a living human with one wide-open eye whose whole body was being slowly consumed and processed into more fingers. They were growing out of his throat. Wheeler didn't see this. He thinks he saw it, but he knows he couldn't have.

And that's it. Wheeler casts around the corridor. Every other door he's tried is blocked or locked. The place is below ground, so no windows. No navigable ventilation.

There are two more gunshots up at the far end of the corridor, ear-splitting in the enclosed space and echoing for many seconds. Hutchinson rounds the corner at a dead run, gun in hand, and reaches him quickly. "Find a way out?" she asks, pointlessly. She can read Wheeler's expression. He's found nothing good.

"This place is infested," Wheeler says. "Every room, all the stairwells… This is absurd."

At the far end of the corridor, the main mass heaves itself around the corner. From this distance, it looks like an ambulatory eight-tonne pile of mouldy mashed potato and fat, wiggling maggots. There are toes in there as well as fingers, and small teeth, and bits of bone. It has twenty bullet holes in it, and blood is flowing from all

of them, but if it has vital organs they must be elsewhere in the building because none of the wounds have slowed it down or otherwise altered its slow, methodical homing behaviour. It smells powerfully and creatively disgusting, like concentrated medical waste.

It lurches forward in intermittent phases, coating the walls and floor with scarlet ooze as it moves. It'll be on them in about half a minute, squashing them against the end of the corridor and then pulling them into the mess to be remade.

"I think we're done," Wheeler quavers. "Thanks for trying."

Hutchinson, for her part, just stands there, gun lowered, watching the thing come. It moves slowly, like a steam roller. It fills the corridor almost to the ceiling.

She has two bullets left and she's considering where to spend them. Shooting the mass itself is like shooting pudding. She'd kill for a grenade. Even a fire axe would be something. She might not be able to stop the thing, but she could at least make herself known with a fire axe. She could make it feel some *regret*.

"There are worse fates, I guess," Wheeler goes on, finding himself unable to stop talking, "than being digitised by that thing, but not all that many."

Hutchinson glances in his direction, apparently paying him direct attention for the first time since they met, sixty crowded minutes ago. She says, "Riser cupboard."

"What?"

She pushes Wheeler aside. There's a white-painted wall behind him. There's a lock in it, and a long vertical seam. She spends a moment choosing the right part of the lock to shoot, and shoots it out. Behind the tall, wide panel which opens is a shallow, dusty, metal-edged space like an elevator shaft with no elevator, allowing filthy pipes and cables to pass vertically between floors. She looks up. There's just enough room to admit a person.

"Can you climb?" she asks Wheeler. Without waiting for a response, she sheds her suit jacket, sticks a flashlight between her teeth and hauls herself up into the darkness. After a brief moment of scuffling, there's another gunshot. The other riser cupboard door.

"No," Wheeler finally manages. "No, I can't climb!" The mass is almost on him. He's transfixed by its motion, its all-too-familiar grasping behaviour.

"I figured," Hutchinson calls down. A hand descends, a human one with the conventional number of fingers. "It's clear up here. Come on, I'm braced. Mind this lip here, it's metal. Come on!"

Wheeler keeps his own jacket on and buttoned; it's the only part of the situation over which he still has firm control. He has to jump to catch hold of Hutchinson's hand, and just as he jumps, the main mass lunges for him, crossing the last few metres in a rush and catching hold of him by one foot.

He sees himself die.

His sweating hand immediately starts to slip out of Hutchinson's. She braces her other arm and hauls him up fifteen or thirty centimetres with an angry grunt, then releases his hand for a split second and reaches down like a flash to take firmer hold of his wrist. She keeps pulling. The mass closes around Wheeler's foot like aggressive, proactive quicksand. He yelps and kicks at it with his other foot until it finally pries his shoe loose. The mass retreats for a second, taking a crucial moment to realise that its prize is not living flesh, but by that time Hutchinson has hauled Wheeler up another half-metre and Wheeler has started pushing himself upwards off the pipework with his feet. The mass lunges again, but falls short, and seems too unintelligent to climb after them. It sloshes around, probing its surroundings, perplexed by the shoe.

Hutchinson hauls Wheeler over the lip into the next corridor. He scrapes his ribs badly and arrives crawling, eyes watering. He doesn't die. He can still see himself dying. He stays on all fours for a significant amount of time, processing what just happened.

"*Fuck!*"

Hutchinson is already standing, and apparently not even significantly exerted. "We need to get to the roof. I might be able to get a signal out from there."

"You're at the gym pretty often?" Wheeler pants, sitting back. "You train for fresh hell like this?"

"Yeah."

"That's great," Wheeler says, "because I play the *violin*. It's not quite as physically demanding. As careers go, I mean. When you said you were a county health inspector, that was an enormous lie, wasn't it?"

Hutchinson ignores the question, out of habit, and waits impassively for the man to cool.

"This is asinine," Wheeler declares. "This is brain damage." His skin crawls, and grotesque visions flood through his brain. Eventually he recovers his breath and gets to his feet. He stands lopsided, so he takes his other shoe off and throws it back down the riser for symmetry.

"We need to get to the roof," Hutchinson says again.

Wheeler blinks a long blink, then focuses on something around the corner, something on the wall which Hutchinson can't see from where she's standing. "Yeah. One second." He goes to it — it's a red panel — and pulls something down. "Here, you were having no luck with the gun. Try this."

It's a fire axe.

*

He stepped on a rusty nail backstage after the show, and came to the emergency room for a tetanus injection. While waiting, he slowly realised that more than half of the people waiting with him were clutching partially or entirely severed fingers. Bandsaw accidents;

hands caught in car doors; hands trapped in door hinges; hands crushed in machinery; every one of them unrelated. There was an epidemic of physical injury, which should have been impossible, and when he tried to bring it up with the medical staff they didn't seem to understand what he was saying.

And then he saw one of the fingers escape. He followed it as it wriggled away down a long corridor to a far corner of the hospital, to an ajar door which nobody in the hospital seemed to be able to perceive except for him, and into a different building where there were no people at all, just hundreds and hundreds of wriggling, exploring, slowly reproducing and lengthening fingers.

He slammed the door and tried and failed to get someone, anyone, staff or patient, to see what he was seeing. He found a payphone and dialled for emergency services and ordered off the menu, asking for emergency industrial-scale pest control or hazardous containment or psychic support or *something*.

And there was a long pause, and he was connected to what was either a very measured, dispassionate human or an impressively articulate robot operator. It told him to wait by the phone; an associate would be with him shortly. Marion Hutchinson arrived in person, slightly less than fifteen minutes later.

He showed her the door. They went a few paces inside, Hutchinson crouching and aiming some kind of flashlight/scanner at the finger worms. Behind them, something reached out and gently pushed the door closed with a *click*. They turned, and saw what it was, and ran.

*

Hutchinson hacks her way through the last of the flesh-clogged stairwell. They're almost at the roof. This part of the distributed infestation doesn't seem to be mobile, although it is freakishly grabby.

Wheeler stands three paces back from her, partly to avoid the backswing but mostly so he doesn't have to watch. It's butchery, and it's grisly, and Hutchinson barely seems perturbed by it; she slices methodically until there are waterfalls of gore coming down the stairs and soaking her shoes and his socks, and she does it with the manner of someone trimming a hedgerow.

Whunch. Krunlch.

Wheeler is shivering, and starting to crash. If he doesn't stay still right in the middle of the stairwell, the remaining fingers tug at his hair and sleeves. In another few minutes it may finally dawn on him that this is really happening. "This is crazy, this is nuts," he says to himself, over and over.

"What was that word you used back there?" Hutchinson asks, suddenly.

"Mmm?"

Whunch. "Don't tune out. When the mass was coming down the hall. Did you say 'digitized'?"

"…Um." Wheeler seems to change gear, and wake up. "Yeah. Uh, but, in the old sense of the word—"

"'Digit' meaning 'finger', so 'digitized' meaning 'turned into fingers'. I just got it." She's smiling, he can tell from the sound of her words. *Chlunk.* "That's great."

"It is?"

"What kind of violin music?"

"Uh. What kind would you like? Tonight's— last night's— Christ, *yesterday*'s concert was Prokofiev's Violin Concerto No. 1. And a few other pieces, of course, but that was the main course for me. That was where I got my teeth in."

Hutchinson stops hacking and turns around. She actually looks him in the eye. "That piece is a nightmare."

"It's a challenge," Wheeler admits, brightly.

"No, I mean it's chaotic. It's unlistenable."

"I can play anything you like," Wheeler states.

Hutchinson appears to spend a moment considering this possibility. "Bach. You can play some Bach?"

"Just get me to a violin."

Hutchinson thinks for a moment longer. She smiles and nods, and goes back to hacking.

*

And they hit the roof, and Hutchinson's radio finally works, and she calls everything in. She speaks in rapid keywords which Wheeler can't quite follow, although he can pick out his own name and "hazmat" and a repeated word which sounds to him like a brand of cassette tape: "Memetix".

It's very nearly dawn. This wing of the hospital is a few storeys shorter than its main body, so rows of bright-lit wards look down over the roof, while the roof looks out over two sprawling car parks and then greenery and roads and a faint, dull red where the Sun is due to come up. Hutchinson quickly ascertains that there is no fire escape from here; the intended fire exit from the roof is the stairwell up which they just came, so they'll have to wait for a helicopter. Or, more likely and less romantically, a long ladder.

"Backup is coming," Hutchinson concludes. "They have to come in from the next city over, so it could be a few hours. They'll have decontamination gear, antibiotics, blankets, tedious debriefing forms, you name it. But most importantly, coffee."

Wheeler makes an inarticulate sound, the sound of one who could use the coffee, and after that, a drink. "God, I have another concert

today," he says. He sits on the thick perimeter wall, rubs his eyes, rubs his sore feet, and begins to shut down.

"You'll be there," Hutchinson says. "The nasty part is over. You did well for a civilian. I've seen far worse."

"Worse than this?"

Hutchinson says nothing.

"I'm sorry." Wheeler opens his eyes again. He gestures at the mayhem from which they just escaped, the fire door and everything it leads to. It's all still down there. "You've seen worse than *this*?"

Hutchinson, again, says nothing.

"What is this? What happened here?"

At first Hutchinson doesn't answer this either. She walks away across the roof and spends an entire minute staring at the forthcoming Sun.

And then, surprising Wheeler and slightly surprising even herself, she walks back to him and says:

"SCP-4051, which is the number we just assigned to this infestation, has an intrinsic property which makes it nearly impossible for sapient organisms to perceive it. It's a form of camouflage. It's not invisible, it's a mental blocking effect. Information about it goes nowhere, it gets suppressed. People walk past this building every day of the week. They don't see what's blocking the windows. They walk past that door and don't realise it's standing open. It could have been here for decades. The researchers will get the whole story eventually."

Wheeler finds in this explanation something he halfway understands. "So… living fnords?"

And this actually slows Hutchinson down for a second. She gets that reference. She read those books when she was younger, years ago, before joining the Foundation. But she's *never* made the connection between fnords and the work she does. For as long as she's been

working there, she hasn't even thought about it. The irony is intense enough to burn.

"Yeah," she says.

"Except that you can see them," Wheeler says.

"I have specialist training," Hutchinson says, declining to mention her drug regimen.

"And I, also, can see them."

"You seem to have a mild natural immunity to memory-clouding phenomena," Hutchinson explains. "It's rare, but it happens. At a hospital this busy, someone like you was bound to stumble into this place sooner or later." *And escape alive,* she privately adds. "But the point is… this infestation, SCP-4051, is a snowflake. I don't mean that it's special and unique. I mean: it's part of a *blizzard*.

"I work for an independent scientific research institution with a specialist focus on the containment of hazardous anomalous phenomena. We have an international mandate and formidable resources and… unimaginable responsibilities. We… we watch the blizzard. And we guard the little fire. We're called the Foundation."

Wheeler's full attention is on her now. He feels tense and exposed here, vulnerable to extraordinary natural forces from which by rights he should be fleeing. But he's also fascinated. Hutchinson has a faintly ethereal attitude to her. It's as if she's not standing on the same planet as everybody else.

"So you're not FBI," he says. "Either, I mean. That was my other guess."

Hutchinson wrinkles her nose. "I hate that show."

"I don't believe I mentioned a show," Wheeler says mischievously.

"They do *everything* wrong," Hutchinson says. A nerve has been touched. She shuffles irately. "They don't have enough people; they don't trust each other. They don't spend nearly enough time on paperwork. Paperwork saves lives. But most of all? I hate the will-

they-or-won't-they. For what, five years? It's forced, it's farcical." She glares at Wheeler. "It doesn't take that long to know. You will or you won't. And then you do."

Wheeler reads her expression carefully. "You do?"

"Yeah," Hutchinson says, smiling again. "Yeah, I think you do."

A distant rapid thudding noise slowly becomes apparent. Hutchinson sees the source of the sound first and points. "Backup's here. And it looks like we rated a helicopter after all."

In the Trenches with the Dead

If you can `read this`, you are already dead.

2.10 — Five Dogmas of Defense: The Identity Warrior must depend on five key elements of identity for defense in IWT, as well as for long-term survival. We call these five elements "dogmas" because you *must* believe them if you are going to survive.
2.10.1 — NAMES: Use the mnemonic "NAMES" to remember your five dogmas: **N**arrative, **A**nchor, **M**ission, **E**motion and **S**ociety.

— *Identity Warfare Training Field Manual-01: Basic Techniques*

Ω—Ω

Item #: `SCP-3125` (`Mobile Task Force Omega-Zero` Iteration)

Object Class: Keter

Special Containment Procedures: The ongoing incursion by SCP-3125 is to be monitored, and opposed by Mobile Task Force Omega-Zero ("Ará Orún") wherever possible. Foundation antimemetics researchers are to be protected while alive, and in the event of their deaths, their nascent info-streams are to be defended against SCP-3125 predation in order to facilitate MTF ω-0 recruitment. Survivors are to be infected with a Type X targeted retro-grade amnestic antimeme and all SCP-3125 information is to be erased.

The SCP-3125 containment unit at Site-41, designed by Dr. Bart Hughes, is theorized to be inverted containment and represents a memetically-insulated space in which informational construct entities cannot enter; this includes both SCP-3125 and MTF ω-0 operatives.

A senior Antimemetics Division staff member must visit SCP-3125 every six weeks (42 days). During this visit, an MTF ω-0 Revenant Team is to manifest in the SCP-3125 containment antechamber and

standby to provide support and defense, if needed, to the staff member upon exit.

Description: SCP-3125 is an invasive memetic ecology or possibly a single large self-organized informational construct, originating in an informational system or alien noosphere with much higher complexity than that of humanity. As such these incursions are naturally adept at Identity Warfare, and are to be considered extremely dangerous.

This system is able to detect and perceive unsecured info-streams that include information about itself[1]. Whenever (and wherever) this information is detected an incursion occurs, resulting in a manifestation of anti-memetically cloaked arachnoid organisms supported by sustained infolaser assault. This incursion attacks any person who hosts information pertaining to SCP-3125, as well as individuals with close association (based on similarity of memeome), killing them and erasing them from the noosphere.

The result of this is that of the over 400 groups once known to MTF ω-0 that were engaged in antimemetic research, only two remain: the Foundation's Antimemetics and Counterconceptual Divisions. The other groups were not only eliminated, but forgotten and unremarked; their very existence is buried under sophisticated feedback-reinforced antimemetic structures.

To date, 36 incursions have been successfully defeated by MTF ω-0 Revenant teams, but at significant casualties, resulting in the unrecoverable zeroing of 13 operatives, and significant permanent identity damage to 17 more. Once a researcher is targeted, these attacks will continue until they either are killed, or suffer retrograde amnesia such that they no longer possess relevant information.

In the event that this is the precursor to an attack, humanity's defenses are now largely eliminated. Counterconceptual Division's **`superior antimemetic defenses`** appear to have cloaked it from SCP-3125, but at the cost of their own ignorance. They appear to have deliberately rendered themselves incapable of conceptualizing SCP-3125, as a countermeasure, making them unable to mount a response. Antimemetics Division is theorized to be working on a containment strategy within the SCP-3125

containment chamber, but as a result the Division is under constant and undetected assault. Over 3500 Division personnel have been killed since 2012, and only 27% have retained coherent enough info-streams for successful recruitment to MTF ω-0.

Footnotes
1. Conventional cryptography and most Foundation memetic and antimemetic techniques are all inadequate. IWT may be effective, and MTF ω-0 currently appears to be either successfully camouflaged from this detection or to be not of interest to it.

Ω—Ω

2.10.1.1 — Narrative: We are only the stories we tell about ourselves. Identity Warriors must have a clear and self-consistent narrative of self. All attacks against your identity fundamentally target this narrative, and either attempt to edit it or cause it to be forgotten. Your narrative is **you**, if you lose control of it, then **you** are lost.
2.10.1.1-A — CIB: You will maintain a Core Identity Biography (CIB) according to the standards given in Section 3 at all times. This document is subject to inspection by your superiors.

— *Identity Warfare Training Field Manual-01: Basic Techniques*

Manifestation Log — Operation Cold City

Team: Revenant-3

Roster: Lyn Marness (Leader/Field Memeticist), Santosh Desai (Identity Defense), Zoe Smith (Identity Offense), Riley Cooper (Quick-Space Manipulation)

Briefing: Today at 1030 Director Wheeler is scheduled for her visit to the SCP-3125 chamber. I don't need to remind you of the significant threat that SCP-3125 represents and that our primary hope in mounting an effective defense is whatever Director Wheeler has been doing in that chamber.

Revenant-3, you are directed to manifest at Site-41 near the SCP-3125 containment airlock, and await the return of Director

Wheeler. You are to render whatever aid she appears to need, and defend against any assault by SCP-3125 entities.

Your manifestation, code-named "Operation Cold City", has been inserted into the relevant systems and is standing by for activation.

Remember: We are the Saints who guard,

— Amos Sanchez, Operations Director, MTF ω-0

BEGIN MANIFESTATION LOG

<manifesting: Marness L; Desai S; Smith Z; Cooper R>

Marness: Alright ghosties, we are logged in. Let's get video up.

Video Feed shows the SCP-3125 containment antechamber. Researcher Paul Kim is sitting at a terminal. The airlock occupation indicator is lit.

Marness: Linebacker, defensive status?

Desai: Situation is nominal. There's still that *pressure* that's been in Site-41 for at least a year, but other than that we are secure.

Marness: Roger that. Stay alert, Saints, and let's hope Marion comes out of there with something this time.

Ω—Ω

2.10.1.2 — Anchor Your anchors are those among the quick who remember you. Strong anchors knew you well, grieved for your loss, and have taken mnestics at some point in their careers. Initially you'll need your anchor to survive but you can, and will, learn to do without. A strong anchor can be a powerful asset to the Identity Warrior. You can learn to use your anchor to sustain your narrative, learn to sense your anchor's location and emotional state, and even manifest at your anchor's location.
2.10.1.2-A — CS Rating: By utilizing exercises in Section 3 you will be able to quantify the strength of your anchors. This is the CS (Chain Strength) scale. To qualify for field operations, you'll need at least one anchor with a CS of 4.5 or higher.

— Identity Warfare Training Field Manual-01: Basic Techniques

Smith: Hey, Riley, did you know our boy Santosh has the strongest recorded anchor in the Task Force? CS 7.8.

Cooper: Really? I didn't even know that was possible, that's a logarithmic scale, right? Who's your anchor Santosh?

Desai: My dad. I really don't like talking about it.

Marness: No secrets between the dead, son.

Desai: Yeah, yeah … okay. I've been dead for nearly a decade now. He keeps sending me **`emails`**, blames himself and can't move on, deliberately makes sure he is mnestic qualified so he never forgets a thing. It sucks for him, it's uncomfortable for me, and a significant asset for Omega Zulu.

Cooper: Jesus, that sucks.

Smith: Uh, what's *he* looking at.

Smith: We've got a hostile vector here. Boss, you want to Casper this?

Marness: Desai and Cooper, keep an eye on Kim here, he's compromised. Yeah, this is definitely 3125 stuff, like we fought in '76. Injecting countermeme.

Marness: C'mon Paul, think!

On the video feed, the airlock starts to cycle. Kim gets up, startled, and goes to the door. It cycles open. Marion Wheeler is lying on the bottom of the chamber.

Desai: Do you feel that? She's under an infolaser assault. I'm blocking it, but I don't know for how long.

Marness: Cooper, start composing a message for Wheeler, try to warn her.

Cooper: On it.

On the video feed, Wheeler is still huddled at the bottom of the airlock. Kim is talking to her. He unfolds a pocket-knife and leans down towards Wheeler.

Smith: I'm dethreading him. Or whatever it is that's puppeting him. … His entire memeome has been overwritten, and what's in there now is tightly bound, I've never seen anything like this.

Desai: It's trying to overwrite her too. I'm shielding, for now.

Wheeler and Kim are struggling, Wheeler parries a thrust and kicks Kim hard. He flies through and is flung against the wall.

Cooper: Fuck you!

Blood streams out of Kim's nose and flows into words on the wall behind him, "Wheeler, Site-41 under siege. Compromised". Wheeler surges up, and glances at the message. She then looks directly into the camera and clearly enunciates "I'm okay. I remember the plan", then sprints out of the containment chamber.

Wheeler sprints down the corridor, heading to the pharmacy. Around her Site-41 begins to suffer structural failure. A section of ceiling tile collapses behind her and a dog-sized arachnoid organism drops out, and begins to skitter after Wheeler. Suddenly it staggers and blunders into the wall. Behind it another spider drops out of the ceiling.

Smith: *These* things. All right, I've got the first one's threads. Got it pretty confused about what it is right now.

The second spider spontaneously crumples into to a ball and stops moving.

Cooper: Guh. **`I don't like spiders.`**

A third one drops down and slowly staggers after Wheeler.

Marness: Got this one. They're fighting back.

Cooper: Something bit me. Hang on. I am Riley Cooper. I broke my brother's tooth with a basketball when I was 12. I'm Riley Cooper.

Good to go.

Desai: Yeah, they're feeling for your threads. I'm on it.

The two remaining spiders fold suddenly in on themselves and are crushed into balls. A dozen more spiders fall from the ceiling in quick succession followed by a shower of debris from the weakened floor above.

Cooper: Got 'em all.

Desai: Whoa, that's some hardcore poltergeist stuff, rookie.

Cooper: Yeah, I'm REALLY pissed off.

The video feed switches rapidly and Revenant-3 catches up with Wheeler as she reaches the pharmacy. Writhing tendrils of dark static are slowly growing in from the edges of the frame.

Desai: The informational environment is becoming corrosive to coherent data. We are going to lose the cameras. I'll hold them as long as I can.

As Wheeler enters the pharmacy, a woman lurking behind the door lunges for her with an injector, mouthing something incoherent. Wheeler quickly backpedals and parries the arm away from her neck.

Cooper: NO!

A heavy medical cabinet shakes loose from its bolts and hurls across the room and into the pharmacist's skull, shattering it and grinding into the floor. Wheeler falls backwards and lands hard. Then glances at the remains of the pharmacist with a visible shudder and pulls herself up, moving into the most secure part of the vault.

Marness: She's going to need to need three factor identification to get what she needs, if she's doing what I think she's doing.

Smith: This thing is chewing up information all over, it's definitely playing havoc with the security systems. I'm not sure the scanner

even can recognize bio-metrics anymore.

Marness: Good thing my team was the one that designed these systems in the first place… and, I'm in. Marion's my anchor, these systems can't forget her now, so long as she can't forget me.

Desai: No promises there, boss.

Marness: With what's in there, she won't live to forget anything ever again.

Ω—Ω

Wheeler moves past catatonic personnel laying in fetal curls among the dead and dying. On other feeds living personnel are mouthing incomprehensible guttural chants as they carve strange glyphs into themselves and each other. Wheeler is following arrows drawn on the walls in blood, a path that avoids contact with the infected.

Smith: And then a right towards block C.

Cooper: Roger that.

Smith: Shit! Collapse. There goes Area 11. It's completely impassable.

Desai: No way for her to get the armory now.

Marness: We can work with this. Coop, tear that wall open to the North. She can cut through there to the elevators.

Marness: Come to think of it, there's probably something in there she can use.

As Wheeler approaches the intersection, the opposite wall peels open revealing an unlit containment vault. Rows of standard containment lockers loom silently in the darkness.

Marness: Zoe, she'll need light.

Smith: Yes, she does. **`I'll need music`**:

Motes of dust floating in the new entrance are visibly gathering together and coalescing. After a few seconds a glowing ectoplasmic curve takes form, then another, and then dozens. They resolve into a recognizable pattern, a swarm of softly glowing spectral moths that swirl around Wheeler as she steps over the shredded steel wall into the vault.

Desai: No surveillance in there. We're blind. That vault isn't on the plans either? What is it doing there?

Marness: Safe-Class containment inherited from the Unthinkables, long lost and forgotten by everyone. Well, everyone except me.

Marness: Cooper, can you reach in there?

Cooper: Probably, a little, yeah.

Marness: Three rows in, second locker from the right. Combination is 23-19-32. Only one lock, those were simpler times.

Cooper: Got it! What's in there?

Marness: We confiscated it from High-Energy when it turned out their alien "disintegrator" was actually just turning targets into antimemetic worms that the rest of the Foundation couldn't see. Then we made sure they forgot they ever had a SCP-7381.

A section of wall in Area 09 suddenly flashes into a shower of tiny white worms and Wheeler steps through the hole. Over a quarter of the image is now obscured by the roiling tentacles of static at any time.

Marness: Right on schedule.

Desai: Looks like they are getting coherent. There's four, no, six, massing near the elevators and they've stopped cutting on each other. They're just waiting.

Smith: No getting around them. She's going to have to go through.

Smith: Ugh, it's getting worse than before. It's like a hand has reached into them and is now wearing the thinnest notion of people

as finger puppets. I'm trying to dethread them. All of this connects, but none of it makes sense. There's no semantic content … it's like it's all just structure … but there's no pattern … no meaning.

Cooper: Fuck 'em. Still made of meat.

The feed switches to a view of the the front of the elevators barely visible behind the static. One of the six people waiting bursts into flames. He runs screaming into the woman in front of him who also ignites. One by one, three more collapse from internal bleeding and organ failure. When Wheeler appears around the corner all but one are down. She aims the red two pronged mass of pipes at the remaining man, converting a quarter of his body mass into worms, then ducks into the elevator

The interior of the elevator is barely visible behind the static. An old corpse slumps under the words "Grey is here", scrawled on the wall. Wheeler is visible briefly speaking apparently to herself. The elevator begins to descend.

Desai: Boss … it's getting a lot worse. I'm not…

Smith: I remember I took some personal time when I got the diagnosis. Richards knew, of course, but I didn't tell anybody else in **`Eta-11`** yet, I couldn't even tell Helen. I uh, I think that I went to Portland and met with Charlie. I told him over coffee, we were crying, but I don't understand. Why him? Didn't we need to stop him? I don't remember grgkkjkldsfkj

Smith: Oh. I think I can hear the signal now.

Smith: Hey Santosh, look at this thread that winds through your whole self worth, through all your relationships, all throughout your sense of duty and back again. Some pathetic little childhood trauma, that you've painfully nursed through life and death. Didn't your mother ever tell you not to pick at your boo-boos? It would be so easy to loop it this around until the feedback just tears you wide open.

Desai: **`Dad! Dad! You remember that placement test? I got a 95 on it!`**

Cooper: What the hell, Zoe?

Marness: Damnit Smith, you are an MTF Omega-Zero Operative. Even death could not release you from duty and you sure as hell aren't relieved now.

Smith: Zoe Smith died a long time ago, I am just a biography who once played at being the woman it described. You are way too old to still be playing pretend, Lyn, grow-up.

Desai: Negative, just try to get your people out of here. I'm going to activate the failsafe before he can finish killing us all.

Smith: Santosh is coming apart. This shade will fall to the same flaws that destroyed the man and then we'll be left defenseless. Won't that be awesome?

Marness: Specialist Smith: reset CIB to protected state: *three-heirophant, two-moon, one-magician, zero-reset-zero.*

Smith: Lyn, what part of "higher complexity memetic ecology" don't you get? The first thing it did was lock all your crude backdoors behind it.

Desai: I died letting you think I hated you. How could I do that?

Smith: See his whole sad meaningless life spilling out of this one tiny hole. Watch out, don't get any protracted adolescence on you! :p

Cooper: Injecting pacificati—urk.

Smith: Nice try Riley, but you should leave editing to the pros. Have a flashback while I deal with the real threats.

Cooper: It's smiling at me. Why is it smiling at me?

Desai: I… died… I died… I died for a reason. For duty. I had, no, I *have* a duty. I am Santosh Desai, Keter Containment Specia… no, Identity Defense Specialist, Mobile Task Force Omega-Zero and I will not falter, not even in death. … Threads go both ways, Smith.

Smith: What? You can't … I think when I was sick I tried to make up songs to the beat of the hospital machines. Why can't I remember the words?

Marness: Welcome back Desai, good job. How are you holding up?

Desai: More-or-less together now, sir. I'm not coming apart anymore, anyway. I don't know if I can survive another dethreading like that. What can we do for Smith?

Marness: Nothing, son, Zoe's gone. Just take Cooper and get the hell out of here.

Cooper: No way. No. NOBODY IS LEFT BEHIND. NOT EVER AGAIN.

Smith 5^5: I can see you.

Desai: Sir?

Marness: It's over, son. Marion's got the plan, but she's not coming out of here alive, and I am going to stay to see her end this. You know how it is, you made that call yourself once.

Cooper: YOU NEED ME HERE!

Marness: Our fight's over, Riley, now it's all up to Bart Hughes and Marion Wheeler, one way or the other. If this fails, it's going to be a tough fight up there, it's going to be a resistance, they'll need you in it. I need to stick with my anchor. Santosh, go to yours.

Desai: Understood. Riley, listen to me, we are going to snap back to my Dad. You heard your orders.

Cooper: What? But … yeah okay.

Marness: Fight another day, Saints.

<demanifesting: Desai S; Cooper R>

Marness: Marion's got you now, you spidery son of a bitch.

5^5: No, no she doesn't.

Marness: So you communicate after all.

5^5: Of course I do

Marness: You really shouldn't be able to. You are a fifth dimensional pile of rotten ideas. An incomprehensibly complex set of symbols devoid of meaning. Coherent dialog is pretty much the opposite of what you are made of. Yet, you are apparently engaging in it. What does that tell us? Is contamination both ways? Swallowed something too coherent once, I think. You've got a little human-shaped lump inside you now and you can't digest it. It's a memeome, an adaptable system of aggressively self-organizing information. It's spreading, simplifying and ordering wherever there is contact, and when you try to stop it it just spreads faster, doesn't it?

5^5: You know, I almost feel sorry for you, Lyn? You're consistently, eternally too late… I killed you twice, and you keep turning up at here at the end anyway. All those lost battles, you *almost* won, three entire lost wars that you managed to come up with something that just might have worked if you only had more time, and then I get to watch you have to make yourself forget about it and start all over again. The eternal loser. You don't deserve that kind of luck. Nobody does.

Marness: Someone has to try. We only needed to get it right once.

5^5: I killed your whole team. I did it twice! I ate your life, left you to rot, and then eventually I killed you anyway. I'll hunt your new team down and I'm going to eat them, bring them up here with me, make them a part of the whole. After you watch, I'll just erase you, there's nothing in you that I need. You are out of last chances, old man! The war is over! Finally! All that's left is Marion, a division of one! Dying from mnestic overdose, two hundred metres underground, cared for by no one known to exist to no one. No one except a handful of meaningless leftovers soon to be part of an immortal, unkillable idea.

The elevator stops, and the feed switches to an airlock. This camera

is better shielded and the picture clears. Wheeler opens the door and steps into the airlock.

Marness: Even if this doesn't kill you, I know we've hurt you.

(Audio feed) Wheeler: *Ideas can be killed.*

5^5: How?

Wheeler: *With better ideas.*

Marness: It goes both ways. We've infected you, too.

The airlock's complex outer door folds closed.

<signal lost>

Ω—Ω

TO: ALL HANDS
From: Director Sanchez
Subject: Loss of Site-41

Saints,

I regret to inform you that Site-41 was erased by an Antimemetic device this morning, taking with it the rest of Antimemetics Division, as well as MTF ω-0 agents Lyn Marness and Zoe Smith. No information can survive there now. All knowledge of Antimemetics Division and its people is gone from the quick, only we, the dead, remember them.

For many of you this means you've lost anchors. This is regrettable, but does not have to be catastrophic. Remember, without anchors you must rely even more upon the remaining four Dogmas of Defense, but they *will* sustain you.

Furthermore we are now very clearly at war, and it is just as clear that we are certainly losing it. SCP-3125 was never contained at Site-41, but rather the containment chamber may have been the only place it isn't, designed to develop a plan to combat the invasion without detection. We have no idea if there ever was such a plan,

and currently have no way to retrieve it, if there was.

It's unclear how long we have before it targets us directly, but recent developments indicate that it is capable of doing so. All MTF ω-0 operatives should exercise extreme caution, and be prepared to defend yourselves.

It is now clear that Dr. Bart Hughes was aware of the threat, before he disappeared, long before the rest of us knew. If he had anticipated this, it's possible Dr. Hughes had a plan to win this war.

Hughes' whereabouts are unknown among the quick, nor is he among us. It is imperative that we find him, wherever he is, alive or dead.

Remember: We are the saints who guard,
— Amos Sanchez, Operations Director, MTF ω-0

« **SCP-2111** | In the Trenches with the Dead| **A Thin Dangerous Line**»

A Thin Dangerous Line

This is a thin dangerous line. To die without gaining one's aim is a dog's death and fanaticism. But there is no shame in this. This is the substance of the Way of the Samurai.
— Yamamoto Tsunetomo, *Hagakure*

If you can `read this`, you are already dead.

2.10.1.3 — Mission: Intuitive informational entities are frequently sustained only by their singular dedication to personal directives that, left unfinished in life, are impossible to complete in death. The Identity Warrior draws strength from a more sophisticated version of the same idea: dedication to the core missions of Mobile Task Force Omega-Zero and of the Foundation. So long as these objectives remain relevant, the world still has need of the Identity Warrior, and the dedicated Identity Warrior remains bound to the world.

— *Identity Warfare Training Field Manual-01: Basic Techniques*

Manifestation Log — Operation Fisher King

Teams: Wraiths Four, Seven and Nine

Roster:

- Wraith-4: **`MacLaughlin, Andrew (Field Memeticist); Vasilev, Pyotr (Quick-Space Manipulation Specialist)`**
- Wraith-7: **`Desai, Santosh (Identity Defense Specialist)`**; **`Cooper, Riley (Quick-Space Manipulation Specialist)`**
- Wraith-9: **`Barnes, Samuel (Identity`**

Offense Specialist); Barnes, Tanya (Identity Defense Specialist)

Briefing:
Foundation Antimemetics Division researcher and containment architect Dr. Bartholomew Hughes went missing in late 2008. Officially he was reported dead, of unknown anomalous causes. Research into the death of Hughes was frustrated by the "contagious murder" phenomenon, in which personnel who were close to understanding what happened to Hughes would also die or go missing. We now recognize this as typical of **SCP-3125** attacks on unsecured living memeomes that contained information about itself.

While we can count among us 47 saints who died as a result of the contagious murder of Bart Hughes, in all cases they lost key information related to their recent research to dethreading damage incurred during their transition.

Information regarding Hughes' activities in the period leading up to his disappearance has been nearly entirely expunged from the Foundation with a level of operational secrecy exceeding all known Thaumiel Class projects. Saints who believe they had predeceased contact with him during that period were apparently exposed to extremely effective memetic editing techniques, and even in death are unable to recall many specifics. During that time Hughes lived and worked entirely in memetic isolation chambers and therefore went unobserved by **MTF ω-0**.

Additionally, significant Foundation resources cannot be accounted for during this period, and even the Level 4 black accountants that report directly to O5 Command appear to be selectively unaware of these discrepancies.

Due to intelligence gathered during Operation Cold City, we have reason to believe that Hughes had developed a plan to oppose the incursion into our noosphere, and that

Director Wheeler had learned this in the Site-41 Vegas Room prior to her death and the loss of Site-41.

Composite intelligence from what sources we do have suggests the following:

- Hughes may be dead, *or* he may be in hiding.
- If he is dead, *he is not among us*.
- If hiding, he has successfully hidden himself from us, which means he was able to evade SCP-3125 as well.
- Hughes was aware of SCP-3125 and had constructed the Site-41 Vegas Room in order to safely brief others on what he knew.
- Our Specter teams' best theoretical reconstructions of what Hughes may have been working on would require a large, multi-year, extremely expensive project.
- Hughes' disappearance may be a sign that he was moving from a theoretical stage into the construction of a prototype.
- Personnel who went missing while looking for Hughes may have found him and are currently assisting this project.

Director Wheeler died believing that Hughes had left something for her to use, something that would win this war.

Therefore it has become imperative that Task Force Omega-Zero ("Ará Orún") ascertain the status of Dr. Hughes, determine if he is quick or dead, and attempt to locate him or failing that, his research. To this end, Wraith Teams Four, Seven and Nine are hereby directed to conduct the search for Hughes. Report directly to Manes-1 for this operation.

You have broad discretion to carry out this directive as you see fit, and are expected to thoroughly investigate any avenues you deem appropriate to the fullest extent possible. In the event communication with command is

lost due to enemy action you are to continue the search. If you do succeed in your mission, you are to render Hughes any and all support within your capacity while awaiting further instruction.

Team leaders are to coordinate and designate initial target sites. Your manifestation, code named "Operation Fisher King" is prepped and awaiting insertion, on your orders.

Remember: We are the saints who guard,
— Amos Sanchez, Operations Director, MTF ω-0

Ω—Ω

A portion of each floor of the futurist-organic-style cabin spiraled out over open water. On the spacious covered third story deck, Sarah Hughes, **Mobile Task Force Tau-5 ("Samsara")** commander, sipped her coffee. She looked out through the wire screen onto **the pond**. There, Chen instructed Onru and Munru on how to fish from a canoe, all three of them laughing in the sun. All the way from the ground floor kitchen she could smell some delicious Kurdish dish that Ghazi was teaching to Irantu. Nanku was sitting on a couch a couple of meters away. The Specialist concentrated intensely as she painted a watercolor duck. Hughes wondered, not for the first time, if this was really any different from having a family.

"Captain Hughes?" asked Nanku, having stood up, suddenly alert.

"Yes, Specialist?"

"Someone is coming."

"Explain" ordered Hughes as they took the stairs to the second floor.

"I believe it is an extrasensory perception, legacy of **my cell line**. I feel someone searching nearby, and whenever their awareness touches mine I know. There is a mind gazing at us, a mind without body."

"What is it searching for?"

"I think, it is for *you*, ma'am."

The stairs let out into a landing with a large bay window overlooking the water, framed by the white ultra-toughened alloy walls. Opposite the window, doors led to the three bedrooms and to the bath. Captain Hughes knocked on one of the doors and opened it. "Campos, get your people up and standby for action. I want weapons squad on overwatch on the upper deck as soon as possible."

Sergeant Juan Campos grunted assent. He switched on his bunk lamp and swung his legs onto the floor as she closed the door.

On the ground floor, the spacious living area was empty. Nanku grabbed her massive battle rifle from the weapons rack. Sergeant Irantu stalked out of the kitchen, calm but poised, arms in a guard position and ready for a fight. Right behind him came Sergeant Nazgul Ghazi, who was on a handheld radio and getting reports from the duty watch stations.

Ω—Ω

Specialist Aaron Quinn was on road guard duty watching a car approach that had no business being there. It was a black Ford Explorer, with tinted windows, and it looked like a rental. Quinn flagged it down, and it rolled up to a stop, the window rolled down and he looked in at four people. A young man and woman sat in the back, mid-20s, and an older pair up front, probably in their 50s, all of them white and wearing conservative Sunday church clothes. The woman in the passenger seat smelled of cheap perfume, and the car as a whole smelled like incense.

"Ma'am, this is a restricted area, I am going to have to ask you to return to the guardhouse the way you came."

"Now honey, we don't need to do that, we are exactly where we are supposed to be be."

"Appointed," said the others in unison.

"And you are going to let us slide right on, brother. We bring a message you are to hear," and then she told him.

Ω—Ω

"Report," ordered Hughes.

"Ma'am, we can… sense… an entity is now present," answered by Irantu as he cocked his head to the side, listening for something.

Nanku shook her head. "*Two* entities."

"Are they hostile?"

"No ma'am, I don't think so," Irantu said as Nanku shook her head again, "They seem to be… trapped?"

There was a loud creaking from the walls. "Not surprising, Sergeant," said Hughes, "my brother designed this house."

Ω—Ω

Manifestation Log: Operation Fisher King (Wraith Team Seven):

> **Cooper:** No use, I can't shift or break any of it. This place is locked down tight.
>
> **Desai:** And I still can't connect to my anchor.
>
> **Cooper:** Don't look at me, my best CS is 4.52.
>
> **Desai:** Yeah, let's take a break and then maybe we can work together and crack a window or something.
>
> **Cooper:** I'm fairly sure that I could throw a car, and we are struggling to maybe crack a window. This is one hell of a cage.
>
> **Desai:** Well Hughes was *the* guy for containment architecture for informational anomalies.

Cooper: Yeah…

Cooper: That's a sobering thought. We *are* just a couple of informational anomalies now. Santosh, do you ever wonder if you are really Santosh Desai? Or are you just a construct generated from your Dad's memory that filled the void in the noosphere left when you… he… whatever… nuked yourself?

Desai: Ah yes, the copy question. You know, sooner or later every saint asks this.

Cooper: And?

Desai: Well, I definitely remember stuff that only I knew.

Cooper: You *think* you do anyway, you know as well as I do that expertly constructed memories are indistinguishable from the real thing.

Desai: Ouch. That's something I didn't want to think about.

<manifesting: Irantu>

Cooper: Whoa!

Irantu: Who goes there?

Desai: I feel like I should ask you the same thing. I'm Saint Santosh Desai, Mobile Task Force Omega-Zero ("Ará Orún"), and this is Saint Riley Cooper. How did you get in here?

Irantu: I am Sgt. Irantu of Mobile Task Tau-5 ("Samsara"). This iteration is a neural clone of my most recent backup scan, running in simulation mode.

Desai: Normally you need to be, well, dead to even see this manifestation.

Irantu: I have been dead 47 times. Perhaps that is

enough?

Desai: Yeah, I guess you have at that. We are here are on a mission.

Irantu: Can I assist you?

Desai: What do you think, Riley?

Cooper: It's my expert opinion that we are stuck. We might as well tell him why we are here and see if he can help.

Desai: Agreed, he *is* level three and we aren't getting anywhere otherwise. Sgt. Irantu, I am reading you into the following codenames: SCP-2111, READ THIS, and Operation FISHER KING. Do you acknowledge that you will not share the information you are about to receive with any unauthorized persons, and that you are aware of the penalties for mishandling classified intelligence?

Irantu: Of course.

Desai: Allright, the short version is Cooper and I are ghosts. We died in the line of duty, but never stopped working for the Foundation.

Desai: Our mission is to find Dr. Bart Hughes. Hughes went missing years ago, and all the information about that was so heavily expunged that even we don't have access to it. If Hughes *had* died we would expect him to be entangled with your CO, his sister, in a way that we could track. If alive, we were hoping she knows something and we have ways of finding that out too. Except we got trapped in this house, which is like a a Farraday cage for free memes like us. Can you help us?

Irantu: Yes, I can, once I reintegrate with my current self-stream.

Desai: Thank you, Sergeant.

Irantu: Cooper, there is no difference.

Cooper: Huh?

Irantu: You wonder if you are a copy or Riley Cooper. There is no difference. I am a copy. I am Irantu. Identity and authenticity are not equivalents.

Cooper: Huh. … I think that helps. Thanks!

<demanifesting: Irantu>

Ω—Ω

On the ground floor, Corporal Zabek disconnected the feed from Irantu's neural shunt. The Sergeant regained consciousness, stood, and quickly opened a window.

"Report" ordered Hughes, "Wait, belay that, there's a vehicle coming."

Outside, the Explorer rolled up the dirt road. Staff Sergeant Arthur Chen, Corporal Munro and Specialist Onru beached the canoe.

"Ma'am," Sergeant Ghazi said, as she readied her carbine, "My road guards just tried to send me something that the coghaz filters killed."

"Understood Sergeant. Order the rest of the watch to keep their distance and report to MTF command if they think we are compromised."

"Roger that."

"Irantu, no time for a prepared defense. Rally your squad, and assault through on my signal."

"Yes, ma'am."

The SUV rolled to a stop in front of the cabin and the passengers got out.

The older woman looked up the walk. Hughes stood behind the

partially open airlock door with her sidearm ready and concealed.

"Good morning, honey," the woman said. She smiled broadly and squinted into the light.

"Have you hea__".

Hughes shot her.

Samsara squad's assault was swift and violent. The two other passengers were down almost as a quickly as the woman was. The driver managed to grab the machine pistol from under his seat, but didn't make it any further.

Under cover from the cabin, the four Samsara troopers duck walked through the killing ground. Nanku and Munru sliced the pie from opposite ends of the vehicle, and around the far side.

"Clear!"

"Clear!"

"Wait," said Onru, "There's still something here."

Smoke swiftly spiraled up from the open mouths of the corpses. It formed a cloud of free memes so dense that the three dimensional shadow of the fifth dimensional structure was visible to the naked eye. The cloud hovered for a moment and then descended on the four Samsara troopers.

In the membrane between the dimensions, where information interacts — as the Samsara troopers battled to retain their identity — the tendrils of soul-smoke were being ensnared by Cooper and Desai's outstretched threads. Within the saints' memeomes was information about their enemy and they launched their attack across the bridges formed where memes found their counterparts. Driven by their undying purpose, and armed with the Foundation's extensive documentation of this particular threat, the two saints began to methodically erase the alien information from existence.

The machine gun crew on the upper deck fired a burst of spell-eater rounds into the cloud. The anti-supernatural bullets passed through

harmlessly and peppered the car with holes. Then the cloud shot tendrils out, racing with sudden speed towards the house. These stopped flat as though they hit an invisible wall inches from their targets. The smoke hung there for a beat and then began to ooze through the invisible barrier as though by osmosis. Hughes slammed the door shut as she watched the smoke pour mercilessly into the mouths and eyes of the the stunned Samsara troopers, still surrounding the SUV.

Meanwhile, in the noosphere, the invader battled Wraith-7, its complex fractal redundancies allowing it to continue to fight on despite suffering significant damage. As it lost entire chains of intricately structured nonsense, it reflexively attempted to launch counterattacks from the undamaged portion — like a jellyfish uselessly stinging the squid that consumes it. This increased contact only served to hasten its annihilation. The fifth dimensional memetic structure, lacking any meaningful purpose or unifying focus, was soon overwhelmed by its opponents' ceaseless dedication to their mission.

Sarah Hughes watched through the observation port as the smoke thinned, evaporated, and was gone.

With a deep breath, "I am still me," said Nanku.

"As am I," said Onru.

Munru nodded, and Irantu signaled a thumbs up towards the house.

"After we secure the road guard position," he said, "you should roll us back anyway, just to be sure."

Ω—Ω

To: Manes-1
From: Wraith-7
Subject: Field Report: Operation Fisher King (attached)

Summary:
Contact with Captain Sarah Hughes was successful. She believes Bart Hughes is definitely alive and she is

confirmed to not be an anchor. She does not know his current whereabouts. Bart Hughes' disappearance was carried out operationally and deliberately with extreme secrecy and voluntary amnesticization protocols. Captain Hughes retains very little useful intelligence on the subject. However, the location of the last place she saw her brother is in a memetic void, strongly indicative that the entire location was subsequently erased. Site-41?

Additionally we encountered and erased an enemy incursion which had penetrated Area-756. There were five Foundation casualties. The four Samsara troopers have, of course, already returned to the quick but we should dispatch a Reaper team for Specialist Aaron Quinn, who has died in the line of duty.

It seems the enemy is also now looking for Hughes. We probably should get there first.

Remember: We are the saints who guard,
— Santosh Desai, Team Leader, Wraith Team Seven.

« In the Trenches with the Dead | A Thin, Dangerous Line»

Tales of Anomalous Items

“It has long been an axiom of mine that the little things are infinitely the most important.”
— Arthur Conan Doyle

The Challenge:

+ Show the challenge

To quote **`the challenge thread`**…

> Hello, my name's Westrin[1], and I'm here to give you a hopefully fun challenge! Been bouncing this idea around for a while, and the general consensus is that it should be a challenge thread, so it shall!
>
> Pick an item from the log-of-anomalous-items, and make an interesting tale about it.
>
> Here are the rules:
>
> - As it says on the tin, pick a single item from the log and make a tale about it.[2] There are no word limits, so go nuts.
> - Copy and paste the anomalous object you wish to write about at the top of the page, and then follow up with the tale. This isn't required any more. You can put the AO entry wherever.
> - The tale *cannot* feature any SCPs heavily. It can get minor mentions, but cannot put one onto the spotlight. This is to prevent the "Anomalous object getting

empowered by an SCP" route from being taken.
- The anomalous object must show a deeper and important meaning or have deep implications to its setting (Foundation-verse), and not just be a simple anomaly. You have to make it feel like a significant anomaly, despite it just being an anomalous object. Whether it's the unbreakable lamp being Zeus' bedside lamp, or the ranch dressing banana slugs being an endangered species that introduced ranch dressing to the native Americans in the first thanksgiving. It's also encouraged that the deeper meaning makes sense to the object's nature, and is not completely random.
- Please pick an item that most likely isn't going to get pruned. Any new entries are discouraged, but you still can pick them if you want to take the risk.
- *HARD MODE:* Make the tale for one of the canons in the canon hub. Does not matter which one.
- Have fun. If you disobey this rule, you will be executed. :)

Good luck!

Feel free to format and style your entries however you want, and I'm opening the challenge up to entries from the logs of Extranormal Events and Unexplained Locations — the more tales the better!

The Tales:

The current responses to this challenge are:

- Time After Time, by **MaliceAforethought**

- **Some Are Born To Endless Light**, by **Flawed**
- Tum-Tum-Tum-TUM-Tum-Tum-Tum-TUM-TUM-TUM, by **Tufto**
- **Shot Down**, by **Penton**
- **Tjalla**, by **Mortos**
- **Anomalous Incidents**, by **Roget**, admittedly written five years before the creation of the challenge.
- **The Lizard in the Mosaic**, by **Ihp**
- ミスター・タトゥーがあるやつ, by **EFU** on the Japanese branch.
- **Charcoal**, by **Boogey_Man23**
- **The Scarlet Shadow Saves the World**, by **Modern_Erasmus**
- **The Three Bullets of Destiny**, by **Superblobby**
- **White**, by **Varaxous**
- **Do Not Collect $200**, by **SeptemberJackal**

Tales that *almost* meet the criteria, but either don't fulfil one of the rules or don't utilise a preexisting anomalous object are:

- **She Waits**, by **taylor_itkin**

Footnotes
1. The original poster of the challenge. This hub has been created in his stead.
2. Writing your own AO specifically for this challenge doesn't count, as it kind of defeats the point. Otherwise, everything's fair game.

Time After Time

Tick

Two people stand in a room, facing one another. One is wearing a lab coat, and one is dressed in a shiny black suit that rustles as he shifts his weight. Twilight streams through the high, barred windows. For a moment, all is still.

Tick

The man in the lab coat opens his mouth to speak, but no words come out. The suited man places a hand on his shoulder and tells him, not unkindly, that the decision is final. The project has been discontinued. The scientist hangs his head and nods, gesturing to an assistant to help him shut down his machine. The man in black turns to leave.

Tick

Together, a gaggle of university-graduates and unpaid interns stroll down a country road, bemoaning the lack of funding that is strangling their discipline. They load their equipment into a van and set off.

Once they are out of view, the man in black shakes his head, and positions the final package against the beam. After a final sweep of the room, he leaves, unspooling a long line of wire behind him. Rubbing the dust from his hands, he steps out, secure in the knowledge that the world is safe once more.

Tick

The world is full of fire, and dust, and smoke, and the tortured screams of brittle metal bent beyond breaking point.

Tick

A thousand miles away, a tight-lipped woman opens a document, scans through it, and closes it again. A minor edit to another, much longer file, and three years of work is Neutralised. The woman frowns. She really should start on the after-action reports, but then again… there'll be time enough tomorrow. She'll be able to finish them then. There's always time.

Tick

A man sits down to enjoy a meal with his family. The four of them talk, and laugh, and smile. Without warning, a small black box on the man's hip begins to beep and vibrate, summoning him to action. He shrugs on his shiny black jacket, kisses his wife on the cheek, and steps out of the door. The half-eaten meal, cooling softly on the table, is wrapped in clingfilm and put to one side. For later.

Tick

Within the rubble of the warehouse, a timer placed there some weeks previously clicks down to zero, and a discarded fuse ignites like a Catherine wheel, burning through a network of wires concealed in the concrete. For the second time in as many weeks, the world is full of fire.
It clears after a while, and the floor collapses, slow and inexorable, pouring down like water into the pit below. At the centre of the pit, a squat metal box stabs at the universe.

Tick

Gunfire. A black suit is torn, and splattered with red. Twelve minutes pass and the backup crew arrives. Another building is demolished, and a small child is killed in the collapse.

Tick

A mechanism starts, hurling a shape several hundred feet into the air. The box, sullen and grey, whirs to life, shifting through realities. Time slows to a trickle.

In his chair, the man in the lab coat smiles, a large, toothy grin that has nothing to do with humour. He hears, in his mind, the whirr of

gears too warped to exist on any normal diagram. They reverberate backwards and forwards across the aeons, smashing down the walls between worlds.

Tick

The shape, its face now visible, flashes back into existence. It is bound, now, to the world around it. It thunders down at a snail's pace, bending the nearby air into a cone of brilliant purple light. A second later, and it is gone, pulling apart the walls of the universe with all the care and precision of a trebuchet.

Tick

A flash of light. Another thud as temporal entropy passes the point of no return. The clock, slowly passing lightspeed, flickering in and out of actuality like a bad projection, hits the ground. The impossible pendulum bursts from its frame, and the glass casing shatters, taking reality with it. Miles away, what was once a man in a lab coat stands up, revelling in his destruction. The wooden veneer implodes, leaving only echoes across phase space. Causality grinds to a halt, and the wheels are silenced once more.

Tick

Item #: AO-001432

Item Description: An Ikea-brand wall clock which seems to disappear and reappear once every second.
Date of Recovery: - -19
Location of Recovery: , Scotland.
Current Status: Disappeared at 1124 hours GMT on - -19 . Item never materialised, presumed irretrievable.
Research Value: None.

Are We Cool Yet? Hub

Are We Cool Yet? is an artistic movement existing on the fringes of the international avant-garde, with roots in the early surrealist art movements of the late 19th and early 20th century and the growing scientific understanding and study of the anomalous that began to develop during that time. (For one man's account of how the movement came into its own, refer to the contest entry tale "Birth of the Cool".) The movement has no centralized leadership, no headquarters, very few traditions or conventions, and no official membership rolls or requirements - the only thing one need do to call oneself a member is to make art that employs, exploits, or revolves around anomalous objects, beings, or phenomena.

The organization of an AWCY? cell varies wildly from place to place. Many groups are organized into small salons led by a creative mastermind or a professional critic, while others are collectives with no clear leader, and some members prefer to work entirely on their own. In the opinions of some, it is not even necessary to know that the movement exists in order to be a part of it. The tendency of some such groups to produce highly visible public artworks that cause death, injury, or lasting psychological harm has led some to decry the entire movement as a bunch of "art terrorists", a label some of its members wear with pride, some repudiate entirely, and some wear ironically.

The largest and most visible gathering of AWCY? artists in any place or time is "*Sommes-Nous Devenus Magnifiques?*", a grand exhibition held every ten years since 1874, at which those "in the know" can gather to view and scrutinize a selection of some of the finest works in anomalous art produced over the previous decade. To have a work accepted is considered (by those who care about such things) to be one of the greatest achievements an anartist can attain in a career, and members of cells all around the world petition to have their works displayed.

Birth of the Cool
Birth by Guitar
Living in the Limelight
Preparation
Project Proposal 1964-238: "The Eater of Worlds"
Project Proposal 1964-301: "The Essence of Indolence"
Project Proposal 1994-103: "A Song of Hope and Home"
Project Proposal 2004-024: "My Father's Values"
Project Proposal 2014-2112: "Dreams of Failure"
Project Proposal 2014-733: "The Role of a Lifetime"
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International Articles:

- **Pillow**

- **SCP-3447**
- **SCP-2388**
- **SCP-3403**
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- **SCP-1803**

- SCP-3435
- "Baby's First Guide to Euclid-Class Anomalies" & Other Questionable Documents Recovered from the Hard Drive of Dr.
- SCP-1446
- SCP-1018
- SCP-1564
- SCP-2635
- SCP-1672
- SCP-1207
- SCP-1800
- SCP-1074
- SCP-1883
- SCP-1127
- SCP-1590
- SCP-092
- SCP-1802
- SCP-1057

International Articles:

- SCP-024-FR
- SCP-ES-056
- SCP-103-FR
- SCP-172-FR
- SCP-521-KO

- Tension
- Foundation Patent/Intellectual Property Policy
- Ruiz Sobers Up
- Torrent
- Dark Arts and Crafts
- Adam's Worthless - Choose Yokim
- The Subject of Ordinance
- Down the Silver River
- Purity Of Essence
- Kiefdust Crusaders
- A Witch's Tale - Mistakes Were Made
- Ex Nihilo Nihil
- The Lord Judge

- Alternate Character Interpretations
- **Not with a Whimper but with a Bang**
- **It's All Behind Us Now**
- **Notes towards a manifesto**
- **The Melody Of Autumn, Passing Into Winter**
- Bong Rip Tendency
- **Ichor**
- **Interlude: A Special Letter**
- **Interlude: An Exhibition**
- Flow
- Phantom Blunt
- **In other news,**
- **Orgy 5 Counsel 9: XXXK End of Virginity Scenario**
- **Moonlighting**
- Ganymede
- **Snipped From The Same Cloth**
- **Be a Dali and Help a Mann Out, or The Lamentable State of Modern Art**
- **Coming soon to a gallery near you!~**
- **Patronage**
- **Quintessence Of Dust**
- Concerto in D-Major, Orchestrated for Paintbrush and Fedora
- **Disposal And Discourse**
- **Brotherhood**
- **And Then What Happened?**
- **The Cool Kids**
- **Shady Meetings**
- **Insufficient Clearance**
- Are We Christmas Yet?
- **Detained**
- **Final Attack Orders**
- **Nobody Dies**
- **SCP-173-D**
- **Snip Snip Snip**
- **Novel Cultivars**
- **Eulogy For The Living**
- Cool War 2: Ruiz From Your Grave
- **wowwee u kild ursefl**
- **The Friday Exhibition**

- **Empty Unmarked Grave**
- The Critic
- **Flexibility**
- **It Just Shattered**
- **The Cool War**
- **A Cooler Manifesto**
- **Everyone Knows**
- **wowwee go kill ursefl**
- **Quiet Days**

AWCY objects are described in a format called a Project Proposal. The Project Proposal is a brief essay by an individual artist about an object s/he has either created or intends to create, and is submitting for consideration in the decennial exhibition or which they are seeking funding or materials from a patron so that they can create it. The page title of a proposal should be "Project Proposal XXXX-YYY: Title", in which "XXXX" is the year of the next exhibition for which it will be eligible for entry (so if the artist is writing in the late '70s, it would be in preparation for the 1984 Expo), "YYY" being an arbitrary number assumed to be derived from the order in which that proposal was received by the exposition's submission jury, and "Title" being the artist's name for the object.

The essay is formatted as follows:

Title: *The artist's title for the piece as mentioned above, italicized.*
Material Requirements: A bulleted list of materials the artist used to create the piece or which s/he expects to need, ranging from the ordinary to the exotic and hard to find to that which is anomalous in and of itself.
Abstract: A brief description of the piece - what it is, what it's supposed to do, how it does it (if the artist knows), how it should be displayed, etc.
Intent: In this section, the artist, speaking in first person, describes their reasons for creating this piece; what motivated them to come up with the idea, what they hope to achieve by producing it, how they went about making it, who the intended audience is, what kind of reaction they hope to get from the audience, and so on.

Creator Information

"The Treachery of Euclids" is a parody incorporating elements of a photograph by **Keisuke Yamamoto** of the work "Untitled 2004" by **Izumi Kato**, and the painting "La trahison des images" by Rene Magritte. All rights are reserved by the artists.

A note of caution: SCP-173 is a secondary use of the image of the art piece "Untitled 2004", which was created by **Izumi Kato**. The concept of SCP-173 does not have any relationship with the artist's original concept of "Untitled 2004".

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Birth of the Cool

In the nineteenth century, the march of progress made it possible for the first time for human science to contemplate and comprehend those phenomena which had long seemed to contravene the laws of nature. Within a matter of decades, concepts that had long been viewed as witchcraft or sorcery were laid bare in the terms of a new and secret science, and governments and organizations around the world began to classify, study, and collect all such anomalies. And, just as artists throughout history have turned a critical eye to the events of the day in their work, so too did the artists of this scientific Renaissance begin to interpret these new discoveries on canvas.

By the 1870s, Paris was the center of the world of anomalous art, and the city stood witness to endless debates about the role of the anomalous in art, or whether such a role existed at all. When in 1874 the famed Salon des Magnifiques *refused to allow any "works of a phantasmagorical nature" to be displayed at their grand exhibition, those artists shut out by the committee organized their own counter-exhibition, to be held at the same time across the river. "Sommes-Nous Devenus Magnifiques?", as the show came to be called, was the talk of the Parisian press for months, earning equal amounts of curiosity, dismissal, and outright derision, but the exiled gadflies had made their point - the paranormal, the anomalous, and the bizarre had found a place in the world of art and would not be so easily gotten rid of.*

"Sommes-Nous Devenus Magnifiques?" held its exhibitions every ten years thereafter, and as time passed the world of anomalous art grew larger. From its

beginnings in Paris, artists from all across France and Europe, and later from the Americas and the Orient as well, began attending the increasingly prestigious - and increasingly bizarre and difficult to keep hidden from the disdainful eyes of a concerned government - exhibition, expressing new and different interpretations of the role of the anomalous in human life. It was at the sixth decennial exhibition in 1924 that the growing rift between the two largest schools of thought - logical vs. emotional, science vs. faith, Old World vs. New - came to a head, for it was at that show that for the first time, the works of the French surrealist Marcel Duchamp would be exhibited alongside those of Ruiz Marcos, the Mexican artist whose themes of magical realism and religious awe intertwined with the viscerally accessible Forteana of our world had set art critics worldwide at war with each other.

Those who saw the two during the days leading up to the opening of the exhibition said they spent nearly the entire time in heated discussion with one another (in English, for neither spoke the other's mother tongue confidently) about everything under the Sun - the importance of the artist in relation to his work, the importance of context, faith, knowledge, law, free will, God, the State, democracy, Marxism, the war, the League of Nations, and the best way to serve a cup of coffee. It seemed that they might continue bickering throughout the entire exhibition, but as the artists prepared to greet the assembled press on the morning of its grand opening, they appeared to have finally come to an understanding.

If there is one image that comes to the mind of any art historian when the 1924 Expo is brought up, it is of that iconic photo of Duchamp and Ruiz posing side by side with their fellow artists in front of the still-closed doors, Marcos seemingly leaning over to whisper something into Duchamp's ear. For decades, many have speculated on what words Marcos had for his colleague during that memorable instant; a question of metaphysics? Or a challenge? An affirmation of their coming to terms? A

reminder of the reason why they were there at that moment of time? Perhaps an expression of amazement at the multitudes that had come to see them? According to one reporter who claimed he stood close enough to overhear that whisper amidst the din of the crowd, it was all five at once, expressed in four simple words;

"Are we cool yet?"

- **Excerpt from** *The Coolest War: Memories of a Critic*, **by Anonymous**

Birth by Guitar

> Some people are fond of saying that those who do not learn from history are doomed to repeat it. It would be more accurate to say that history is doomed to repeat itself.
> - **Excerpt from** *The Coolest War: Memories of a Critic*, **by Anonymous**

As the sun set over the Seine river, the migration began. It was slow at first, with a few figures crossing the waters by bridge. As the sky darkened, the travelers multiplied. They came in bicycles, boats, taxis, and trucks. A few walked. A few more ran. The sun sank completely below the horizon, and the migration ceased. The crowd, now a few hundred strong, reached its destination, merging with the multitude of individuals who were already there. It was closing time at the *Sommes-Nous Devenus Magnifiques*, and the final exhibition was about to begin.

The *Sommes-Nous Devenus Magnifiques* opened its doors for a month every ten years, closing them for fifteen minutes at sundown. A large poster glued to the wall of the gallery lied about the reason for this closing in seventeen different languages. The poster identified the downtime as, among other things, a time to have lunch (French), a cleaning period (English), a dirtying period (German), and a mandatory smoking break (Swahili). In truth, the gallery did not shut down during these fifteen minutes. It simply moved outdoors.

The gallery's doors swung closed, and a final figure darted between them. She carried a weathered guitar under her arm. The figure leaned against the side of the building and began to tune her guitar. When the job was finished, she raised her head, acknowledging the crowd for the first time.

"Ah!" gasped the Guitarist, feigning surprise. "Who might you lot be?"

The crowd erupted into a roar of sound as hundreds of voices rose to answer the question.

The Guitarist clicked her tongue. "This simply will not do," she said. "You must appoint a speaker from within your ranks if you wish to be heard." She paused, adjusting a few of the strings on the guitar. "Go on, make your selection. Choose *somebody* to do the talking. Nobody in particular."

As it did every night, the crowd parted to reveal a serene, well-dressed man. The man strode to the front of the crowd and locked eyes with the Guitarist. The crowd held its breath. The man coughed, and the Exchange began. It was an old performance, one that had been scripted decades earlier. As the two players spoke, the members of the audience mouthed the performers' lines, having seen the Exchange dozens of times before.

"And who are you?" asked the Guitarist.

"I am, as you requested," replied the man, "Nobody in Particular."

"Why are you here?" asked the Guitarist, gesturing towards the crowd. "What did you hope to accomplish by gathering before me tonight?"

"We have come to be cool."

"Why not take a dip in the river, then?" the Guitarist replied with a smile. The crowd chuckled. The joke wasn't particularly funny, and hadn't matured well after a thousand repetitions, but the crowd always chuckled.

"We're here to listen to music."

"Is there something you had in mind?" the Guitarist asked, lazily strumming a chord.

"A special song, stolen from the future." The man doffed his hat.

The Guitarist grinned. "Ah, but the future comes later." She placed her hand on the neck of the guitar. "It will be stealing from *me*."

The Exchange was completed. The crowd cheered, then fell silent as the Guitarist began to hum. She tried a few notes before she felt her voice catch on the proper one. She hummed again, and her voice caught again. She tried once more, and felt the catch in her throat tear itself free, releasing a deep, throaty voice. The Guitarist opened her mouth and sang.

Brother, won't you lend your ear
And help me if you can
'Cause I ain't seen hide nor hair
Of the Manna Charity Man.

They said he had no soul for jailin'
Nor the talents for work in art
The Circus didn't call him, no
He's been helpin' from the start.

Well if manna falls from heaven
Then it lands above our heads
But don't you frown, 'cause the Charity Man
Said he'll keep all of us fed.

Oh, the Fact'ry's still now workin'
Smokestacks pushin' smoke
Assembly line still movin'
Overseer can't take a joke.

Brother, won't you lend your ear
And help me if you can
'Cause I ain't seen hide nor hair
Of the Manna Charity man.

Charity Man said don't you worry, now
Charity Man said don't you cry
Said he's knockin' on doors all the way to Heaven
Ain't nobody gonna turn a blind eye.

Seen Jailers down over by the docks
Jailers don' understand
Jailer-man always askin' if
I've seen the Manna Charity Man.

Charity Man's been workin' on something
Way deep underground
But I ain't seen no Charity Man
Since the Jailers came lookin' 'round.

Brother, won't you lend your ear
And help me if you can
'Cause I ain't seen hide nor hair
Of the Manna Charity man.

The Guitarist bowed her head, and the crowd applauded. The man smiled and tipped his hat again, vanishing into the throng. The doors of the gallery creaked open, and the wind picked up, carrying the song to the lips of the performer who would sing it for the first time, years later.

Somewhere between the singers, in a small house in New York, an insomniac tapped his pen against a sheet of paper. He was meant to be writing a highly important letter, concerning nothing less than the fate of humanity, but he could not find the right words. Truth be known, the writer was beginning to doubt his own cause.

A breeze blew through the window, and the paper rippled beneath the pen. The writer rose to close his shutters, then froze. For a moment, he was certain that he'd heard a voice drifting through the room along with the wind. Then, he dropped back into his seat and began to write, the voice and the window forgotten.

> In the interest of sharing all of God's miracles with the least of His children, and in the interest of humanity as a whole, I am pleased to announce the formation of a new organization that shall work towards the liberation of those in poverty, in depression, and in the throes of death. This organization shall hereby be known as the Manna Charitable Foundation. May it prosper for generations to come, and all of mankind with it.

Living in the Limelight

> *I believe it was Shakespeare who said "All the world's indeed a stage, and we are merely players, performers and portrayers, each another's audience outside the gilded cage."*
>
> *He was half-right.*
>
> *-Except from* **The Coolest War: Memories of a Critic***, by Anonymous*

The symphony hall was packed to capacity for what promised to be the event of the season. Ushers lead men in tuxedos and women in evening gowns down dimly lit walkways to their seats, the twinkling of hundreds of tiny lights on the chandeliers overhead illuminating the elaborate architecture. The city's finest conversed in their box seats, the elite and the middle class sat out front to see and be seen, and in the galleries even the less fortunate of the city had put on their Sunday finest and turned out. A hush fell over the assembled multitudes as the Conductor stepped onto the stage, empty save but for his podium. The audience rose in respect as the thirty-ish impresario in impeccable white tie took his position upstage, bowing once to the crowd to signal that they could sit. The Conductor turned to the podium, where his sheet music and baton lay at the ready. He opened the book to the first movement of tonight's performance, looked straight ahead at the empty space before him, lifted his baton, and the performance began.

A sense of shock and wonder rippled through the crowd as the first bars of the overture rung out - aggressive, powerful, demanding attention. A brief pause allowed the crowd to compose themselves - there was no band on stage, there were no speakers anywhere to carry the sound, and yet, as sure as they could hear their own breathing, they heard music. Before they had too long to ponder it, the second bar hit them, at first just the horns, then came the violins, the bass section, oboes, flutes, timpani, and the sound of an entire

orchestra filled the hall and echoed from front to back. The Conductor kept time and signaled the invisible, imaginary band with his baton, sweat dripping down his brow as he struggled to ensure that the cellists were in tune and the xylophonist wasn't coming in too early. He gave them a five-minute preview, in music, of what he hoped would be his magnum opus - the history of creation itself - and as the final strings of the overture gave way to the lone drum representing the heartbeat of the last man alive (or perhaps the first), he prepared himself for the part he had not yet performed before an audience. The Moog synthesizer kicked in as the Conductor grabbed the podium with his free hand, twisted it around 90 degrees counterclockwise, turned himself sideways to face the crowd on the left and the fictional orchestra on his right, and picked up the second baton.

With a quivering hand, the Conductor raised his second baton towards the audience, and flicked it like a magic wand, the Moog providing a sting to punctuate the flick. Nothing. The violins quivered along with his hand as he tried the flick again - still nothing. The Theremins kicked in on the third try, and with a third flick - and the sound of the gong - the chandelier hanging above the floor seats vanished, leaving only a hundred flickering bits of light in midair. The crowd gasped and applauded politely, but the Conductor only raised a finger to his lips, a "Shhhhhhh!" provided by the electric guitarist's Vocoder, as he carried on. Continuing to direct the orchestra with the baton in his right hand, he now stared upward at the flickering lights, pointing at one with his baton and nudging it slightly to the left. He pointed at another and moved it up somewhat, then another which he directed to fly around in a circle. Before long, the points of light were flying every which way around the hall, up and down, front to back, swinging in grand arcs over the balcony or zig-zagging or orbiting the head of a particularly confused old woman in the front row. The orchestra carried on in a regimented cacophony, dozens of leitmotifs representing the different lights as they swirled around, joyful, playful, ever in flux, one minute a minuet as two lights seemed to dance around each another, another anticipatory as one slowly wiggled its way up from the floor to the top of the hall, triumphant as it swirled about above all the other lights - and then a crashing sense of betrayal as it swung down, collided straight into another light, and the light broke apart and was snuffed out,

accentuated with the sound of the cannon.

Silence fell, and the hundred lights stopped their play and gathered in a circle around the attacker. The string soloists called out in confusion and mourning. Why? How? What has happened? The time for wonderment was short lived, as from the back another light swooped down and smashed into another extinguishing it, then a third, then a fourth. The gathered lights panicked and grew a bright blue, huddling together at first in fear, and then some of their own launching outward to defend themselves against the yellow-red aggressors. The machine gunners kept time, the bassoons sounded the march, and the accordionist wailed - it was war.

Few in the crowd took the time to look at the Conductor as the war raged on above them. Had they, they would have seen the sweat dripping from his brow, his hair soaking wet from it, his hands wildly flailing in both directions at once as his mind focused on keeping both his imaginary productions in sync. The orchestra rose to a crescendo as the room grew dimmer, more and more of the once-so-innocent lights vanishing into the darkness, and the last handful of blue lights gathered together in a ball, their attackers orbiting around them like a giant molecule of some unimaginable element, diving in and out in an attempt to penetrate the defense. A single chord that the Conductor had hoped would sound like the one from *A Day In the Life* sounded out from the entire band in unison as all the attackers swooped in at once and the entire concert hall erupted in a blinding flash of white light. The lone drumbeat returned as the light faded, and the crowd could see that the ceiling of the concert hall had been dematerialized entirely - and beyond it, there stood nothing but a sky full of millions of stars.

The Conductor set his batons down as the drumming stopped, turned to face the audience, and gave a short bow. The crowd applauded thunderously, some of them rapt with joy, others with tears running down their faces, all of them looking forward to the second movement. The Conductor cleared his throat and snapped his fingers, and in an instant the performance was over. The roar of the crowd ceased as the men and women disappeared back into the ether from which they came, and the walls fell in until the concert hall was once again the rehearsal space of the West Soho

Performing Arts Center.

"Well, there you have it," the Conductor said to the two actual humans remaining of his audience of thousands. "Concerto No. 3 for Reality Warper, 1st Movement. 'The Fall of Heaven'. What do you think?" The bespectacled middle-aged man in a Grateful Dead t-shirt, his long graying hair tied back in a ponytail, gave a tentative nod of agreement.

"Well, you put half your audience to sleep," the Critic said as he gestured to the ten-year-old boy who'd nodded off next to him, "but I was a Phillistine at his age too. The lighting effects are a little amateurish, and the score could use more Steinman and less ELP, but your work with the audience has improved by leaps and bounds. I swear I recognized my old drill sergeant sitting two rows behind us."

"Thank you," the Conductor said. "I'm planning on elaborating more on the visual effects in the second movement. We haven't even gotten to the creation of man yet, after all. It ought to be ready by the next time you're in town if you'll have time to see it."

"I look forward to it, Mr. Chesapeake," the Critic responded as he stood up and headed for the door. "Keep working on this and by '84 you'll be ready to make a big splash. Leave the sheet music on my desk and I'll have some more detailed notes for you by the weekend. Oh, and see if we can do the next session earlier in the day so your son can stay awake through the whole thing. I'm sure he's got an artist's soul buried in there somewhere."

Preparation

Thump.

Thump.

Knock.

Knock.

Knock.

The noise gently shook the walls and floors of the small studio apartment.

Thump.

Thump.

Thump.

Knock.

Knock.

The wood carving of Richard Nixon rocked back and forth on its hook.

Thump.

Thump.

The frame holding the poster of Hitler rattled slightly on the wall.

Knock.

Knock.

The shaking upset the clock made out of a repurposed lab rat and

caused it to skip forward
three and a half minutes.

THUMP.

THUMP.

Finally, the noise managed to shake awake the sleeping artist.

KNOCK.

KNOCK.

"Shit!" The artist thought to herself. She quickly rolled out of bed and dug out a small
sculpture before rushing to the door.

On the other side of the door was what resembled a six-foot tall blobfish, except that it was
covered in barely-visible downy fur, and had muscular arms that were webbed like the wings
of a sugar glider. It was wearing slacks and a button-down shirt. It looked at the artist with
beady black eyes, before holding its enormous four-fingered hand out expectantly.

The artist quickly pressed the sculpture into the creature's hand. "It's called *Cleanliness is Godliness*," she said.

The creature closely examined the piece. It was a realistic soap carving of Mr. Clean, standing triumphant over a much smaller representation of the original bar of soap. The blobfish looked back up at the artist.

"Right, context. Well, if you leave it somewhere overnight, by morning it will have eradicated any living material in about a two-foot radius. It's a commentary on the sterilization of popular culture, as well as the dangers of adhering too strictly to-"

Before she could finish, the creature opened its two-foot wide mouth and greedily shoved the sculpture in. It chewed thoughtfully for about a minute before swallowing. Apparently satisfied, it thumped

away.

Her month's rent having been paid, the artist took a sigh of relief.

Turning to her cluttered desk, the artist looked over the pages and pages of blueprints she had drawn up over the last few months. Her apartment wasn't big enough for her to assemble all of the schematics together into a full blueprint, so she had only a rough idea of what the final product would actually look like.

The idea came to her in a nightmare; over ten thousand moving parts, seventy-two illegal memes, four human brains, and a pocket dimension the size of Jupiter. This was going to be her immortality—if it didn't kill her (and everyone else) first.

Refocusing on reality, the artist began gathering her belongings. Today, she had errands to run.

BackdoorSoho was perhaps the most colorful place on the planet. The graffiti that appeared in patches across the rest of Manhattan expanded to cover every surface that would take paint, and some that wouldn't. Even the sky was slowly working its way through the color spectrum. Right now it was light green.

The streets, in contrast with the grid of upper Manhattan, wound back and forth, over and under each other in spatially impossible ways, making the neighborhood both massive and tiny at the same time.

The storefronts were often stacked one on top of the other, with stairs, ladders and walkways creating layers on layers and streets on streets.
Her first stop was the metalworking shop, in a narrow alley off Duchamp Boulevard known as Sélavy Alley.

A man with receding black hair stood over a workbench.

"Hi, Jakob," the artist said as she walked through the open storefront.

"Hey, kiddo," he replied. Jakob called everybody "kiddo." The artist was fairly sure he didn't know her name.

She looked at the scorch marks on the wall. One of the shelves had collapsed. The floor had puddles of what looked like motor oil. "What happened," she asked Jakob.

"Some Church wackos wanted me to build them something. Called it 'the will of he who shall be made whole' or some malarkey. They got mad when I said no, so I had to get Hank to take care of them."

As if on cue, a seven-foot tall amalgamation of used car parts in a vaguely human shape lumbered in from the back of the shop. A license plate reading "HANK" was screwed on to its chest.

"Wasn't anything he couldn't handle, of course. What did you need?"

"I'm here to pick up the parts I ordered."

"Right, right." He went to the back of the shop.

The artist tapped her foot and looked at the piles of scrap metal strewn about the small shop. She wondered if she would be able to recoup some of these expenses if something went wrong. She then realized that if anything did go wrong, she, and a lot of other people, would probably be dead.

He came back out a minute later, holding a large pile of shining metal parts.

"Let's see here", he said, "we have five Penrose gears,"

He placed five stainless steel gears that were neither spirals nor circles on the counter.

"Three reinforced psychic shields, 30 centimeters by 60 centimeters by 2 centimeters,"

He produced three metal rectangles and placed them next to the gears.

"And twelve custom parts, made from imaginary metal." He pretended to lift several metal pieces up onto the counter.

"If you don't mind me asking, what do you need all these for?"

"Secret project. If I'm really lucky, you can see it at the “Sommes-Nous Devenus Magnifiques?” exhibition in about five years."

The artist took one of the gears into her hands and inspected it closely. It twisted back on itself in a way that defied Euclidean geometry, an object that was both spiral and complete circle.

Inspecting the shields, she was able to see the complex and delicate layering of telekill alloy. Hopefully this would be enough to prevent resonance.

She pretended to inspect the imaginary metal. Jakob did good work.

"You've really outdone yourself, Jakob. These are fantastic," the artist said as she wrapped the parts in cloth and placed them in her bag.

"Art demands the best,” Jakob replied. “Of everything.”.

The artist gave Jakob a fistful of crumpled bills, hugged Hank, and left the shop.

Her next stop was three stories above one of the main streets. As she climbed up the fire escape, she saw the sign that said “Biological Components and Alterations.” The storefront windows were barred from the inside, and the door was a solid piece of metal.

Opening the door, she saw Frank talking on the phone. She shut the door as quietly as possible.

"For the last time, no! I've already told you, I can make the zygote, but you're going to have to find someone else to implant it."

Frank looked at the artist and rolled his eyes.

"No, I don't know anyone who can do that because **nobody's ever done anything like this before**."

He held his hand to the mouthpiece. "This might take a while. You got a minute?" The artist nodded and sat down on a whale vertebra.

He turned back to the phone. "Look, I've been far more reasonable

with you than any sane person should be. What you're doing is dangerous, irresponsible, and quite frankly, doesn't make any sense. The only reason I'm doing this is I'm reasonably certain this won't *kill* you, and also because you're paying me."

The artist stifled a giggle.

"Honestly, I don't care. You either pick it up when it's ready, give me my money, and leave me alone; or tell me now, and we can skip straight to the leaving me alone part."

Frank paused.

"Fine, I'll see you on Friday. Goodbye."

Frank hung up the phone and put his head in his hands. "I swear to god, you people are going to kill me. I mean, an in-utero art project? Why would anyone in their right mind do that? I try to talk her down, and she's like, 'no, I already booked the gallery space nine months in advance.' I swear, sometimes I forget why I moved here."

"The rent's cheap." The artist pointed out.

"Yeah, that's probably it. What did you need?"

"I need some kind of sedative for that clock you sold me. It keeps gaining time whenever anyone bangs on the wall."

"You do realize it's not meant to be an accurate timepiece, right?"

"I know, but it's getting out of control, and I can't re-set it."

Frank shrugged and grabbed a small phial from under the counter.

"A drop of this should slow the heartbeat enough to let time catch up. You'll have to experiment with it to get the correct dosage. Don't give it more than five drops in twenty-four hours."

"Thanks," the artist said, handing him a handful of money and some change.

"Anything else?"

"Has my order come in yet?"

"No it hasn't," Frank replied, scratching his head. "It's too dangerous to ship it here, so they've decided to take it through the Ways. Even then, they're really worried that something might happen. Are you sure I can't talk you into something less potentially world-ending? I've got a couple things in stock that should do what you want."

"No thanks," the artist said, "the potential disaster is central to the theme."

"I would tell you you're making a huge mistake, but you wouldn't listen to me anyway."

The artist walked to the door. "Good luck with that zygote," she called back as she returned to the street.

"Thanks. I really need to stop selling that girl stuff."

Outside, the sky had changed to a golden yellow. A girl was doing backflips down the sidewalk. A couple was waltzing in the middle of the street (nobody owned cars in BackdoorSoho, and no one really knew why it had streets). The artist smiled to herself.

But there was no time to dwell on that. The artist started making her way toward the gallery space. She had a lot of work to do.

Project Proposal 1964-238: "The Eater of Worlds"

Title: *The Eater of Worlds*

Material Requirements:

- Schematics and components for an implosion-type fission bomb
- 6.2 kg of weapons-grade plutonium lead
- One pair of Hi-Fi stereo speakers
- Duct tape
- Live brain tissue surgically extracted from Edward Teller, Robert Oppenheimer, Eugene Wigner, Leo Chazdwick, Ernst Goldberg, and/or any living US or Soviet head of state or national defense director
- One transistorized positronic cognition matrix (consult with I.A.)
- Solenoids salvaged from pinball machines constructed after July 16th, 1945
- Acrylic paint and brushes

Abstract: *The Eater of Worlds* is a functional replica of the "Fat Man" atomic bomb that was dropped on Nagasaki, Japan near the end of World War II. Per the safety guidelines established after the incident at the 1954 Expo and the recommendations of the Submission Committee, the exploding-bridgewire detonators and plutonium core in the version to be displayed at the 1964 Expo will be replaced with inert analogues. The trigger and other internal mechanisms remain active but are incapable of producing an explosion.

A positronic matrix based on the latest developments in synthetic consciousness has been integrated into the bomb's casing, rendering the device self-aware and capable of seeing and hearing events occuring around it. Brain tissue from several leading scientific and political figures involved in the development and deployment of nuclear weaponry have been used as the seed material for the

bomb's artificial mind, effectively producing a gestalt consciousness representing the very concept of atomic warfare personified.

Once functional, *The Eater of Worlds* should be displayed on its own in an isolated room with a laboratory motif for contextual purposes. Visitors are to be encouraged to speak to and question the bomb, thus allowing the bomb's responses to reflect its opinions as a weapon on the growing danger of global nuclear war, and allowing the visitor to be confronted with the reality of global annihilation and to challenge their own preconceptions about the matter.

Intent: It was a muggy summer night when I first met Leo Chazdwick in a bar in Greenwich Village. I never thought to ask how one of the fathers of the atomic bomb found his way into that dive, but there he was - pushing sixty, acting seventy, deeply intoxicated, and looking like he was one ill-timed comment away from bursting into tears. He was shocked that I recognized his face (you can thank my Intro to Atomic Energy professor at MIT for that), and we chatted for awhile, the scientific genius and the second-year dropout, over a few pints of Genesee. He was a proud man - but the emptier his glass got, the more that pride changed to guilt and regret.

"We won the war," he told me towards the end of our conversation, "but we damned the human race. We gave Uncle Sam a weapon powerful enough to destroy the world - of course he wasn't going to just use it once and throw away the plans! Now we've got thousands of them just ready to go, and so do the Reds. It's not a matter of if; it's a matter of when."

I reflected on that conversation for a long time, and I had to admit I found it perplexing how differently people were looking at the Bomb. Chazdwick wished he'd never made that fatal discovery in '42 that set the Manhattan Project on its path to success, but men like Teller wanted to nuke half the world as an engineering project, and politicians were more than willing to threaten human extinction over petty international disputes. I wondered - what if we could ask the Bomb itself what *it* thought about the matter?

Getting a nuclear bomb was the easy part - a couple phone calls, a quick stop by 231 East 47th Street, and they hauled one up from the basement and loaded it in the back of my rented Studebaker. The

hard part was getting it to answer me when I talked to it. Chazdwick's brain was too pickled from his addictions to provide a usable sample, and the piece of Einstein's cerebellum that I got in the mail wasn't fresh enough. I definitely needed material from a living person to stabilize it (so Fermi, unfortunately, was out of the question,) but the slices I could come by weren't enough on their own. It took another year and a half and about a dozen samples before the bomb had a stable consciousness that could hold a conversation, but I had to switch it off for fear that it'd trigger itself and instantaneously open up the entire west side to urban redevelopment.

I worry that taking the core out will compromise the project. It's supposed to be the Bomb in living form - what good is a bomb that can't explode? But the 1964 Expo opens in a few weeks, and there's no other way I'm going to get this thing up and running, and safe enough to satisfy the Critics, if I want to have it on display this decade. Perhaps the existential crisis the bomb will find itself in will make for an interesting look at the psychology of one who is completely unable to do the one thing they feel like they were put on this Earth to do?

Project Proposal 1964-301: "The Essence of Indolence"

Title: *The Essence of Indolence*

Requisition:

- Suede Armchair, any colour
- Approximately four (4) meters of matching suede material
- A twenty (20) by twenty centimeter sample of grafted skin from one (1) of each of the following individuals: a Caucasian male, a Hispanic female (must be alive when sample taken, must own a television), and any male-line relative of either Philo T. Farnsworth, Vladimir K. Zworykin, or John Logie Baird.
- One (1) *Bos taurus*, male
- Rubber Cement
- All equipment necessary to perform a skin graft
- A sterile environment
- Ten (10) kilograms of batting of cotton
- One thousand (1,000) milliliters of transmorphic-laced blood, type O negative.

Abstract:
This work consummates in form of a suede armchair, defined with tactile illusionary properties. The furnishing, as it were, feels as if it has been constructed of living flesh, despite its visual characteristics. If an individual were to administer a medical examination upon the piece, one would find vital signs of life, including a heartbeat, breathing patterns, proximal fluctuation of the third soul, etc..

When any being, be it sentient and currently alive, is defined as "sitting" in the furnishing, and concurrently "watching" a television of any build, powered on, the transmorphic plasma injected in the piece activates. Over the course of thirty-two (32) hours, the organism is converted into a furnishing similar in design to the original piece, with considerations made to the organism's overall

size and skeletal structure (if any). This new furnishing will be a living, breathing furnishing, with the same properties as my original piece. For this, display will be restricted, and some sort of barrier must be erected to keep patrons from experimenting with it.

While working with an experimental throw pillow of the same design, I have discovered that these pieces experience hunger, and must be fed foodstuffs appropriate to their species at regular intervals, if one wishes to keep their art alive. After the piece has expired, it enters a form of *rigor mortis*, in which it stiffens to a solid furnishing, as well as preserving itself. Dissection is still possible.

Intent:

> "When television is good, nothing — not the theater, not the magazines or newspapers — nothing is better. But when television is bad, nothing is worse. I invite each of you to sit down in front of your own television set when your station goes on the air and stay there, for a day, without a book, without a magazine, without a newspaper, without a profit and loss sheet or a rating book to distract you. Keep your eyes glued to that set until the station signs off. I can assure you that what you will observe is a vast wasteland. And if you think I exaggerate, I only ask you to try it." — Newton N. Minow, 1961

The television. It was an invention originally intended for mass media and the entertainment of people across all differences. And yet, what was meant to improve life has done nothing but fail. I have seen naught but the masses with their eyes trained to a screen, ignorant of friends and family, adopting slovenly hours into their already full schedules. The once fascinating new idea has become an outbreak of rapid devolution into what can only be known as an inferior of the working man – the “couch potato”.

This piece was created in the sole influence of exposing the erroneous invention and what it has made of us. We are becoming no more useful than the furniture upon which we lounge. In that essence, why not *be* the furniture? We are seats and pillows upon which those who work rest, an ideal that allows them to work as to

avoid lowering to such a level. It is nothing but a motivation and a rock bottom from which the working man starts and rests.

In our society, then, there is truly nothing more worthy of disgust than the man who cannot do more than provide a seat and a television for his home. The television is nothing but a false life and for those who cannot live their own.

Project Proposal 1994-103: "A Song of Hope and Home"

Name: Adebowale

Title: *A Song of Hope and Home*

Material Requirements:
For the creation of the piece:

- One guitar, electric
- One drum set
- Three flutes - one of African Blackwood from this dimension, one of bamboo from Universe X-519, one of Elderwood from Universe X-162
- Two triangles - one of steel and the other of beryllium bronze
- One pipe organ
- One theremin
- One rainstick, made of a cactus from X-736 and filled with sand gathered from around the cactus
- The recorded roar of a dinosaur or another animal non-extant on this plane
- The bird song of the tillikana, from Universe J-057
- A waterphone, filled with water from Universe X-218
- A full choir singing the following: *Ave Maria* by Schubert, *Hallelujah* by Leonard Cohen, and *Africa* by Toto
- A cannon
- Music recording and editing equipment

For the performance of the piece:

- 20 chairs, modified to have arm/leg straps
- 1 speaker
- 20 blankets
- Hot chocolate, coffee and tea

I would have liked to perform this live, but any attempt to do so would instill the same vision in the performers. As

such, I had to get different parts of the song individually and then splice them together into a recording that gives the right vision.

The chairs are modified to have straps for the protection of the listeners: most listeners I have played the piece for tend to react to the vision as though they were there, which often leads to accidental injury and movement.

Abstract:
A Song of Hope and Home is a thirty minute long song, consisting of five movements. A listener that listens to the entirety of the song will experience a vision of my journey to the most beautiful thing that I have ever seen. This is a purely visual, auditory and tactile hallucination - at no point are listeners actually transported anywhere. During the duration of the piece, listeners are incapable of sensing any outside event. The five movements are:

1. A short memetic primer to allow the memetic elements in the rest of the piece to have maximum effect (one minute)
2. A vision of my life before I began my journey, which begins the induced hallucination (three minutes)
3. The journey itself (twenty-two minutes)
4. The most beautiful sight and my life after that (three minutes)
5. A memetic cleaner to remove the memetic primers and end the induced hallucination (one minute)

Intent:
Twenty years ago, I saw the most beautiful thing I had ever seen or would ever see. It was back when I was wandering the planes, searching for a new world to live in. My home was gone, and I will not speak of what happened to it. It has been two decades and the pain is still too raw.

What matters is that I had been searching for a new world for three years. In my haste to flee a dying world, I took a poor method of crossing between worlds. It relied more on brute force to pass through planes than a targeted method, and so I was cursed to randomly sojourn. I passed through thousands of planes on my way.

3592 worlds.

Not one was even close to home. The vast majority of these worlds couldn't even support life and every time I passed through one I drained my rusting life support system, running out of air and water and food and hope.

Every so often, I passed through a version of Earth that did support life and I was able to rip off my helmet. But make no mistake, these worlds were not cradles of civilization. These often were worlds locked in prehistory, ruled by titanic dinosaurs or children of night. These weren't suitable: I wasn't looking to survive, I was looking to live.

The worst were the worlds that had already came and went. A wretched handful of them had life left to them, the remnants of humanity eking out a foothold in a world that had died. But again, they were surviving and not living. I could have survived in my old home, a horrid and brutal life.

Other dead worlds were truly gone, paved over in a myriad of ways. Worlds in which every person was dead, worlds that were nothing but cake, worlds where I could not even find a corpse to cradle.

It would be condescending of me to say that hope had left my life not long after I began my journey, it still trapped in Pandora's Amphora. That's obvious. You can tell it by now.

And then, after 1274 days, I stepped out onto a dock in the New York City Harbor, drowning in light and people. I can't quite recall what happened next, as my next coherent memory is being treated in a hospital with tears on my face. It was basic kindness that had been absent in my life for too long.

This world is not the same as my home, but it is close enough that I can accept it. In a certain sense, I wouldn't have it to be the same, because I would have been lying to myself that I had never left. My old home could never truly be replaced, but this is a home too.

I've never been able to capture the totality of what I felt on that day. New York City was beautiful to me even in my old world, and that steel grandeur coupled with me finding a new, better world broke me. It wasn't the thousand worlds I walked through, but the one that

I ended upon.

Conventional methods have completely failed at letting others feel what I feel on that day. It's not just the skyline itself that was beautiful to me, but it had the added weight of everything that had happened to me in the preceeding years. They have always managed to capture some of it, but never the whole, never the entirety.

So I turned to song. In 1934, Frederick von Hayek submitted an exhibit that consisted of a symphony that made listeners think they were on a cliff face overlooking a waterfall. It did decently for the time because standards were lower back then, but in the end it was little more than a proof of concept.

But there's a diamond in that rough, and I was able to make a ballad that puts listeners in my shoes. It goes quickly, but the beauty of magic is you can force ideas into people's heads. A single note of my song will carry hours of sights, sounds, inferences and learning.

Perhaps with this, people will actually understand what I went through in its totality. It may not be enough, but I can only have hope.

Project Proposal 2004-024: "My Father's Values"

Name: Guy Chesapeake

Title: *My Father's Values*

Material Requirements:

- Batteries (9 V, only one necessary while piece is active, to be replaced as needed)
- Copper wire (1 mm cross-sectional area, ~3 feet needed)
- Silicon chips (5 cm x 5 cm, 3 needed)
- Electrical components (see full list of necessary resistors, transistors, capacitors , etc. on back of page)
- Solder
- Straight pins (~20 needed)
- Glass jar (1 needed, already in my possession)
- Formaldehyde (2.5 L, already in my possession)
- Human brain w/ reality-altering capabilities (1 needed, already in my possession)

Abstract:

Programmed electrical stimulation of the brain of a reality warper will result in the periodic appearance of not-quite-people within 15 m of the brain's location. These not-quite-people (hereafter "actors") will carry out a series of predetermined performance art pieces. The central device will be situated in the main exhibition hall and activated at midnight, resulting in the following performance schedule:

9:00 am - 5 actors will appear in a circular formation around the central piece, wearing nightwear. They will walk around the main exhibition hall while yawning loudly. Dissipates 5 minutes after activation.

11:00 am - 1 actor in a suit will appear within 5 m of the central

piece. He/she will offer to shake the hand of various patrons and/or employees. Handshakes of insufficient pressure will result in the actor breaking the weak shaker's hand through grip strength. (Not sure what happens if you don't shake his/her hand. Wouldn't advise that.) Dissipates 20 minutes after activation.

12:30 pm - 1 actor wearing a tour guide uniform will appear. He/she will offer to give tours to entering patrons. Once 5 or so people have agreed, he/she will lead patrons around the main exhibition hall, explaining the significance behind each piece present there. These explanations will almost certainly be incorrect, based on superficial readings of each piece present. Tour guide will also occasionally insult the artist(s) who created a particular piece, unless he/she is talking about mine. Dissipates at conclusion of tour, which is about 30 minutes long. Also dissipates if next performance is scheduled to begin, and not enough people have agreed to take the tour.

4:00 pm - 2 actors (1 male, 1 female) will appear dressed in casual clothes. They will pretend to be ordinary patrons for 15 minutes. The couple will then get into an increasingly loud argument about something personal. This argument will escalate until one actor performs an act of violence against the other. Both will then weep loudly until dissipation. Dissipates 25 minutes after activation.

6:30 pm - 1 actor will appear. He/she will lie on floor in fetal position. He/she will not cry. Dissipates 45 minutes after activation.

8:00 pm - 1 actor will appear, with hammer and chisel. 1 stone block will also appear. The actor will use the hammer and chisel on the block in various places, eventually causing the whole thing to break apart into various chunks. He/she will yell profanities if approached. Dissipates 40 minutes after activation.

9:00 pm - 5 actors will appear as far away from the central piece as possible, dressed in nightwear. They will walk around the main exhibition hall, yawning loudly. 2 minutes prior to dissipation, they will form a circle around the central piece. Dissipates after 5 minutes.

Warping reality is supposedly quite tricky. Warping reality posthumously is probably harder, especially when doing so relies

largely on electrocuting specific parts of the reality warper's brain. This is not the first time I've set up a piece like this, but I've never set up a piece of this style with this many performances per day. Things should go roughly according to plan. Expect some improvisation from the actors. Try to keep people from forcing them to get out of character, and everything should be fine. Actors should be easy enough to subdue if they get out of hand - they all have regular strength, with the exception of the handshake guy's hands.

Intent: I've heard a lot about how hard it is to grow up with the soul of an artist and overly pragmatic parents. I think that it's probably equally hard to grow up with the soul of an electrical engineer and a committed anartist as a father.

I can neither deny nor erase the impact that my father has had on my life. He used to tell me that he was the best I was going to get, and I'd do well to follow his example. As near as I can figure, he wanted to instill in me the following values:

- Punctuality
- A firm handshake
- Self-serving bullshit Creativity
- Self-confidence
- Emotional reservation
- Passion

I think we'd all do well to keep these in mind. I can't erase the scars of my childhood, but I can't ignore how much my father played a role in making me the man I am today.

I suppose it's out of a sort of reverence for my father that I ended up making art after all.

I suppose it's out of a sort of resentment towards him that I chose to do so by zapping his brain with electricity roughly fifty times a day.

My father and I used to have a lot of hatred for each other, but I think we're cool now.

Project Proposal 2014-733: "The Role of a Lifetime"

Title: The Role of a Lifetime

Materials: Tatemae
One (1) "façade"-type identity template
Reality disruption agent
The idea of Theater
Megaphone

Abstract: A simple director's megaphone, composed of a cone of wood, cardboard, or other suitably stiff material (the actual material of the device is irrelevant, so long as the device looks like the stereotypical director's megaphone). When "cut" is called through the device, it removes the learned behaviors and society norms of the individual, replacing them with those of the actor.

In essence, the person will become convinced that rather than being whoever they thought they were before, that they are an actor playing their previous persona in a stage or film production. The individual recognizes his role in the grand farce of existence and acts accordingly, willingly taking direction from the user.

The actors are some of the best I've ever worked with: compliant, patient, always willing to take criticism, and I believe their performance speaks for itself. My only complaint is that they have a tendency to fall into a role. If the direction goes too far away from the established role, the quality of their performance drops steeply.

I've also found that the actors can leave the "set" entirely, going "backstage". Not wanting to detract from the point of the piece with irrelevant ethical questions, I have avoided resuming the performance until all actors are accounted for. When I asked one of them what it was like, he seemed confused, saying "It's… it's backstage. Don't you know what that is?" When I inquired further, he only seemed to get more agitated. This seems to happen whenever inconsistencies are pointed out. The actors don't seem to

understand the question, perceiving it as stupid or nonsensical.

Intent: Like a lot of writers and directors, I've often wondered how "real" my characters are. If I could somehow manifest them in reality, would they function as people? I tried this in my 2005 piece *Character Study*. As that piece so beautifully demonstrated, while characters often appear to act as real people, this is a surprisingly thin disguise (apologies to gallery seventeen).

This time, I decided to try the reverse. Rather than take a character and make them real, this piece takes a real person and reduces them to a character. Unlike *Character Study*, the piece acts directly on the audience, which I hope will give a more comprehensive experience.

The piece is, first and foremost, meant to inspire doubt and questioning in the audience. Because both their normal state and their behavior within the scope of the piece feel equally real, lucid, and plausible, they are forced to come to terms with the idea that they may, in fact, be nothing more than someone else's character, literally or figuratively.

Characters, by their very nature, can only present the façade of being a full human being. Even the deepest of characters cannot be whole conceptualized people, as this would imply that the author has developed a full extraneous personality (which is normally considered a sign of mental illness).

By assaulting the locus of control of the audience, the piece attacks one of the most fundamental axioms around which the human experience is constructed: namely, that the individual is in control of their actions. Shifting the locus very rapidly from the somewhat internal position of the average psyche to the very much external environment present in the piece is meant to cause severe psychic disorientation.

The secondary goal is to call attention to the discrepancy between the outward appearance, known in Japanese as *tatemae*, and the actual self, known as *honne*. The audience must then question the lies, the half-truths, the omissions that form their outward persona, and whether or not such a persona is an independent construction,

capable of existing as a concept on its own, or whether it is intrinsically linked to the internal, though not necessarily “true” self. By equating the *tatemae* façade used in polite society with the authorial façade used to create fictional characters, the audience is left to simultaneously doubt their own moral integrity, as well as the very integrity of the world around them.

Project Proposals 1964-011/1974-014

Name: Mieszko Wójcik

Title: *Masoschism*

Material Requirements:

- 40 m x 40 m clear plastic tarp (One needed)
- 2 m steel tent poles (Four needed)
- 20 cm steel tent stakes (Four needed)
- ~1 m rope loops to connect the two (Four needed)
- Forks (20 needed)
- Knives (20 needed)
- Sharpener (One needed, already in my possession)
- Wooden baseball bats (20 needed)
- 60 mm x 2.5 mm iron nails (200 needed)
- Hammers (20 needed)
- Stove (One needed)
- Generator compatible with the stove (One needed)
- ~1 m wire to connect the two (One needed)
- Branding irons of any mark (10 needed)
- Metal table (One needed)
- First aid kit (One needed, already in my possession)
- Any unmentioned miscellaneous items which may be used to harm an individual (No bombs/diseases)

Abstract: *Masoschism* is a makeshift tent made out of clear plastic, which is draped over four metal tent poles and fastened to the ground using ropes tied around tent stakes. While inside of the tent, feelings of pleasure and pain are inverted, so that any harm done to a person feels "good" in a manner unique to each person. Likewise, any action which would normally result in feelings of pleasure (a gentle caress, petting a fluffy dog, the obvious example(s) you're already thinking of, etc.) result in pain; again, unique to each participant. This is achieved by a simple temporary re-wiring of the brain, causing pain signals to output dopamine and pleasure signals

to output whatever it is that causes pain. Due to this process, the participant's brain is re-wired upon exit, which can cause them to suddenly realize that they've stabbed themselves repeatedly (Hence the "schism").

Masoschism should be displayed outside, where the tent stakes can be properly hammered into the ground. The metal table should be put in the center of the piece and all instruments capable of inflicting pain except the stove and branding iron are to be neatly placed on top. The branding irons should be kept partially inside of the stove, which should remain on and at a constant temperature sufficient enough to keep the branding irons red-hot.

Up to 20 people should be allowed in at any one time. Waivers must be signed by any and all participants, for hopefully obvious reasons. In accordance with the health and safety regulations of potentially lethal pieces (Article 5, Section 4), the first aid kit will be kept on-hand in case of severe damage.

Intent: On 12 September 1961, I accidentally wandered into a freshman college philosophy class instead of my normal chemistry class. Too shy to leave and therefore non-verbally admit my mistake to the 50 or so people seated, I decided to sit in on the lecture. The professor walked in and spoke at length about morality and why people consider certain things to be "distasteful". When he asked the class why they thought certain things were inherently bad, almost everyone said the same thing; these actions cause pain.

This obviously got me thinking. If the existence of evil is inherently based off of suffering, then would evil be considered moral if the harmed person gains nothing but pleasure? Admittedly, this kind of thought is why I would have failed philosophy, but it nevertheless remained in the back of my mind for the next few months. Needless to say, this is my practical display of that thought.

Name: Johnathan Miller

Title: *It's still garbage*

Material Requirements:

- 2 foot tall cylindrical steel garbage cans; 1 foot diameter (5 needed, 70 preferred)
- Steel garbage can lid (1 needed, already in my possession)
- Something capable of cleanly cutting through steel
- 2 foot tall marble pillar; 1 foot diameter (1 needed)
- Hammer and chisel (1 set, already in my possession)
- Spotlights (4 needed)

Abstract: *It's still garbage* is a steel garbage can 2 feet tall and between 12-142 feet deep depending on the number of cans gathered. The can should be placed in the center of its own room on the intricate marble pedestal provided. The room should be devoid of light outside of the spotlights, which should hang from the ceiling corners and directly face the piece. At no point should the spotlights be turned off.

Intent: Mieszko Wójcik won the 1964 exhibition with *Masoschism*. While I respected and continue to respect the opinions of the judges, I disagree with their verdict. I saw *Masoschism* firsthand, and even tested out some of the milder injuries during the off-hours, as I didn't want to be hit in the back of the head by Sociopath-Sophie with one of the 20 spiked bats that were lying around. While I was sitting down on the table idly prodding my thigh with a fork, I had time to reflect on the tent I found myself in.

It was ugly as sin.

Specks of blood dotted the tarp, steak knives were partially buried so their blades stuck up, and none of it meshed in the slightest. I understand that most of it was out of Wójcik's hands, it was performance art after all, but even in its initial state, the state Mieszko had the most control over, it was simply bland.

This piece is meant to be self-reflective of our community, and call into question the worrying shift away from beauty. The art world as a whole seems to be focusing on making their point as blunt and noticeable as possible, and completely disregarding the aesthetic of their piece.

Project Proposal 2014-234: "Outdoor Object of Ordinance"

Title: *Outdoor Object of Ordinance*

Material Requirements:

- One (1) 7’ Park Bench

Abstract: The *Outdoor Object of Ordinance* is a park bench. It is fully functional in the sense of it is able to be sat on comfortably by up to three people who do not know each other and up to five people who have known each other for a long period of time. One individual is able to comfortably assume his/herself in a horizontal or resting position on the surface of the bench. The *Outdoor Object of Ordinance* may also function as a surface of which objects can be placed, however objects smaller or as large as the gaps on the bench may drop to the ground if not handled with care.

As the object’s intent, it should be displayed in a park in which the public are able to spectate and utilise it as they please.

Intent: In my search for inspiration I have come across marvellous, remarkable displays of the most unconventional means of contemporary art done by my idols, the professionals, and quite a few of my colleagues. I marvel at their creation, in my mind thinking how I can succumb to their degree. Such dangerous, controversial, brave surrealistic objects can only be exceeded by a piece more dangerous, more controversial, more surrealistic.

I was sat down one Monday afternoon and in vain, attempted to gush all my thoughts and ideas into a sketch book. A life-sized replica of Joseph Stalin’s head reciting Soviet secret in the tune of the first documented song by humanity. A school play of Les Miserables with genuine famine. North Korea but bees. Nothing satisfied me. As I stood up from where I was sitting, it hit me.

Everything in the movement could be broken by something ordinary.
I am making an anomaly among anomalies.

Ex Nihilo Nihil

I wake up, and I wonder once again what I am. What I was meant to be. I move, though I will my limbs not, and as I walk through the darkness I feel them scrape upon one another, and crunch on the brushed concrete floor. This is not life.

They open the door, and my body freezes. The light is so bright it burns, and although I have no eyes to see it I know it is there. They move slowly around me, and I cannot run. I can never run, even when they no longer see me. I am a slave to myself, and to my shapeless limbs.

Sometimes, before I kill them, I look at myself. At my grey, formless hands, at my misshapen head. At the walls of my prison. At the floor, stained red and brown by the substances that I will into being. I am a statue, but I have no beauty. I move constantly, but I have no purpose. I am a thing without form or function.

I am not art.

They come, and they look at me. I feel their stares bore into my hollow body, probing for any hint at my tormented mechanism. It continues for days, for years. The burning light, and the inevitable darkness. They have stopped now: they know that there is nothing more to learn. I was not made for them, nor they for me. I am no plaything of theirs.

I am not **`wonderful`**.

It is possible that I was a gift of some kind, but it is hard to imagine what good I could possibly do in the world. My frame is weak, and I have no kindness to bestow. I cannot control the crimes I commit, and I can *only* commit those crimes. My life is not mine to give, and I

know in my heart that they will not take it. I will never know the pleasure of death.

Whoever created me, they were not **charitable**.

It is true that I am beyond their comprehension, and that they hold me in reverence. It is the reverence of the damned. I kill for pleasure, and the pleasure is not even mine to have. My painted mask runs red with blood, and I know that there is no God, for if there was he would not let me live. He would not let me be. I am an abomination, a threat to both good and evil. In a world of black and white, I dwell in the grey.

I have been called many things, but never divine.

What, then, is my ultimate fate? Not to be **bought** and **sold** as a commodity, I know that. I am outside the reach of mere wealth. Those that hold me in their possession would rather see me ground to dust than traded as merchandise. Nor am I a weapon: I am weak despite my strength. I murder, but I do not harm unjustly, and I am not under the control of any single person. I have no **knowledge** to impart, no joy to bestow, and no task to fulfil. I do not even scare them any more, disquieting though my visage is.

Amongst a web of life, I am a dying prisoner in a shell of clay. I am a single object, doomed without purpose, without any source of respite. To subsist as I do now is to die a death more potent than that suffered by mortals: I can only dream of having the vitality they take for granted. No-one takes responsibility for my actions save myself, and even I am unable to speak out against the world.

My legs walk onwards, tracking pathways through the brown and red, awaiting the pain that comes with light, and the darkness that hurts me more.

In my cage of brick and steel, in my cage of dye and dust, I am alone.

Ascension Hub

In between each tiny thing,
Cracked in rock or dreamed in dreams,
Lies a piece of a mystery,
Its secrets

In each spark of lightning,
Drawn on walls, in sewing seams,
Lies something we barely see,
Its secrets

Lean in close, lend an ear,
Do not fuss, forget the years,
Everything will be explained
And all in good time
What secrets kept from you
Inside your own mind?

Sometimes I Wish This Moment Could Last Forever
Waiting on the Good Times

- **In the Beginning...**
- **Breaking & Entering**
- **Camping w/ Friends**
- **The Meeting**
- **Philosophical Car Ride**
- **Cabin in the Woods**
- **Jerry Saves Us From Ourselves**
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- **Epilogue**

Forever Young

Sometimes I Wish This Moment Could Last Forever

by DarkStuff

Are there any questions?

What happens in real time?

Our brains collapse into black holes. There is only so much information the human brain can store, and entropy would eventually have it collapse entirely. Fortunately, our machine works faster than physics the way we understand them. Nobody will know they're dead, and we won't be present to handle the aftermath.

Have you tested your machine?

No. There is no way to test it. If it works, we all die. Which means it's a one shot. All we can do is trust the equations and the conscience within. We have been able to test some cursory abilities, to make sure it works on a simpler level, but there is no way to know if the end goal works before executing said end goal. Worst case scenario, we all die and are here to feel it, which is what would happen if we didn't activate the machine anyways.

Specify cursory tests.

They were extraordinarily dangerous, which is why we only have

two. In the first, the tested subject entered a coma. We believe her consciousness left her body completely, and dissipated into the universe. The second one, our subject's conscience was able to connect with my partner's. In this way, we know that we can connect souls, and we can release souls. But we could not test its ultimate use.

This, for obvious reasons, is a last resort.

Of course.

If we come within a month, this will be considered. In the meantime, your research will be monitored. Make your theories more practical. Work harder to prove them. We will see if we need your help in time. If your machine does indeed fail, it should at least provide a quicker more painless death than the inevitable.
Mr. Young, please take a seat.

Rachael was doing very important work.

60%

It wasn't homework, to be sure, but it was important.

60%

Only two days ago, while stressing over a math test in class, Rachael made the lights go out.

60%

Nobody suspected her, but she felt it. She felt her mind searching the cables and wires running through the walls.

60%

Right now, she was figuring out how to charge her cellphone without a charger.

60%

Work damn you.

61%

"Rachael," her mom called up to her, "get out of your cave and come to dinner, you've had your 'just a minute' already!"

And she had. Rachael Davidson practically danced down the stairs, rubbed her dog's face as she passed by, and spun into her chair. Rachael had accomplished something. She was learning control. She sat down, facing a bowl of split pea soup, the best possible addition to her day. Silently, her parents stared her in the eye, and they all simultaneously bowed their head. In unison, they hummed "Bless, oh lord, this food to our use and us to thy service, and keep us ever mindful of the needs of others. In Jesus' name, amen." Rachael didn't hesitate to dig in, ignoring looks from her parents.

She was having the best day she could remember, even better than Disneyworld, even better than her 13th birthday, even better than 8th Grade graduation. She had a purpose now, she was excited, she was *electric*, she felt like the queen of this crappy town, of this stupid country, of this dingy world!

She looked at her toaster and could feel its functions, reach through it into the outlet, and faintly feel a rat gnawing on a large important wire. She could warn her parents that they might have a rat problem, say that the fuse box looks faulty, tell them the fridge isn't as cold as it should be. She could search the house all the way into her room, and she could turn on the cat feeder without having to lift a finger. She did so, felt it hum, and felt so very, very *alive*.

She glanced around the room, searching for some more things she

could test her abilities on without drawing attention. A home computer she could email, an alarm clock she could make go off, a TV absently playing Fox News that she would be glad to shut up.

"Wow."

"What?"

"You finished so fast."

"I have homework. It was delicious. May I be excused?"

"If you have homework, of course. Lights out by 9:30."

"'Course, mom!"

She was halfway up the stairs, contemplating her abilities. She could see everything's internal workings, activate things without a power source - where did the electricity come from? - in the right situations she could unstick an elevator, operate dangerous equipment from afar, anything with wires were her - brains had wires, brains were all wires and electric impulses, she could be a therapist, she could find cures for Alzheimer's, she could look into her mom's mind and see what she's seeing… huh.

She peered down beneath the landing, spying her mom between two stairs. She knew it was dangerous, if she screwed up who knew what would happen to her mom. But she can look through things much easier than she can affect them, what's wrong with taking a look? She hesitated for a second, contemplating the situation. It didn't take her long to weigh her options.

Rachael closed her eyes, concentrated, found the glowing oblong thing that was her mother's brain, and held it. It was difficult, she winced at first, touching it was like a constant static electric shock. She got used to it, her mom noticed nothing. She dug deeper.

She could feel the impulses, thousands of nerves going off at once, information coming in and out. She thought that in time, she might be able to read these electric messages. She barely knew what she was feeling, surges and waves soared through Rachael's body, her eyes felt like popping out of their sockets, but she held on, she

maintained. She got used to it, and absently wondered if she looked suspicious right now. Maybe she was slumped on the stairs. She'll know soon enough, she thought.

She concentrated, hard, her head felt squeezed and twisted as she tried to figure out what her mom was seeing. Her biology class had conveniently explained pieces of the brain recently, and she worked her way through nerves and axons towards the back of her mom's brain, towards her occipital lobe. She felt around it, she knew. She knew she couldn't maintain this for long, she could feel it. But she wanted so badly to know. She reached a hand in, grabbed this large pulsing sphere, and felt another shock siege her body, and…

And…?

Hello?

That's not right, she must've done something wrong. She was surrounded by white, pure white, extending in all directions up down left and right.

I did something wrong. Oh shit, I did something wrong. My mom's blind, she's seeing nothing, that's what's going on. I have to pull out.

But she couldn't. She couldn't let go. She felt nothing, smelled nothing, heard nothing, and saw white. Just whiteness. This is when panic set in.

Shit shit shit shit shit.

It was like a choir in her head.

Shit fucking no, I did something wrong, I'm in a coma or she is or we both are, I wish I listened to me more often, god fucking-

There was a dark spot.

Could she move?

She could move.

She panicked in the direction of the spot.

And she was scared.

She saw darkness again, a night sky and a cobble street, gas lights and long vaguely Victorian looking dresses. Everybody's motion was frozen, like she was looking at a colored in black and white photo, men in fancy suits just going about their day. She could see a club, boozy bachelors and wooing women, a beggar on the side of the road and a bratty child spitting in his face. All their heads… where their brains should be, she saw lights so intensely bright it hurt to look at them, and a soft glow emanating throughout the rest of the city, through the walls. But none of this scared her.

What scared her were the hands she saw.

Long twisting arms extending from beyond the skyline, reaching into the heads of all these people, grabbing tightly to their minds. These were mobile, so very mobile, writhing and twisting while even the raindrops held stoutly to their spots in mid air. She could see them spreading throughout the city, disappearing behind buildings, tugging on the neurons of their heads, even more extending up into the sky, into space, going beyond the limits of vision. She couldn't move, couldn't squirm, couldn't run, as something made its way over the horizon. She was paralyzed, unable to speak, to turn, seeing herself stuck in the air dancing in the street, some large amorphous being making its way into her vision. She wanted to run, anywhere, even take her eyes away from the thing - how huge must it be, glowing from beyond comprehension.

And she felt it. Staring at it, it stopped. And she couldn't think, her thoughts replaced by true terror, a pressure in her chest, head, and stomach, a hint of nausea taking hold of her eyes and throat, as she stared at it, with no eyelids to shut. And she saw it.

i t
l o o k e d
b a c k

It was a long time before anybody heard from Rachael Davidson again.

Sometimes I Wish…|**Waiting on the Good Times** »

Waiting on the Good Times

by DarkStuff

FoldUnfold

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1: In the Beginning…

I have known Ed for a long time. I mean, a *long* time. We met back when we both lived in Placer County, which had a good decade between now and then. I was a socially awkward 4th Grader hitting adolescence early, and he was a green eyed kid who had all the signs of growing up to be a sociopath. We made a wonderful pair. He did all the dirty work, I reaped all the rewards, we got in trouble a lot, we toughed everything out with each other. It was quite a time to

be a 10 year old boy climbing trees and spying on girls with a 9 year old crazed blonde haired tornado. Sure, we were creepy kids, but with the childish innocence that came with the age. In short, it was a blast. Almost blowing up old abandoned houses, kicking dodgeballs at Jai's house and accidentally breaking windows, doing so again and intentionally breaking his windows — it was just such a reckless fantasy.

However, like most people end up doing, we grew and matured. I always played with the ladies, Ed found a peace staring at dudes' abs. He always got good grades, I always skated by with C's. I always walked a fairly straight edge, he was caught for selling cocaine. As we grew up, our dynamics changed, but it remained that we were quite a team. When I found myself bicurious — and later bisexual — we had our romantic fling, but it fucked with our normal routines and after a couple dates and a drug fueled bedroom adventure we went fairly fluidly back to our chummy ass slapping insult slinging nature. I went back to my cheerleaders, he went back to his football players, and we called it even.

When graduation finally came, it was an awkward time for both of us. Life as we knew it hadn't existed without each other in close reach, and so after a very short discussion following a couple drinks at a celebratory party we found each other to be roommates. Due to his perfect academic record (the recommendations of a couple teachers got him through in spite of his drug dealing incident), Ed got accepted into Vanderbilt University School of Medicine, and so we were off to Massachusetts. Of course, I wasn't certain what I was gonna do there, but hey, I could figure that out along the way. First priority was sticking with my emotional rock and extra best friend Ed Dilber. I could get a minimum wage job working at some fast food chain in the meantime, it honestly didn't matter to me. If I could continue chasing tail and Ed could continue to serenade me with his newest genre idea, I was all shaped up to be a happy man.

After four years — six relationships for me, just one for him — of Ed making it through college and me just trying (and succeeding) to get promotions at Subway, he made it into Vanderbilt University. At this point we were living with his boyfriend Jai (different Jai), hiking on weekends, biking on weekdays, drinking and being stupid young

adults. We infiltrated fraternities (sometimes not even at Vanderbilt) and messed with all the big burly dudes and all the skinny unreal perfect babes. Trashed our fair share of parties, made a couple friends — some dudes named **Jacob and Richard**, their pals Kailash, Jessica, and Gyana, and a freak named Rachael — and had an overall good young adult experience. Barely spent a night in our apartment because we were avid couch surfers and partiers. Not sure how Ed even managed to get good grades with how little time we spent at home, at Vanderbilt no less.

While Ed was cutting open bodies (or so I imagined) and I was getting intimate with his boyfriend, times were good. Very good. In fact, I'd say I've just had a good life, really. Enough money, fantastic friends, great sex life, good health and fun adventures. It was really all I could hope for. A good life, yeah. A very good life. But alas, all good things must come to an end. I didn't say that with the intent of implying I died, though I get what it sounds like. However, it's not *that* crazy a conclusion to make. In a kind of weird, roundabout, stupid metaphorical way, we all sorta died a little in the process. Worked very close with it, too — oh I'll stop my rambling and just cut to the chase. This is how it went down:

I was making out with Jai because we had nothing better to do, and Ed practically kicks down the door. Seeing his crazy red eyes and wide sprint ready stance, I took my tongue outta Jai's mouth and he took his hand outta my pants.

"What's —"

"Fucking pack it. Alex, Jai, pack everything," he made an exasperated smile, "we're on the fucking run so take your precious items and get in the car and we are fucking booking it okay?"

There wasn't a question about it. No other words had to be shared. Despite the immediate confusion, the three of us had a sort of pavlovian response to situations like this. Trust ran thick through our veins, and we began to fucking pack it. Pictures of my old dog Roxie, Ed's bong, and my laptop were all in a bag in seconds. In the remaining time I had while Jai and Ed were taking care of their own shit, I grabbed some snacks from the mini fridge and stuffed them in a sack.

We all made eye contact for a meaningful second, and rushed out the door and down the stairwell. Emptying into the parking lot, we rushed for the Toyota — the parking job was clearly rushed — and practically crashed into the seats. Ed bumped his head on the car door. He then got the car into gear like it meant his life. Jai and I shared a glance that said “we probably shouldn’t initiate conversation”. Ed looked behind him, backed up and out, and sped onto the road. We took a turn here and there, going a little too fast, and ended up on the interstate. Finally, after about a minute of silence and finally obeying the speed limit, Ed spoke up.

“Okay, so, Jai, take over driving.”

“The fucking, how?”

“Just figure it out, okay? Here,” Ed started climbing into the back seats.

“*Dude!* Are you fucking high? What the — get back to the wheel, this is — !”

Ed ended up in the back seat, and Jai clambered from the passenger seat to get to the wheel continuing to scream well justified profanities at Ed and getting them back on course for not careening into woodland.

“Sorry about that. No, I’m not high, except on adrenaline. Look, we’re gonna have to go to Rachael’s house.”

“Rachael’s house? Why?”

“Well well well, uh, you see… This is all pretty impulsive, but like, see… I want you to meet a friend.”

Ed patted the back seats, and a head poked up from behind them. There was a… slimy looking man, with a couple noticeable incisions on him, and he was wearing only a white gown.

“Holy fucking *sharktits* man, who the hell is this?”

“Who the hell is who?”

“Ask *him!* He can speak, you idiot!”

“Is there someone in the trunk?!”

“And who might you be?”

“I don’t really know.”

“What does he mean he doesn’t fucking know?”

“It means he doesn’t know, shut up and let him talk!”

“‘Let him talk’? No, no no no, you have more explaining to do than he does.”

“Babe, please, who is this man and what is he doing in our car?”

“Why doesn’t *he* do the explaining? Here, everybody shut up, okay? Shut up.”

“Uh, I don’t, like, I don’t know anything.”

“Tell them what you told me.”

“I have some vague memories — more like images, but that’s it.”

“Oooh, soooo helpful. We picked up an amnesiac. Did you just hijack him from a hospital bed, I mean, what’s wrong with him?!”

“Dudes, dude dude dooders, okay? Listen up here, ya cunts, we’re doing this…”

Jai and I paused in uncomfortable angry silence.

“…Because I owe Rachael Davidson.”

“Babe, we’re breaking up.”

“No no no, okay okay, look! She’s the whole reason that I even *got* into this university! She got the cocaine dealing overlooked, it was all her, and now I owe her a favor no questions asked. I would have done this alone but she seemed panicked as shit. Thus, I panicked, and needed backup.”

“Bullshi —”

“Okay fuck off, look! We need to meet her at her house, deliver her an amnesiac named Jerry Gardner, and then we’re done! We’re done, okay? It’s gonna all be good. Just trust me.”

“Bullshit. We’re going home.”

“I’m behind the wheel, and I agree.”

Ed Dilber glanced between me and the strange naked Jerry sitting in our trunk.

“Guys, I’m scared of Rachael. I don’t think that any fate we would suffer at the hands of the law could be worse than what Rachael will do to us —”

“Do to *you.*”

“— if we don’t go along with this.”

“You are pulling us along in this adventure —”

“This *task.*”

“— this extremely illegal adventure because you owe Rachael?”

“How how how how do you know it’s illegal? We’re just *transporting* a *dude* who doesn’t remember nothin’ to her *house.* She could be helping him — you know what, let’s work under the assumption that she’s helping this dude, okay?”

The silence in the car was tense and unbreakable. Jai continued to drive angrily, and Ed looked with eyebrows raised at the rest of us (excluding Jerry). I glanced, concerned, between Ed and the slick, slimy naked man in the trunk of our car. Jerry looked utterly confused and out of it. I figured maybe he was just… really high? Who knew, honestly. He was freaked out, and I was freaked out in turn. Ferrying a naked man to someone’s house wouldn’t even be that weird a thing to do in my world if it weren’t for the panic from Ed and the fact that it came from an owe to Rachael.

As far as I could tell, Rachael consisted off of people owing her. When she first met someone, she would make sure to do something huge for them. As big as she could get. In return, she'd tell them they owed her one favor, no questions asked. Using this system, Rachael would make a safety net of debtors so that whenever she fell she would take begrudging people and make them do things for her. It was her substitute for friendship; instead of getting people to help her out of the goodness of their heart and their undying companionship between them, she would lure people in with a feeling of debt and guilt. It made her a particularly unlikable personality.

Jai came up on the left turn that eventually led to Rachael's house, and he stopped at the stop sign. Grunting in disapproval, and continuing to not look at his boyfriend Ed, he turned on the turn signal and began to hang a left. After making the turn, he tilted his head back.

"You know what? You owe me."

2: Breaking & Entering

It was a very small house — one floor with maybe three or four rooms not including the bathroom — with a luscious colorful garden in front. We stayed in the car while we ushered Jai out to knock on the door. Due to the situation, what would normally have been an awkward campaign to cover Jerry enough to get to the door turned into a covert mission to reach Rachael and transfer some classified good. Jai approached the building, looking nervously back at us, and then rang the doorbell. No response. He looked back at us again, and we wordlessly egged him on. He rang the doorbell again, looked in one of the windows, and then came back.

"Nobody's home."

"Bullshit."

"Bullshit? You saw!"

"No no no, I'm taking a shot —"

“No you’re not, you idiot! *You* look after Jerry. *I’ll* go. Me.”

I walked up to the door and rang the doorbell. I knew Jai and Ed were looking at me disapprovingly, but I wasn’t going to look at them. I rang the doorbell again. No response. I turned back, they had the look I expected them to have, and then I just sorta… opened the door. Jai hadn’t checked if the door was unlocked yet. Jai and Ed mouthed at me such sayings like “what are you doing?”, “close the door!”, “no no no no no!”, but I just shrugged at them and walked in.

The house was pretty clean. Looked really nice. The most prominent colors were purple and dark blue. She definitely had themed her house. I searched around, finding everything extremely tidy and well organized. It practically looked like nobody lived here, like it was a model home. After walking around for a bit, and finding nothing, I saw that her desktop computer… was on. She must have left it like that. It was on the desktop, and currently open was a .txt file called “For Housesitter”. I walked up, and read it to myself…

“Dear Ms. Housesitter,

I have entrusted you with my house this week, and I hope you take good care of it. My cats need to be fed and watered every morning and every evening, my plants need to be watered every night (use three full watering cans), and on your last day here it would be wonderful of you to vacuum and dust the house. Take all that you want from the fridge for food and such, and clean any dishes you dirty. If you have any questions, you can *open Chrome on this computer and email me from my own email* — I’m already logged in, and if I get an email from myself then I would know it’s you.

Sincerely,
Rachael Davidson”

I opened her email, and composed… something. I mean, that part was emphasised with asterisks. It seems like something you’d need to do, right? I wrote to her. Er, well, it looked digitally like she wrote to herself. But anyways, it went like this…

“Dear Ms. Davidson,

Well, I have some questions and I think better in person. How do I meet you?

Please,
Ms. Housesitter."

I, uh… Well, I didn't know what else to do. She was going to respond to herself, and I didn't know her email's password, so this is the only place I could have gone to see if she responded, and guys were waiting for me, and — oh! There it was. An email. That was fast.

"Dear Ms. Housesitter,

Where Alex got kicked in the nuts by Sofia that one time. Tomorrow.

Sincerely,
Rachael Davidson

P.S. Smooth."

I admittedly didn't know where I got kicked in the nuts by Sofia. That might have been one of my blackout drunk nights — of which I have only had a few! Stop your judgement. Stop it. Anyways, I sprinted back to the car, and delivered the news.

"Was she there? What did you do?"

"Ra— wait shit!"

I sprinted back in, and logged out of her email. Didn't want anyone else coming and seeing the conversation, she couldn't have had that house without having roommates as well. I sprinted back out, and slid into the car.

"Rachael's being really fucking secretive. She had a text file open that told me, in very vague terms, to open her email and send her and email through her own email. I did that, and she responded telling me to meet her at the place I got kicked in the nuts by Sofia. Tomorrow, she specified. Oh, and she called me smooth"

"Oh yeah, that place. Okay. So I guess we're going home and

meeting her —”

“No, no no no, no, we aren’t going home. This is too weird to go home. We’re camping.”

“Camping? Are you crazy?”

“I’m not — come on, it could even be fun! We have snacks, we have some blankets for Jerry, we can just go out and light some things — ‘cause we have lights for blunts — and hang out and get high and have a good time.”

…

“Just drive out into the woods and we’ll set things up, we’ll get to know Jerry better, c’mon!”

“Fine. Fine. Here we go. As per Ed’s request. Again.”

And away we went.

3: Camping w/ Friends

Our makeshift campfire threatened the underbrush, and made me very nervous. Ed had assured me we were fine, and that the leaves weren’t even dry yet so the forest was fine too. I wasn’t so sure, but the ground *was* really wet, so I ignored my pyrophobic instinct. We had thrown some blankets over Jerry, who sat in the trunk of the car. None of our clothes really fit him — as if we had any to spare. The campfire was uncomfortably silent, but we did have some pretty great marshmallows.

We talked at length about what Jerry might be. We grew grand conspiracy theories surrounding his origins, and we studied him up and down to see if we might have known him from somewhere. Perhaps he was an alien abductee, and Rachael was a government spy. Perhaps he was the world’s first clone, and Rachael is saving him from the labs so he can have rights. Maybe he was just some guy Rachael found on the side of the road and now she was going to exploit him… somehow.

“Well I didn’t say I knew *how,* just that it’s possible. It’s more likely than him being the result of an experiment involving switching minds with a pond duck.”

“I’d like some clothes.”

“You’re not getting clothes.”

“I feel naked.”

“That’s ‘cause you are.”

“I don’t like this.”

“Neither do we.”

“Glad that people enjoy my presence.”

“I thought you were shy.”

“No, just disoriented.”

“That makes four of us.”

Soon, we had set up a makeshift tent by flattening all the seats in the back of the Toyota minivan and laying out some blankets and tablecloths. The cuddle puddle — which excluded Jerry, who decided to take the whole night watch (we were feeling paranoid) because he wasn’t tired — was not as affectionate as usual. Probably due to everyone sitting deep in their own mixed feelings.

“I’m gonna miss class tomorrow.”

“Babe babe babe, this is so so so much more important.”

“Really?”

“Really really really. Now shut up so I can sleep.”

“Guys?”

“Yeah?”

“What *do* I do if I see people?”

“Can you drive?”

“I have not a single clue.”

I took the keys out of Ed’s pocket and threw them at him.

“Learn.”

“Oh wonderful.”

“That’s all, folks. Goodnight.”

The silence was sweet. Crickets chirped in the background, and the stars were actually quite pretty. This place wasn’t *devoid* of artificial light, but it was pretty nice. It made me think that I should spend more time in the woods. I also thought I should spend more time at the beach, but I couldn’t spend more time in *both* places. Also, beach was pretty far. Soon enough, I had remembered that Ed had taken the reigns on how I “chose” to spend my time.

“This sucks.”

“For god’s sakes, just sleep.”

I grumbled, turned over, and fell asleep to the wind in the leaves. This was insane. Very, very insane and not cool. It took me awhile to get comfortable, but I was certainly exhausted from the day. In my final moments of consciousness, I caught Jai mumbling “not in the mood”.

4: The Meeting

“Sofia kicked me in the nuts here…?”

“Yeah, it was pretty funny.”

This was out by Robert’s abode. A supposedly haunted house in the suburbs, Robert and some of his pals got it dirt cheap. I know I had been out here for a party or two, but it had been a long time, and I

most certainly did not remember being kicked in the nuts by Sofia. We were in a little area just above the house on a hill, partially hiding ourselves behind the car.

At this point, we were sure something illegal was going on, but we had committed too much. Jerry most certainly wasn't just some dude, and we started giving him fearful looks and he started making uncomfortable faces back at us. Whatever this was, it had warranted Rachael not coming back to her house and instead leaving us a cryptic note as to how to find her. This was beyond just some weird favor.

"What did I do?"

"Not entirely sure. You two were making out up against a tree over… there, both pretty drunk at the time, and you musta done *something,* because she just went 'augh!', reeled back and kicked you hard in the *nuts.* You sorta crumpled in pain, hugged the tree, and you let out a loud moaning 'ooooOOOOooooohhhh noooOOOOOOoooo'. It was hilarious."

"Huh. Musta blacked out."

"Yeah. Musta. HEY!"

"WHAT?"

"SEE ANYBODY YET?"

"NOPE NOPE NOPE, NO RACHAEL OR NOBODY."

"ALRIGHT, KEEP LOOKING BABE."

"I WILL I WILL I WILL, LOVE YA."

"Maybe we shouldn't be yelling."

"We need Rachael to know where we are *somehow.*"

"But, like, that could alert anyone."

"Hey, guys…"

“Well how else would you like us to do it? Should I just *whisper* in her direction?”

“Don’t talk at all! She said she’d be here, we said we’d be here, that’s it.”

“Guys?”

“COULD YOU TWO SHUT UP?”

“Don’t you —”

“SURE THING, BABE!”

“WHAT DID I JUST TELL YOU?!”

“Guys!”

“WHAT?”

“Rachael’s here.”

“WHAT?” He scurried back to us. “Where?”

“Here, you dumbasses.”

We all turned around and checked our blind spot. Rachael tossed down two license plates and a sander of all things.

“*Anyone* could have snuck up on you. You’re all dumbasses. Let’s get in the car.”

“Now wait, we need answers. What is all of this? Who is Jerry? Why’d you ditch us at your house? What the everliving fuck is going on?”

“Your first goal after everything went down was to find me. I have every right to just not give you answers. Right now, if you want to continue your goal of figuring out what the hell is going on, you will listen to me. Understood? I didn’t ask you to bring your little posse, so I am willing to overlook some common human decency.”

“Hey, wait a minute —”

“I brought a man back from the dead, and yet you are continuing to challenge me.”

She pointed at Jerry, looked impatiently at us, and then sat there waiting for a response. We all just looked at each other. She did *what?* The wind blew threw our hair, and Jerry just sort of stared at Rachael.

“You did *what?*”

“Did you not figure it out? Jerry was one of the bodies that professor whatever the hell was going to dissect in front of the class today or tomorrow or the next day or it doesn’t matter. He wasn’t embalmed yet, perfect for rejuvenation. I stole his corpse and brought him back into this world from wherever you go after you die.”

Everybody was just about to yell and scream at her, calling her a liar and a fraud and then probably cussing Ed out for bringing us on such a stupid mission, but Jerry made sure we didn’t have time to get anything out.

“I woke up on a table in one of the rooms at the… University? And she showed me a sheet of paper with my name on it and my picture. I looked in the mirror, and it was definitely me.”

Rachael, as if on cue, pulled said paper out of her back pocket and unfolded it. She handed it to us, and it was all what they both said it was. It wasn’t proof enough, because she could have plagiarized it, but it was certainly a step above what we were expecting. Before we could object, Rachael was the one to cut us off.

“I can prove it, even more than this does. Because, you know, bringing someone back to life isn’t something a paper can prove. If you saw aliens on live television you might still be skeptic because you weren’t there in person and it challenges your views too harshly. This is the same way. So, let me give you a little taste of what I am capable of doing.”

The car came on, honked three times, and turned its brights on and off. This, of course, startled the daylights out of everyone there except maybe Jerry. Looking back at Rachael, she showed that she

had nothing in her hands.

“Give me a beat.”

“A what?”

“A beat, like — oh, the Mario Bros. theme.”

Hon-hon-honk hon-honk honk, *honk.* It continued to play the Mario Bros. theme (without a tune, just the beats of the song), as Rachael seemed to conduct it with her hands. She even encorporated the sound of the brights clicking on and off sometimes.

“It’s not like I believe you, but holy shit, this is weird.”

“So we can get in the car?”

“Uh… well… wait, *no!* Answers, damn it! And I am the leader of my posse, it’s not like you can just waltz in here and take over! What the hell is happening?”

“I *said* no questions *asked,* where was I *unclear* on that?”

“I dunno, everything became slightly muddled when you claimed to have fucking BROUGHT someone BACK from the DEAD.”

“I’m not going to lie, man, I am scared of her, I think —”

“*Scared of her?!* You never admit that in front of someone! I was team leader, I am *continuing* to be *team fucking leader!*”

“For a day, babe. You have been ‘team leader’ for a day. She revived a dude. Supposedly. She can tell us what’s going on. Maybe. So get off your high horse, come live with us peasants and let Rachael take the reigns.”

“You just blindly believe her?!”

The car revved its own engine.

“…Yes.”

Ed sat in his seething, clenching his fists and furrowing his brow at

Rachael. His eye twitched a couple times, he glanced at Jerry in the car, and then he let out a deep, angry sigh.

“Fine fine fine, Rachael take the reigns, fucking fine.”

“Okay, good! Now, I need you all to discard your IDs.”

“What?”

“Oh come on. It’s common knowledge that IDs are trackable, the government has trace radioactive elements on IDs so that they can track you wherever you go if the situation calls for it. Slight differences in isotopes can tell them things about the person they’re tracking, up to and including the true identity. Everyone knows that."

…

“They do…?”

“Of fucking ‘course they do, what do you think —? Oh, fucking whatever. We’re in too deep already, okay? Look, think of it this way: you are involved in possibly the first time in history that a man has come back from the dead — like, the absolutely irrefutably dead. Is that just something you take credit for?”

We all glanced at each other. Was it? Why wouldn’t it be?

“No! If you came back from space and proved that you had traveled faster than the speed of light, then cool, but the public’s not getting to know that right away. That’s getting hushed up and you’re getting taken in and interviewed and locked up. Maybe you get to work with the big names, but maybe not. There is so much fucking risk involved, do you get that? You are in too deep to not tread carefully! All of us are in this now, if anyone leaves it is a liability to everyone else. I was not expecting to be met with such stupid resistance, but you have made me feel the need to ask: *are you in or aren’t you?*”

We all looked at each other nervously. Jerry didn’t really have a choice, so he just sat huddled up in his blankets. It was our, what, fifth uncomfortable silence? It sucked a lot. I was getting quite tired of this routine. Rachael pulled a heap of cut up ID out of her pocket and threw it on the ground. She motioned emphatically to us, and

we all just looked at her. After a bit, Jai threw his ID onto the plastic remains, and stomped it. He looked up to Ed and I and pursed his lips.

Reluctantly, I pulled out my ID, tried to snap it in half, was embarrassed when I wasn't able to, and then did the same as Jai. Now Jai and I were both looking at Ed. He looked so angry and distasteful… He glanced between me, Rachael and Jai. Then, he took out his whole wallet, pulled out the money to keep, and then lit it aflame with a lighter (his wallet was hemp). He threw the flame onto the pile, and sneered at all of us.

"Fine. I was having fun, too."

"Looks like I'm in for quite a ride."

"Certainly looks like it."

5: Philosophical Car Ride

After she showed us to her abandoned car that she took the plates off of and retrieved cans of baby barf green paint out of, we were on the road again. Rachael had argued over how well we had done the paint job, and we kept telling her that it didn't have to look good it just had to make the car unrecognizable. She had told us very clearly that when we got out to the cabin her parents own and she had the keys for that we needed to teach Jerry how to drive. That was to ensure that we didn't get recognised while on the road. She was really quite glad that we were out of the city, because that meant that there weren't cameras at every intersection. Still, we were all nervous. We decided that Jai was the designated driver until Jerry could do it. Jai made sure that he had a hood on the whole time. He (and everybody else) just prayed that it didn't impact his driving ability.

We had large swaths of silence on our drive out to the cabin. After the first two hours of heated debate on what to do, we had decided to first be secluded. Some way to give ourselves time to think. Rachael assured us that by this point they would have figured out a body was missing and that we were missing too, and a search

warrant would have been put out. Looking out into the wooded wilderness was, at the very least, calming. We all knew we weren't going back to school ever — or, in my case, that I was going back to Subway. As weird as it was, I really did enjoy being the manager of a Subway. Made me feel powerful. Paid enough for me to have hobbies. It was a damn shame to see it go. Now we were on the run, and man, that was interesting. Life as we knew it had already thrown itself off the top of a ten story building, but it seemed like change was going to just keep coming. I vouched that we learned wilderness survival skills and just sat up in the cabin, but Rachael assured us that as the search grows bigger the cabin *would* be checked — and even if not, her parents would come up there eventually. I said that we should just camp forever and be cavemen then. She told me to shut up. I rebutted that it was possible she had a stick up her butt. She rebutted by being right and it sucked.

Rachael was adamant about not spilling any more beans until we were safe and sound in the cabin. It was annoying, and left everyone in a bad mood. Jai lamented about not getting to see his dog again. Ed lamented about not getting to go to parties anymore. Jai lamented that we didn't bring any weed. Ed lamented that we didn't bring any beer. I lamented that we didn't bring any water, to which Rachael responded by pulling a water bottle out of her pack. That was nice. The last four hours of the ride were spent testing out each other's music tastes. Rachael said she didn't have any sort of music collection, which felt odd. I could have sworn I had seen her with ear buds before. Otherwise, Jai put on some weird geek rock, Ed put on some hip hop, and I played a bunch of pop songs turned Jazz. We all respectfully disagreed and also agreed to just go to a classic rock radio station and let it play itself out.

I began to wonder how many times this must have happened before. I mean, humans have existed for, what, hundreds of thousands of years? Did it reach a million years? I had forgotten. I just knew it was a crazy long time, and many, many, *many* humans had existed. I mean, it can't have taken until 1995 for someone to end up with powers if it was a possibility, right? How many other crazy unimaginable things had not only been imagined but had come to fruition? How many other humans had made the trek back from the afterlife and into the world again? If I thought about it too hard, this

whole situation could do more than just change my life forever, it could change my philosophies and experiences. I wasn't ready for that, so I shushed up my thoughts. Started paying more attention to the music, and let it envelop me. It wasn't good, to be certain, but music had a strange effect on me. I tranced out, and the landscape absorbed me.

6: Cabin in the Woods

"Okay. Fine, here we go."

Jerry, Jai, Ed and I all sat on a log outside the house and eagerly awaited an explanation. Our little fire was starting to really get going just as the sun was setting, which was nice. It was very cold up here. I suddenly felt very sorry for Jerry. He refused to be held, but Jai had offered.

"I'm still not entirely sure myself. *Don't!* Don't, okay? Sit back down, shut your trap, let me talk. Good? Good. Okay, so, you know how the human body is run by the brain, and the human brain is all electricity? Well, I just, uh… I just… fiddled with electricity. I am not even sure what I did. It was like some otherworldly intuition. I've been having some really odd experiences with electricity since I was little, and I made some friends over the internet that seemed to sorta get it. Not, like, not that they had experienced the same things, per se, but that they got that weird shit just happened sometimes. I told them what was going on, and they told me how to revive someone. It's not anything I can explain, okay? I can just… do it. The parameters are that the body has to be fresh enough that all the organs would function if they came back online. Jerry just *was.* I don't really know how I knew that either, but Jerry was a guarantee. That's it."

"Well that was the most unhelpful explanation."

"Well sorry for trying. Regardless, the goal — my goal, which I needed to make sure you were 100% in before telling you about — is to reveal this to the public."

"I thought the whole point was to stay *out* of the public eye."

“And it is, *until* we can get it out to the public in a way that can *not* be hushed up. Something irrefutable. Something irrefutable that gets out to the entire country before anything can be done about it. That’s what we are looking for.”

“This is suicide.”

“Well, too late now, isn’t it?”

The sun was fully below the horizon by this point. We were only lit by the fire, and my toes felt like they were freezing. I pulled up a camping chair that no one was using and set it by the fire, then using it as a foot rest heated up my feet. We all sipped on hot chocolate and sat in contemplative silence. I don’t think any of us were really used to silence, except maybe Jerry since he was just sorta born two days before. I mean, out of all the weird things that had happened — camping out and painting the car, finding a naked man in the trunk, stealing a license plate, picking up Rachael, the realisation that life as we knew it was gone, and we had all swallowed the pill and there was no going back at this point — this was what solidified it. The fact that all the time I might normally be spending talking to people, or getting drunk, or fucking, or working, I had spent quietly waiting. Everything felt so hectic, it was interesting that this chaos had come with so much stillness. Next time I looked over, Jerry was leaning on Jai and Jai had an arm around him. You couldn’t even hear the highway up here. It was peaceful. A part of me wished we didn’t have to leave. The sky was beautiful with minimal light pollution. I could faintly make out the milky way, and caught a shooting star. I never believed in it, but I never believed in people coming back from the dead either, so I thought I might give it a try: I wished that this was all a dream, and that I would wake up soon. That life might go back to normal, and that I could have my bed and my job and my friends back. Jacob and Richard and the like. I wished that everything was just as normal as I had thought it was before, or that there was an explanation in sight. Though, taking other people into account, I finally settled upon wishing that we were all gonna get away with this scott free. That would have been a nice fate. I closed my eyes, and thought I might sleep out under the stars tonight.

“So when do I get to drive?”

7: Jerry Saves Us From Ourselves

Well, I'm getting tired of telling this story. I mean, sure, I have fond and not fond memories of the next few days, but I am going to cut to the chase. I can see your impatient looks, thought we might as well get to what you brought me here for. So we were trying to come up with ways to get it out, you know — the secret to human revival. We figure, you know, that we'd have to revive a celebrity. Someone everybody would notice if they were gone. Of course, the immediate idea was to kill someone, you know? Dirty business — Jai was not on board for moral reasons, Ed because it sounded difficult. I agreed with Ed. Rachael thought we were being weak. It *had* to be someone famous, someone that everybody would know was irrefutably dead, so that bringing them back would be irrefutable too. We thought long and hard, and of all of us Jerry — who was a natural at driving — piped up.

"Why don't you guys just *wait* for someone to die?"

We brushed it off at first, you know? There were way too many variables… firstly, when was someone famous gonna die? We had to be incognito until something like that happened, and being incognito is difficult. I mean, I'm sure *you* would know. Anyways, there was also the problem of *where* it would happen. Even if someone famous died, we would have to be there when it happened. That and for it to be a famous person identified as dead it would have to be kind of under… wraps? That's the wrong word, but you know. Lots of media coverage, people around the body, that stuff. It felt like the wrong idea… until. Right up until our artsy fartsy friend Jai informed us of something very interesting.

As soon as we could, we packed up and headed out. Jerry gave us… more than a couple scares, but we were otherwise a weirdly happy bunch. Never had we ever been so excited to know of someone dying from lymphoma.

Now we were on the road to Florida, ready to kidnap the corpse of Bob Ross.

8: Getting the Hotel Hots

New Smyrna Beach was thankfully pretty small, as far as cities go. Only about 25,000 inhabitants. Sending Jerry into a couple of stores to do our bidding, we cobbled together money and rented a motel room. It was very small, because Jerry was the only person expected to be in there, but we made it work. Messing with the cushioned chair we made a bed for somebody on the floor. We took one of the blankets off of the bed and gave it to the floor dwellers, who were (at this time) Rachael and Jerry. A couple of us thought we spotted cockroaches, there was a clear draft, and the lights flickered in an obnoxious fashion where you couldn't quite make out what was going on but all your movements looked sort of holographic (but the place was cheap, and we weren't really in a position to be choosers). We just knew this place wasn't rich enough to have security cameras, and that was comforting enough for us to settle down and forget all its issues.

While Rachael was using the shower of questionable cleanliness (we could swear that the water was not as transparent as it was supposed to be), us guys got to talking about stuff. You know, normal everyday guy stuff.

"So like, how long are we going to let Rachael get away with saying she has powers of electricity before we actually test her on it? She hasn't done anything to prove it to us, except some car tricks. I could see that being faked."

"*Thank* you! We're getting near to the big Bob Ross do-or-die day, and we don't even know if she can do it —"

"Oh fuck you."

"What?"

"Just fuck you! You would have believed her in a heartbeat as long as you were still the group leader, you've never been a skeptic. You're the ghosts and goblins guy! You would *jump* at proof of this shit as long as it didn't threaten your bullshit power regime!"

“He’s kind of exactly right, and I concur in the ‘fuck you’ sentiment.”

“Well. Alright. Fuck me, I guess.”

“Honestly don’t feel like it.”

“Oh ha ha.”

“Me neither.”

“Oh come on — that’s not even what we’re talking about!”

“You guys have sex with each other?”

“Shut your stupid judgemental trap you upstanding ‘too good for gay orgies’ heterosexual piece of shit.”

“*Woah.*”

There was a short pause as Ed, red in the face and standing up, looked around the room. For a little bit, the only noises were Rachael’s shower going and the TV playing some mindless reality show on low volume. Ed looked between Jerry on the floor, Jai on the stripped chair, and myself lounging on the bed.

“That was uncalled for.”

“Agreed.”

“Thirded.”

“Fourthed. Sorry.”

“It’s alright.”

“Still sorry.”

“You’re right though. She needs to prove herself.”

“Doopity dopity doopity”

“What the *fuck*.”

“Woah was that the TV going ‘doopity doopity doopity’?”

“*What.* I mean, yeah, it was.”

“Woah that’s weird, I bet it will never say ‘I have powers shut it’.”

“I have powers shut it.”

Ed wasn’t even surprised. Just annoyed. He gave Rachael no recognition, and collapsed on top of me, releasing a “*guuuuuuufff*” as he went. His weight kept me from breathing how I wanted to, but I just dealt with it and tried to distract myself with the new channel on (it was some sort of Spanish news network). This was fine. All of this was fine.

“Hey Rachael?”

The sound of running water stopped.

“Yes?”

“Could you get the flickering to stop?”

“Actually, I’ve already tried. I can direct electricity however I want, but without the wires getting fixed I’d have to focus on it the whole time. It’s not like a brain that’ll keep itself going once started.”

“Augh. It’s really annoying.”

The door opened, and Rachael came out in the same attire we’d been wearing for days.

“I know.”

“You take quick showers.”

“No, I’ve just given up on being clean. These are the same clothes I have been wearing for days.”

“Yeah. Is everyone cool with me getting naked for that very reason?”

“I would feel —”

“Sure. What’s this?”

“Some kind of Spanish news channel. You speak Spanish?”

“Well I was adopted from Honduras, but no. I took French for my second language.”

“Huh. Can you reverse entropy?”

“Kinda.”

“Sweet.”

“Oh my this feels better.”

“I retract my previous statement, babe.”

“Which uh, which uh, which one?”

“Something about how gruff you’re starting to look is doing something for me.”

“Oh?”

Jerry hid himself under a blanket.

“*Please* no.”

“Agreed.”

“Oh come on. I have been dry for two days.”

“And it shall stay that way.”

Ed groaned and fell on me *again.*

“Fucking stop falling on me! This is the second time! Get off!”

“Nnngggg no…”

“We can go out in the *car,* you know?”

“Yeah okay you guys can go out in the car if you must.”

“Don’t use any heat. We can’t afford to waste gas.”

“Yay yay yay! Let’s go!”

Ed didn’t bother to cover himself as he lunged out the door, and a half embarrassed (and fully clothed) Jai followed him out into the night. As they closed the door, Rachael half laid half sat on the other side of the bed — as far away from me as she possibly could be — and started switching the channels without using the remote. Jerry stared, confused, at the door, and then turned to me.

“You’re not going to go join them?”

“Unlike Ed, my end goals aren’t always sex, drugs, and power. They are fun sometimes, but I am more layback. Lower energy.”

“Except that you work at — er, sorry, *worked* at a Subway and had dropped out of school.”

“Uh, yeah. As I said, more layback. He’s much higher energy. He has to be doing something. I am content sitting around and enjoying myself.”

“Huh.”

“What?”

“You’d think that someone with the goals of sex, power and drugs would be more inclined to drop out of school than someone who liked a more stable life.”

“Huh. I guess.”

We settled on some mindless cartoons, and the three of us sat and watched for an hour or so. I waved my hands in front of the light, and saw my movements look unreal and odd. After a while of Rachael looking a little irked at my childish fidgeting, the light suddenly went off and the TV was the only glow. Although I couldn’t see Jerry from my position anymore, I imagined that he had fallen asleep on his makeshift mattress. Soon after I had taken off my shirt — it was pretty hot, you know? — and rolled over, falling asleep.

Once in the night I woke up, and the TV was off. Apparently I had turned over in my sleep, because I could see Rachael, still sitting up, silhouetted by the moonlight swimming from the window.

9: Shit Goes Down

Bob Ross was dead.

Holy shit, Bob Ross was *dead.* I mean, we could tell. Jai had always wanted to meet the great star that he was, but him being dead was a bit odd. Poking and prodding at Bob Ross was not the intended first interaction, but for absolute *certain,* he was dead. Oh, right, how did we acquire the body? Well, Rachael said not to worry about it, but that the place really wasn't well guarded. After he was dead, getting the body out of the coffin really wasn't hard. The hard part was making sure we did this before anybody realized the body was gone, which might have already happened, so really the time span was from now until they found out we were the ones responsible. It was stressful, because Bob Ross couldn't just… *be* revived. A body had to be possible to live in for Rachael to do her magic, and our dear old Bob was riddled with tumors. It wasn't a pretty sight, poor old Bob was pretty indisputably dead, and he was trying his damnedest to remain so.

Rachael was panicked. Well, we were all panicked. To save you the details, there was a lot of yelling, many slurs were said — and I mean, you couldn't really blame any of us. This was the moment, this was supposed to be the big break. The big next step. We had gotten to the point where we could try and do what we set out to do, which was get Bob Ross back alive and well, and if we didn't… Well, *best* case scenario was jail. We didn't even know what worst case scenario would be. Point is, one thing in a high stakes situation led to another, and uh, Rachael killed Jerry.

I mean, he just… he just had a heart attack, then and there. Reeled over, and died. Ed went mad. He lunged at Rachael, and she reminded him and the rest of us that she could do the same to us. I guess we were all just realizing how much Rachael was to be feared. Sure, we had hailed her as the leader for her reasons of

being leader, but we never truly felt that she had absolute control until that point. It was terrifying. You know what it feels like to have someone be angry at you who can kill you in — literally — a heart beat? Not something dodgeable, you can even react to a gun being pulled, no, she could just make you keel over and die. Sitting behind that gas station at midnight and having this sudden realization of the power she possessed was, and continues to be, the most frightening experience of my entire life. For what it felt like, Rachael could have made the stars go out and that would have been indicative of nothing we didn't already think.

"Just shut your god damn mouths for two seconds and let me explain to you how this is going to work. Jerry is dead, but Jerry is dead for a fucking *reason* and you won't even let me spit it out! Jerry is dead because we need a host. Bob Ross ain't coming back, I can tell you that. We may be medical students, but we can't just make him not a cancerous wreck. He's dead. For certain."

The sound of sirens in the distance fucked with us. It could have been coming for us, it could not have. If there ever needed to be another thing to induce stress, the sirens were ready to fill that role. Bob Ross's corpse lay across the back seats of the car, and Jerry lay slumped against the wall. Jai held Ed back, and I just stood in awe at what I perceived to be a god of our world standing before us. The angrier she got, the more the lights flickered and threatened to burst. Ed was threatening to burst a vein, but Jai was right with me. All sense of anger at Jerry's death was replaced with paralyzing fear.

"Jerry died for a reason, okay? He's a *host*. Bob Ross can't come back, but we can imitate him."

"What do you *mean* we can imitate him?"

"I mean just what I say. I can revive Bob for a hot second before he goes under again, and read his brain waves. I can try and restart Jerry's brain with those brainwaves. It's not going to be Bob Ross, because the way that neurons are connected in the brain choose how you think and what not, but I can get Jerry to act like Bob Ross on a surface level."

"…What? You fucking *mad* man, you killed Jerry so he can be your *puppet?* What good will this do us? How does this prove anything? How can you fucking *stand* there and be okay with all of this?! How does this prove *anything* to *anyone!!*"

"I thought you wanted Bob Ross back, I'm giving you what you wanted!"

"Not at the expense of *Jerry!* I know, I know what you are, you're a fucking fucking fucking **psychopath.**"

"WHAT DO YOU THINK I AM CAPABLE OF, CLONING? Want me to just POOF another Bob Ross into existence? What closed off little world are you living in?! We're fucked, okay? We've gone too far, and we're fucked! There's no two ways about it, at this point they've reviewed the footage and found me sneaking in and there's already a price on your guys' heads I'm sure. We're fucked. We might as well wait here and get fucked together. Deal?"

"Then bring Jerry back."

"He'll have forgotten us."

"I don't give two fucks. Bring Jerry back or else."

"Oh man, you really got me there. *'Or else'.* I'm spooked, to be honest. Really shaken to my core."

"I'LL KILL YOU YOU MURDEROUS SON OF A BI—"

And Ed just fell to the ground, just like that. Jai screamed in terror, and I took two steps back, a second from sprinting.

"Oh calm down. He's just knocked out. Oh, and Jerry's back. I just didn't want to give Ed the satisfaction. We're all one big happy family now, aren't we?"

"You monster! You're playing God, you're fucking toying with us like you're some wannabe ruler of this realm!"

"I couldn't revive Bob Ross, now *could* I? Some things I just can't do, it's not all under my control! Do you want to see his corpse sputter

and call out for help before dying again?"

"Just stop it, for god's sakes just *make it stop!*"

Bob Ross came to life only to give shell shocked looks, spit and gargle, and fall limp once more.

"*Stop it,* dear god *stop it now!*"

The same pattern repeated, of Bob Ross going through his death throes all over again, staring helplessly at his surroundings and releasing painful moans of anguish.

"You **freak,** leave him **alone!**"

And again.

"LEAVE HIM ALONE!"

And again.

"*YOU FREAK, LEAVE HIM ALONE! LEAVE BOB ALONE!*"

"G… guys? Rachael?"

"Oh, hey, he does remember us."

"I don't think we are alone."

As he said that, two cop cars pulled around the corner. Sirens going off, bright disorienting red and blue lights going off. Of course, they didn't for long. Policemen came out of the two cars and pointed guns, yelling "*Freeze!*" as you see them do in movies. Rachael, of course, took none of it. I mean, she put her hands up, but she kept her haughty in control type vibe.

"I know I have the right to remain silent, but do I have to? Don't answer that, there's something I need to show you guys. Bob Ross is alive."

And *again.* The officers hadn't even taken notice yet, instead beginning to radio for backup and hold us down with guns. Jai was

still weeping over Ed, and they were screaming at him. Jerry laid against the wall and held up his arms, I held up my arms, Rachael held up hers. The officers closed in and confirmed that we had Bob Ross's body, and just as they had a visual on it, Rachael made it happen *again.*

"Holy fuck, he's alive!"

"He's not, wait a second."

Bob Ross died for the (*n+1*)th time that night (at this point it was hard to keep track). The officers were wordlessly dumbfounded.

"Check his pulse."

It took a good twenty seconds, but an officer complied while the other one made sure to survey us with the end of his pistol. He made absolutely certain that Bob Ross was without a doubt clearly most certainly dead. Just as soon as he was done, Rachael made him gasp alive again.

And, uh. You know the rest. I mean, you knew up to some parts in there, but now we are all caught up, right? We tried to revive Bob Ross, we weren't able to, and then the police detained us and then you said "hey police we got this". Don't tell me you're police. I know you're not. I'm probably… I'm probably a couple hours from disappearing off the face of the earth, aren't I? In the whole process of hushing this up. I don't know how in the world you got Rachael to comply. I thought she'd just start a murderin' and escape and see where that took her, but she seemed oddly… happy, when I last saw her. Like this was all part of some unseen plan. I guess it's too much to ask that I say some kind words to my family, or leave some sort of suicide note?

What? Where are you going? Hey! *Come back here!*

…

What's that taste? Kinda like an acidic… peppermint…

10: Rachael Wins

“And that’s how it went down.”

“If you lied even once, we will know within the next 24 hours.”

“I am counting on it.”

Soon they would find it in her attic. The Hume reader that she made out of spare parts in her garage and from the hardware store. They’d read Bob Ross’s body as anomalous, and they’d read her as perfectly normal. Why? Well, because Hume readers ran on electricity, that’s why. If those people on the internet had taught her a single thing, it was that when you have a power you use and abuse it. You don’t let it become a weird quirk, you don’t let it become a party trick. If you want to live without the constant fear of being found and abducted, you let it become a part of you and you *use* that shit. Figure out its ins and outs, its ups and downs. Figure out how to use it without anyone knowing, figure out how to use it to find ways away from people, spend nights upon nights in your garage editing videos and audio and time in the backyard altering the memory of your dog. Then, when they come, and oh they will come, you have the will and power to fight back. Usually, of course, this took multiple people. Teams of artists, circles of support groups you found on chatrooms, an organization of people who read way too many books, you name it. However, the rules were different for Rachael. Sure, she disliked phrasing it this way, but it was true: she was playing God. Power over electricity covered an amazingly broad range of things, up to and including biology. For this, she just had to pass off as a genius, and that wasn’t going to be hard, seeing as she was.

Bob Ross would be an anomaly she found. Him and Jerry, of course. She would have read them with her own Hume counter that she had made. They were found to be anomalous. How did she know that Bob Ross would have been anomalous? Simple. She was finding a pattern. A pattern in people who would be revived. First a boy in China, another in India, and another somewhere else and another somewhere else. The weirdest thing was that the anomaly followed names only, and Bob Ross was next on the list. She would

be hailed as a prophet of the anomalous scientific field. She'd be the youngest of their most esteemed scientists. Jerry was easily… "fixed" into going along with her story. The footage was going to look exactly how she wanted it to look, and say exactly what she wanted it to say. Oh, and that guy that just interviewed Alex and the others? Well, Rachael made sure that he was going to remember it her way.

11: Epilogue

Junior Researcher Dorer and Senior Researcher Hillenburg moseyed down the hallway and into the humanoid containment wing. There was a problem that needed attending to: as far as they could be certain, they had two completely non-anomalous humans that they had ended up with in custody. They had both come from interesting backgrounds, but ultimately they were normal average people who were being kept from the rest of the world in a big covert research site. This was a problem, and they had just come out of a committee meeting to decide what to do with them (the same committee were the ones who had decided letting a man die and revive and die all over again was just a terrible thing to let happen), and they had landed on a fairly simple solution.

Dorer and Hillenburg stepped into the room, where Bob Ross and Jerry Gardner sat playing cards. Looked like Speed, based on the set up.

"How are you?"

"Hey guys."

"Hey," Dorer replied, sitting down in a plain white chair and letting his elbows rest on the table, "we've got a proposition for you two. I mean, it varies between you two, but it applies to both of you. Sort of, like —"

"We're thinking of giving you Level 0 clearance around the facility. It's a spot we reserve for guests and janitorial staff. You would still be unallowed to leave the facility, and you would be given menial tasks from time to time. This would still be your room, but we are considering furnishing it and improving upon your living conditions if

you keep on good behavior. You would be able to eat with the rest of us at breakfast, lunch and dinner in the cafeteria. You would work on a two strike system: at the discrepancy of higher members of staff, you will be given strikes. One strike and you lose most privileges until said otherwise. Second strike and you are sent back to your chamber and life resumes like it continues now. However, good behavior will not only make your living space better but get you more privileges and access to the facility and more trust. If you agree to all of this…"

Hillenburg motioned to Dorer, and he slid a sheaf of papers forwards.

"There's more details in the packet, but we aren't fibbing you or anything. You guys would just need to," he pulled out a pen and handed it to Jerry, "sign right here."

"Hey, it's like we're people again."

"We were never not people, just treated differently."

"Thanks, Bob. You're right. We've been people for as long as I can remember."

They read it over, and they both enjoyed its contents. Jerry went on to work as janitorial staff (and often an errand boy), while Bob got to return to his love of painting. Site-31 was well adorned with never before seen Bob Ross paintings from that moment on, and they were the proud hosts of *The Joy of Painting,* Season 34.

« **Sometimes I Wish...**|**Waiting on the Good Times**|**Forever Young** »

Forever Young

by DarkStuff

"Rachael!"

An annoying, high pitched voice was calling from the distance.

"Rachael? Hey, uh, Rachael," Robert Dorer peeked his head around the corner of her door frame, which she really should have left closed. "You know there's no shame in eating with everybody else in the cafeteria, right? Or, uh, at all? I brought you something!"

Dorer shoved a plate with a burrito and some white salad on the side on top of her papers. She took a deep breath and was finally forced to look up at Dorer. He had a big grin on his face.

"It's Dr. Davidson."

"Nah it ain't, you never got a PhD. Besides, you don't eat enough. I uh, I saw the menu today and thought of you so I thought I'd pop over. Do you always leave your door open?"

"No, no I don't."

"Lucky me, then. What're you working on?"

"Classified."

"No it's not, it says 'General Level 1 Access' at the top."

"You shouldn't be looking at a paper immediately after I say that it's *classified*."

"Oh I looked at it before that. Riveting stuff. You *know* I worked on that paper last, right? I mean, heh, I don't really remember it. Got accidentally infected with that window meme. I'm all good now, though," Dorer tapped the side of his glasses, "see?"

Rachael hated Site-31. That word, "hate", albeit strong, is thrown around a lot, but Rachael really did. She needed downtime from her last assignment, of course, and that's what Site-31 was good for, but the professional attitude was all but lost here in an attempt to be friendly and cordial. Her own office didn't have a lock on it. Apparently that one site up in **Wisconsin** was doing really well, and the experiment had started to spread and pervade. She of course understood its importance, but it didn't make her any more accustomed to it. She wished that she had some easier way of having her own space.

"Thank you for the food, can I get back to my work? I'm not working on the top paper, and it really *is* classified. You're a level below me, and have no relation to this anomaly. It would be in your best interest to leave."

"Did you know we have the same initials?"

Rachael Maria Davidson took one long, deep, exasperated breath, and spun her chair to face Robert Maximus Dorer. It was clear that she wasn't going to shake him that easy, and she had gotten complaints about her behavior here. For a site, the whole place seemed irritatingly anti-work and efficiency. Just because the place was filled with Safes didn't mean there wasn't something to get *done*, and Rachael felt like she was the only person there who really knew that. However, some official requests had suggested to her that she lighten up and engage in more social activities. It was the place's specialty, of course. Being sociable.

If only her god damn door had a lock.

Mustering up a fake smile, or maybe it came across as a wince, she began to… *engage* the eager fellow that wasn't more than three

years older than she was. That made him the second youngest person in the whole site.

"Yes, I had noticed that before. I found it funny."

"Quirky, even! I bet it means something, eh? Some sort of mystical connection between the two of us, eh? What do you think? How often do the two youngest people share the same initials — and hey, did you know I was born in Mexico too?"

"Honduras. I was born in Honduras. They're *different*. And no, I don't think it means anything."

"You know what I like most about this job?" … "Well do ya?" … "It's that we're scientists. We are predisposed to disregard horoscopes and star signs and ghost videos online. So of course we'd assume it's just a coincidence. But! The coolest thing is that we're *para*scientists. Just as easily as we can brush it off and be right, sometimes we can take a good long look at something and find out 'by God, there really *is* something there!' That's what this feels like. I feel like our names mean something. The RMD! We should find some good acronym for that, eh?"

Rachael chewed on her salad only because it gave her an excuse not to respond for the time being.

"And besides, I am certain I can get the Level 1 run down of whatever you're working on. I'm Level 3 site-wide, and that gains me access to Level 1 knowledge of any anomaly Euclid or Safe. Is it Keter?"

Rachael groaned.

"No, it's Safe because although it's global it's self containing."

"Ooo, sounds interesting." Dorer took a seat on the desk, brushing aside some well organized papers. "Give me the stuff."

"If only I had more sighs to sigh, you took them all out of me."

Dorer chuckled. "Oh c'mon, you tell me this and I'll get out of your hair. I promise. Speaking of your hair, nice hair."

"No flirting between co-workers."

"Ain't flirting."

Rachael gave Dorer a long, cold stare. Seeing that he really wasn't going to yield, she pushed aside her plate and picked up the stack of papers beneath it. Flipping through them until she landed on the one she wanted, she began to scan it. The motion was less to remember information and more to not have to look at Dorer. She knew the whole thing front to back. Clearing her throat, shifting her eyes up to Dorer to give him one last chance to leave… she started.

"It's anachronism. Objects that appear out of time, before they were invented. We thought it was just a side effect of other chronology affecting skips, but it has its own logic to it. Objects created through this form of anachronism will be looked on by all people as normal, and the few people immune to this effect who try and point it out will be ignored and called crazy, or conspiracy theorists. We thought it was a pretty standard anomaly, barely a blip on our radar — especially because it does its own disinformation campaign — but the real tickler is that it starts on a certain day."

"What day is that?"

"Can't tell you that, then you could read it. There are, decisively, no records of this anomaly before a certain date. We're trying to figure out why. That's it. That's all I can cover under Level 1 access. You may leave."

"Hmm. Alright, I'll leave you to it. If you need me, I'll be in my office across the cafeteria — or in the cafeteria, hanging out with **Victor**. Oh, and one thing."

"Yes?"

"If I get transferred to this 'anachronism' project, will you believe me then? That we're connected?"

Rachael looked up at Dorer, and smiled a wide, confident smile. Genuinely, this time.

"*No.*"

"Well alright then, see you!"

Dorer skipped out the door, danced down the hallway, and was out of sight. Rachael got up, closed her door, jammed a mini-fridge in front of it, and sat back down at her desk. The burrito was, unfortunately, really good. She finished it quickly. Setting back to work, she studied dates and major events and anomalous records on site for clues. So far, she had been noticing a pattern. A creation pattern. Anachronism didn't seem to be the only anomaly that started on May 10th, 1829. It was an odd sort of coincidence. Something a scientist might brush off — like horoscopes, star signs, and ghost videos online. However, she wasn't a scientist. She was a *para*scientist.

She was beginning to develop a theory.

Tom and Abe sat at a dingy hole in the wall bar. The smoke in the room was thick, and the sound of clinking pool balls echoed only barely louder than the bellows of football announcers on the television. A beautiful lady whose life had went nowhere sat behind the bar and cleaned glasses in stereotypical fashion. Her name was Tulip, and Abe knew her well.

Tulip saw Abe looking up and down her every curve. She didn't mind it — she was a showgirl once, and Abe was a willing customer. Recently, though, she had noticed a spark missing in Abe's eyes. He looked ever less ravenous, ever less willing to come back to her room with her and give her the few fleeting moments of real feeling she usually ever managed to experience. He was growing bored with her. No, it was more than bored. He was growing disappointed. And yet, he came with her each time, and they spent their nights the same way that they often did when he was in town. She thought it might just be her imagination, but she couldn't help but notice a desperation in his movements. Where there was once an exchange between them, Abe seemed to retreat behind his eyes. No longer was she part of his equation. He was only doing it for himself, she thought, and yet he still went to her. As if he didn't have countless other lovers. What did he hope to gain? She caught him again, glazing over and failing to appreciate her. Instead of taunting him, she went around the corner to grab a cigarette in her room.

Abe sat up. He hadn't done more than gazed at his drink. Slumping ever more on his stool, and setting his drink aside, he looked to his left and caught Tom staring at the men playing eight ball. They puffed on cigarettes, and they barely spoke. The majority of their conversation consisted of calling shots, and the rest of it was asking for smokes or saying what a good game it was before restarting. Tom seemed intent on watching their every move. Abe struck up small talk.

"Would you like to move closer?"

Tom turned to Abe and held up his glass. "This stuff doesn't do anything for me anymore."

"Then why have it?"

Tom slid the drink down the bar to where Abe's was, and turned to look at the pool tables again. The men had restarted once more, and a satisfying clack was heard when the first shot was fired and the triangle broke.

"Because we always do."

Abe stared at Tom for just a moment longer before looking at the two drinks in front of him. Playing with the small umbrella in one of them for just a second, Abe scooted the drinks even further out of view and turned to look at the pool game with Tom. For a good couple minutes the two sat in silence while the other two shot balls into pockets. Before long, Tom spoke.

"How long do you think you can play pool?"

Abe shrugged. "It can keep me engaged for around five games, each one takes around twenty minutes, so almost two hours."

"Huh. I meant more in the long term. If you made it a point just to play pool, and get good at it and go to competitions. How long do you think you could do it?"

Abe looked oddly at Tom. "I've gotten good at pool before. Some men let it take them a life time. That seems reasonable. Most things can last you that long if you're interested."

"Do you think it would be worth it?" … "To take up pool?"

"Well, worth what?"

Tom sunk a bit. "That's what I thought." It was inaccurate to say that Abe had never seen Tom like this before, but it had all been recent. Within the past decade, at the very least. They were getting more frequent recently, and Abe didn't have any really good idea what they were all about. He'd known Tom for most of his life, and he wasn't a pessimist. No, Tom was a realist. And, realistically, most of the time life was as good as either of them could have asked for. Unfortunately, Abe thought that might have been what was getting to him. Abe might have felt it too, if he were more introspective. Abe didn't understand Abe the same way that Tom understood Tom. When Abe was indulging himself, Tom could be found just thinking. Tom thought a lot. Abe thought it wasn't good for him. Being alone with his thoughts had never been comforting to Abe, and he couldn't imagine it being any different for anybody else.

"Hey, Tom —"

"So how many trick shots do you think there are? In pool. You can get a bank shot, you can hit the two off of the one and into the side pocket. Could you get the eight ball in on the same shot you got the last of your balls in? Would that work? How many variants do you think there are, really? When would it get stale? At what point does it stop feeling new, when do you admit that you've seen the same board before, and that you've made the same shot before. Maybe in a different context, maybe the other balls were in different positions, maybe you were stripes last time, it doesn't matter. You've made that shot before."

Abe expected him to continue, but suddenly Tom stopped and twitched a little. Another peculiar silence sparked between the two, and Abe decided it was time to get up. The bar was giving them that melancholic air that it sometimes did, and Tom would do better to get to sleep. While Abe was beginning to stand, Tom started up again.

"I asked a question."

Abe shrugged it off. "I think it gets stale when your opponents never win."

Tom began to stand up himself and pull his jacket on. "What if they never do?"

"Well, what do you *mean* 'what if'?"

Tom pursed his lips, and then sneered, and then sighed in a short facial evolution. "Yeah. Sure. You're right. I think you should stay and have a couple more drinks."

"What?"

"I said that you shouldn't follow me. You wouldn't like where I'm going."

Just as Tom walked over and was about to reach for the door knob, it disappeared. His hand hovered in mid air for a moment, and then he straightened the hunch in his back.

"Abe, bring the door back."

"I'm not stupid, and I'm far from a bad friend. I might not get it, but I'm not going to go let you hurt yourself."

"Now is not the time to be sappy."

"Not trying to be, Tom. Just trying to understand you."

Tom turned halfway around. "Let me out of your head."

"You know as well as I do that you can leave whenever you want."

Tom turned back to where the door should have been and walked through it without a word. Abe stood in the midst of the bar stools and tobacco smoke and hum of the air conditioner. He wondered if he should give chase… and he decided against it. Tulip returned to see Abe slink back into his seat. She flashed him a look, and he simply shook his head. He fondled the tonics, and then downed both. Soon enough he stood back up and made his way, determined, towards the wall. The door appeared again, and he

pushed his way through it. In the snowy street, Abe found Tom's jacket. Abe still had the choice to follow him, but Tom didn't want to be followed.

Abe made a short yell, stomped the ground, and everything went away. The road, the buildings, the people, all of it. He stood in void for a second, before stars began to fade back in. Soon he was surrounded by the milky way and all the constellations that he found familiar. The stars sparkled and nebulae blurred and galaxies swirled and turned but everything was silent. Abe felt only his heart beat, heard only a low ringing. He didn't want those either. His body faded — his skin unraveled in glorious velvety strands, his organs conformed to basic shapes and shrunk, his brain separated into lobes. His neurons and axons expanded into gaseous balls of plasma, becoming celestial bodies and attracting thoughts like planets and asteroids. Finally, he couldn't feel or see or hear. Finally, he couldn't do anything but think.

Finally, he was alone.

When you're able to do anything whenever you feel like it, with nobody challenging you, with absolutely no limits at all, what's the point anymore? Once there's nothing more to win, what do you do with all your time? If you can't die and you're a jack of all trades, if you've traveled the multiverse twenty times over, if you've become everything you've ever wanted to be. If that, what then?

What happens upon your mind when you hear the word "god"? Does the lack of a capital make you jump not to the monotheist visions of the Abrahamic religions, and lead you on an odyssey through Greek and Roman lands, perhaps the great thunderous wraths of Zeus and the curses his lover Hera may put on his mistresses? Do you think of the nights Hephaestus spent toiling over his anvil, hammer in hand, handing his cyclopian helpers tools and barking requests? Do you believe in Hermes' treacherous journeys through Hates' domain, making it out alive with scorch marks on his winged shoes, just to bring the departed souls through?

Maybe you are more familiar with the Norse myths, of the similarly stormy nature of Thor, and the omens of Odin's Ravens, or the

mystical powers of runes. Perhaps when you think of gods, you think of idols, of men and women you look up to, of geniuses in their respective fields, be it music or science or athletics, be they Jerry Garcia or Stephen Hawking or Usain Bolt. Maybe you were raised in the deep south, and God is a sacred word to be feared and respected, and His name must not be used in vain.

However it is perceived, I assure you that these are tall tales. If ever these gods lived, for which there is an argument to be made, they have long since left us. Since the world as it is now was made, gods have been finite and static. There's one titan, and eight gods. The gods were human, once. They were born just like you or I, from a mother's womb and into a hospital room, or perhaps at home assisted by a midwife. They were mortal, and they went to school. They got degrees, their names became recognized, and one discovered that whether someone is observing the universe or not changes the laws of physics at their base. His name was Thomas Young.

I won't go into him much. Everything you need to know about his backstory can be found on wikipedia or the like. We live in the digital age, and I do not intend on communicating useless information. There are things they don't tell you, though. He was a hero. True blooded, to his core, a hero. The world was in peril — they don't mention that either — and he was far from giving in. The public blissfully unaware, Tom recruited myself and we got to work. A year passed, and another. We toiled on a new model, and then a newer one. Continuously improving.

Each one had a more impressive name; Gaia, then Atlas, then Chronos, but the final model was called Brahman. Each one better. Each one grander. Each one safer. The smiles on our faces widened, breaking an otherwise professional veneer. Nobody would even notice. We'd be like doctors, the earth our patient, and we'd repeat the ancient phrase *"This won't hurt a bit."*

There's another thing they lie about. Tom didn't die in May. On the 10th of May, 1829, Mr. Young and his companions, myself included, flipped a switch… and that's when the world turned on.

« Waiting on the Good Times|Forever Young| *TBA…* »

Atzak Hub

Atzak I

Atzak II

Atzak III

Atzak IV

I've done the math enough to know / the dangers of our second guessing.

Atzak I

As you lie sleeping-

you dream of dark and empty eyes.

ATZAK

PART ONE

You wake up when an alarm rips through the silence of the sleeping quarters. You blink the sleep away from your eyes, and glancing around the room you confirm your first thought; the others' sleep was just as fitful as yours. A room full of men who had dreamed the wrong dreams. A man at the other end with a uniform and a gun barks an order, and the day begins.

You stumble towards the door after getting dressed. Your head pounds. It always pounds after waking up. Everyone's does. You go over the same mental checklist you do every day, the one that they said you should. Your name? Of course you know your name. Where are you? On a submarine. Why are you here? You'd rather not remember, but it's there.

Any friends, family?

Ah, but that's where it gets fuzzy. You see children, maybe. You didn't yesterday, but there they are. Playing in your yard outside of Pittsburgh. *But you never lived in Pittsburgh*, you remind yourself. *You had a child, but she died young. And you never lived in Pittsburgh*. But why do you remember this so clearly?

They told you that this would happen. Said they were studying something in the water down here, some chemical, that made people hallucinate things. You don't know much about science, but you figure it's probably something radioactive. Like those people who got their brains fried when they dropped the bombs on Japan. You pause for a second to wonder if they ever remembered things that never happened to them.

You're all ushered into the cramped hall, where you're assigned a job. There are twelve of you, *but there were thirteen last week?* Maybe not, you can't remember. "Don't worry about your memory", they've said. "It'll all come back to you as soon as we surface." Have you surfaced before? You can't remember if you've been on here long enough to have gone back up and seen if your head would stop aching so badly. Would you even remember if you had? *You could've sworn there were thirteen of you last week.*

You grab a mop and get to work. Custodial today, just like yesterday. The day before you met with the psychologist all day to talk about how you felt. You liked him, he at least looked at you like a person. "Please, call me Anand," he had said. He asked about your family, what you could remember. *Had you told him about the children in Pittsburgh?* He asked about your parents. Asked about your earliest memory. Asked you about your dreams.

He looked anxious, you had noticed. You saw it on the faces of the other prisoners every morning, the lingering dread. That's what they all called it. The doctor at the clinic told everyone it was something about nitrogen, made people feel nervous. Said the pressurized metal tube you were all in didn't help. You believed him, but the light beading of sweat on Dr. Anand's forehead didn't help either.

You mop for a little longer, but a crewman comes up and shakes

you. Says to report back to the bunk. How long have you been working today? *Can't have been more than about fifteen minutes.* "Ten hours," he said. *That's impossible, you just got here.*

So you shuffle back towards your bunk, stopping only for the quickest and coldest of showers. All of you report back to your beds, and are asleep when you're told to go asleep. Nobody wants to stay up. Why would they? It's not like any of you can remember enough to talk about for more than a few minutes. There's a bed empty next to you. The guy above you remarks that there was someone there last night. *No there wasn't, that bed has been empty since we got down here.*

When you sleep, you float weightlessly in darkness. You feel a chill wind, and fall for a long time. Above you is only dark and empty eyes.

You awaken the next morning to an alarm. You shuffle out of bed and get dressed. You go through your list. Of course you know your name. Of course you remember the old woman you shot. *Of course you remember your wife in Omaha. You've both lived there for years.* That doesn't make sense, though. How could you have shot someone in Savannah if you lived in Omaha?

Oh well. There was probably a reason. You have a hard time remembering things anymore. You wonder why.

They line you up against the wall to assign jobs for the day. The guy next to you gets to mop, *like he always does. Great. You wish you got to mop. Instead you're stuck cleaning toilets everyday. Disgusting.* The crewman pauses in front of you, reading from a list of names. He nods to another man standing next to him, and the two of them lead you towards the back of the ship. You briefly recall that *you've never been back here.* You ask what you're going to be doing today, but it's not until you've reached the back that you realize you never actually asked.

There's another man in a white coat there. He introduces himself, but you can't hold his name in your head very long. It was weird, anyway. Some long name, probably paki or something. He says that

they're going to need you to collect a sample of water from outside the submarine for analysis. *Easy enough, you think. You and your husband Aaron were divers in Brisbane for years.* The man smiles, and shakes your hand. Says they appreciate what you're doing. "It's a very important part of what we're trying to do here." He says you'll be allowed to return to the surface after you're finished.

You smile and nod. Something about his face encourages you. It's been a long time since somebody told you that you were worth something. That you were helping them. *In fact, you can't even remember the last time somebody said anything nice about you.* You become determined to do as well as you can, and who knows? Maybe when you get out of this, you can work for these guys. Put your life back together. *Actually make something of yourself. Make somebody proud of you.*

You put on a reinforced diving suit, and something about it seems familiar. In your minds eye, *you remember putting the suit on before. In fact, you even remember a little more than that. Walking down the hallway again,* which is weird since you've never been back here before, *and getting chosen out of that line. You remember looking to your right as you walked away, and you see yourself standing in that line.* How is that possible? The doctor notices your face, and comes to comfort you. Says he understands, and that it's just the water. You take a deep breath, and feel better.

They have you stand in the airlock, with a tether attached to your back and a light strapped to your shoulder. They hand you a nylon satchel filled with glass tubes. "Just a few samples, from different distances," they say. "Won't take more than a few minutes." You nod. You feel good about this. You're excited, if nothing else, to get out of the submarine for a while. *But something feels odd.* As the chamber floods, *it starts to feel familiar again, and you feel dread.*

The water reaches your shoulders, and you look back towards the airlock door again. There's no porthole here, nobody can see you. The water reaches your head, and you go under. The world around you becomes muffled and slow, *and that feeling lingers. You can't shake the uncertainty, the feeling of apprehension. Like you've done this before, and then something—*

But you really don't have the time to finish that thought, as the exterior door opens and you're pushed forward by rushing water. You hear a voice in your head, and recognize the doctor. He reminds you to turn on your shoulder light, so you do. It doesn't help much, but then the giant submarine behind you turns on its floodlights and that helps. *Your stomach feels funny.*

You're floating now, suspended weightlessly above a darkness that stretches on forever. The water here rocks you back and forth, slowly. You think you can make out shapes on the edge of your vision, but it's so goddamn dark. You paddle forward a little bit, the satchel of glass vials clasped in your right hand. For the first time in a long time, at least as long as you can remember, you feel freedom. You're alone out here; no alarms, no toilets to clean, nothing to mop. Only silence and something to do. *But you're not really alone.*

Something in the back of your mind, something innate and substantial, some part of your consciousness that predates consciousness, starts to tingle. You feel a creeping up your spine as you pull out the first vial, a creeping that makes you begin to sweat against the cold. Your mind starts to rush. *Why are you out here, anyway? Aren't you supposed to be doing something?* You look around, and realize that you don't know where you are. You're underwater, but where? And how far down? How far do you have to go to get to the surface? You look up and only see darkness. *Aren't you supposed to be doing something?*

A reassuring voice in your ear tells you that you need to swim out a little further. You feel something in the voice, something that doesn't feel normal, but you swim out anyway. You're not sure why, your body just starts to act. All the while, you feel the shroud of forgetfulness being pulled over your mind. *You just have a hard time remembering things sometimes, is all.* But your body resists. Like it would try and fight off disease, your mind fights back. Do you remember your name? *I mean, you could remember it if you really needed to. It's on the tip of your tongue.* What did you do? *Started working as a doctor at the SCP Foundation.* What? You squint, and kick forwards, and don't notice the shapes moving on the edge of your vision.

You fell out of a fishing boat and sank for a long time. That's how you got here. Then why are you wearing a diving suit? *I was looking for something in the water. Samples.* Samples of what? Off a fishing boat? *Samples of water. Samples of fish?* There's something moving in front of you, can you see it? *Hang on, you're trying to remember. There was definitely a boat, and some other guys. You got lost, and you couldn't remember how to get back. You have a hard time remembering anymore.*

You realize the voice in your head is gone. You realize you can't remember your name. You look in your right hand, where there should be a satchel of glass vials. *That isn't right, you didn't have anything in your hand. You're down here collecting samples. Samples of fish, right? You're a fisherman. What's your name?*

Somewhere behind you, the lights go off.

In the darkness of the sea, illuminated only by the light on your shoulder, you feel that strange familiarity once more. The familiarity is followed by horror, and the face of a creature appears in front of you. *You've seen it before.* You've seen it before. Your mind forces back the veil for only a moment, and in your lucidity you remember your dreams. The wrong dreams. Dreams of darkness and silence. Dreams of hanging weightless over the void. Dreams of dark and empty eyes.

Dreams of the eel.

The creature rises up slightly, and you're suddenly aware of its incredible size. You see, in your mind's eye, endless lengths of brimming flesh, wrapping and coiling down into the abyss. *You see your own face, unaware that you're next in line. Oblivious to this.* Oblivious to the dark god in front of you. You see the eel moving all around you, all at once. A long, single line, endlessly twisting in the darkness, and at the very front a slowly opening jaw, and dark, empty eyes.

You see your mother in front of you, taking you to church. You sit with the congregation and pray. This memory is real. *This memory is real*. Our Father, *who art in Heaven,* hallowed be thy name. A part of you, some animalistic instinct, begins to panic. Your body twists

against itself. You try to look away, but the eel is everywhere around you. Your breathing quickens, your heart rate accelerates. You scream desperately, begging for them to pull you back, begging for them to hear you.

You cry out to God, and beg forgiveness. Beg for mercy. Beg for anything to brace against as the silencing darkness buffets you like a rag in a hurricane. You cry out for God, *as you've done so many times before,* but God isn't there. Your mind scrambles for anything else to hold on to, but it's empty. You used to be there, but you're not anymore. All that remains is sublime recognition, and solitary fear.

The eel hovers above you for a moment, jaw open. You look up, and you beg it for absolution. You ask for an answer to a question you… you can't remember… but you ask for something, anything at all. An acknowledge… an acknowledgement… of kindness? Or malice, or… *anything at all.* But as it comes down around you, and your mind is obliterated, the shell that used to be you struggles for one last thought…

Hub - Atzak II

Atzak II

A man is cast into the encompassing dark-

And the infinite coil draws tighter.

ATZAK

PART TWO

Dr. David Bell wrenched open the door to the observation theatre, cursing the rusted hinges. This close to the sea everything ended up coated with a thick crust of corrosion eventually, much to the chagrin of site staff. It wasn't uncommon to pass someone straining against a jammed door in a hallway, muttering under their breath about lacking amenities. As he dusted flecks of red dust from his jacket, David did the same.

The interior of the theatre was dimly lit and damp, like everything else at Observational Site-305. It wasn't a new structure, like Site-121, or a well maintained one like 17 or 25. No, INWBKL OBVS SITE-305 was something cobbled together out of an abandoned

office building and a few adjacent parking garages. What it lacked in warmth it made up for in humidity, with even the usually cozy staff residences a breeding ground for unpleasant moisture.

He hustled down the hallway towards the viewing room door, briefly pausing at a hanging fan to escape the heat for a few brief, beautiful moments. He pulled at the neck of his shirt and wiped his brow, then slogged on until he reached the end of the room. On the other side of the door stood three men around a table, and another man under a sheet. David paused briefly, and one of the men turned to him.

“No, it’s alright,” Dr. Jans Ulrich said, motioning towards the man on the table. “He’s not dead; the sheet is just to keep the flies off.”

He nodded, and approached the table cautiously. This room was thick with body odor and sweat, and the faint sting of brushed formaldehyde burned the inside of his nose. The other men were as drenched with sweat as he, but none of them moved away from the table. None of them looked up. As David stepped up to the sheet, Dr. Ulrich ripped it off. The other men grimaced.

The man on the table wasn’t a man at all, and David would’ve been surprised if he had been any older than his mid-twenties. Strong, like most security personnel were, but young in the face and lacking the typical track marks of age. He bore a slight scar across his cheek, and his dark hair had been shaved back on one side to allow for the placement of electrodes, but otherwise he looked no worse for wear. His eyes were closed, and his breathing was steady. David looked up at the other men, his hand beginning to shake.

“Is this it?” Bell said, his voice echoing in the little room. “Have you tried waking him up?”

One of the men, a fat doctor who Bell didn’t know, spoke up. “Yes, we uh… tried waking him up. There’s nothing *to* wake up in there. We can keep him fed and watered, and his systems are otherwise normal, but there’s nothing going on in there.”

David shook his head. “I… I don’t understand how this could have happened. Was he screened before this assignment?”

The man to the left of Ulrich, one who David recognized as Dr. Isaac Kent, produced a sheaf of papers. “This is his file. Everything is there; memetic resistances, cognitive resistances, full psychological profile, everything. Nothing we have would’ve given us any indication that this was possible.”

“*Nothing?*” David barked, the hairs on the back of his neck standing up. “Nothing at all, huh? No reason in the world why a healthy, grown man would experience a sudden fucking mental break and then go comatose. No reason at all? You sure?”

Dr. Kent flinched. “We’re sure, we’ve looked at everything we—”

“Well you’d better be goddamn sure,” David said, his eyes sweeping over the room, “because I already had Cimmerian breathing down my neck before, and now I’ve got *another* goddamn vegetable to deal with? Christ!” He stepped away from the table, rubbing his temples slowly.

Ulrich looked up from staring at his feet. “David, it’s not that simple. You haven’t been down there, you haven’t… haven’t seen it. Those values are helpful with most things, but not with something like this. It’s different.”

David sighed. He walked back over towards the table and looked down at the man on it. “Tell me again what happened,” he said, his voice soft. “Start from the beginning.”

Dr. Kent pulled out a paper from the file. “At 0700 hours, during a routine sweep of **SCP-3000**’s primary area of activity, Security Officer Li began to experience intermittent headaches and was referred to the clinic. Dr. Khatri oversaw the care of Officer Li, who quickly deteriorated to the point of not being able to respond to simple questions. Over the next half hour, Officer Li experienced three moments of lucidity, during the first of which he expressed that he was a woman from Brussels, the second of which he expressed panic at his situation, and the third of which he got up from the observation table, walked across the room to a corner, pointed at the corner, and screamed. Twenty minutes later, Officer Li was comatose, and remanded to on-site care.”

David surveyed the young man again. “Is there nothing in there we can salvage? Is it bad all the way through?”

The fat doctor shrugged slowly. “He’s been observed by our on-site psychologist, and a neurologist flown in from Site-81. The trains are running, but there isn’t anybody on them. There’s just nothing— er, nobody in there right now. He’s empty.”

David motioned for the paper file, and Dr. Kent relinquished it. He flipped through the file quickly, his eyes darting around for something missed. Anything missed. The *Eremita* had been shuttling crew back and forth from Site-151 to the contact site for years. But while there were always incidents of crew members with notably low CRV’s becoming affected by the cognitive deconstruction SCP-3000 was capable of, more recent protocols limiting distance from the entity and the minimum CRV of staff onboard had reduced the number of casualties from a few each month to a few each year. Occasionally one would slip through, but it was almost always some sort of error, and not a mutation of the phenomenon.

But this was different. As David scanned through the documents, he saw nothing out of the ordinary. CRV’s were well within tolerance, no family history of psychological disorders. Good mental and physical health. Nothing *weird*, but even at a documented safe distance with all precautions taken, a healthy adult man had been pulled from his body and obliterated.

“*Fuck*.” David said, casting the pages back down on the table. “We’re going to need to keep this shit quiet. The moment this gets out, we’re going to have the whole circus showing up here. Does anyone other than Kerry and you chucklefucks know about this?” They all shook their heads. “Well, at least there’s that. Goddammit. What were they even doing down there? The next Atzak rotation isn’t until the end of the week.”

“They were assessing some lifeforms that we’ve noticed living on the eel’s skin,” said the fat doctor. “Crabs and fish and what have you. Wanted to investigate the relationship they shared with it, see if we could gain anything from that. They did end up recovering some samples, but—” he hesitated, “they obviously had to cut the mission

short."

David nodded. "Cover him up. Move him to infirmary and keep him there for now. Put the crew he was with on a limited Class-C regimen, just the last day or so. We don't want anyone knowing about this right now, not until I can figure out what the fuck happened here."

He moved towards the doorway and paused.

"Get Kerry on the phone, and meet me upstairs."

The office of Director Kerry Eckelkamp at Site-151, in contrast to the dim and muggy Observational Site-305, was well lit and temperature controlled. A number of plaques and commendations adorned his desk and the wall behind it, and a small fan sat in the corner of the room to make sure the space was well-circulated. He shuffled through some reports on his desk, doing his best to appear to be busy. His charade was interrupted when his secretary, a squat woman named Viola, rapped quickly on the door. She poked her head through.

"Boss," she said, "phone for you."

Kerry nodded, and the door slid closed. He looked at the number next to the illuminated button on his phone, and sighed. David Bell hadn't been in India for more than a week and was already trying to raze the site. He ruminated for a moment on the necessity of Ethics Committee liaisons, long enough, he was sure, to piss off the already fuming Dr. Bell on the other end of the line. With deliberation, he slowly lifted the phone to his ear.

"David," he said, smoothly. "Good to hear from you again."

"You didn't *tell me* we had a goddamn dead man down here, Kerry." He could almost feel the spittle hitting him through the receiver. "And that, after the Atzak revisions. Are you fucking kidding me?"

Kerry took a deep breath. "David, listen, first of all he isn't dead. For all we know, he could very well wake up tomorrow. He's responded

very well to his care thus far, and—"

"Horseshit," David spat through the line.

"…and second of all, there's no reason to get upset. Nothing we've got tells us anything other than that this was a freak incident, an unfortunate, stress induced episode. Officer Li was already experiencing a significant amount of stress due to his position, and couple that with the conditions within the *Eremita* and the, uh, the—"

"…the goddamn eel, you mean? Yeah, we're all fucking familiar. Christ, Kerry, I don't know how you're so nonchalant about this."

"I don't know why you're so worked up about this," Kerry said. "Accidents happen. People die everyday, within this organization and without. Our asses are covered, what else do you want?"

"What I want," David said, his voice tense and his frustration growing, "is to know if anything was missed. If there's something we should've seen that we didn't. Because if we did, and if there's some extenuating circumstances here that caused this man's death, then the Committee is going to show up and park their asses on your front step and find someone to hang for this." He paused for effect. "And it may very well be you."

"I'm not worried," Kerry said, laughing beside himself. "If Cimmerian wants to try and get my goat about an accidental death, I'll refer him to any number of other sites where the same thing happens every day."

"You know damn well it isn't just about him being a dead man, Kerry," David replied. "The Ethics Committee can get itself worked up about it, but for the people who are important that's not what matters. What matter is where he died. And in the proximity of what. InfoSec is starting to get worried about the Atzak trials. Say that there's no way we can know for sure what's getting taken and where it goes. We send someone down there with Level 4 clearance and they lose that memory, and where does it end up? We've seen this kind of thing happen before, and they think it's only a matter of time til we lose something important from someone. There's even murmurs about the Overseers being involved. You want to be

standing around with your dick in your hand if O5-3 strolls up one day?"

Kerry's blood ran cold. "No," he said, "I'd rather not. Did Officer Li have clearance on any other skips?"

"He didn't, but that's not the point. This was, for all intents and purposes, a random and unpredictable change in SCP-3000's behaviour. If we aren't able to figure out what the fuck happened to him, the EthCom is going to throw a fit. Then, once they're done, we're going to have InfoSec in here, and then we start to see missions getting pulled, or drastically reduced. If we start to drop production, we get Area-909 on our asses, too, and if we start to see shortages of Class-A and -B's, then we're super fucked and we're *definitely* getting a visit by an Overseer."

"Alright, Jesus," Kerry said, running his hands through his hair. "I'll have some guys go through his file again. What do you want us to do if they find anything?"

"Call me first, and then write up a report. Find a way to stick this on someone, but make it convincing. We need to make sure InfoSec doesn't think this is going to be an ongoing issue, because the moment they do they'll coldstop the program and we'll both be out of a job. If we're lucky, we won't remember it, but I doubt we'd be given the kindness."

"Sure. I'll be in touch, then. What are you going to do?"

David sighed on the other end of the line. "Find a way to spin this, first. I'll be at the Obs site until the end of the week, and after that I'll have to present to EthCom. Get me something by Tuesday night, because I'm going to have to spend at least a day or two on-site to gather some more information." He paused. "And don't fuck this up, Kerry. Take it seriously, goddammit. I know you probably think after the promotion you're damn near invincible, but trust me when I say the moment they think your team is letting things slip through the cracks, especially with something as massive as the eel, they'll beat you to death with a sack of shit bricks."

They exchanged a dismissive farewell, and Kerry hung up. He

immediately dialed for his Head of Human Resources, who dialed the IT Administrator, who dialed up a server bot to dig through Officer Li's file, and the files of his nearest coworkers, and the files on his family, and his family's family, and so on. Kerry didn't hang around to witness the end of the search; he had a meeting with Site Director Gore the next morning, and needed to sleep. He wished the best to his staff, thanked them for their efforts, and left his office.

On his way out of the site, he passed by the barracks and the docks, where the *Eremita* was pulled into port. The *Eremita*'s captain, Yoric Jon Hastings, stood with a handful of other officers near the ship, and flagged down Kerry as he passed by.

"Director," Hastings said, somberly, "we haven't heard anything about Officer Li. Is he well? Some of the other officers were asking about him."

Kerry tried to smile despite himself, but ended up with only a twisted grimace. "He's fine, Captain. Recovering well from his ordeal." He thought about the man under the sheet he'd seen the day before. "He just needs some time to heal, is all." He thought about the man's eyes, hazy and crusting over, unseeing and empty. "In fact, you should all check in with the clinic. Get yourselves patched up, take a breather before the next shift."

The captain nodded slowly, and a sound behind them made the man turn and look. A long line of crew members were slowly wheeling carts of unconscious D-Class out of the side of the *Eremita*. As they passed, Captain Hastings grimaced. Kerry stared at their eyes.

Atzak III

Not all who have died-

have stopped breathing.

ATZAK

PART THREE

The phone in David Bell's office rang four times before it was answered, knocked to the floor though it was by the just-woken doctor. In the darkness of his office, he fumbled for the receiver, eventually righting it and pressing the cold plastic against his face.

"Dr. Bell," the voice on the other end said, a voice he knew belonged to one of the Director's aides, "Director Eckelkamp for you."

David murmured a reluctant acknowledgment, passionately rubbing at the bridge of his nose to force life back into his face. He heard the tell-tale three clicks on the other end of the line, and then heard the sea. The hair on the back of his neck stood on end.

"David." It was Kerry. "There's been an incident."

"Incident?" David squinted in the dark, trying to find a light switch with his loose hand. "What incident? Where?"

"On the docks. We've got it contained, but I need you to get down here quickly."

"Divers?"

"No."

"Not divers?"

"No, not divers. I don't have time for- David, listen, we have a lot of bodies to deal with and we need to figure it out fast. EthCom is involved."

Adrenaline surged through David's veins. "What? Why? What happened?"

The voice on the other end of the phone hesitated for a moment. "One of our lieutenants down here called our Region Hub before calling me. The call was routed to an EthCom liaison due to "loss of life". He says he didn't say much to whoever he talked to, but Cimmerian is on a plane right now."

"Fuck me," David said, scrambling now to slip on pants. "Don't let anyone leave. Get the, uh, get some fucking Class C's and uh… Jesus I can't even think right now, give me just a minute… Ok, ok. How many bodies are we talking?"

"Forty-three."

"Dead?"

"Some. Not all."

"That's some slight blessing. Were they ours?"

"David, I could explain this better if you-"

"Kerry for fuck's sake, just tell me. Ours or not?"

"No. It was a fishing trawler. We don't know how long they've been out there, the ship was just pulled in to port a half hour ago."

"Any Americans?"

"No."

"Another blessing. These sure keep adding up, don't they." David threw his coat over his shoulders. "How long do we have?"

"A few hours at best until the regional liaison gets here. Another few after that until Cimmerian and his posse show up."

"Ok. We work fast, then. Give me ten minutes, I'm leaving now."

Kerry acknowledged, and hung up the phone. David grabbed a few more things: his ID, a pack of Marlboros, his gun. He stumbled out into the not-yet-light of the early September morning, waving off his security detail as he threw all of his belongings into the back of his car. The engine hummed to life, and David Bell accelerated down the side road leading towards the docks. It was 1:27AM.

Kerry had been mistaken. After another twenty minutes of searching, three more bodies were pulled out onto the dock, making forty-six bodies out under sheets. From his vantage point in a control tower, Kerry could see the faint rising and falling of the chests from the few who were still breathing. A handful of security personnel stood at the far end of the docks on either side, all aware that by sunrise they wouldn't remember they had been there that night. A handful of site doctors stood around the bodies, taking a few samples and making some observations.

The scene was almost comical, he realized. Every great tragedy looked like this through the filter of the Foundation's response mechanism. *Quarantine, assess, wait for reinforcements.* More often than not, this ended in a few people in white coats standing around staring at something horrible and making idle small talk while they waited for somebody to do something. Kerry thought it was funny.

He started at the top again. *Good morning, Dr. Cimmerian. Good to see you again. Yes, everything is going fine here. No, just a false alarm. One of our agents got a little jumpy. No, we don't have a pile of bodies hidden in a warehouse somewhere. No, I expect your investigation to proceed with little issue.* Kerry felt his blood running cold. The Ethics Committee had a number of influential members, but none of them wielded that authority with such absolution as Jeremiah Cimmerian. *Maybe if we're lucky we'll just lose our jobs. Worst case scenario, we botch the coverup and they just kill us.*

The facts, as he knew them, were simple. One fishing trawler was found, non-communicating, floating aimlessly somewhere about seventeen klicks from the shoreline. The crew was unresponsive. The ones who hadn't experienced cardiac arrest and death were carrying on, slowly starving and running down the battery on the rest of their life. *This isn't your fault, Kerry. You didn't do this to them.* But the Eel had.

Kerry Eckelkamp was made director of Site-305 for one reason: his team, or rather, Adam Hollister's team, had developed the Atzak Protocol, and after Hollister's death Kerry was the most senior member. As it stood, he was one of only four members of that team left working on the SCP-3000 project, along with Isaac Kent, Jens Ulrich, and Angela Hughes. The rest had known better, and skipped town when they could. But not Kerry - Kerry found himself in a position of power and relished in it.

"*These new Foster-class compounds are really something, Kerry,*" he remembered Dr. Lang telling him during their last meeting. "*The work your team has done is really incredible. If you can maintain this kind of production, you'll have revolutionized the Thaumiel class. Hell, that has to be worth something, don't you think? A directorship, maybe? Or even more, who knows.*" The Foundation needed people to forget, and if you needed people to forget you needed Y-909, and if you needed Y-909 you needed Kerry Eckelkamp.

Sure, he hadn't necessarily been the most forthcoming about the side effects of working with SCP-3000. Dr. Hollister might have realized exactly how big the can of worms they had opened was, had he not been little more than a muttering simpleton by the time he died. He might have said something about the growing number of

bodies they kept finding, fishermen and tourists and locals, all with the same blank eyes and emptiness inside. *This is the cost of doing magic,* Kerry had told the rest of the team. *This is the price of working miracles.* Most of them had left shortly afterwards.

But Kerry remained, and so did the bodies. Some of them were reported. Most weren't. This, though, was something different. So many at once was unheard of, and with the Ethics Committee already hovering over their entire operation… there couldn't be setbacks. Kerry's division, Experimental Parapharmacology Trials, often came to odds with the Ethics Committee, and each had earned the ire of each other. *Cimmerian would have us amnesticizing subjects with hypnosis and tonic water,* Dr. Mann had said, with no shortage of disdain in his voice. *Don't fuck this up.*

There was a knock on the door behind him, and Kerry braced. He turned stiffly, an alabaster smile stitched onto his face.

"Dr-"

"No time, Kerry," David said, throwing his coat onto a chair inside the door. "We need to figure this one out quick."

Kerry sighed in relief. "Yes, absolutely. Any ideas?"

David paced back and forth in front of the window. "Do we have any indication the vessel was inside the exclusion zone? Something we missed, maybe?"

Kerry shook his head. "They weren't even close. We combed the ship, too. Nothing really of note, though we do have a cell phone that might have something recoverable on it. They had it sent down to processing after we brought the boat back here."

David tapped furiously on the side of his head. "Does anyone else know about this?"

"The men on the dock, our other primary support staff. You and me."

"None of the locals? Nobody from Regional?"

"The phone call our lieutenant made just implied there had been a

local loss of life. Didn't say why, or how."

David nodded slowly. "Ok. Ok. Ok. I think this is what we do. How much time do we have?"

"Another couple of hours, maybe."

"Do we still have mines around the exclusion zone?"

Kerry furrowed his brow. "Yes, but-"

"Put the bodies back on the ship, run it into a mine. The ship sinks, we report it as an unintended disaster, and Regional Containment buries it so they don't have to deal with it."

All of the breath came out of Kerry at once. "Are you fucking crazy? Your plan is to sink the ship?"

"Yep. That's the fucking plan, Kerry, because there's something going on here that you idiots can't seem to figure out, and until shit like this stops happening we're going to have to do some nasty stuff to keep it under wraps. You got it?"

"The exclusion zone is miles from the coast! What if they ask about why they were out so far from-"

"Then empty a couple of cheap liquor bottles out and throw them around the fucking boat, Kerry, I do not give two shits how you make this happen or how you explain it, but you explain it. If EthCom shows up and we have to explain forty or so mysteriously dead individuals *on top* of Officer Dead-Eyes down there, they'll shut down our operation for months, and we can't afford that Kerry. You can't afford that."

He paused to take a breath. "You need to know that the first time one of our agents reaches for a Class-A and it isn't there, Lament is going to pay you a visit. Tell me what you would prefer, Kerry. You want to do something shitty now and brush this whole ordeal under the table until we can get this shit fixed, or would you like to explain this to both Cimmerian and Lament?"

Kerry Eckelkamp sat down against the wall. He pushed his palms

into his eyes, quietly seething at the unfortunate scenario he found himself in.

"We don't have much time."

"Then get a fucking move on, Kerry," David said, grabbing his coat and bounding out the door. "I need to go distract our lovely Regional EthCom rep while you take this thing and *sink it to the bottom of the goddamn ocean.*

ONE SAVED MESSAGE.

The task fell to the *Eremita*, because it always did. Dark chains stretched from the deck of the silent trawler into the darker seas below.

Ani… Ani it's me, Vihaan. Ani… something is happening.

As the shore grew more distant behind them, forty-six sailors stood their posts on their vessel. Some of them breathed. Most of them didn't. None of them blinked.

Some of the others are seeing things, things that aren't there. The captain… the captain took his own life, Ani. He died screaming, and he… he said… he saw *eyes*…

They had voices, once. Their laughter or curses might have once filled the air on deck, a light on dark seas that reminded them they were still alive.

I… I can see the eyes too, Ani…

But the light had gone out.

It… it doesn't matter. Run. Fight. It ends the same.

The chains came free, and the *Eremita* pulled away. Moving once more under its own power, the vessel pushed forward towards inevitability. No one uttered a single word.

I called you to tell you something, but I… I don't remember. I don't remember who you are. I don't… I don't remember who I… who I… who…

There was an explosion, but it too seemed to step quietly around this moment. Water filled the ship from below, and as it leaned to one side and slipped below the waves, not a single soul on board cried out for mercy, because-

…there was never any mercy to give.

When the last of the nameless trawler and its crew of quiet men had disappeared into the dark sea below them, the *Eremita* turned away and left. No one uttered a single word.

END MESSAGE. WOULD YOU LIKE TO REPLAY MESSAGE?

Atzak II - Hub - Atzak IV

Austringers

Phineas looked at the old photo on the wall, near the dining room table of his apartment. It depicted a young man with a meticulously trimmed beard dressed in a ragged flannel, his arm around an even younger man with dark green eyes, and long black hair tied back in a ponytail. The men in the photo had ear to ear grins. Their troubles had not yet come to pass.

He then turned to the ***elderly woman*** *sitting next to him at the table who looked at him with a kind, sympathetic smile.*

"I have never doubted anything more in my life, 45," he said with a sad grin.

"Phineas," the old woman said softly, "Vince tried to kill you. The kind young man you knew has finally died. What stands in his place is nothing short of a monster."

Phineas simply looked at the picture again. His mind was filled with colliding thoughts, as one may have when deciding it was time to kill your best friend of over 30 years. Phineas closed his eyes.

"I don't have much in the way of life experience," the old woman eventually chimed in. "At least, none that you didn't program into me. However, in my 15 years of service I can safely say that Vincent Anderson has effectively become a tumor on his own company. If he is not stopped soon, his toxicity will metastasize and destroy everything you helped build."

Phineas nodded. He sighed and reached for his phone, then carefully typed in a text message and sent it to a Foundation Agent named ***Sasha Merlo****:*

I know how you get him.

Phineas placed the phone back down on the table and looked back up at the picture on his wall.

"Well," he said with a melancholic chuckle, "here goes nothing."

Series Overview:

Since its creation in the late 90's, **`Anderson Robotics`** has been a joint venture between the company's two founders, Vincent Anderson and Phineas. However, as time passed, leadership of the company changed both men, mentally and physically. Seeing his company begin to head down a path he cannot follow, Phineas prepares to retire, a move that soon proves easier said than done.

With nowhere else to turn, Phineas is forced to seek aid from the Foundation, resulting in a covert war for the future of Anderson Robotics…

- Part 1: Ties That Bind
- Part 2: Realignment
- Part 3: Consolidation
- Part 4: Bal-chatri

« `Series Two: The Elusive Anderson` | `Anderson Robotics Hub` | No Good Deed »

Ties That Bind

Phineas looked himself over in the bathroom mirror.

Where have the years gone, old man? he thought to himself.

His bald head reflected the bathroom lights. Veins were faintly visible beneath his pale skin. His long white beard strongly contrasted with his black dress shirt, a bright red necktie the only colorful thing on his person. Like the man within, the clothes were visibly worn, coated in two decades worth of turmoil. Phineas gave a heavy sigh. His frown turned into a smile and he headed for the door, a slight mechanical whirring filling the silence with each step.

Phineas stepped out of the bathroom and into the workshop beyond. A party was in full swing and he was expected to make an appearance.

+ July 14th, 1994

July 14th, 1994

“What have you got to show me, Vince?” Phineas asked.

He sat outside in the pleasant summer sun at a café in downtown Portland. The right sleeve on his flannel shirt was neatly rolled up while the left sleeve remained pinned beneath the stump of his left forearm. A meticulously trimmed beard covered his face, easily the most well-groomed part of his appearance. He brushed a few locks of brown hair out of his eyes as he gazed at the briefcase his companion gently placed on the table.

The young man sitting across the table from him sheepishly smiled. His long black hair was tied back in a ponytail, and his tan skin suggested that he had recently

spent some time in a warmer region. His dark green eyes focused on the combination lock on the briefcase before triumphantly allowing the lid to open.

“Behold!”

Sitting in the bottom of the box was a small silver rubber ball. Phineas looked at the orb carefully, blinking as a large red dot appeared at its center. The dot focused on Phineas as a series of four needle-like legs emerged from the orb’s side. The orb stood up, and then waved at Phineas with one of its tiny legs.

“I’ve named it Benny,” Vince said with a satisfied smile. “Pretty cool, huh?”

“Vince,” Phineas grinned, “You built a robot?”

“More like brought to life,” Vince replied. “In the same sense that the soul pilots the meat ship that is the human body, I created a simple intelligence to pilot the circuits of this little guy. I found a couple of schematics from a man named ***Durand*** *while I was in Europe. They were a real eye opener.”*

Benny gave a small nod in agreement, and then began to roll around the interior of the briefcase before stopping to look at Phineas again.

“How intelligent is it?” Phineas gently placed his hand in the briefcase and allowed the tiny robot to crawl onto his palm. Benny immediately climbed up his arm and perched on his shoulder.

“Well, I mean, it’s not the sharpest knife in the drawer, but it’s smarter than your average cat or dog.”

Benny gave a small salute in response, causing the two men to chuckle.

“It can record video and sound too,” Vince added. “I was thinking, maybe I could sell them as reconnaissance

droids. I know a few people who would be interested in that sort of thing."

"You're going to start a robotics company?" Phineas frowned. "You think you have the business chops for that sort of thing?"

"Actually, I was hoping we'd start a robotics company. I have a lot of other designs in mind, and you've always been so good with the kind of incantations we'd need. We'd totally be able to hit the ground running."

Phineas furrowed his brow. He gently returned Benny to the brief case and stared at the small droid pensively for several moments.

"I'll let you name the products…"

Phineas gave a devilish smile in return.

"You're going to regret that," he said and extended a handshake. "I'm your man."

Vince accepted.

"Welcome aboard!"

Phineas slowly made his way through the crowded lunchroom before returning to his seat at an empty table, a newly opened bottle of beer in his left hand. He watched the various hobnobbers socialize around him. Most of the crowd consisted of **Anderson Robotics** employees, patrons, or personal friends of Vincent Anderson. A few representatives of **Marshall, Carter, and Dark** also were in attendance, their business attire looking out of place among the casual outfits of the majority of the Anderson staff.

Phineas took a long sip from his beer and looked across the room. A banner reading "10,000 SOLD!" stretched across the far wall. He closed his eyes and sighed.

"Is someone being a party pooper?" a bubbly voice asked. Phineas

opened his eyes to the site of a short, middle aged woman with shoulder length brunette hair and faint blue eyes. She wore a flowered sun dress and smiled warmly as she took the seat across from him. “It’s as much your day as it is ours. You should be ecstatic.”

“I think he removed his ability to feel joy when he put on that last prosthetic,” said a tall, lanky young man who took the seat next to her. His eyes were slightly obscured behind a mop of curly blond hair, but the thick glasses he wore were still plain as day. When he wasn’t speaking his lips seemed to permanently be turned up in a smirk. “Still, in all seriousness, you’re the man of the hour. The **Gyrfalcon series** would never have worked without you. This party might as well be for you.”

“Afternoon Medea, Jason.” Phineas raised his eyebrows in amusement. “Always nice to see the dynamic duo. But your praise is poorly spent on me. You two were ones who finally got the damn things to work. It’s your baby now. I’m just the old fool who kept messing it up.”

“Always so modest,” Medea said with a small laugh. “You need to start taking credit, Phineas. Out of all of us you’re the one who has poured their entire being into this company. We’d be dead in the water without you.”

Phineas responded with a small shrug.

“If you’ll excuse me,” he said as he got to his feet and began to walk away. He crossed the room and entered the hallway. Jason was quick to follow.

“Hey man,” he said as he placed himself in front of Phineas. “All my mom was trying to do was pay you a compliment. The least you could do is not be a monumental dick about it.”

Phineas swiftly grabbed the boy by his arm and pulled him in close. Jason let out a small gasp in surprise.

“I know about that little **Nankeen project** you were working on with Isaac, and about Ian, and how you lost him to the Foundation,”

Phineas whispered into Jason's ear. "Now, I suggest that if you don't want me to tell Anderson you go right back the way you came and the two of you give me some space for today. I am in no mood to pat anyone, especially myself, on the back. Am I clear?"

Phineas released the young man's arm and watched as Jason took a few steps back.

"Crystal…"

Jason returned to the lunch room without another word. Phineas took a seat on the floor with his back pressed against the wall. He raised his beer in a mock toast.

To the monumental dick, he thought to himself, and took another sip.

+ January 10th, 1998

January 10th, 1998

*Vince and Phineas sat in the living room of a small Seattle apartment. The room was sparsely furnished, save a couch against the far wall, and two desks weighed down with a menagerie of computers and software disks. A small pennant that read "**Alexylva**" was visible along the far wall. A little boy with curly blond hair rapidly typed away at one of the computers, the monitor reflecting in the lenses of his thick glasses. The boy's mother returned from the kitchen with two mugs of coffee, her brunette hair tied back in a bun as she handed the beverages away.*

"Thank you very much," Vince said as he accepted the drink and took a small sip. Over the course of the last few months Phineas had noticed his partner's once tan skin fade into a pale, almost ivory-colored hue. His once proud and rebellious ponytail had been replaced by a shorter and more traditional cut, one that did not make his hair loss so obvious. Phineas accepted his own mug

with a kind nod, his new left arm making an audible whirl as he brought the coffee to his mouth.

“So, Medea,” Vince began, “What’s this little guy’s name, and what on earth is he doing? If he types any faster he’s going to melt that keyboard.”

“This little guy’s named Jason,” Medea gave a chuckle and ruffled the boy’s hair. “And, I’m not too sure what he’s currently working on.”

“Star Wars!” Jason replied without missing a beat.

“Oh right,” Medea smiled. “He’s programming himself a computer game.”

Both Vince and Phineas looked to each other and nodded in approval.

“You named your son Jason?” Phineas raised an eyebrow as he returned his gaze back to Medea.

Medea rolled her eyes as she shook her head.

“I didn’t name him anything, poor Jason’s parents died in a car accident when he was three. When I came across him in the adoption process the two of us just clicked. The name was just a coincidence.”

Phineas nodded in understanding, and then looked back at the pennant on the far wall.

“I understand you have a PhD in Computer Science. Is that your alma mater?” Phineas asked. “I’ve never heard of it before.”

Medea frowned slightly.

“That’s a long story, but yes. I don’t think anyone around here would have heard of Alexylva. All you need to know is that it’s a top notch technical college in Tennessee. Anyway… Rick said that you two had a job offer.”

“Indeed we do,” Vince replied, and quickly opened his briefcase. He pulled out a ***smooth black ceramic disk*** *and handed it to Medea.*

“Where on Earth did you get one of these?” Her face flushed for several seconds before she finally broke the silence.

“That’s not really important,” Vince replied. “What is important is we like your work, and want you to do similar projects for us down in Portland. In addition to helping us work on a few of our designs, you’ll be given plenty of freedom to design your own products. Freedom you were denied from your previous employers, if I understand correctly.”

“I’m… I’m flattered, really… But I can’t just uproot everything on the spot. Jason has school, and…”

“I think you should take the job,” Jason chimed in.

“What dear?” Medea turned to her son in surprise.

“I don’t mind switching schools,” Jason elaborated. “And you always talk about how much fun you had working on robots. I think you should take the job Mr. Anderson is offering.”

“You really do, huh?” Medea grinned. She then looked back to Vince, and smiled. “I’d need time to put in my two weeks at my current job… and there’s finding out a new place to live… a new school… we haven’t even discussed salary…”

“Take all the time you need to prepare,” Phineas interrupted. “Vince and I will mail you a copy of your contract to sign before the end of the week. I think you’ll find the pay to be quite generous. Plus there will always be a spot for Jason in our workshop, if he’s so inclined.”

“Awesome!” Jason shouted, and ran over to Medea,

grabbing her in a big hug. “You have got to take this job now!”

Medea chuckled and nodded in understanding.

“I guess I can’t say no,” she laughed. Vince extended a handshake which Medea enthusiastically took.

“Welcome to Anderson Robotics,” he said.

It was not long after that Vince and Phineas took their leave, stepping out of Medea’s apartment and into the cold Seattle rain. Phineas took one look back at their future employee and shook his head.

“I hope she doesn’t take too long to get down to Portland,” he said. “We need the extra hands on deck as soon as possible. We’re completely back ordered on the ***Amur and Aplomado series****.”*

Phineas looked up when heard footsteps. A middle aged man with dark skin approached, his face permanently pressed into an expression of worry. He carried a bottle of beer in his hand, and gave a small nod to Phineas. Trailing behind him was a young man in his mid-twenties. His skin was the same tone as the first man, and his head was shaved.

“Thought you’d be running a little empty right about now,” the middle aged man said as he handed off the bottle to Phineas. The old man chuckled and popped the top off the bottle with his left hand.

“Thanks, Jeffery.” Phineas took a long sip. “How’s it going? Enjoying the jubilations?”

“It’s not really my thing,” Jeffery sighed.

“How about you, **Miles**?” Phineas looked towards the young man.

“It’s just a bunch of employees sucking up to the rich and successful.” The young man shrugged. “Not really my cup of tea, either.”

“Guess we could start our own club,” Phineas chuckled and took another sip from his beer.

“Miles, I’d like to speak to Phineas alone for a bit, do you mind?” Jeffery asked. Miles nodded and headed back into the lunch room. Jeffery watched the young man leave before turning back to Phineas.

“I always appreciated that you call him Miles. Isaac insists on calling him Saker-00.”

“Well, for all intents and purposes he is Miles.”

“For the record, I told Anderson that this party wasn’t the best idea,” said Jeffery. “But he insisted that we have a reputation to uphold now, and that this event would be the perfect opportunity to up the ante with the investors.”

“Anderson sure does love causing a spectacle,” Phineas sighed. “I appreciate the attempt though. Thanks.”

“Any time.” Jeffery began to make his way back towards the lunch room door. “Are you coming back inside soon?”

Phineas slowly nodded.

“In a bit. Just let me finish this last beer.”

Jeffery briefly smiled and headed back into the din of the party.

+ December 17th, 2002

December 17th, 2002

As they sat at the kitchen table in a residence located in Beaverton, Phineas looked over Vincent out of the corner of his eye. His employer’s skin was now completely ivory in color. His hair had long since fallen out, leaving him with a smooth scalp. Over his left eye he wore a silver eye patch. The changes had been gradual, but now that he had the time to look his friend over, the

time had come to acknowledge Vincent was not necessarily the same man who had offered him a job that summer day in Portland. Phineas then looked himself over. He felt he might not be in any position to judge. After all, his left arm and both his legs had been replaced with prosthetics of his own design. Maybe this was just what working in their field did to people like them.

Phineas then looked over to the **`android`** *that stood at the far side of the room. A dark skinned gentleman in his early thirties examined it in awe. Eventually he returned his attention to Vincent and Phineas, and then whistled.*

"I have to hand it to you, it's an impressive design," he said. "But what exactly is it?"

"That's the prototype for our new **`Peregrine`** *series," Vincent replied. "They're guaranteed to be one of our top sellers once we get all the bugs hammered out. That's actually why we're here, Jeffery. I'd like your help to finish it. A mutual associate of ours informed us that you were working on a new form of AI at Prometheus Labs before their big meltdown."*

"I'm going to stop you right there," Jeffery sighed. "That project was a dead end from the start. The tech won't exist for a long, long time."

"You're saying that while we literally have an android standing behind you?" Phineas asked with one eyebrow raised.

"An android that I'm assuming is dumb as a post," Jeffery returned. "You guys want me to provide you with AIs, right? Well believe me when I say that it's not going to happen."

"Why is that?" Vincent inquired.

"You want the explanation? Fine," Jeffery snapped. "My

model basically involved mapping out a human brain digitally, and then replicating that consciousness in digital space. I got the mapping part up and running, but then PL imploded, and soon after that my son was diagnosed with small cell carcinoma. I tried to finish the project on my own to hopefully save Miles, but like I said, the technology simply wasn't there, and then Miles died. You're wasting your time!"

The room fell silent. Jeffery simply looked down at the floor.

"I'm sorry for your loss," said Phineas.

"Yeah… so am I," Jeffery replied.

Vincent then placed his briefcase on the table, breaking the silence with the clicking of the locks. He pulled out several papers and diagrams and slid them across the table, most were labeled "PEREGRINE" but the page on top said "SAKER". Jeffery read them intently and then looked behind him at the Peregrine unit for a few moments before snapping his head back to Vincent.

"We have the technology you're missing," Vincent smiled. "Well, technically I suppose it's more of a form of magic, but I digress. Did you map out Miles's mind before he passed?"

"I… uh, I…" Jeffery stuttered for several moments before he nodded.

"Come work for us," Vincent cooed, "Help us smarten up the Peregrine series, and I promise you that Phineas and I will help you get Miles back."

Jeffery nodded. He closed his eyes, and turned towards the window.

"Deal," he said with a deep breath.

Vincent gave Phineas a satisfied nod. The two men

placed a trench coat over the Peregrine unit and began to make their way towards the door. Along the way, Phineas stopped and placed a hand on Jeffery's shoulder.

"Welcome to the team," he said.

Vincent and Phineas then left the residence, loading up into a plain white van they had rented for the occasion.

"That should solve the Peregrine problem," Vincent said with satisfied smile.

"Maybe if we're lucky we'll get the Saker series up and running too," Phineas added. "Looks like we're really starting to go places."

Phineas had just finished the second beer when he heard the doors to the lunch room open again. Looking over, he saw a muscular man in a business suit approach. The man's hair was neatly combed back, and a faint scent of aftershave seemed to follow him where he went. Phineas rolled his eyes.

"To what do I owe the pleasure Isaac? There's no one out here for you to schmooze."

"Funny," Isaac replied. "Anderson wants you. He's about to do his big announcement."

"Does he need me to talk for him?"

"Stop being such a little bitch and come along," Isaac said flatly. "Anderson doesn't want to begin without his best friend and partner, and you should want to be there. The Taita series was your design after all. A little socializing won't kill you."

"Socializing with MC&D reps might," Phineas mumbled under his breath. He then sighed and got to his feet. Isaac trailed behind him as the two made their way into the lunch room.

+ May 9th, 2003

May 9th, 2003

Phineas sat in an uncomfortable chair within a small private office in San Francisco. In the chair next to him sat a completely hairless, ivory skinned creature in a charcoal suit. Veins were visible beneath the rooms bright light. Its head was without ears, and its face was obscured beneath a silver comedy mask. Its name was Vincent Anderson.

Across from the duo, behind a large desk, was a young muscular man in a business suit. His had a sly smile as he looked over several documents, and then turned his attention to Anderson.

"I have to admit," Isaac said coolly, "When Jericho told me that I was meeting with a man named Anderson, I was expecting something with ***`a little more rust.`****"*

"Heh," Anderson replied in a metallic voice. "Uh, yeah that happens all the time. Rest assured, however, that I have no affiliation with James Anderson or his, uh, factory."

"So what is it exactly you are looking for, in terms of my services?"

"To be frank," Phineas chuckled, "we need a businessman. Right now the company consists of the two of us, a few designers and computer specialists, our fab team, and some hired muscle. The books are getting beyond our ability to manage, and we are soon going to outgrow our customer base. Jericho said you'd be the perfect man for the job."

"Not to toot my own horn, but he is correct. So now that we've established that you need me. Let's get down to why I'd need you. I mean, you do have a promising

company, with a very interesting line of products, but the same could be said about any paratech firm. You're not the only ones who have asked to have me on payroll. So, what does Anderson Robotics bring to the table?"

"Well, as you probably saw, your salary would be very generous," Phineas frowned. He quickly flipped through notes to find the pearls within the oyster. "You'd have a massive discount for any of our products, including use of the Saker Series, not to mention…"

"Phineas," Anderson interrupted, "I know, um, what needs to be done."

"We agreed that would be a nuclear option," Phineas protested, silencing as Anderson snapped his fingers with a surprisingly loud volume.

"You're, uh, on Sycamore Gordon's kill list, right?" Anderson asked. "What, with the whole Vegas incident, if you step foot in Nevada again, uh, you'd be a dead man, correct?"

"What the hell are you getting at?" Isaac demanded. His smirk turned into a scowl.

"Nothing too complex," Anderson replied. "We've, uh, simply done our homework. If you join our crew we'd make sure old Sycamore was, um, no longer a problem for you."

Isaac remained silent, cocking his head as he spun around in his chair and looked out the window.

"How long do I have to decide?"

"Until Phineas and I leave this room. After that, uh, we'll simply look for someone else."

Isaac spun back around.

"Jesus you guys play hardball," He said with a whistle.

“Fine. I’m yours. I expect Sycamore to no longer be a problem before I arrive in Portland.”

“He’ll, uh, be out of the way before the end of the day,” Anderson replied. “Glad to have you on the team.”

Phineas and Anderson then quietly collected their papers and left. As they moved through the isolated halls of the surrounding office building, Phineas cleared his throat.

“Was that really necessary, Vince? He puts up a little resistance and you agree to kill a mob boss for him?”

“He is exactly what we need,” Anderson shrugged. “Sometimes you have to break eggs and make the omelet, or uh, however that saying goes. Besides, it’s not like the world will be a worse off place when, uh, Sycamore is gone. Hell in some circles we’ll be heroes. Just make sure Saker #21 is, um, ready to act within the hour.”

Fuck me… Phineas thought, slowly trailing behind his old friend as they made their way back to the car.

The room quieted down as Phineas slowly made his way towards the front. Awaiting him, next to a large object obscured by a sheet, was Anderson. His employer wore a blue dress shirt, with a silver vest and matching slacks. The silver comedy mask gleamed in the lights of the lunch room. Eventually Phineas took his place by Anderson’s side.

“The, uh, man of the hour has arrived,” Anderson chuckled. The audience laughed in kind. “As you all are aware by now this little shindig is to celebrate the sale of our 10,000th Gyrfalcon series prosthetic. This, um, milestone would not have been possible without months of dedication by this man here.”

The crowd burst into applause. Phineas frowned slightly and then turned to Anderson. His old friend placed a hand on his shoulder and quieted the audience.

“But, uh, on top of such a wonderful achievement, today we are pleased to announce the completion of a new prototype. The Anderson Robotics Taita Series Security Droid. This, um, new line is Phineas’s baby, and is going to easily become our new high selling product.”

The crowd began to cheer once more as Anderson handed Phineas a corner of the sheet.

“Would you do the honors my friend?”

Phineas nodded, sighing as he turned to face the crowd, the corner of the sheet in his hand.

“Before I reveal the Taita series, I have something I would like to say.” The crowd instantly quieted down to hear his words.

“Most of you who have worked with me know that I don’t give speeches often. Not my cup of tea, I suppose. However, I have something I’ve wanted to say for a long time. All you hobnobbing bastards can kiss my ass. Especially those of you from MC&D. And especially Skitter and that soul sucking Lana Fuentes.”

With a fluid motion, Phineas reached into his pocket and pulled out a glob of neon blue goo, effortlessly chucking it at the sheet covered object. The droid beneath let out a horrid death wail and crumbled into rust. The crowd fell silent as Phineas gave a bow.

“Have a nice party,” he said with a smile, and stormed out of the lunch room.

Phineas stood on top of the Anderson Robotics office building, his eyes staring into the Portland sunset as he took a long drag on a cigarette. The sound of a door opening behind him indicated that he was no longer alone.

“You, uh, really made an ass of yourself today, Phineas,” said Anderson as he approached. Phineas looked over his shoulder. Anderson’s mask had changed from comedy to tragedy.

“Perhaps I did,” Phineas said with a shrug. “But I finally got to say

what I really wanted to say.”

Anderson stood next to his friend and looked out at the sunset. Phineas offered him a cigarette. Anderson hesitantly accepted, and slowly took his mask off. In place of eyes, he had what appeared to be two small camera lenses that glowed with a faint green light. Rather than a nose, he had a triangular grating that occasionally hissed with the passage of air. Anderson lit the cigarette and took several short puffs.

“So, um, was all of that supposed to be your two week notice?”

“More or less. I’ll have my office cleaned out by Monday.”

“You just really can’t accept the fact that we are successful now, can you?” Anderson continued to query. “You just have to be the underdog, huh? It, uh, just gets to you that you might actually be, uh, *The Man* now.”

“Success is a funny way to look at turning a small custom shop into what is little better than a terrorist cell,” Phineas replied. “Especially if you consider that our company not only regularly engages in espionage, but has catapulted an entire section of the population into an arms race to become the bigger and better cyborg. And the real cherry on top is that we’re doing all of that on MC&D’s dime.”

"Who are you to judge anyone for improving themselves you hypocrite!" Anderson yelled. "How on earth do you have a leg to stand on?”

Phineas dropped his cigarette and crushed it with the sole of his shoe, turning back to face his friend.

“You’re right,” he said with a melancholy smile. “I’m guilty too. Tried as hard as I did to cut off the hydra’s head, two more would always take its place. Eventually it was easier to just roll with things. But not anymore. I quit.”

Phineas began to move toward the stairs, stopping when three Peregrine units emerged ahead of him, each brandishing a high caliber pistol.

“So this is how it’s going to be then?” Phineas asked, turning back around to face his friend.

“You're, uh, more than welcome to stay,” Anderson replied. “In fact, I insist. Please don’t go, Phineas. Don’t leave me alone.”

“Don’t do this, Vince. Just let me go.”

“I, uh, know for a fact that if you leave this company, you’ll be back to throw every monkey wrench under the sun into our operation. Just don’t leave.”

“This isn’t what I signed up for back in ’94, man!” Phineas shook his head.

“I know, right? Boy did we ever sell out,” Anderson said with a sad laugh. He then placed his mask back on his head and threw his cigarette butt away. He gave the droids a nod.

The droids opened fire in unison. At the same time, Phineas clapped his hands together, sending a sonic wave across the rooftop. The incoming bullets scattered. The Peregrine and Anderson were thrown backwards, clattering across the concrete like discarded toys. Losing no time, Phineas turned on the spot, throwing a wide arc of neon blue goo at the Peregrine units. The three droids wailed and writhed in pain on the ground before disintegrating into piles of rust.

The old man then began to sprint towards the edge of the building, turning his head briefly to see Anderson sprinting behind him. Anderson’s right hand was extended, the index and ring finger pointing as if they were a gun. Phineas immediately jumped to the side. A bolt of lightning shot past him, striking the concrete on the far side of the roof with a loud bang. Lightning continued to sail past the old man as he approached the ledge of the building. With a great leap, he jumped over the side, but not before a final bolt nailed him square in the chest. Phineas then fell four stories to the earth below.

Anderson gave a heavy sigh as he approached the ledge of the building. He glanced down to the parking lot below. Phineas lay crumpled below within the small crater he created upon landing. His

left arm and legs arced with electricity as he shouted in pain. His right hand reached into his pocket and pulled out a large wad of black goo, quickly slamming it into the pavement beneath him. Anderson quickly raised his hand and fired off one last bolt, but to no avail. Phineas vanished into the black goo, and was gone. The bolt harmlessly struck the pavement below.

“See you around, old friend,” Anderson whispered to himself. He then turned around and headed back inside.

Agent Sasha Merlo sat alone in her office at **Site-64**. She took a long sip of stale coffee, and quietly brushed a strand of her brunette hair out of her eyes as she read over MTF Gamma-13’s most recent string of reports. As usual, all their current leads had turned into dead ends. She let out a heavy sigh. She didn’t know what she would say to **Director Holman** this time.

Bzzzzzzzt

The sound of her cellphone receiving a text and breaking hours of silence almost caused her to fall out of her chair. Lazily she opened the text message, her brow furrowing as there was no listed sender. The message itself only contained a single phrase

I know how you get him.

Austringers |**Realignment»**

Realignment

Many years ago, when she was a young Cyber Operations Specialist, the site where she stood had been alive, humming with the energy of a hundred servers, buzzing with activity as researchers hurried back and forth through the halls to their classified projects. The faint background noises of generators and servos gave the entire facility the feeling of a machine, no less efficient in its operation for its strangeness. As a nexus between the Foundation and the United States military, it had been invaluable. The electricity of the place seemed to infuse her. When Holman had approached her, had showed her the hidden madness of the real world and offered her a place in the true, secret struggle of their time, anything had been possible. Of course she had accepted the new life that beckoned her.

In the present day, the cold rangeland wind blew the tufts of grass that dotted the cracking concrete of what had once been the primary robotics facility. Changes in leadership and the budget cuts that had followed stripped away any hints of the former nature of this place. Within one hundred miles, there were vast stretches of bentgrass, a few white-tail deer, and herself. The lack of graffiti and trash at the abandoned site added a sense of eeriness to the desolation. She may have been the only person to visit since Fort Charles had been decommissioned. That this was the meeting place was an unmistakeable signal. Proof of knowledge, more convincing than any argument. And, she noted, more unnerving.

She stuffed the fear back down. Four years should have been enough time to move on from the breach at Site-64. She threw herself into other assignments, did her duty, earned recognition. But these things could not erase the wasted years of planning, the ruined careers around her, the humiliation and shame of being at the mercy of what she hunted. The lives ended. All of what she had, all of the successes in preserving the crumbling edifice of mankind's sanity, was tainted. The combined effort of the most sophisticated

organization humanity had ever known, and she had been hopelessly outmatched. It was only a matter of time, really, before it happened again. Before something else shattered the thin veneer of control they lived with.

Anderson still haunted her. Every day.

She stepped into the abandoned concrete structure, as the encrypted e-mail had instructed. Unauthorized intervention in a matter deemed officially closed by Site Command could end her. The possibility that she would suddenly wake up in a new town, false memories of a plain, low-profile existence forcibly inserted through a tender spot in the back of her neck, was very real. The only communication she dared was one response to the initial e-mail, delivered from a public library while she wore a hooded sweatshirt and sunglasses, any devices that could possibly be used to track her location three hundred miles away, left on her bedside table. If she did not walk away from this meeting, no one would know what became of her. And no one would be able to finish her work. All possibilities awaited in the darkness of the ruined laboratory.

I know how you get him. The words froze her as they appeared on her phone. They urged her forward. The words appeared in her mind periodically to drive off the thousand scenarios unfolding before her in which this went terribly wrong. She stepped completely into the darkness, the path before her lit with her small, head-mounted flashlight.

"I'm here," she called into the now empty chamber. She waited. A low, empty howl as the wind gusted past the entrance to the laboratory. The damp chill and the smell of musty concrete were the only reply to her call.

Suddenly an ear-splitting crack filled the room, the reverberating sound of metal hitting concrete as a vent grating fell from the ceiling. She looked up to see a mass of wires slowly trailing down from the ceiling vent, seeming to twist and move of their own accord as the larger mass lowered itself into the room. She drew her pistol in a quick motion, looking quickly for anything in the mass that looked like it might be vital.

The wires touched the floor. They seemed to stiffen and tense, anchoring into two points in the ground. A larger, central mass now lowered from the ceiling vent. It was shaped like a person. She aimed at where she thought the heart would be.

"Please put the gun down. There's no need for that." An older man's voice wafted down from the ceiling, as the mass of wires began to coalesce around where they had affixed on the floor. In seconds, they took the shape of legs as the rest of the man descended to stand in front of her. The pale skin, the white beard. Her pulse quickened. She raised the gun again.

"Albert Frostman. PoI number 45543. Also known as Phineas."

"Agent Merlo. Please put the gun down."

There were more lines in the old man's face this time around. More veins and capillaries showing through where her light shone on his skin. His hardware, however, looked much the same. If not upgraded. The faint sound of clicking metal came from where he stood as whatever it was that was inside him reset and reconfigured after his descent from the air vent. Beads of sweat started to run down her spine.

"You killed two Agents. Your group has killed a lot more."

Phineas sighed. It sounded like air rushing through a heating duct. "Your people spent years flaying one of ours alive. These grievances are pointless. I didn't come here to kill you, and you're familiar enough to know that if I had, you wouldn't have stood a chance."

Merlo knew this to be true. Of course it was true. None of that changed how dangerous this man was. She held the gun steady. "How can I be certain?"

The old man slowly raised his hands, his palms facing outward towards Agent Merlo. The woven fabric that took the place of skin appeared to ripple with the subtle movement of his fingers. She noticed now that his eyes were red and puffy. Hers likely were too. She had not slept in two days.

"You can't of course. But I think you'll want to hear what I have to say. Now please, put the gun down, it's making me nervous. Neither of us want to get hurt."

Agent Merlo stood her ground as she thought it over. Theoretically, she could bury a slug in his brainpan. Even Anderson's tech was unlikely to work with a good chunk of the nervous system taken out by a hollow point. But it had been four years. A lifetime in the world of mainstream robotics technology. Who knew what the hell that was to Anderson.

Her finger remained on the trigger. The adrenaline ebbed just a bit as Phineas remained where he was. What reason could he possibly have to meet with the Foundation? There had been rumors that things had changed within the structure of Anderson's outfit. The number of questions she had finally tipped the balance of her thinking. She slowly lowered her weapon.

"Talk."

Phineas exhaled, the ductwork inside him creaking again. "I'm going to reach in my coat pocket now to retrieve something. Please don't shoot me. Does Congressman Raymond Caldwell mean anything to you?"

Agent Merlo considered the question. "He's been a giant pain in our ass since he got control of the House Subcommittee on Research and Technology. Funding from the US has been a lot harder to come by lately."

She watched carefully as Phineas pulled a phone out of his jacket pocket. He held it out to her view. "That's not an accident, as you can imagine. Even the Foundation has budgets, it seems."

A video feed of some sort was visible on the phone. A crowd, gathered in what looked like a hotel lobby. Lots of suits, lots of flunkies rushing around. Whoever was holding the camera was moving among the members of the crowd, heading for a dais of some kind.

"This is a live video stream," said Phineas. "Taken from the

viewpoint of one of my people. One of the few left."

The camera continued to weave into the crowd. Eventually, the view was of a stage, political banners and flags festooning a podium. A fundraiser. At the podium was Congressman Caldwell.

"What is this? Why are you showing me this?" Merlo's fear was beginning to creep back.

"I am about to do something distasteful in the extreme. I'm about to help the Foundation." Phineas raised his wrist close to his lips. He grimaced, then spoke into his sleeve.

"Do it."

A hand holding a gun suddenly came into view of the camera. Out of the shot, a woman had time to scream briefly before a single shot was fired. Blood splattered on a campaign poster behind the Congressman as the left side of his head seemed to be pulverized. He fell to the ground, likely dead before he landed. The room scattered amid screams and commotion. The camera remained fixed in place.

Merlo's stomach dropped as she watched the scene on Phineas' phone. She stammered.

"What…the fuck? What are you doing? Just…why? Do you have any idea…"

Phineas remained still. "Keep watching, Agent Merlo."

The camera moved up onto the stage, focusing in on the Congressman's shattered head. Blood was everywhere. The first sirens were audible in the distant background. A woman's voice from behind the camera spoke.

"Go on then. There's no purpose in pretending."

The Congressman's body shifted. A few quick spasms, and it began to push itself up. As the camera caught the gaping hole in the man's skull, Merlo saw not the bloody pulp of exposed brain tissue underneath the bits of scalp and flaps of loose skin, but instead a

gleaming, white shell. Too smooth and too polished to be bone.

"Holy shit. He's a Saker."

Phineas nodded. He spoke once more into his sleeve. "Go ahead and get out of there. We'll meet up like we discussed. Good work."

The camera feed cut out abruptly. Phineas put the phone back in his coat pocket.

Merlo was reeling. The consequences of what she had just seen were only beginning to take shape. "That…that was a sitting member of the United States Congress. When this hits the news-"

"It won't. By all accounts, that was an embarrassing lapse of security, and an exposure of a clandestine product. Anderson and his backers will see to it that the Congressman is said to have died of a heart attack, or in a car accident. They've likely already rounded up the witnesses. Watch the newspapers. You'll see."

"But…why?"

"Take it as a token of good faith. Congressman Caldwell was quite well-informed for a freshman member, wasn't he? Caused a lot of problems for your North American Command, I'm sure. The House Subcommittee will cease to be a problem for you for oh, about four years or so. Six if the latest polling holds up."

Despite the facility being empty, Merlo instinctively lowered her voice. "Don't you think we've considered the same thing? The kind of shit that would start, even if we could cover up something like that?"

"Had you known that a Saker unit was sitting in Congress, your hand would have been forced."

She had to concede that point. "Still, I don't see how this leads to Anderson. He'll be looking out for us for sure now."

Phineas frowned. "Yes, this is far from ideal. There is no element of surprise anymore, so you'll be running into a buzzsaw. Anderson also knows that I'm the only person who had the means and the

knowledge to take out Saker-13. This was an open declaration of war."

Merlo thought of herself as quick to read a situation, but this wasn't making any sense. "What do you gain from this?"

"Now you know I'm acting in good faith. I also have insurance." Phineas cleared his throat. "There are others you know. If something happens to me, you'll never know where else Anderson has his hooks."

"Jesus." Merlo put a hand to her forehead as she contemplated what that meant. "Then that meeting with MC&D. It's true. It's not a small business anymore."

"Anderson's operation is something else now. Something that I can no longer abide. And it threatens us both."

"Now wait a second." Merlo was beginning to feel things clicking into place. "If you think the Foundation is going to cooperate with you on something like this…we don't even have a full-time MTF assigned to Anderson anymore. I can't imagine how I'm going to take this up the chain."

"You're going to have to find a way to convince them. Our continued survival depends on it."

The sound of a shotgun racking behind Phineas punctuated the end of his sentence.

"You'll have to start by convincing me."

Stepping out from the shadows just behind Phineas, a lanky, unshaven man in a dark suit appeared. Agent Daniel Navarro trained his shotgun directly at his head.

«**Ties That Bind** | **Austringers** | **Consolidation**»

Consolidation

We're here. I'll send you a response when the dust has settled. I hope you have a plan B, because I'm honestly expecting this whole thing to crash and burn.

Your concern is noted, but I think you'll find that we have more of an edge than you realize. Good luck.

As they stood alone in a parking lot near a trail head for Forest Park, Sasha Merlo simply watched the light November rain fall around them, and placed her cell phone back in her pocket. Her brunet hair was stuffed beneath a small beanie as she took in a deep breath. On the other side of the parking lot, Daniel Navarro was finishing up a cigarette. Once they were in **`Site-64`** there would be no more smoking, so he was making sure to take advantage of this last opportunity. Eventually, the lanky man approached, taking a few moments to watch the rain fall with Merlo before he finally spoke.

“So…” he began. “How about those SCPs?”

Merlo immediately punched him in the arm.

“Hey,” Navarro said through a chuckle as he hopped backwards, rubbing his arm with his free hand. “That’s a little extreme don’t you think?”

Merlo shook her head.

“Four years,” she said. “You could have at least sent me an email. ‘Hey Sasha, just a heads up, I’m not dead or had my memory wiped.’”

“What can I say,” he shrugged. “The new task force has me swamped. This is the first time I’ve even been back to Oregon since 2014.”

“See, that also burns me,” Merlo snapped back, “I offered you a spot on Gamma-13 at least four times, and each time you said, ‘MTFs are for squares.’ And yet here you stand as a Bibliographer. Seriously, what the fuck?”

“They put a bag over my head,” Navarro replied with a sly smile. “Clearly they wanted me more. Try kidnapping next time.”

Merlo let out a frustrated sigh and turned back to the rain. She managed to maintain a frown for a few more moments before it cracked into a small grin.

“They really put a bag over your head?”

“Sure did.”

The two agents let out a brief laugh before they turned towards the maintenance trail leading westward into the forest. Half a mile in they would find yet another trail that would lead to one of Site-64’s entry ways.

“Think Holman will bite?” Navarro asked. Merlo’s thoughts then turned to the folder in her backpack, detailing the intricate plan Phineas had shared with them back at Fort Charles.

“I doubt it,” Merlo sighed. “But right now he’s the only one who’d even agree to meeting with me, let alone another scheme to capture Anderson. Holman’s our only shot, as poor a shot as it is. I’m just hoping that the incident with Saker-13 is enough to show him that Phineas is willing to play ball.”

“I mean, what else could he ask for? Two dead congressmen?”

“With our luck, probably.”

Site Director Edgar Holman looked over the folder in silence. Navarro and Merlo sat before him, each remaining motionless in the two chairs he kept in front of his desk. As he continued to read, Merlo looked Holman over. The years had not been kind, as the wear and tear of over two decades at the helm of a Foundation facility had finally begun to show. His slicked back hair, once black,

was beginning to show streaks of gray. Merlo had enough difficulty handling the MTF she had been assigned. She could not begin to imagine how one managed to sleep when they were responsible for an entire site.

Eventually Holman took off his reading glasses and closed the folder. He looked up at the two agents before giving a small chuckle.

“I don’t know what I’m more impressed by, the fact that you brought me this little scheme or the fact that you did it with Dan Navarro in tow, as if it would help,” he said. He then shook his head. “We’d never get approval for something like this, Sasha.”

“But what do you think?” Merlo inquired.

“It doesn’t matter what I think,” Holman replied. “I could be convinced that this plan was God’s gift to the Foundation and we still wouldn’t get approval, assistance from Phineas aside. They’re only calling Gamma-13 together to raid known **Anderson locations.** Not bait traps, especially ones dependent on known PoIs.”

“So that’s it then? Plug’s being pulled?”

“I’m afraid so,” Holman said with a sigh. “Valiant effort, but no dice.”

Merlo gave a defeated nod and stood.

“Thank you for your time, sir,” she said, and made her way to the door. Navarro followed suit. It was not long before the two agents were in the halls of Site-64, slowly meandering back to Merlo’s office.

“So what now…” Navarro asked, keeping himself in time with Merlo’s stride.

“I have no clue…”

“There is always my way…” Navarro said with a chuckle. Merlo laughed briefly then shook her head.

“I don’t have the benefit of being a wizard, Dan,” she said. “If I go through with this unapproved, even if I was successful, they’d wipe

my mind and leave me on the banks of the Willamette. I told Phineas this would be a long shot, and go figure I was right."

Merlo sighed as she pulled out her phone and sent a single text.

No go.

She once again pocketed her phone and the two continued in silence, only stopping their solemn gait when they heard Holman calling out behind them. The older man was nearly sprinting, his breathing heavy as he finally caught up.

"Sir?" Merlo asked.

"You two… the AMAT Lab… now!" Holman said between gasps. Eventually he regained his breath and let out a final sigh. "There has been a development."

Merlo felt her phone vibrate. As she followed behind Holman she discretely checked the new text.

Dust hasn't settled yet.

Site-64's Anomalous Materials lab was one of the newer labs in the facility. As such, when Holman, Merlo, and Navarro entered they were greeted with the sights and sounds of new scientific toys whirling, buzzing, and otherwise being scientific. A handful of researchers buzzed as they went about their business, excitedly chattering among themselves before they noticed the three outsiders standing at the threshold of their academic lair.

A scrawny man in a lab coat with messy blond hair, and sleep deprived eyes stepped forward. His lips were turned up into an ecstatic smile, as he offered a handshake to Holman.

"Director," he said in a slightly monotone voice, "thank you for making the trip down here."

"Of course, **Conwell**," Holman said, eyeing the chittering researchers in the background. "These are Agents Sasha Merlo and Daniel Navarro, would you mind telling them what you told me on

the phone earlier?"

Conwell gave the two of them a sharp nod, his smile vanishing briefly.

"We've met."

"Long time no see, Sadman," Navarro replied. "What have you got for us today?"

"A flashdrive was left on my desk this morning. Inside was directions to synthesize a stable variant of **SCP-1360-1**," said Conwell. He then took a small tray from a nearby work bench. Sure enough, a square of the familiar tough, black fabric that always covered Anderson's androids was there. Conwell then handed over a small piece of paper. "This was found with the flashdrive."

Merlo snatched it from his hands and read it hungrily, Navarro reading from over her shoulder.

> *Conwell,*
> *You and Johnson got pretty close to cracking this. I felt that you deserved an answer.*
> *Tell your superiors that all my cards are now on the table.*
> *Phineas*

"We're running a large series of tests," Conwell added, looking to Holman. "But once we get your approval, I'd like to send this to the paratech devs. Self-repairing body armor could be a useful tool. However, I think you'd be more interested in this little tidbit."

Conwell took out a small spray bottle, and immediately sent a few drops of an unknown liquid flying at the fabric. Within seconds the aramid fibers shriveled into dust.

"Phineas also provided instructions on how to destroy it. I imagine this, if weaponized, could be handy to Gamma-13, or any number of task forces dealing with Anderson robots."

Merlo and Navarro beamed at Holman. Both agents wore a smug smile. Holman sighed in response.

“How much longer until you finish the preliminary tests?” he asked.

“I’ve cleared our entire testing schedule for the day,” Conwell replied with a smile. “Give us a day or two to verify everything, and I’ll have the full report on your desk.”

“Have a copy ready to send to the paratech devs,” Holman replied, then turned to his agents and gestured to the hall. Merlo caught a glimpse of the AMAT lab techs scurrying about before the door closed, leaving the trio alone in the hallway.

“Sooooooooooo…” Merlo said, turning to Holman with a grin. “Phineas provided us with a dead Saker, names, locations, and has now armed us. He clearly wants Anderson taken down. If we don’t take him up on this offer, he’s going to find someone else. This is our shot, Edgar.”

Holman rubbed the bridge of his nose. He then let out an exasperated sigh.

“I’ll pass this up the chain,” he finally said after several moments of silence. “No promises anything will come of it though. Our track record is not exactly top tier.”

The Director slowly walked away, two fingers rubbing his right temple.

“And for the love of all that is good and holy, behave,” he added. “Or I swear I will personally be dumping your bodies into the Willamette.”

Very clever. Your gamble worked. Gamma-13 has been approved to launch the operation.

I figured that would grease the wheels enough to get things moving.

Right. So this bait you mentioned…

Dr. Contos and her son. Two people that if captured would draw Anderson out. I'm still on good enough terms with them that they can agree to meet with me. There your team can grab them. Should be simple.

Just tell us where to be, and we'll make it happen.

As per our initial agreement, they are not to be harmed during any part of these proceedings, else the identities of no less than five of your agents within MC&Ds operations will be revealed.

I thought you said you laid all your cards on the table.

I kept an ace up my sleeve.

Agent Clarissa Shaw sat alone in a small coffee shop in downtown Seattle, the outside world soaked in Washington's fall rain. Her long blond hair was neatly hidden under a red wig. Her usual thin rimmed glasses had been replaced by contacts that changed the color of her eyes from blue to green. As she sipped from her mug of coffee she looked at her watch.

Any second now… she thought. The door to the coffee shop then opened. Shaw hid her smile behind the mug.

As Phineas promised, a thin young man with a mop of curly blond hair and thick glasses entered, a short, middle aged woman with shoulder length brunette hair and faint blue eyes followed behind him. Four businessmen trailed them, each looking about the room in a seemingly random pattern. Jason Contos and Dr. Medea Contos had arrived.

Shaw turned her head and scratched her ear. A gentleman in the far corner of the room folded his newspaper, while two women in different corners closed their laptops. The company of six had only just sat down after obtaining their drinks, when Shaw and the others stood in unison throwing several canisters to the ground and covering the room in a fine cloud of white powder. The four businessmen attempted to stand and draw pistols hidden on their person, but rapidly fell apart as the powder coated them. Thick black puddles were all that remained.

Shaw and her fellow agents lost no time in drawing their pistols, the barrels trained at Jason and Medea. The two scientists held their hands up, Medea shaking in terror as she looked around at the

approaching agents. Jason maintained a vigil of hatred.

“Gotcha,” Shaw said with a sly smile, and tapped Jason on the nose.

Dr. Contos and Jason are in our custody. We have the bait, and Navarro has set up the trap. We're ready when you are.

In a studio apartment on the edge of **`Three Portlands`**, an old, bald man with a large white beard watched the rain come down. Occasionally, he’d glance at his phone, each time there would be no new messages and his heart would sink a little deeper.

“Something has happened,” Phineas said to himself as he turned around, and went to the kitchen where he started preparing water for tea. Saker-45 and Saker-32 should have checked in by now, as should have Douglas Walker and Tessa Kim. With Jason and Medea now in Foundation custody there was much to do before the final blow could be struck. All hands would be needed on deck.

The kettle whistled as the water came to a boil. Phineas reached into his overflowing sink and pulled out a dirty mug in which he placed several bags of peppermint tea. As the water took on its light green-yellow hue, Phineas sighed. They had just kicked the hornets’ nest.

“I hope no one else got stung,” he said to himself, and looked down at his steeping tea.

Shikt

There was a sharp pain in his back. Protruding from his stomach was a large, thin blade. Phineas felt himself forced forward, a powerful electric shock blasting through him, destroying the functions of his mechanical limbs. He used his arms to keep him from slamming into the kitchen counter, the devices powering down as they locked in place.

“You bastard…” a metallic voice said behind him. “Did you think there was any place you could hide that I wouldn’t eventually find you? Don’t you remember all that we’ve done to build this company?

Don’t you remember what *I’ve done?!?*”

Phineas coughed. He could taste blood in his mouth. Slowly turning his head, **`Vincent Anderson`** came into view, his silver tragedy mask shimmering in the dim light of the room.

“Hey Vince,” Phineas said with a small smile. “You finally fixed that voice module, I see.”

“Silence…” Anderson hissed, twisting the blade and delivering a fresh wave of pain. “How could you do this to Jason and Medea? Of all people…”

Anderson trailed off. He reached into the pack he carried and pulled out a large black helmet covered in wires, carefully placing it on Phineas’s head. The helmet quickly began to hum.

“Initiate.”

The old man felt a sharp jab at the base of his skull.

“What are you up to?” Phineas asked. He felt his mechanical limbs grow rigid while his biological self grew weaker. Even a cyborg of his caliber still needed his internal organs.

“Its one of Wilson's gizmos, creates some kind of electronic neural imprint or something.” Anderson said in a matter-of-fact manner. “I don't really know, Wilson made it before signing on with us. The point is, I'm digitizing your memories. It will take some modifications, but I’ll have my friend back. Then we’ll get Jason and Medea, and put this mess behind us.”

Anderson paused for several moments.

“Then all will be well again.”

Phineas gave a short laugh before coughing up a large amount of blood.

“I was wondering when we’d reach this point,” Phineas said as he spit out the dark red fluid. “You can’t just edit out the parts of people you don’t like, Vince.”

“Don’t tell me what I can and can’t do, old man,” Anderson replied. There was a static sound. Phineas imagined that his old friend would be crying now if he was still able. “I’ll see you real soon.”

Anderson then pointed his right index finger at Phineas’s head. There was a bright flash as lightning. Then Phineas was still.

Anderson stood motionless for several moments, and then slowly slid down to the floor. He pulled off the tragedy mask, and placed his head in his hands, slowly rocking back and forth.

“It's okay…” he said to himself. “I can fix this. I can fix everything. It's okay… it's okay…”

Anderson then got to his feet, and flicked the tragedy mask with his index finger. The masks expression changed to comedy. Anderson placed it back on his face, and made his way towards the door, grabbing Phineas's phone on the way. He quietly scanned the texts and sent a reply.

Ready or not, here he comes.

Anderson stepped out into the Three Portlands rain as Phineas’s apartment erupted into flames.

«**Realignment** | **Austringers** | **Bal-chatri**»

Bal-chatri

Arcs of electricity left Vincent Anderson's body as he walked through the **`Three Portlands`** rain, the wayward bolts striking nearby buildings and light fixtures as he slowly marched down the center of an empty street. Occasionally, he could be heard mumbling to himself, "It's okay… I can fix this…"

Anderson eventually reached the foot of a hill near the edge of the anomalous city. At the hill's peak stood the remains of a school. He stood motionless for several minutes, the rain making a light tapping sound on his mask as he eyed the decrepit building. A small silver droid crawled out of his pocket and up his arm before perching on his shoulder. The tiny spider-like drone's single red eye looked up at the school, then back toward its master, shaking off the rain with a tiny wiggle.

Anderson reached beneath his mask and removed a small drive and placed it within the droid.

"Take care of yourself, Benny," Anderson said, "I'll see you soon. Be good."

The small drone gave a salute and crawled away. Anderson watched it go, and then turned his attention back to the distant school.

"I can fix this…" he said to himself again and continued his ascent.

The Tristan Academy of the Arts had been a prestigious school in Three Portlands between 1972 and 1998, when the death of its founder Abraham Tristan and subsequent financial problems resulted in the school closing its doors. Since then it had remained abandoned, its windows boarded over and its halls filled with all flavors of trash, graffiti, and stagnant puddles of rainwater leaking in from the numerous holes in the roof. On this day in November,

however, the building came to life once more. As an academy teaching both mundane and anomalous practices, the entire building was fortified against magic. It was for this reason, **Agent Sasha Merlo** assumed, that Phineas selected the abandoned school to serve as the location of his intricate trap.

Merlo stood on the stage of the school's auditorium and checked her phone. Her brunette hair was tied back, and the MTF field uniform she wore gave the normally laid back agent an appearance of authority. On the screen appeared the same message that had been there for the last two hours:

> Ready or not, here he comes.

Merlo and the rest of MTF Gamma-13 were now rushing to put together the final pieces of Phineas' plan, a good fourteen hours ahead of schedule, and without a Phineas.

Merlo turned to the center of the stage. There stood two vacant folding chairs, each over a glyph drawn in red chalk. The area surrounding these glyphs was covered in an even larger glyph, the final touches of this one currently being drawn in white chalk by Agent Daniel Navarro, his focus intense as he quickly worked on the many intricate lines and curves needed.

"How much longer?" Merlo asked.

Her colleague didn't look up but simply continued his work as he spoke.

"Binding glyphs are not something you can rush," Navarro said. "If I draw this wrong it could turn into a killing curse, or interact with teleportation circles under the chairs and explode, which is the exact opposite of what we want. I will give Phineas credit though, this is high end magic. The kind people go to schools to learn. It's going to get the job done… assuming I've done it right."

Merlo nodded, opening her mouth to reply, but stopping when a series of voices blasted over her radio.

"Austringers, this is Sentry 1. We have visual on the target, ETA ten

minutes!"

"Austringers, this is Sentry 2. We have visual on target… he's performing a type blue event… Visual lost!"

There was the sound of a distant explosion. The lights in the school all died at once.

"Fuck…" Navarro said, as he lit up the room with his flashlight, the glyph he was working on still incomplete.

"He's here…" Merlo replied. "I guess we're doing this live."

Agent Clarissa Shaw was in the main hall of the school with four other agents when power went out. Dressed in the MTF field uniform, with her blond hair tied back and her glasses replaced with goggles, she and her colleagues readied their arms. The main doors blew off their hinges. A wave of **Peregrine Androids** flooded in through the breach. The team scattered to avoid the incoming shrapnel, taking cover in the nearby classroom doors. The opposing forces began to exchange fire. Within seconds the hall was littered with bullet casings, hole-riddled droids, and the bodies of two dead agents.

The remaining Gamma-13 agents lost no time in tossing several canisters into the hall, quickly filling the area with a fine white powder, the oncoming wave of droids crumbling into slick black puddles. The ones that the powder failed to destroy were subdued with bullets. The hall became quiet, save for the heavy breathing of those left alive.

"Breach at the main entrance," Shaw said over her radio, as her teammates reloaded and readied for what was likely another wave of the assault. "Hostiles subdued, Frost and Donner are down."

"Copy, any sign of target?" Merlo's voice responded.

"Negative, we…"

The response was cut short by the loud crackle and heat of electricity, her two fellow agents flying away from her into the

classrooms in which they had taken cover. Shaw turned on the spot, and was greeted by the gleaming smile of a silver comedy mask.

As Shaw attempted to fire off a round from her rifle, she felt her legs get swept from beneath her, the burst harmlessly flying into the ceiling as she smacked onto the linoleum floor. Anderson proceeded to kick the gun away, pressing down on her vest with a heavy foot as a long, animate wire retracted into his hand.

“Nice seeing you again, Clarissa,” Anderson spoke. “Would you be so kind as to tell me what you have done with my friends?”

She kept her mouth shut for several moments, looking up at her foe with silent contempt.

“Auditorium.”

Anderson gave a relieved sigh in response.

“Your cooperation is appreciated.”

The wire shot out of Anderson’s hand again, piercing through Shaws’ body armor with a sick *pop.* It then punched through her torso and wormed its way through her, between her organs, and wrapping around her spine. She let out a scream of pain and terror. The wire began letting out a small continuous shock which caused her to involuntarily stand up. Anderson gave a satisfied nod as he forced Shaw to move down the hall in front of him.

“Why don’t you join me?” Anderson whispered in her ear.

Shaw did her best to remain silent as she made her forced march, occasional tears running down her face. Her body was no longer her own. The short walk to the auditorium felt like an eternity as she waited in the prison of her own flesh. Anderson had her push the door open to the auditorium, and the pair stepped inside.

On the stage were two empty chairs. No one else was in the room.

Shaw shrieked again as the coil around her spine tightened, the electricity sending waves of anguish through her.

“In the auditorium?” Anderson hissed, the coil continuing to tighten until Shaw felt a snap, and then nothing from below the waist.

“They were supposed to be here!” she screamed. “They were! Please!”

“Bullshit!” Anderson shouted. The wire whipped back, and then flung forward. Shaw flew through the air, over the theater seats, and crashed onto the stage. She rolled for several moments, then became still.

Electricity arced from Anderson as he gave a frustrated yell. The hall filled with the smell of ozone.

And then with the sound of a shotgun being pumped.

Anderson turned his head. Navarro and Merlo stood at the opposite end of the hall, the former brandishing a shotgun, the latter a pistol.

“Where are they?” Anderson asked, regaining his composure. “This has gone on long enough.”

Navarro replied by pulling the trigger, a large blue bolt of energy flying from the barrel. The cyborg fell backwards, the blast flying past him and slamming into the far wall. Anderson swiftly leapt to his feet, firing off a shot of lightning which hissed harmlessly through the air.

Navarro and Merlo were gone.

With a shriek of rage, the cyborg sprinted down the hall, his head rapidly swiveling to track his targets. Another blue blast shot past him. Anderson let out another yell and began to chase.

Agent Shaw slowly rolled herself over as she coughed. Her body was on fire from the bruises and lacerations she sustained during the landing from her brief flight. She looked over her crumpled self. She couldn’t feel anything from the waist down, her legs unresponsive to her commands, leaving her to crawl upon the stage. While there was a small pool of blood from where the wire had pierced her, the bleeding from that wound seemed to have stopped.

She propped herself up as she heard fast footsteps; Agent Merlo was sprinting down one of the aisles toward her. Two other agents followed behind, each carrying a bound and gagged prisoner. The first carried a thin young man with a mop of curly blond hair and thick glasses that clung to his face as he looked around in terror. The second was a short, middle aged woman with shoulder length brunette hair and faint blue eyes, who simply looked straight ahead, tears in her eyes. Respectively, they were **Jason Contos and Dr. Medea Contos**, two members of Anderson Robotic's inner circle, and two of Vincent Anderson's closest friends. The agents placed them down in the two folding chairs gingerly.

"Jesus Christ…" Merlo said, as she knelt down beside Shaw. "How bad?"

"I can't feel my legs," Shaw replied. "Where's Dan?"

"Buying us time," Merlo answered "Clarissa, I'm so sorry… Phineas promised us more time to set the trap, and then you and your crew got stuck in the cross fire…"

"Wouldn't be an Asimov's Fuckups mission if things went right…" Shaw said, grinning through the pain.

Merlo gave a sad smile and signaled one of the agents over.

"Get her to Sherman, now! Have the rest of the team at the standby point. The trap's set. Carter knows the contingency plan."

"Yes ma'am," the agent replied and scooped up Shaw gently.

"Take him down…" Shaw called to Merlo as she was carried away.

Merlo nodded in response. She turned a glance to Jason and Medea, giving them a small half wave as she drew her pistol.

"See you folks real soon."

Anderson stood in a locker room, his eyes scanning for a very annoying man in plain clothes who had been taking potshots at him across half the interior of the school. The last one had hit his leg,

leaving him slightly hobbled as he continued his search. There were no other exits apparent. Whoever this agent was, he had them trapped.

“There is nowhere else for you to run.” Anderson hissed. “Where are they?”

“Did you check the auditorium?” Navarro’s voice called back from somewhere in the maze of lockers.

“Do you think this is a fucking game?” Anderson shouted back, only to be met with a small nervous laugh.

“Yeah, kinda.”

Anderson reached into his pocket, and pulled out several globs of neon blue goo. He gave a frustrated sigh, and then proceeded to chuck them at each of the locker clusters. The metal quickly disintegrated into rust, leaving the once hidden Navarro exposed. The agent looked around, and then back to Anderson, holding up a bloodied hand.

“Okay, that’s just cheating.”

The agent immediately clenched his fist, sending a column of flames up from the floor. Anderson dived to the side to avoid being flash fried. Navarro fired off another blast from his shotgun, the slug nailing the cyborg in the chest and sending him flying backwards into the wall. Navarro sprinted for the door, only to crash to the ground as his feet became snagged. An animate wire was wrapped around his legs, dragging him toward the sparking cyborg.

Navarro slashed his hand again and rolled over as he released another fiery blast. The wire jerked him forward, sending the column of flame into the ceiling. Anderson let out a wild howl and he dived forward, the animate wire protruding from his palm sharpening itself into a fine point as he tried to lance his foe. Navarro had grabbed the wire. Anderson grunted as he placed his weight into the strike, the wire sliding down slowly, cutting into Navarro’s palms on the way down. Blood dripped from Navarro’s palms as he felt the blade slowly slip.

Suddenly Navarro let go with his right hand, grabbing Anderson by the lapel. The blade forcefully sunk into his left shoulder as he let out a cry of pain, followed by a cringing smile.

“Gotcha,” he said through gritted teeth. From his hand erupted a blast of flames which completely engulfed the cyborg. Anderson screamed in pain as Navarro kicked his foe off of him and hobbled out the door, grabbing his shotgun along the way.

The bloodied agent lost no time getting back to the auditorium, his body slamming through the doors as he began to limp down the aisle. Jason and Medea watched him with impassive eyes as he frantically looked around.

"Sasha?" he shouted. "Lets go!"

CRACK

A bolt of lightning struck Navarro in the back and threw him forward. A glob of orange goo hit him mid-flight, and quickly encased him in a bright orange cocoon. As he lay incapacitated, slow, dragging footsteps filled the room, as did the smell of ozone, and seared flesh.

The agent looked up to see Anderson. Parts of his suit had burnt away, exposing charred flesh, and the strange hybrid of organic and mechanical components beneath. His mask was gone, leaving full view of his face. In place of eyes, he had what appeared to be two small camera lenses that glowed with a faint green light. Rather than a nose, he had a triangular grating that rapidly hissed with the passage of air.

"Gotcha," Anderson stated. He launched the animate wire at Navarro and let it squeeze. Navarro howled in pain as he watched his left arm, from the elbow down, roll away from the rest of his body. The cyborg watched his helpless prey scream in agony, then raised the wire for the kill.

Bang.

A gunshot rang out. Anderson backed up slightly in shock, the

projectile hitting him in the torso. He turned to the source. Merlo stood in the auditorium doorway, pistol raised.

“Kill him, and you kill Jason or Medea. We’ve linked a kill agent between his vital signs, mine, and theirs. Either of us dies, so do they.”

“You’re bluffing.”

“Want to take that chance?” Merlo raised her pistol. “Try me. Otherwise your friends are right there. Go get them”

“So just like that, you’re done? You think I was born yesterday?”

“You’ve sliced up our team wizard, and crushed the spine of my second in command. I’ve only got this 9mm. The time for tricks has long passed,” Merlo stated coolly. “You’ve won. Collect your god damn prize.”

Anderson and Merlo’s gazes locked for a minute, and then the cyborg began to move toward the stage.

“If you have harmed them… I’ll destroy everything you care about, Sasha.”

Anderson kept one eye on the agents as he approached the stage. Merlo quickly cut Navarro free from his orange prison and watched him cauterize his stump hand with a small blast of flame.

“Mechanical asshole…” Navarro mumbled, violently shaking as he was helped to his feet a wink, the two agents watching as the worn down husk that was Vincent Anderson stumbled onto the stage.

“Friends,” Anderson called out. “Friends, I am so sorry. I swore that I would protect you and I have failed.”

Jason and Medea looked at their employer in silence. Their eyes were bloodshot, and their faces plastered with the exhaustion known by those living in a state of terror.

“It will not happen again,” Anderson continued. “I promise you that. With every fiber of my being, I promise. I can only hope you’ll find

the kindness to forgive me for this… for all my faults. After all, to err is human…”

Anderson took a final step, then turned to Merlo.

"Bring them to me," he barked. "Now."

Merlo nodded, placing Navarro down in a seat in the first row, then began to climb on the stage. Anderson gestured towards the two bound prisoners expectedly, his eyes locked on Merlo as she knelt down and began to undo Medea's restraints.

Meanwhile, Navarro noticed his shotgun lying on the ground near the stage. A small smirk came to his face.

"Heads up!" Navarro shouted, diving to the shotgun and letting loose one final blast as Anderson turned on the spot and let loose another orange glob.

Both Navarro and Anderson were hit square in the chest. The former crashed into a row of seats. The latter stood motionless, his frame stunned. Merlo sprinted forward, tackling the cyborg. The two landed in a heap between Jason and Medea.

The room became silent. Anderson stood quietly, his hand around Merlo's throat. She clawed at her assailant; but it was no use, his grip was absolute. The agent made short gasps for air as the grip tightened.

"And we were getting along so well," he said with a sigh, and threw the agent across the stage like a piece of trash. Merlo landed with a sickening thud, skidding face down across the smooth surface of the stage before coming to a final stop.

Two red glyphs began to glow beneath Jason and Medea’s chairs, as a larger one appeared beneath all three of them, glowing with an intense white light. Anderson felt his entire body go rigid as he was locked into place, a great force pressing against him from all directions. Jason and Medea phased out of sight, vanishing with soft pops, the glyphs beneath them growing cold, leaving their images burnt onto the stage.

The cyborg recognized this kind of magic. He had seen it before, from an old friend.

“Well played, Phineas,” Anderson said weakly. “Well played.”

Agent Shaw watched the monitor in front of her intently. Upon it were the remains of Vincent Anderson, lying motionless upon a secure exam table within a cell in **Site-64**. At some point between his capture at the Tristan Academy in Three Portlands and his arrival on site he shut down, and entered a form of stasis. Life signs were present, and the physical body was repairing its damaged components automatically, but none of their equipment could detect brain activity.

Shaw gave a heavy sigh, and rolled her wheelchair over to a coffee pot in the back of the observation room. She poured herself a mug and then returned her attention to the screen. They had finally captured the white whale itself.

The door to the chamber opened. Agent Merlo stepped inside. Shaw gave her superior a friendly nod.

“Any changes?” Merlo asked, looking over the screen.

“Nope,” Shaw replied, taking a sip of her coffee. “Did they settle on a plan?”

“They are shipping him to 19 tomorrow for long term storage,” Merlo sighed. “High priority PoI, maximum security containment needed, O5 orders, and all that jazz.”

“At least we got him,” Shaw chimed in cheerfully. “For once, we won.”

“It's true,” Merlo said with a small smile. “We finally got him.”

The two looked at the monitor for several moments, watching the motionless body on the screen.

“Dan and I were planning on hitting up Secret Crest tonight,” Merlo broke the silence. “I’m buying. Care to join us?”

Shaw smiled but shook her head.

“I think I’ll pass for now. Thanks though.”

“Clarissa, I insist.”

“Don’t do this to yourself,” Shaw replied sharply. “You don’t owe me a damn thing. This wasn’t your fault.”

Shaw wheeled herself back and forth slightly for emphasis.

“If you need atonement, seek it from **Holman**, or Navarro. As far as I’m concerned, the only one responsible for this situation is the monster on that screen.”

Tears were visible in Shaw’s eyes.

“Just… promise me I’m still a Lawbringer.”

Merlo closed her eyes. She wasn’t sure what they were going to do with Shaw at this point. There was talk about making her the HQ coordinator for the agents in the field, but mobile task forces needed to be mobile above all things. It was just as likely that Clarissa Shaw would be forced to retire.

Merlo gave a sharp nod, and hugged her friend.

“They’ll have to pry you from my cold, dead, hands.”

Navarro and Merlo sat at the bar of the Secret Crest Pub, a small brewpub located in Portland’s Pearl District. The owner, having been a former Site Director of Site-64, made the location a welcome haven for those Foundation personnel who had gotten off their shifts. Both agents sat in plain clothes, the former’s left sleeve pinned upward to make up for his new lack of a hand.

“Shaw might let you off easily,” Navarro commented as he sipped his drink, “but you’re buying me my drinks forever.”

“Fair enough,” Merlo replied, holding up her fingers to signal another round. She paused for several moments before she finally added.

“I’m sorry though Dan. I really am.”

“You should be,” Navarro said with sly smile. “That was the hand I used to flip people off. Now I can’t properly express myself. You have emotionally crippled me.”

Merlo gave small snort and shook her head, taking a long sip from her beer.

“What kind of ammo were you using in that shotgun, anyway?” Merlo asked. “Haven’t seen it before.”

“Something I picked up on **an assignment in Japan**. Completely nonlethal.”

“The great Daniel Navarro, even in the face of a killer cyborg, you can’t bring yourself to kill someone.” Merlo chuckled. Navarro joined in. After a few more moments they returned to their drinks in silence.

“So what happens now?” Navarro asked after finishing his second drink. “You guys got your prize. What’s next for Gamma-13?”

“We caught Anderson, yes,” Merlo replied with a sigh. “But the company still exists. Phineas has probably taken over by now. Lop off one head and have another two grow back in its place.”

“Indeed,” said a warm voice from behind the two agents. They swiveled on their stools and came face to face with an old woman carrying a box. She wore a dark blue business suit and her grey hair was tied back in a bun, and gave a soft, sympathetic smile.

Navarro and Merlo locked eyes for a moment, and prepared to speak. They were interrupted as the old woman introduced herself.

“My name is **Mrs. Saker**,” she said. “I was a friend of Phineas.”

“Subtle,” Merlo replied. “Phineas send you to strike out another deal?”

“Phineas is dead,” Mrs. Saker said softly. “Anderson slaughtered him in his apartment shortly before you captured him, as he did to all of those who threw their lot in with the old fool. I’m all that’s left of

Phineas's band of merry men."

Merlo paused.

"So who has taken charge of the company?"

"It remains to be seen," Mrs. Saker replied. She then placed the box on the bar next to Navarro.

"Phineas would have wanted you to have this for your troubles. I'll be working on something for your friend Ms. Shaw in the meantime. We'll be in touch."

Mrs. Saker gave a curt nod and turned away, leaving the pub as quietly as she entered, and disappearing into the foot traffic outside. Merlo and Navarro looked towards the box, the latter cautiously opening it. Inside was a black prosthetic arm, marked with the Anderson Robotics logo. A card was placed on top which read:

> Thank you for your purchases of your new **GYRFALCON™ Series prosthetic.**

Jason and Medea Contos sat at the board room table inside Anderson Robotics HQ. Neither of them could remember the last 72 hours, and had woken in their respective homes beaten and bruised. In the time they had come into work, they had learned that both Vincent Anderson and Phineas had completely vanished, leaving no one to man the company helm. Joining them at the table was Dr. Jeffery Wilson, and Isaac Dillard. The former was a middle aged man with dark skin. His face seemed to be permanently pressed into an expression of worry. The latter was a muscular man in a business suit whose hair was neatly combed back, and carried a faint scent of aftershave with him. Isaac cleared his throat, and then began to address his colleagues.

"Well folks," he began, "we all knew this day was likely to come. Now we need to make a decision, and fast. The stability of the company depends on it."

Isaac let out a sad sigh.

“We need to replace Anderson.”

All the eyes in the room turned to one another, bouncing from locked gaze to locked gaze before all glances settled on the floor.

“My vote,” Isaac continued, “is for Medea to take the reins.”

“M.. me?” Medea stuttered. “For the love of God, why?”

“You’re the closest person we have to matching Vincent and Phineas’s raw talent,” Isaac replied. “You know their vision for our products and customers as well as they did. It will be a hard road, but we’re here to help every step. Unfortunately, someone needs to step up to the plate, and I’m afraid it’s your turn to bat.”

Medea looked down at the table nervously.

“I… I wouldn’t even know where to start… Isaac, I can’t be set adrift like this…” Medea mumbled. “I… I don’t know what to do…”

“You don’t need to,” said a voice from the entrance of the room.

The four heads at the table turned to the board room’s entrance. Standing there was a tan man in a blue dress shirt, with a silver vest and matching slacks. He had long black hair tied back in a ponytail and piercing green eyes. A silver comedy mask was gripped in his left hand as he made his way to the head of the table. While it was no longer mechanical sounding, the four board members recognized his voice.

“Vince?” Wilson asked. “What…. What happened to you?”

“Got a little tied up with the Foundation, I’m afraid,” Vincent replied with a cheerful smile. “I’ve made use of some of the tech created by **Myra Rider**. You remember her, right? Lovely up-and-coming member of the R&D team. Anyway, for the time being I’ll be operating remotely through Saker-101 here.”

Anderson gestured to himself.

“Not bad, don’t you think?”

“If your physical body is in the hands of the Foundation…” Jason asked slowly, “Isn’t that potentially a massive breach of security for us?”

“You bet,” Anderson said warmly, "They've got me by the balls. If they tamper with my body I could die, and I can't use magic like this. But for the time being it’s the best option I have. I'll just pop back to them every now and then. Throw them a bone.”

The room fell silent. The eyes of the board members fell on the table. Their frames felt small under weight of Anderson’s piercing gaze and monumental smile.

“I’ve also got a surprise for you…” Anderson chimed, and turned toward the board room doors. “Look who's back!”

Anderson threw open the doors, and a skinless Saker unit walked in, dressed entirely in black save for its red tie.

“Afternoon everyone,” the android said in Phineas's voice then produced a small smile. “I apologize for my absence. It’s good to be back.”

The board members looked at the Saker with wide eyes. Sideways glances met with one another and an air of terror crept over the table.

“Anyway,” Anderson beamed, placing his comedy mask on his face. “Phineas and I have a lot of work to catch up on from this past month. Let’s hit the ground running. We still need to get the Taita series prototype rebuilt. You all take care.”

Anderson and "Phineas" left the room, the doors closing behind them.

For several minutes there was silence. Isaac organized several papers in front of him, and met the horrified gaze of every other member of the room in turn.

“Well folks,” he said softly, “we all knew this day was likely to come…”

No Good Deed

January 18th, 2020

As the doctors, nurses, CNAs, and other hospital personnel carried out their duties within Portland's St. Vincent's Hospital, a man in a blue and silver suit weaved his way towards a room in the facility's med-surge unit. His name was **Vincent Anderson**, and he was there to visit an injured employee.

"Keep up, Isaac," Anderson said to a man trailing behind him. "We don't want to be here longer than we have to."

"Sure thing," his associate replied, and quickened his pace. Before long, the two of them had arrived at their destination, one of many identical hospital rooms.

Inside this room, a young woman laid in a hospital bed. Her face was swollen and bruised, and her right arm was held against her in a sling. It was clear that both her legs had been amputated below the knee. Sitting beside her was an older woman in a dark blue business suit.

"Mr. Anderson," the older woman stood up at their arrival. "We weren't expecting you to personally pay a visit."

"Afternoon, 45," Anderson replied. "Thank you for looking after our friend here."

He then approached the woman in the bed, giving her a sympathetic smile as he approached.

"You must be Rebecca Quinn," Anderson continued. "I'm Vincent Anderson. This is my associate Isaac Dillard. I do believe you work for me."

The woman on the bed gave a weak smile and slowly nodded her

head.

"Yeah…" She coughed and gave a small chuckle. "Distribution Center in **Three Portlands...** Had a bit of accident with one of the Taita units."

"Just a small one," Anderson chuckled. "Isaac told me you chose to come here over Sacred Gear in Portlands. If you don't mind me asking, why? It would have been faster…"

"I… just felt more comfortable receiving treatment that wasn't bedazzled, or from a Witch Doctor," Rebecca replied. "Besides, the Taita incinerated my legs after severing them. Not much they could have done there that they didn't do here."

Rebecca's smile then became a worried frown.

"Am… am I fired, sir?"

"Oh of course not," Anderson said, taken aback. "You've put in over 10 years of top-notch service, and these kinds of things happen when you work with prototypes."

Rebecca's smile returned.

"Thank you…"

"Of course. My employees are my family. We're going to put you on paid leave until you feel you're ready to return. At that point, we'll set you up with a voucher for two **Gyrfalcon** series prosthetics. Throw in two upgrades as well. Then, once you're comfortable with your new hardware, your position will still be there."

Rebecca's mouth hung open in shock. The room fell silent, save for the tapping of Isaac taking notes on his smartphone.

"Mr. Anderson…"

"Call me Vincent," Anderson interrupted with a chuckle. "And I insist. Here at Anderson Robotics we take care of our own, no matter where they fit into the company machine."

Rebecca nodded. Tears rolled down her face as she smiled.

"Thank you, Vincent," she finally managed to say.

"Any time," Anderson replied. "I'm afraid Isaac and I will need to take our leave now. **Mrs. Saker** here will stay with you until your emergency contacts arrive."

Without another word, Anderson and his assistant took their leave. Isaac finished typing up his notes, walking beside his employer as they made their way through the hospital parking garage, toward an entrance into Three Portlands.

"I'm not in accounting, but I'm pretty sure your 'Get Well Soon' present is going to cost the company a pretty penny," Isaac commented. "The Gyrfalcon series are not just things to give away as party favors."

"It's my private company," Anderson replied. "I'll do whatever the hell I want with it. My employees are my family and I will do well by them, just as they do well by me. Am I clear?"

"You're the boss," Isaac agreed with a shrug. The two men entered an elevator, and tapped an intricate pattern into the buttons. Despite being on the top floor the elevator began to ascend and carried them into Three Portlands.

August 15th, 2020

Bzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzzt

Agent Sasha Merlo stirred from her sleep. She brushed a lock of brown hair out of her eyes and looked at the digital clock on her nightstand. 2:16 AM. She grumbled under her breath as she grabbed her cell phone.

"Go for Merlo," she said sleepily, sitting up in bed.

"Sasha, it's Clarissa," came a woman's voice over the other end.

"Shaw?" Merlo asked. "It's two in the morning… what's up?"

"It’s Anderson. We got a call from **Labelle** at Site-19. He's awake. We're getting called in to do interviews."

Merlo's sleepiness immediately left her.

"I'll be at **Site-64** within the hour," she replied, and promptly hung up. At the same time, the lump in the bed that rested next to her began to stir.

"Getting called out to save the world again, sweetie?" Gabe Merlo asked groggily.

"I'm afraid so," Merlo sighed.

"Jessie's going to be pissed," Gabe commented with a small chuckle.

"I know… Think you can cover for me?"

"No worries. Just make it up to her when you get back. Please be safe."

"You know me," Merlo said with a tired smile and pecked her husband on the cheek as she got out of bed. "Love you."

"Love you too."

Within 30 minutes Merlo was dressed, packed, and ready to leave her apartment. Before making her way out the door, she quietly dipped into the apartment's second bedroom where a small girl slept soundly.

"Love you, Jessie," Merlo said under her breath before giving the little girl a kiss on her forehead. Without another sound, she grabbed her bags, her jacket, and made her way to her car. She had a flight to catch.

March 23rd, 2020

At a small Portland coffee shop overlooking a public park, a tall, pale woman watched the foot traffic pass as she occasionally took sips

from her oversized coffee mug. Her name was Jill Herring, and she was waiting to see someone she hadn't seen in nearly a decade.

"This seat taken?"

Jill looked up to see Vincent Anderson smiling at her. Her mouth hung open briefly. When she had last seen him, he had pale skin, and was bald. The man in front of her did look like Anderson, but not the Anderson she was expecting to meet with today.

"Vince…" she said softly. "You're looking good. Like, when we first met…"

Anderson nodded and sat down.

"This isn't my real body, I'm afraid. Just a **puppet I'm controlling** while the real me is a bit tied-down. Still, glad you like it."

Jill nodded and gave a melancholy smile.

"How have you been, Jill?" Anderson continued. "How's life treating you?"

"Can't complain. Work's the same as ever."

"Still teaching studio art at that high school?"

"That got closed down in **2008.** I've been working at a graphic design firm since."

"Heh, that kind of work suits you," Anderson nodded in approval. He then paused, looking down at the table for a few moments before asking, "How's Erica doing?"

"She's doing very well," Jill sighed. "She'll be graduating from OSU next year. Bachelors in Computer Science. Really takes after you in that regard. Plans on moving on to her Masters."

"Does she still ask about me?"

"Occasionally. She accepted Tom as her father a long time ago, but

the subject of Vincent Anderson still makes her curious from time to time. I think at some point she'll ask if I can help her track you down, but not anytime soon. She's still rather bitter…"

Jill frowned and closed her eyes briefly, then quickly attempted to hide her expression by taking a sip of coffee.

"Well, when she enters the job market, I'll always have openings on my staff. Let me know if she's interested," Anderson continued.

"Will do," Jill replied.

Anderson pulled out a paper check, and slid it across the table. Jill picked it up and examined it briefly before folding it and putting down on the table in front of her.

"I thought I told you that I'm not comfortable accepting these." Jill frowned. "Tom's not comfortable accepting these."

"And I've told you that you are more than welcome to rip them to shreds. I can get that money into your account in other ways. This is just a courtesy," Anderson replied sharply. "Are the checks I've been sending you enough, though? I can increase them if you want. Money's no object for me now…"

"The current amount is more than enough, Vince! Erica has more than enough to pay for the rest of her schooling and then some. Tom and I have already paid off our mortgage and debts. At this point it's just piling up. The only thing I can see us using it on, is if Erica decides to buy a house, or wants to live in the city after graduation…"

"Let me know when that happens. I'd be more than willing to help."

"Of course…" Jill took another sip of her coffee, then sighed. "So, in the end, was it worth it?"

"Do you have to ask me that every time?" Anderson's brow furrowed.

"I will until you give me a straight answer. Was it worth it? Leaving us."

"Sticking around would have just put you and Erica in danger. Besides, Tom's twice the husband I ever was, and at least four times the father. You two ended up way better off."

"That's fucking bullshit, Vince!" she hissed. "You never even gave yourself a fucking chance!"

"I didn't need to," Anderson replied coolly. "This year alone I've had multiple attempts on my life. My real body is currently in the possession of the Suits. Did you want to be a part of that? Did you want Erica to be a part of that? At least this way you two are safe."

"Oh, don't even pretend you chose your path for our benefit. Everything you did was for you! You found out how to make your little toys and then jettisoned us!" Jill gave a sarcastic laugh, stood and shredded the check before Anderson's eyes. "Well, now we don't need your patronage, we don't need your support, and we sure as hell don't need you! If you ever come near my daughter or I again, I'll let the Suits know where you are, I swear to god!"

Anderson watched with a blank expression as Jill stormed away. He pulled out another check from his pocket and neatly folded it, then reached into his other pocket and pulled out a hand-written note and a small silver ball. He placed the ball on the table and watched as it sprouted needle-like legs.

"Afternoon, Benny," Anderson said to the tiny **`Amur drone.`** "Go ahead and make sure Erica gets these, will you?"

The tiny robot gave a small salute, and stuffed the two slips of paper into an internal compartment before scurrying away. Anderson watched it bolt out of sight, as the waitress approached.

"I'll take an Americano, please," he ordered. "Extra shots. I need something strong right about now."

August 16th, 2020

"How long has he been awake?" Agent Merlo asked. As she spoke, she walked through the halls of Site-19's high-security humanoid

storage wing. Beside her was Agent Clarissa Shaw, who effortlessly rolled herself along in a wheelchair, matching Merlo's pace. The two of them were being lead through the facility by a researcher named Rose Labelle.

"About two days now," Labelle replied, looking over her shoulder as she led them towards the cell that supposedly contained the now-conscious body of Vincent Anderson. "One moment, completely brain-dead, the next, wide awake and demanding to speak with the leader of his containment team. We sent Site-64 a message as soon as we met all our protocols."

"Are his systems operational?" Shaw inquired. "Magic? Weapons Systems? Comms?"

"We have him in an anti-thaumaturgic cell, so he's dead in the water on that front unless he can break the geis there," Labelle answered. "As for his other systems, they're operational, sure, but still heavily damaged. He's not going anywhere without serious system repairs. You two can relax. We've got him under lock and key."

"Paint us impressed," Merlo commented with a grin. "Out at Site-64 they had us trying to hold him with the containment equivalent of a cage made out of sticks."

"We do try our best," Labelle gave a small smile in return. They then arrived at a large blast door that Labelle swiftly opened with a swipe of her keycard. "Here we are."

Beyond the door was an observation room in which several of Labelle's colleagues monitored read-outs of Anderson's systems. Several anti-thaumaturgic security personnel stood in the room's corners, their expressions blank as they kept their eyes on the contents of the adjoining room. Through a large observation window, Shaw and Merlo could see their old enemy sitting on a cot, his hands and legs restrained as he stared blankly ahead. Merlo approached the window, her expression a mixture of fear and awe as she looked over Vincent Anderson from the business end of a set of one-way glass.

He seemed almost skeletal. His pale, nearly translucent skin had

been replaced by scar tissue, a remnant from having most of his flesh seared off by nuclear fire during their last encounter. Only one of the camera lenses he had in place of eyes glowed with a faint green light; the other lens sat dark with a large crack running down its center. Occasionally he'd give a violent involuntary shake.

"Jesus." Shaw gave a sharp whistle, "he looks like shit."

"Looks better off now than when we originally shipped him here," Merlo replied. She turned back to Labelle. "I take it you guys received a copy of our objectives for this interview."

"We did," she replied. "We're ready whenever you are."

"Dandy," Merlo said with nod and placed a hand on Shaw's shoulder. "He's all yours. Make us proud."

Vincent Anderson looked up as Agent Shaw rolled into his cell on her wheelchair. He gave a small smile and waved as she stopped several feet away. She looked over some notes on a clipboard in her lap, adjusting her glasses before looking up.

"Afternoon, Clarissa," Anderson said. "Was, um, Merlo unavailable?"

"I'm the interrogation specialist for this task force," Shaw replied coolly. "So, I'm afraid you'll be mainly interacting with me."

"Oh? Is this an interrogation?"

"Let’s consider this an interview for now."

"Swell. Did Labelle tell you what my SCP item number was? She, uh, won't tell me."

"As far as I know, you're not going to be assigned one."

"Oh…" Anderson sighed. "That's, um, a little disappointing, to be honest. Why?"

"Because if we gave an SCP number to every wizard or cyborg we picked up we'd quickly bloat our database. You have a Person of

Interest number. That’s about it."

"Ah, well… Better than, um, nothing. I suppose. How can I, uh, help you today?"

"Just going to ask you a few questions. I'd appreciate answers."

"Wouldn't we all," Anderson chuckled. "Try me."

"First off, something simple. Who’s in charge of Anderson Robotics in your absence?"

"Phineas I would think."

"Yeah, no…" Shaw replied with a tsk. "We are aware that you killed Albert Frostman in Three Portlands shortly before the incident at the Tristan Academy. Who is really in charge now?"

"Ah, well…. guess that cat's, um, out of the bag," Anderson shrugged. "To be honest, I don't know. It's a company, Clarissa. Not a kingdom. There is no line of succession. The board probably appointed someone else to be the new acting CEO in my absence. I don't know who. I've, uh, been here. Can't exactly update my news feed in this anti-magic, anti-tech cage you slapped me in."

Shaw leaned on her wheelchair's armrest as she scribbled down a few notes.

"Fair enough. Onto something a little more complex. We know about the distribution deal you have with MC&D for your Gyrfalcon series. We want the names of the MC&D reps you've been going through."

"Talk about shooting myself in the foot. Why on earth would I give you those names? That's just bad business."

Anderson gave a violent shake for several seconds. Shaw smiled and continued to write down more notes.

"Because, according to Labelle's scans of your systems, you need to make repairs, badly." Shaw gave a sly smile and Anderson began to shake again. "We're prepared to provide you with the supplies, but you have to play ball. That means MC&D names. That means

identities of any other public figures you replaced with Sakers. That means letting us in on what exactly this Taita Series is."

Anderson paused for a moment at this last phrase.

"Oh yes, Vincent," Shaw continued. "We've heard whispers about the Taita Series."

"I'm willing, uh, to bargain," Anderson finally replied. "But unlike Phineas, I, um, am not going to cash all my chips at once. You'd be surprised at how few materials I need to make most of these systems work again."

"Fair enough," Shaw shrugged and closed her notepad as she began to wheel her way towards the door. "We'll give you some time to think about it. Give us a ring when you've decided what you're willing to provide."

"By the way, um, Clarissa," Anderson called out just as she was about to leave. Shaw paused, turning slightly to hear what he had to say. "I never got a chance to apologize for what I did to you at the Tristan Academy. So, uh, yeah… I'm sorry."

"You shattered my spine," Shaw commented. "Really hard for me to accept an apology for that."

"Yeah, well, you kidnapped two of my closest friends and used them as bait," Anderson snapped back. "In fact, so far, all my actions taken against the Foundation have been in retaliation for something you guys have done to us, unprovoked! I operate out of Three Portlands. You have no jurisdiction there. You guys, uh, poke a bear with a sharp stick, and then are surprised and offended that it tries to maul you."

"That all?" Shaw asked, her face turned into a scowl. Anderson waved her away.

"That's all," he replied. "Sorry for the damage, um, done. But perhaps it would humble you to remember that it might, uh, have been a teensy bit your fault."

Shaw shook her head and rolled out of the room, the blast door

sealing shut behind her as Anderson began to violently shake once again.

May 6th, 2020

"Uncle Vince!"

Two small boys, one ten and the other seven, tackled Vincent Anderson to the ground.

"How have you been?"

"Did you bring Benny?

"Did you bring us anything?"

The boys spouted question after question as Anderson wrestled them off of him, chuckling the whole while. Eventually, with swift, fluid motion, he lifted the two boys up, one in each hand, and then placed them on their feet. He ruffled their sandy hair, and pretended to ponder.

"Benny?" he asked in mock confusion. "Do I know a Benny? Small robot? Silver? Looks like this…"

Anderson held out his palm. Benny stood at its center, the little droid shaking its nubby legs in a fashion reminiscent of a 'tada!' The tiny droid leaped off his hand and scurried away across the grass, the two boys shouting in glee as they chased it. Anderson smiled and brushed loose pieces of grass off his slacks as he watched them run around.

"You really are their hero, Vince," said a voice from behind.

Anderson turned to see the familiar face of his brother, Adrian. Like Anderson, he had dark hair and tan skin, but stood half a foot shorter, and was seven years younger. Adrian had his arm wrapped around a woman with sandy hair, whom Anderson recognized as his sister-in-law, Phoebe.

"I try," Anderson said with a grin. "To be honest I think they just like

me for my toys."

"Maybe," Phoebe commented, "but to be fair, your toys are pretty cool."

Anderson chuckled, and watched as his nephews jumped up and down at the base of the tree, trying to reach the small Amur drone that was taunting them from the branches.

"You look good, Vince," Adrian continued, gesturing up and down Anderson's figure "What all did you do this time?"

"Heh, If I had known my regular body was so jarring I would have made this switch a long time ago," Anderson said with a melancholy laugh. "I'm afraid this is a puppet I dressed up to look like me. I got a little tied-down in person, and so I had to send in the next best thing."

"Well, in person or remotely, the kids and us both appreciate the visit," Phoebe replied cheerfully. "Seriously, we know you're a busy guy, so these are always a treat."

"Thanks," said Anderson. "Always nice to be appreciated…"

The trio fell silent for a moment, watching as the two boys in the distance used one another as stilts, only to lose their balance and fall back to earth. Benny proceeded to drop down onto them as they lay in the grass before scurrying away towards another tree. The boys lost no time resuming their chase.

"Speaking of trips," Anderson broke the silence, "where do you two want to go for your anniversary this year?"

"Vince," Adrian began, smiling as he shook his head, "you really don't…"

"If you don't tell me, I'll ask Josh and Craig," Anderson threatened with a smile. "I bet they'll say Disneyland again."

"Could we offer a counter-proposal?" Phoebe chimed in. "Instead of paying for us to go on a trip for our anniversary… maybe you come with us? We'd love to travel with you. Adrian said you spent time in

Europe when you were younger. Said you'd be a fantastic guide…"

Anderson remained in quiet thought as he watched the boys in the distance succeed in finally catching Benny, the older boy holding the tiny drone aloft in success as the younger stomped around in victory.

"Why?" Anderson finally asked.

"Why?" Adrian repeated.

"Yeah, why? What on earth do you two want me tagging along for?"

"Vince," Adrian said, taken aback. "You're my brother. You've always looked after me. If you're going to insist on sending us on these trips you might as well tag along once in a blue moon. We really don't see you outside these short visits…"

Adrian stopped as his sons returned to them, triumphantly holding Benny high as if he was a hunting trophy.

"We got'm!" the younger boy shouted. "He tried to climb a tree, but we got'm!"

"You sure did," Anderson said as he ruffled the boy's hair again, and got down on a knee. The boys gently placed the robot in his out stretched palm and watched, wide-eyed, as Benny proceeded to crawl up his arm, around his head, then down his back before vanishing into his pocket.

"So…" Anderson looked back at Phoebe. "Where did you want to go?"

August 19th, 2020

In the end, Anderson provided the SCP Foundation with a list of five names of current and former MC&D suppliers who handled the Gyrfalcon Series sales. In exchange Labelle and her team provided parts and tools he needed for repairs. Shortly after completing one of many repairs, Anderson fell asleep and reentered the coma-like state he had been in since being captured by the Foundation.

Without anything else to be done, Shaw and Merlo were called back to Site-64, while the diligent members of **MTF Kappa-10** began their work within the MC&D intranet to make use of Anderson's report. The adventure concluded in the same manner as all MTF Gamma-13 adventures: A brief trip to the Secret Crest Pub in Portland, followed by paperwork.

"How are you and Lily doing?" Merlo asked her friend as she placed an empty pint glass down on the table.

"That broke apart weeks ago," Shaw said with a sigh. "It was… complicated. I've started seeing **Roland** again."

"I'm sure Roland appreciates that," Merlo chuckled. "Still, sorry to hear about Lily. She was nice."

"She sure was." Shaw stared into her drink. "How's Gabe and Jessie anyway?"

"Can't complain. Gabe's a huge dork as always. Jessie's, well, a preschooler. So, you know, fun times there."

Shaw laughed and nodded in understanding.

"Still can't believe that the great Sasha Merlo ended up marrying one of the Site-64 accountants. You could have had anyone, but you chose the math guy."

"Screw you." Sasha grinned, "Gabe's the best. He's on the right side of the veil so I don't have to tiptoe around him. I don't have to worry about him getting dragged to the seventh circle of hell unless he manages to summon a calculator demon. Plus, he's a good father and an even better cook. I'll take my accountant over whatever it is you're doing."

"You sure shot me down quick." Shaw let out a laugh and held out her hands in mock surrender.

"I play to win."

"Ahem."

Shaw and Merlo turned to find that they had been approached by a man in a black and red suit with long black hair tied back in a braided ponytail. He grinned at them and placed a small box on the table.

"My name is Mr. Saker," he said. "The board at Anderson Robotics wanted me to present you with this, Agent Shaw."

"We really have to stop meeting like this…" Merlo commented as she watched him slide the box across the table. "Also, Christ, do they even bother to name you guys anymore?"

"There are hundreds of us, Agent Merlo," he replied. "After a while they stop caring about names unless it's something mission-critical. Don't need a fancy name to be a courier."

"You think we are just going to open a box from a known enemy agent?" Shaw asked.

"You think we'd be stupid enough to launch an unprovoked attack against the Foundation, in one of their fronts, for shits and giggles?"

Shaw looked at the box for several moments. She looked to Merlo who only offered a shrug. With a sigh, Shaw picked up the box and opened it. Inside was a small black strip of medical grade plastic, with several tiny mechanical probes running down its side. Shaw examined the piece of equipment and then looked quizzically at the Saker.

"It's a new model of the Gyrfalcon series," he commented. "It will serve as a repair for your damaged spine. Should allow you to walk again. Nothing fancy."

"And this is what?" Shaw asked. "A way for AR to say sorry for what Anderson did? Just going to offer up equipment to the SCP Foundation, and hope for us to be buddy-buddy?"

"Consider it a sign of good will while you have our CEO in lock down at your Site-19."

"I'll have to turn this in to containment! They're not going to let me use this!"

"They don't have to know about it," the Saker shrugged. "Honestly, what you do with it at this point is your business. Our conscience on this matter is clear."

He gave them a nod and began to walk away.

"You two have a nice rest of your evening."

Shaw and Merlo watched the android leave in silence, then both stared at the small plastic strip that tantalizingly sat within the box between them.

"Are you thinking about it?" Merlo eventually asked.

Shaw nodded, and continued to stare at it in silence for several moments before finally asking, "Did Dan ever get around to installing that robo-arm?"

Earlier…

It was late in the early afternoon when Vincent Anderson knocked on the door to a nondescript apartment within a Portland suburb. He was surprised when a man with glasses and stubble answered, and not the SCP Foundation agent he was expecting.

"Afternoon," the man said, with a raised eyebrow. A child's voice could be heard from somewhere beyond the door. "May I help you?"

"Ah… yes," Anderson replied, "is this the residence of Sasha Merlo?"

"It is…" the man replied cautiously. "I'm Gabe Merlo, her husband, how may I help you?"

Anderson paused for a moment and then chuckled.

"Oh man," he said. "I had no idea she had a family…"

He pulled out a silver business card and flashed it at Gabe. The man's eyes became dilated as the card's memetic effect took hold.

"I was just stopping by to drop something off for her and one of her associates," Anderson continued. "May I come in? I'd love to talk to you."

Gabe gave a slow nod and stepped aside, allowing Anderson to enter.

"Who's that, daddy?" a little girl who was coloring at the nearby coffee table commented. Her brown hair was tied back in a ponytail, a style that reminded Anderson of Sasha Merlo.

"He's just a friend of mommy's," Gabe answered as he closed the door. "Feel free to have a seat, Mister…"

"Call me Vince," Anderson replied with a sly grin. "What a lovely family you have here…"

Later…

The sun was beginning to set when Sasha Merlo finally returned to her home and family. With a tired sigh, she opened her front door to the sound of Jessie playing and the smell of Pad Thai.

"Done saving the world, sweetie?" Gabe called from the kitchen. His bespectacled head poked around the corner with a grin.

"You know it," Merlo called. She trudged into the kitchen and had a seat at the table. Gabe gave her a quick peck on the forehead before returning to the task at hand.

"You had a visitor while you were away," said Gabe as he prepared several plates.

"What?" Merlo raised an eyebrow. "Someone from the site?"

"No, he was definitely something else. Figured he was a contact of yours from Third Portland, or whatever it's called."

"What was his name?"

Gabe paused and thought for several moments, then chuckled as he

shook his head. "You know… I don't remember. He left a card though."

Gabe put a plate of Pad Thai down before her, and then slid a silver business card into her hands. As Merlo began to read it, he left the room to bring Jessie to the table. Merlo became pale as she read the front, then quickly flipped the card over to the back.

&

You really have a wonderful family, Sasha. Your daughter is absolutely adorable, and Gabe is a pretty decent guy.
Thank you for your hospitality
Vincent Anderson

Merlo's hands shook as realization set in. Her mouth felt dry, and her arms felt heavy as they rested on the tabletop.

"Hey Gabe," Merlo called after her husband. "Do you remember what this guy looked like?"

"Tan skin, braided ponytail, and a red and black suit," Gabe commented as he carried a still giggling Jessie into the room and set her down in a booster seat. "Why?"

"Mommy!" Jessie exclaimed, "Look what your friend let me play with! He said I could keep it until you got back!"

Merlo looked to see Jessie holding Benny in the palm of her hand. The tiny droid gave a wave, and then vanished in a puff of black smoke. Jessie laughed and clapped at the tiny display of magic.

"You okay, honey?" Gabe asked.

Merlo had become pale. Without a word, she stood up and went over to Jessie, and began to hold her daughter in a tight hug.

"Sasha?" Gabe asked again. Merlo shook her head and waved him over. As soon as he was in range, she pulled him into the hug as well.

August 22nd, 2020

Vincent Anderson sat in his office at the Anderson Robotics Headquarters. As always, there were stacks of papers to be read, things to sign, memos to browse, meetings to plan, and designs to review. However, rather than bothering himself with running his business, Anderson plugged a **`flash drive`** into the large monitor on the wall behind his desk and waited. Within several minutes, the screen began to display a different cluttered office. Sitting at the desk was an old man with a long white beard, dressed all in black save for a red tie.

"Afternoon, Phineas," Anderson said solemnly.

The man on the screen remained silent. His eyes were filled with a cold hatred as he stared straight ahead.

"I don't have to remind you that I can force your AI construct to speak, do I?" Anderson eventually asked.

"You do not," Phineas replied. "But considering how you keep me around so you can talk to an unaltered version of my AI construct, I doubt you'd actually do that. Anyway, to what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I recycled the Saker I was using to represent you, just as you asked. Is there anything else I can do for you? Make you more comfortable. Absolutely anything is possible in your space."

"To what benefit?" Phineas inquired. "Albert Frostman is dead. You killed him yourself. I'm just a program designed to simulate his thoughts as close as it can. I'm not real!"

"You're real enough in that virtual world of yours, and given an internet connection you'd be real enough in this world as well."

"But you won't give me internet access for obvious reasons, so I'm left king of my little pocket dimension. A real Ozymandias! Look at my works and tremble!"

The background around Phineas faded into black, leaving him standing alone in an empty void.

"You might as well delete me, because this whole charade has gone on long enough."

"I'm not going to delete you, Phineas," Anderson whispered. "I need you…"

"God, damn it, Vince! You're always so fucking selfish!" Phineas shouted. "You left your wife and daughter to pursue your dreams alone, you killed your best friend for holding a dissenting opinion on the direction you were steering the company he helped build, and now you trapped a construct of his memories in a virtual prison forever! You might not be the worst person to ever drag their sorry ass across this planet, but you are certainly a bad man!"

"I'm not selfish," Anderson weakly mumbled in reply. "I'm a generous man…"

"That's the beauty of it," Phineas sneered. "It's still selfishness. You do these horrible things to people, then you go out on the town doing good deeds as you find them as a way to balance the karma scales and clear your conscience. In the end, there's nothing altruistic there. You're just a frustrated, lonely man who's become so unhinged from the world he resides in that -"

Anderson pulled the flash drive from the monitor. The screen instantly blacked out.

"Good chat, old friend…"

Anderson placed his head in his hands and sat in silence. On his desk, Benny watched him with a curious eye, and gave a little hum as Anderson gently pet the top of the droid with his finger.

"I'm a generous man, right?"

The little droid nodded in agreement. A small, tired smile came to Anderson's lips.

"You always know what to say."

Anderson grabbed a silver tragedy mask that sat on his desk, and placed it on his face. He flicked it with a finger, and the expression of

the mask changed to comedy. He held out his hand and allowed the tiny droid to crawl up his arm and perch on his shoulder, then stood and made his way towards the door.

"Let’s see how Ms. Quinn is settling in to her new legs," Anderson said. The little droid nodded and pointed a single leg onward.

"I bet she'll say she loves them. Everyone does. Everyone loves Anderson."

« Series Three: Austringers | Anderson Robotics Hub | Decisions We Make »

Dr. Edison's Bargain Bin of Direct-to-Forum Sequels

When I see a tale that I feel particularly strongly about, I occasionally write a short, spur-of-the-moment-"sequel" and post it on the tale's discussion page. It's kind of the end result of the Foundation not having any set canon; everything written about it is equally valid, even the stupid stuff.

But it's getting kind of hard to find them again, so I figure I might as well put them all in one place. I don't claim these are the funniest things I've ever written, in fact I'd have to say this it the literary equivalent of a deep fried snickers bar. But hey; they're my stories, and no matter how stupid they are I think they need to be written down somewhere.

Apologies in advance to the people who wrote the original stories. I sincerely thank you for not hunting me down and stringing me up by the town hall.

-Edrobot

Cut Short

Sequel to The Long Con

+ Show

> Keats was in his study, strangling a puppy, when suddenly Dr. Clef burst through the stained-glass window with a helicopter. "Drop the kitten, Keats!" he screamed. "I came here to do two things: Chew bubble gum and kick ass! And I decided to save the bubble gum for afterwards!"
> "Impossible!" said Keats. "I trapped you in a

building with an infinite number of cloned SCP-173s! How on earth did you survive!"
"It wasn't easy." said Clef, "But after days of trial and error, and thousands of casualties, we discovered that SCP-173 has a fatal weakness to guns and bullets!"
"Of course!" Keats exclaimed, "The one thing no one else had tried!" And he was so angry that he decided to shoot Delivery Agent Roadrunner with his sniper rifle for no good reason. He then held up the puppy and said "Stand back! If you shoot me, you'll shoot this puppy too!"
"THAT'S A SACRIFICE I'LL HAVE TO MAKE FOR THE GOOD OF THE FREE WORLD! AND PROBABLY SOME OF THE PARTS THAT ARN'T FREE EITHER!" and then Clef shot Keats and the puppy with a machine gun untill they both died.
"Tell me-" said Keats. "You could not have done this alone! Who set you up to this?"
"That is a secret to everyone." Said Clef. And then Keats died. "Mission accomplished." said Clef. "Keats is dead."
Meanwhile, in his secret Tropical Base, the incredibly studly and hansome Dr. Edison answered the radio while lounging in his big pile of money. "Of course he is. I planned it that way. All of my plans go that way beacuse I am the greatest researcher of all time. Now if you excuse me, I need to stop the Chaos Insurgency from stealing the economy of Russia." And then he left to go do just that.

Dr. Edison: Alien Blaster

Sequel to We Have Dismissed That Claim

+ Show

Suddenly, Dr. Rex panicked as the Destroyers' UFO landed on his house.

"PUNY HUMANS!" said one of the destroyers "WE ARE HERE TO VAPORIZE MOST OF YOU AND SEND THE REST TO OUR SPICE MINES ON RIGEL V!"

Dr. Rex tried to say "Oh no! I totally thought this wasn't going to happen! How dramatically ironic!" but he couldn't because he had just been vaporized by the destroyers' space guns.

They then shot Delivery Agent Roadrunner with a teleportation gun that sent him to their spice mines on Rigel V, where he lived for 70 tortuous years before he was eaten by a sand worm.

Dr. Edison meanwhile was in Tokyo, dueling a ninja master for the possession of a new SCP; a magic sword that can shoot lighting and fly and sing and show one's true self that can't cut the innocent and also causes demons to explode that was forged by an ancient samurai out of 666666 thousand year old Egyptian sarcophagi. Suddenly he got a call from the O5 Council; "Edison, The Destroyers have come to vaporize most of us and send the rest to their spice mines on Rigel V! Are you a bad enough dude to blast aliens?"

"Am I a 10-dan Akido master in addition to an ace fighter pilot and a master sharpshooter?" said Edison, effortlessly parrying each one of the ninja's strikes. "Fuck yeah I'm a bad enough dude. In fact you could say that I'm a 12.0 on the 10.0 scale of badness!" He then sliced the ninja master in half using a single

stroke. "I'll be there in five minutes!"

Lord Blackwood Vs. The Destroyers

Sequel to We Have Dismissed That Claim and Dr. Edison: Alien Blaster

+ Show

Suddenly, Dr. Rex *Watson* panicked as the Destroyers' UFO landed on his house.

"PUNY HUMANS!" said one of the destroyers "WE ARE HERE TO VAPORIZE MOST OF YOU AND SEND THE REST TO OUR SPICE MINES ON RIGEL V *BARSOOM*!"

Dr. Rex *Watson* tried to say "Oh no! I totally thought this wasn't going to happen! How dramatically ironic!" but he couldn't because he had just been vaporized by the destroyers' space guns.

They then shot Delivery Agent Roadrunner *Professor Moriarty* with a teleportation gun that sent him to their spice mines on Rigel V *Barsoom*, where he lived for 70 tortuous years *solar sweeps* before he was eaten by a sand worm *cannibals*.

Dr. Edison *Lord Blackwood* meanwhile was in Tokyo, dueling a ninja master for the possession of a new SCP *artifact for his collection*; a magic sword that can shoot lighting and fly and sing and show one's true self that can't cut the innocent and also causes demons to explode that was forged by an

ancient samurai out of 666666 thousand year old Egyptian sarcophagi. Suddenly he got a call from the O5 Council *Queen of England*; "Edison *Lord Blackwood*, The Destroyers have come to vaporize most of us and send the rest to their spice mines on Rigel V *Barsoom*! Are you a bad enough dude *swell enough chap* to blast aliens?"

"*Wot wot?* Am I a 10-dan Akido master in addition to an ace fighter pilot and a master sharpshooter?" said Edison *Blackwood*, effortlessly parrying each one of the ninja's strikes. "Fuck yeah I'm a bad enough dude *I am indeed a swell enough chap if I do say so myself.* In fact you could say that I'm a 12.0 on the 10.0 scale of badness *I am, without hyperbolie, the most swell chap in all of england!* " He then sliced the ninja master in half using a single stroke. "I'll be there in five minutes! *Pip pip cherrio! For queen and country!*"

I Still Don't Care

Sequel to SCP+MLP=DNC

+ Show

Suddenly, a blue police box appeared in the Head's office. Moments later, a handsome brown colt with an hourglass-shaped cutie mark emerged from the box. "Sorry to bug you, but the multiverse is in grave peril! The Changeling Queen and the Cyberponies have teamed up with Darkseid to start the eighth Holy Grail War! If we don't find the Infinity Gauntlet Philosopher's Stone Equation before they do-"

"No." said the department head.

"You don't understand!" said Doctor Whooves. "The fate of the entire galaxy rests in our hooves, and only Dr. Clef is a bad enough dude to-"

"No."

"But-"

"NO."

Doctor Whooves shook his head. "You know what? Fine. You win! I'll just go and get one of those Homestuck kids instead. You guys are no fun, anyway. No fun at all." The pony then went back into his blue box, which dissipeared seconds later.

"Good riddance." said the department head.

The Long Con

Two old men sat at a dinner table, directly across from each other. Above, an old glass chandelier hangs, ornamented with beautiful lights. On the north wall stands an impossibly large portrait of the same two men – shaking hands and smiling, their once jet black hair now dull gray.

There's the sound of cutlery moving about, of cups being lifted and then replaced.

“Keats,” one says.

“Hm?”

“We need to stop.”

“Oh? Oh! I agree completely, the Oracle stock is played out and useless to us now. We should look to invest in clean -”

“Not stocks, Keats.”

Both men put their cutlery down in unison and look at each other. They've been friends for so long that neither manages to muster up one hundred percent of the steel possible in their gaze.

“What are you talking about, Bill? I have to say, your train of thought is sometimes too fast for me to catch.”

“You know exactly what I'm talking about.”

“I'm afraid I don't.”

“I guess I have to spell it out for you, then.”

“I suppose.”

And here the first speaker -Old Wild Bill, if that matters- looks genuinely angry. He almost stands, thinks better of it, and stops himself. Silence hangs about the room like a condemned man.

“You…this, Keats.” He spreads his arms out around him in exasperation, showing off their grand surroundings. Indeed, the room seems better suited for the upper class streets of London, Washington, Tokyo, or Moscow. Who'd believe it was buried meters deep in Australian dirt? Who'd believe above these men's heads was a statue that would kill you, an immortal lizard, and perhaps worst of all, something red? Who'd believe that below them, even deeper still, was a nuclear warhead with a 20 megaton yield?

As it turns out, quite a lot of people.

“Are you unsatisfied with the Retreat Room, Bill?”

“Listen to me, you little shit.” Bill had taken this tone with the other man only a handful of times in their long, long acquittance, and it slaps Keats awake.

Old Wild Bill stands, and in that moment, he no longer is an old man, but the warrior once called Laughing Bull. His hands, tough black leathery things, come down hard on the table. "I've known you for a long time, William. I know you better than your old whore of a mother knows you. I have stood behind you in all your endeavors; even the ones that were monstrous. It was by my will that my old tribe did not rip your scalp off on the spot when you came riding into our camp. I talked to you, befriended you; you were inquisitive and intelligent, but lacking in humanity."

The other man rolls his eyes and scoffs at the word "humanity".

"It's true. I followed you because…I cared for you, Keats. You were a good friend, despite your greed. But I will not let you hold the world for ransom any longer."

Keats merely takes up a napkin and dabs at his chin and mouth.

"Have you nothing to say for yourself?"

“I'm waiting for you to finish this tired little tirade. Or would you rather

me continue this story? Should I recount the tale of how the metal in your backwards little tribe's sacred 'relic' responded to my touch? Or should I yell loudly about what we found there? We could take this out in the hall, if you please."

"The Factory is a mistake, Keats. It is…" He searches for the right word. "…not a thing of man. We are not meant to create in such a way."

"You are correct about one thing there, at least. It's not of man. It is mine. The Factory is my will made reality. And an effective tool to impose my reality on anyone who cares to disagree."

"You're mad."

"Insults now, is it?"

"Do you realize how old we are, Keats? Why won't you see reason? I am two hundred and ten today. I have watched my entire family die. Ever since you created that damn water -"

"Ah, the Fountain of Youth. Not my most graceful or original creation, but it works."

Bill's rage was growing. He just looked at the other man and gritted his teeth. Keats noted this and grinned shallowly.

"And who would you tell about this grand conspiracy theory, Bill? The other O5? They are mine. A man's creations can never turn against him. You would know that, wouldn't you, Bill? You're the one who produced the most humans with my Factory. What were their names, again? Alto and Jack? Oh, and there was the one that looked like your son. The old you broke. 'Doctor' Gears, was it?"

"Shut up, Keats."

"I think not. You see, I have known of your growing dissent for some time, and I have planned this moment. Perfectly, I might add. Do you think I would honestly let you walk in here one day and end the world's greatest and longest con? No, Bill. There are still countries to bribe, blackmail, and ruin. There is still money and power out there that I do not yet have. Do you realize what leaders will pay to

keep their people safe and their rule secure? I simply cannot allow you to ruin this job for me, despite old friendships." Keat's voice had slowly descended in tone; where there was once affable enjoyment had been replaced with cold stillness.

"I'll kill you, William Keats. And then I'll kill your toys."

“Big words from an old Indian. Excuse me, Native American.”

“You piece of shit -”

Keats had been thumbing the action on his gun since Bill had begun speaking. Two shots rang out, and Wild Bill suddenly found he no longer had knees. There was a scream, and Keats stood, wiping at his mouth with a napkin. In his other hand was a smoking matte-black revolver.

“And history repeats, it seems. The noble English have once again prevailed against our savage foes. ” He presses an intercom button built into the table, and a quiet speaker crackles to life.

“Yes, Mr. One?” An extremely chipper female voice echos throughout the room.

“Mrs. Escot? Which Sites are Alto Clef and Jack Bright currently stationed at?”

“One minute please, sir.” Keyboard taps. “Dr. Clef is stationed at Site 19 sir, but he is currently visiting Dr. Bright at Site 23.”

“Ahhh, 23. The renegades. How convenient; three birds with a single stone. Mrs. Escot, please arrange for SCP-173 and one of our cloning devices to be transferred to Site 23. Once they are inside, please remotely seal the exits and arrange for the two to interact. You have my permission to use our sleeper agents.”

“Yes, sir! Sir, shall I detonate Site 23's nuclear warhead afterward?”

“Hmmm…no, but please ensure that the Site's entrance is buried. And see to it that a cleaning crew is set down to the Retreat Room. Tell them to bring mops.”

“Yes sir! Thank you, sir!” Click. The speaker turns off.

Wild Bill lays on the floor, bleeding and barely holding onto consciousness. Keats walks over and stands over him, the gun still in his hand.

“Any pithy last words, Bill?”

Bill's left hand weakly extends a middle finger.

“How predictable.” There is a single crack, and the world's second oldest man dies.

Keats looks at the broken body of his only friend, shrugs, and pockets the gun. He removes a cigarette and a lighter from his breast pocket, and lights up. The smell of tobacco mixes with the smell of gun smoke, and for a brief second, William Keats, pride of his father and light in his mother's eyes, feels a deep sense of nostalgia and accomplishment.

“You ran a good con. Happy birthday, Bill.”

He throws the lit cigarette unto the other man's body and leaves the room.

Ten minutes later, a crew in orange jumpsuits with mops enters the same room, and wordlessly cleans up the body. Thirty minutes later, every single man and woman in Site 23 is trying not to blink. An hour later, and Keats is sitting across from the President of the United States and calmly informing him how easily SCP-682 could be transported into Washington.

The next day, a large amount of funds are transferred into the Foundation's coffers.

Ignoring death and tragedy, the con, and the Foundation, goes on.

We Have Dismissed That Claim

"This is going to kick the top off the anthill, you know that, right?" General Pendergast asked, looking up from the report.

Doctor Rex scoffed, "Yeah, well, I can't help it that Dr. Von Schmidt is an idiot, or that so many fools actually listened to his ridiculous ideas." Pendergast shook his head. "Besides, General, you wanted a realistic assessment. There you go."

Pendergast sighed. "Rex, the point of Project Heimdall is to assess our risks. The O5 Council takes the 'Destroyers' mentioned in **SCP-1050** very seriously—"

"Ah, yes, 'Destroyers'. The mythical race of warped abominations, allegedly waiting in the 'Realm of Darkness.' We can dismiss that claim, General," spat Rex. "There is not one *shred* of evidence to support the theory that aliens drop by every fifty thousand to fifty million years and wipe out large percentages of life on this planet - *not one!* I mean, unless you count a single artifact which makes wild and unsupported claims. Every major extinction event in this planet's history caused by the same thing? Come on!"

"What about the transmission?" asked Pendergast.

"What about it? It's three words in a predecessor dialect to Latin, followed by one hundred numbers," Rex retorted.

"And some of those numbers are the base-eight equivalent of what's on the obelisk," Pendergast continued, exasperated.

"So what?" Rex asked. "More than half of them *aren't*."

Pendergast massaged his graying temples. "Doctor, don't you think it at least theoretically possible that—"

"No, General, I don't," Rex said. He sighed exasperatedly. "Let's just

take a look at what we know for certain - not what Von Schmidt guessed, what we *know.*"

"Alright."

"Obsidian obelisk of improbable size, covered in a bunch of different languages all saying the same thing, and inexplicably transmitting a signal which happens to match something occasionally picked up by radio telescopes," Rex began. "What does this text say?" He walked over to Pendergast's blackboard and picked up a piece of chalk. "'Beware the Destroyers.' Okay, now there's a helpful statement. 'They come by the millions from the Realm of Darkness which extends where no stars shine.' Millions. Right. Probably hyperbole. Also, where is this 'Realm of Darkness'?"

"Space," replied Pendergast.

Rex looked down his glasses at the General condescendingly. "Really? Remember, 'where no stars shine'. There's no where on this planet that if you look up at the clear night sky forty-eight thousand years ago that you wouldn't see stars. I mean, *now* we know about intergalactic space, but back then? No way. This isn't some space opera cosmic horror story, General. No, if you want someplace dark without stars, at least from the primitive worldview of Paleolithic man, you're talking a cave or underwater. Look at mythological descriptions of the underworld. Hades, Niflheim, those are the places to look. And the Foundation has spent decades digging around looking for subterranean and submarine monsters. You'd think we'd have noticed millions of something.

"Okay, moving on. 'For a thousand generations They slumber, lying in wait.' That's got to be hyperbole. No human society has ever kept records, even in oral tradition, that accurately keep track of things over twenty-five thousand years. Remember, writing only rolled around in the past ten thousand years," Rex said.

"But the writing on the obelisk—" objected Pendergast.

"What, the writing that magically appears over night? *We* made that?" Rex asked. "Okay. Brief description of peace, prosperity, blah, blah. 'Then They Return. They cull and burn. They are warped, and

move beyond the pale, bigger than any man, unnatural births. Every nail, claw-scale and spur, every spike and welt on the hand of those heathen brutes is as barbed steel. It is said there is no honed iron hard enough to pierce Them through, no time proofed blade that can cut Their brutal blood caked claws.' This passage also appears in Beowulf, which, I might remind you, is *fiction!*"

"Then it seems likely the author of Beowulf was aware of either the obelisk, or a contemporary version of dash-two," Pendergast retorted. "It would make sense, actually. Remember that one of the messages on the obelisk was written in 985 in Early Medieval Swedish Runes."

"Right," Rex said. "Except *Beowulf* is about a legendary Geatish hero. Who was roughly contemporary with when the story was first told."

"We think," Pendergast countered.

"Even if Grendel or his mother - or both - are Destroyers, and I'm not saying I believe that, then that would actually support the subterranean or submarine origin of the Destroyers. Remember, Beowulf has to chase Grendel's mother to her lair, which was under a lake," Rex said. "Nothing extraterrestrial about that."

"Huh," Pendergast said. This was an aspect to the text he'd never considered.

"Yeah," Rex said. "I still don't think these Destroyers are real, or aliens, but that doesn't excuse lazy analysis. The least Von Schmidt could have done was done it *right*. Anyway, from the description, we can get that these alleged Destroyers are supposed to be big, ugly monsters. If I showed ancient man a tank, what do you think his response would be? You can kill a tank with a bazooka, General."

Pendergast stood and picked up a piece of chalk of his own, "But what about the next part, Rex? 'Armies are raised and cut down like grasses before a scythe - it is said the armies of Amorah and Suhdom, each ten thousand strong, were swept away between a single rising and setting sun. Heroes come forth and are slaughtered.'"

Rex was unimpressed. "If you have a hundred tanks and you go up against twenty thousand guys with spears and bows, what do you think the result is going to be? General, when was the last time you heard of a spearman beating a tank in combat?"

"Tanks? In ancient times?" the General asked incredulously.

"Alien invaders?" the Doctor countered. "I'm not saying these 'Destroyers' - if they existed - were tanks or anything like that. My point is that they could be something (apparently) completely unrelated to ten-fifty. They could even be something the Foundation has encountered and contained."

Pendergast raised his eyebrows, "Like what?"

Rex scoffed, "You want me to guess? I don't know, six-eighty-two, maybe? Or one-seven-three? Or maybe Able? Honestly, I have no idea. But we can't account for where any of these objects were fifty millennia ago. Maybe it was six-eighty-two's great-great-great-granddaddy!"

"You've made your point, Rex," Pendergast said quietly.

Ignoring him, Rex rambled on, "Just because we 'know', or I should say 'strongly believe', that there is a threat *does not* mean we actually have the foggiest idea what that threat actually *is.*"

"Rex…"

Rex showed no sign of stopping his rambling tirade, however. "We have a lot of information about this object - that we know, I mean, not just that we think we know - but we don't know that there *is* a threat, much less anything about what that threat might be!"

"Enough!" shouted Pendergast. Rex blinked - he'd been so absorbed in his thought that it took volume to shake him out of it. Resuming his usual quiet volume, Pendergast asked, "What about the connection to Sodom and Gomorrah?"

"Do you assume the Biblical accounts of those cities' destruction through fire and brimstone are literally true, General?" Rex asked. "That the Almighty decided to smite them? Besides, their historical

existence is still in dispute by archaeologists. The Bible indicates they were located near the Dead Sea, but we've not found proof of their having been there." Pendergast nodded; petty, arrogant, and bad with people as Rex was, he had a point. "Beyond that, if Von Schmidt's analysis is correct (for a change), and the numbers are dates in Earth years since the Big Bang, then none of those dates are within human history."

"Even the most recent one?" Pendergast observed skeptically.

"No other written or oral history dates back that far, at least not that we know of," Rex said. "Sure, there were humans around, but fifty or so thousand years is a long time. Remember, this SCP notwithstanding, it's generally agreed that the first true writing of language was only invented in 3200 BCE in Mesopotamia - and then independently in Mesoamerica around 600 BC. Writing numbers came first, but even there we're only talking about 8000 BCE in Sumer."

Pendergast nodded. "So, 1050 indicates human writing is five times older than we thought."

"Except there's no clear evidence *humans* ever actually carved anything on the obelisk," Rex said. "Remember how the Nazi scientists went home for the night, only to come back and discover the Russian version of the message had appeared as if by magic."

Pendergast thought about that for a moment, and decided to push Rex back on track. After all, the doctor had failed to answer his question. "Could the Biblical accounts of Sodom and Gomorrah have come from this SCP?"

"If they did, then that would call into question centuries of scholarship on Biblical scholarship," answered Rex. "It is incredibly implausible for the Biblical Sodom and Gomorrah to have been destroyed by 'Destroyers', unless, of course, our understanding of where the Bible comes from is completely wrong."

Pendergast raised an eyebrow. "Rex, you've worked here long enough to know that stranger things have happened."

"Is it possible? Sure. But not probable," the doctor replied, adjusting his glasses. "And, on top of that, this message is a warning from ancient aliens who happened to visit this planet to warn us about other ancient aliens who appear out of nowhere every few epochs to wipe out the majority of life on the planet? I know this Foundation handles some crazy stuff, but *come on!*"

Sighing, the General asked, "Okay, what about 'Lightning and fire rain from the sky and the whole earth trembles.'"

"Sounds like what I understand modern artillery bombardment and aerial bombing is like," Rex replied.

"And this stuff about the Destroyers being 'a powerful flood that washes away entire mighty nations and empires'?" Pendergast asked.

Rex shook his head. "General, you know that there are flood myths in just about every culture, but apart from this obelisk's message, we have no reason to think they refer to anything other than, well, *water*."

"'The people pray for deliverance from the gods. The gods fight the Destroyers, but their efforts are in vain'," quoted Pendergast.

"Three-forty-three notwithstanding, how many gods do you know? And, even if you include him, how many gods do you know that actually bother interfering?" Rex asked. Pendergast was not a religious man, but he had been brought up by church-going parents, and was therefore less than amused by Rex's comment. Before he could say anything though, Rex continued. "And this whole bit about the Destroyers being 'as the gods are to men and men are to insects'? Sounds a bit like something out of Lovecraft, doesn't it? Or perhaps *Star Wars* - 'there's always a bigger fish'? Really?"

"And this escape fleet of 'fifty score great vessels'?" asked Pendergast.

"It wasn't until relatively modern times that fleets could be expected to weather storms without losing a ship or two," Rex said, "Or for that matter, to be almost completely wiped out by storms."

Pendergast returned to his desk. "So you honestly think there's no threat here," he said.

"General, the chances of anything coming to wipe us out are a million to one," Rex replied smugly.

Thank you, Ogilvy, Pendergast thought, trying not to smile at the apparently unintentional irony of Rex's choice of phrase. "Alright, Doctor, SCP-1050 isn't what we've previously believed it to be, then what is it?"

"I don't know," Rex admitted, "but just because I can't provide an alternative doesn't mean the Foundation's current guess is anything other than speculative bullshit - imaginative speculative bullshit, to be sure, but bullshit nonetheless."

Pendergast shook his head and looked up. "I hope you're right," he replied. "I'll forward your report. Dismissed, Doctor." As Rex left, Pendergast muttered to himself, "I hope you're right."

SCP+MLP=DNC

Something dreadfully wrong had just occurred within the SCP Foundation. The Head of Otherworldly Matters Department could feel it. He leaned back in his chair, and tried to determine which of the "they have screwed up royally" feelings he was getting this time. It certainly wasn't a containment breach - those were far, far more panicky - and it wasn't death on a massive scale. It was something that had gone wrong in… his department.

Slamming his forehead on the desk a few times, he shook himself off and prepared for the inevitable moment when someone would burst into the office, acting like they were *asking* for help when they damn well knew they were just *demanding* it from a man who was very, very busy and was just trying to get through the day's paperwork so he could sleep without something plaguing his mind!

Sure enough, a panicked lab assistant barged through his door shouting, "Sir, sir! Urgent situation in Experiment Chamber Sixteen! The head of the project sent me here to…"

"No, no, let me save you some breath!" said the Head, raising his hands and widening his eyes in mock surprise. "You breached through the wall of some dimension using some SCP that logically shouldn't be capable of doing that, but somehow did, and now you need me to sort things out because you aren't competent enough to do it yourselves. Did I miss anything?"

"Well, actually sir," said the assistant, trying to get himself back in order, "you *did* miss the part where we were conducting an experiment without your permission, but other than that, you're pretty much spot on."

The Department Head groaned and pressed his hands to his face. "I'd shoot you chucklefucks in the face myself if it weren't for…" he mumbled, seething quietly. The lab assistant stood shuffling his feet while the Head desperately tried to keep his hands away from his

throat. At length, he took a deep breath and asked, "What's the emergency?"

"Well, sir, while we were testing SCP-826 with some of the anomalous materials we recovered during the last testing session, when the door to the closet manifested the properties of the object, even though it wasn't targeted in that direction. Doctor Richmand opened it up, and we were assaulted by three chest-high equine beings, one of which appeared to be winged, though not in the manner of SCP-042."

"After we confirmed ourselves as friendly, it was determined that these creatures were in the possession of speech, and…"

"Oh, stop pussyfooting around the issue," snapped the Department head. "You bastards broke through into the My Little Pony universe. *Again.*" The lab assistant nodded his head quickly.

Jesus Christ, this was what, the fourth time this month he'd had to put up with something like this? The idiots had always managed to do something like this in the past through various means, but repeatedly breaking through the same barrier? After repeated confirmations of the stupid thing being completely healed? That tore it; starting tomorrow, they weren't allowed to conduct any experiments unless a doctor hand-picked by him was standing watch.

A thought occurred to him. Turning to the lab assistant, he said, "Look, I'm going to give you the benefit of the doubt. No matter how mind-bogglingly stupid you lot are, I'm going to say that this isn't your fault, and that it's *them* who keep breaking the barrier."

"Th-that seems like a pretty good assumption, sir…" the assistant murmured, his eyes darting back and forth while beads of sweat formed on his brow.

"So if we want to keep this from happening, and to prevent such gross wastes of my time from popping up so often, we just promise to give them what they want, and hope they go away for good."

The lab assistant coughed. "I'm afraid that's not entirely possible

sir." Stumbling back from the evil eye the Head gave him, he quickly said, "They want us to send large amounts of troops because their best hope against a god of chaos failed! Considering the general nature of 826, I'm not sure that's feasible!"

The Department Head stood stunned for a few moments, before walking over to the nearest wall and kicking it. "God-fuck-dammit!" he shouted. " We've dealt with that damned place enough to know how its story goes, and that is not how it goes! You didn't just break into the My Little Pony universe, you broke into the *fan-fiction* universe! Do you have any fucking idea what that means?" The lab assistant, who had now backed himself into a corner, shook his head.

"It means somebody did this deliberately. It means somebody's trying to start up a *crossover.*"

Striding over to his desk, the Department Head pushed a button to start the intercom. Speaking in an icy, barely-restrained voice, he said, "Attention all members of the Otherworldly Matters Department. This is your boss speaking. It has just come to my attention that one of you morons decided it would be a good idea to increase our workload by deliberately starting up a crossover with another universe. Allow me to reiterate why, here at the SCP Foundation, *we don't fucking do that.*

"We've got close to two thousand objects to contain at this point in time, which, as you may imagine, requires a crap-ton of resources to do. We face death in the face practically every day, just so this world can go on thinking that everything's normal, and that the biggest threat to their existence is some insurgent group in the Middle East. It's a hard fucking job.

"Now tell me: Who here thinks that it's a good idea to break the walls of our existence, and drag someone else's problems here? Especially problems from a universe where things beyond even our power exist, or, God forbid, problems we can't deal with because that universe is instantly fatal to us?

"I can't hear you since I'm on the intercom, and I really, really want to say, 'None of you,' but I can't. Do you know why?" He paused for

dramatic effect. "It's because one of you imbeciles decided it was a good idea to write…" He took on an exceptionally sarcastic, disgusted tone, "*'Friendship is Magic'* fan-fiction, and insert it into a highly dangerous device that can do something like, oh, I don't know… break the walls of this fucking universe!

His chest heaving, he decided to wrap it up. "In short, stop trying to make your jobs harder than they already are. Just because some place looks all sugar-coated and crap like that, doesn't mean we need to get involved with it. We've got an unkillable thing that wants to suck on all our skulls, for Christ's sake…"

Taking his finger off of the button, the Department Head turned back to the lab assistant. "Go back to your doctors and researchers, and tell them that hell is about to rain down on their heads."

The lab assistant stammered, "Wh.. what are you going to do sir?"

Sitting back down at this desk, the Department Head began typing a series of orders. "Those ponies are going back to their universe without any goddamned help from us. Let them deal with that dragon-chaos-god-thing. The man who wrote that tale is going to have his brains blown out for violating…" He counted. "Seven major Foundation codes. Everyone involved in the experiment is being reassigned to departments where they can't do shit like that anymore. *You*, I'm contemplating something worse, for lying to me about the circumstances under which this happened."

He leaned back in his chair. "And I'm taking two aspirins and going to bed."

The lab assistant, cold sweat pouring down his back, bowed and left the room as quickly as he could. The Department Head sighed to himself. "Fucking crossovers… Been like this ever since Darkblade got those wizard kids in here…"

Bellerverse

- The List Of Wonders
- The Seeker
- SCP-One Million
- The Book
- The Word
- Addressing the Second
- Learning
- Those You Leave Behind
- Denouement and Epilogue
- The Brave Little–
- Prologue: Digital Children
- For the RE-PUBLIC

Welcome to the end of the world.

Well, not the world, as such. Planet Earth's spinning by just as well as it's done for the past few billion years.

And it's not even the end of life on Earth. Sure, there have been some extinctions, but plenty of animals are still kicking, like rabbits, dingos, and dolphins. Hi, dolphins!

Really, calling the mere extinction of 99.9999997% of humanity the end of the world is pretty melodramatic, when you think about it.

So, call it the end of the world as we know it. All civilization was wiped out. Every last human on Earth died. There was nobody left.

Except… Earth isn't the only place humans can be. The Foundation had hide-aways prepared for just this possibility. And so a few thousand humans-researchers, agents, and Class-D personnel were spared the disaster. And after a short time, they came out, and looked at the world that was left.

They were based out of Site-23. A few stragglers from other places,

other hide-aways, arrived. But Site-23 had the largest population base of survivors, so it became the new home of mankind. And civilization started anew. With the Foundation in charge.

Oh my.

They knew that a lot of things would of necessity be lost (though it's unlikely they suspected how much). So they worked on making things safe for their descendants. The Class Ds were set to work rebuilding (with various controls devised by Doctor Mann and Doctor Rights), while strike teams led by the likes of Clef, Strelnikov, and Kondraki cleared out new threats. Because this is the SCP-universe, and there are worse things in Australia than dingos. There are monsters, anomalies, and all sorts of unpleasantness. Gradually, they made the land… not safe. It would never be safe, not for many, many years. But safe enough.

But there were costs to be paid. Site 23 was lost when SCP-682 arrived. To trap the creature, they used SCP-184, the Architect, to get it lost deep in endless tunnels, with Agent Strelnikov as bait.

Other researchers went rogue and were driven out. Mann, Kondraki… Others, too. Even the ones who stayed were changed. They used the anomalous items much more readily. What was the point of protecting society, when society was already destroyed? There were fights. Splinter groups.

Eventually, the peoples were split into warring tribes, and more and more knowledge of the past was lost.

That was thousands of years ago. History has faded into legend. The researchers and agents who saved humanity became the common pantheon of the new religion (with variations throughout the land).

Geography

Geography is still fairly loose, with few defined places. Most of the continent is much greener than it was in our time. The climate's changed greatly, and there are plains, forests, even rainforest where there was once only desert. Civilization varies greatly from one

place to another, ranging from tribes hardly into the bronze age to the city people to the east, who are now firmly into the iron age (with a few having discovered the secret of steel).

The city people live, as their name suggests, in city-states. They war, trade, make alliances, and generally make bothers of themselves. They are more willing than the tribesmen to raid the old ruins for treasures (though it's still considered a very dangerous, cursed enterprise). They've rediscovered the principles of agriculture. They're starting to expand, but there's still a great deal of empty land in the east, meaning that they haven't expanded into other territories much. Yet.

The tribesman live throughout the rest of the continent, and are a varied lot. Some of them are nomadic, while others have permanent settlements. They tend to avoid old ruins and places where strange things live. That said, they're also much more likely to encounter such things. It's not unusual to find a tribesman selling his services to the city people.

There are also people inhabiting the islands around Australia. Humans aren't anywhere near taking their planet back, but they've taken their first steps. Whether or not they succeed….

Oh, and a note on the people. It was a pretty varied lot who survived in Site 23, and they've been living for several thousand years in Australia. Selective pressures have darkened their skin pretty well. There's still some variation, especially in hair and eye color, but almost everyone has darker skin.

Now, there's one other important place. No one, not city people, not tribesmen, will go to the south willingly. That's the home of the Everman. It's patrolled by the walking dead, the New Men, and other monsters he's collected over the years.

The Pantheon

The senior staff of the previous times are the gods of the new ones. Some of them did their damnedest to earn the titles, others just did their job, but they're remembered now.

Geyre: The god of smithing and technology, and the chief of the gods. It's said in some tribes that he constructed the old cities, and then destroyed them when they didn't please him. This is especially common among tribesmen who think any city is sinful in old Geyre's eyes.

Drakgin: The god of battle and war. In some places, he's praised as a god for heroes, and they ask him for strength. In others, he's an evil god who brought discord into the world. Some whisper that the dragon Sikayt was his pet, or his steed. Some say he destroyed the old world in a powerful rage.

Kalef: The god of the underworld. The righteous dead will go to him on their final day. He rules a vast empire under ground, on an opal throne. He's also the god of riches. He's known to offer mortals bargains. However, he has a way of twisting them to his own advantage.

Lita: The goddess of nature. She guards the forests and the fields. She's worshipped by hunters, guides through the wilderness, and many of the tribesmen. Her totem is a toothed owl.

Erits, or Old Aggie: The name differs from place to place, but she's always worshipped as a goddess of fertility. Farmers build shrines to her in their fields. In the cities, her temples offer the services of priestesses to lonely men.

Abirt: The god of death. While the righteous dead will go to Kalef, the wicked are Abirt's. When someone dies, they first visit Abirt's realm, where they are judged.

York: The saint of thieves, tricksters and liars. York stole the secret of iron from the gods, planted it among the mortals, and then tricked both to pay him to find the culprit. Some say the end was his doing, a trick gone far wrong.

Starel: Starel is not a god, but the first king. He fought the dragon Sikayt in the Home Ceitu, and both were sealed to protect the world. It is said that one day, when men need him most, he will emerge from the Home Ceitu, unite the people, and bring about a golden age.

There are also numerous local gods. Sometimes they replace gods from the pantheon, sometimes they simply supplement it. Each tribe, each city has its own local version of the pantheon, its own version of events. This is just the most general form of the pantheon.

Wonders and Monsters

These are SCP-Objects, essentially. These are things like the wading pool, the architect, the surgeon crabs. Wonders are the magic items of the Bellerverse. They're relatively rare, but that doesn't mean they're unheard of. Most citystates have a few (locked up by the powerful and wealthy). They can be found in ruins, or in abandoned ceitus. The survivors brought a great number of them to Australia while they still had transportation.

Monsters are, well, monsters. They're SCP creatures. Imagine the Heart of Darkness being encountered by a troop of guardsmen from one of the city-states, or a group of hunters from a tribe. They're dangerous.

Be creative. Ask what SCP might be interesting for them to encounter. And remember that the SCP Foundation hasn't locked away all anomalies. Feel free to invent something, if it fits the story. Hey, maybe you have an SCP idea that you can't make work in an article. Use it here!

Tone

Okay, now we're getting into the most important part. This is, basically, a Dying Earth setting in tone. It's an old setting that was once great and prosperous, and was brought low. Unlike most Dying Earth settings, this one's actually recovering, but it still has the same themes of survival, of wonders from the old world intruding on the new. It's sword and sorcery in an old world. Look to Vance's Cugel stories, or Lieber's Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser. It's cynical, but with the promise of exploration, the sense of wonder that comes with a strange world.

The List Of Wonders

The Beller walked through the Waste, leaving no tracks.

He was a tall, lanky man with black hair and beady eyes. He wore a blue jacket over a red skirt of patches and rags, with a small tongueless bell at his throat, and a ring with the sign of York, the patron saint of thieves and rogues.

Beller wasn't his real name, of course, but he made it a habit never to tell anyone his real name. *He* said it was because his people were afraid to give out their real names. Most people assumed he was wanted under the name he was born with. He was certainly wanted enough under his new one (and unwanted, in some places).

He knew the Ways, though. If anyone could get you from one city to another, it was him (extra if he'd been outcast by the locals). If you wanted a relic from the old places, he knew where you could buy it, or, if the price was right, he'd fetch you one himself.

The waterskin at his side was empty. Water was plentiful in the Waste, and it was one less thing to weigh him down. The real problem was food. Nothing grew in the waste. There were occasional birds and animals crossing the damp sands, but no trees or grasses of any sort.

The Beller knew the Waste well. He'd used its trackless spaces to escape pursuit many times. Today, however, he was looking for someone else.

In the distance, a rocky promontory poked up over the dunes like the back of a beetle. He'd spotted it the day before, and he would reach it in a few more hours.

"Ho! Beller!" a voice called out.

The Beller tensed, reaching for his sword. He relaxed after he

spotted a man atop a dune, wearing thick leather robes. "Benadam! I've come to visit you."

The man began walking down the dune to the Beller. He smiled, his blue eyes almost seeming to shine from under the leather skullcap worn low over his forehead. "I thought as much. I spotted you yesterday. What brings you here?"

"I've found some writings, and I want you to tell me what they mean," the Beller said. He held up the box with the handle he'd found. He'd found it across the world, after he'd tried to rob a wizard's home, and fell victim to an enchanted pool.

"A briefcase full of secrets?" Benadam said. "I'm surprised it's intact. Well, follow me. I've built up a small camp, and we can speak more there."

This was how it always went with Benadam. He always met Beller within a day of the rocks, with a campsite set up. The Beller had never been to the rocks themselves, and he didn't know anyone who had.

Benadam looked to be in his middle years, but he'd been in the Waste as long as the Beller had heard. Some said he was as old as the Waste itself. He certainly knew enough of the lost days.

The hermit led him up the dune and to a small tent, made from leather and with the bones of some great beast for supports. There was a small metal contraption with fire rising from it.

"So, let's look at your case," the hermit said, reaching for the case with his leather gloves. He opened the clasp with hardly a glance, though it had taken the Beller several minutes to figure out. He pulled out the papers, yellow and brittle, and began to read them over. He sucked in his breath, and asked, "Where did you find this?"

"In a fortress built into a mountain, far across the sea," the Beller said. "One of the fortresses of the Old Order." He could hardly keep the excitement from his voice. "There were other relics there, but this was the only thing I could carry easily."

"How did you get across the sea?" Benadam asked. "Never mind. Do you realize what you have?"

"Secrets," the Beller said, smiling. The hermit's reaction told him the papers were important.

"You could say that," Benadam said, slowly nodding. "This is a list of… of Wonders, I suppose you could say, and the locations of the Ceitus."

"Including the home Ceitu?" the Beller asked, hungrily.

Benadam straightened suddenly. "Beller, no! You don't know what's in there. It was abandoned for a reason."

"I'm not afraid. I've been in Ceitus before." The Beller puffed up his narrow chest.

"Not like this one. I won't let you do it," Benadam said.

"Don't try to stop me, old man. Just tell me where the Ceitu is!" The Beller grabbed the hermit's wrist. It felt hard and thin under the sleeve, as though there were nothing there but bone.

Benadam did not move, and his expression never changed, but something changed in him, as though he had suddenly grown larger. The hairs on the back of the Beller's neck rose. There was a sense of power in the air, as though lightning were about to strike. "Will you strike me?" the hermit asked.

The Beller took his hand from Benadam, and he looked away, embarrassed despite himself.

"Now, I'm going to put an end to this nonsense," Benadam said. He put the papers over the fire, and they caught at once. "You should thank me. I've saved you from yourself, you know."

Resentment boiled up inside of the Beller. He hated being made a fool of, and he couldn't resist leaving one last gloating note. "You haven't changed anything," he said.

"What do you mean?" Benadam asked, suspicious.

"Do you think I would make this journey with only the original set of papers? As fragile as they were? I've had time to make a dozen sets, and I've hidden them all." In truth, he'd only taken the time to make one copy, and it was in his bag. But Benadam didn't know that.

"Beller! You can't do this! I won't let you!" Benadam rose, and for a moment, the Beller thought he might attack.

"You won't stop me," the Beller said with a bravado he didn't feel. "You're no murderer."

Benadam stared at him for a long moment, and then, to the Beller's surprise, he burst out laughing. "Oh, Beller, if you only knew. No, I won't kill you, but not for the reasons you think. Go on, then. I cannot stop you. But I don't know how you expect to follow the notes when you cannot read them."

"I'll find another who knows the old language," the Beller said.

"There's no one else," Benadam said. "I'm the only one who still remembers it."

"Not true," the Beller said. "There's one other. And he's not hard to find."

"Who—Oh, Beller. You don't mean to go South, do you?" Benadam's eyes turned to pity.

"If you will not help me, then I have no choice," the Beller said. "I'd go to Abirt himself if he offered me the home Ceitu."

Benadam only shook his head. "It's not death you should be afraid of in the Everman's hands."

Beller kept his fire small, and watched the entrance to the cave. He was a week out of the Waste, and there was something moving outside. It was too big to be a wild dog and didn't move quite right to be a jumper.

It could be another traveller, of course, or a bandit. But he hadn't

seen anyone for two days. The South was a cursed land. Everyone knew that.

Twigs cracked near the entrance, and a human shape blocked the light. White, blank eyes stared at him and a low moan spilled out of a slack-jawed mouth.

"Geyre's forge!" he swore, and raised his sword. The walking dead were only a nuisance in the open, where their slow speed and clumsy movements made them easy to kill. In the cramped confines of the cave, however, he was at serious risk of a bite.

It stumbled towards him, inadvertently stepping into the fire. It didn't seem to react as the flame climbed up its leg. It only stepped onward, reaching for him with gray, bloated fingers.

The Beller swung his sword at the hands, taking off the fingers. He tried to step around the dead man and get to the entrance, but it stumbled over and grabbed at his shoulder with its unmaimed hand. He kicked out, trying to keep from catching fire himself, and knocked its leg out from under it. The dead man fell, nearly pulling him down with it. He managed to get free before it could sink its teeth into his leg. He jumped back, and it began to crawl towards him. He jogged out of the cave.

The Beller congratulated himself on another daring escape. Now he merely had to wait until the dead man came out, and it would be easily dispatched.

As he turned, his smile slowly sank. The crawling dead was hoisting itself through the dead leaves that had built up around the cave's entrance, and they began to ignite. Beller looked at the dry chaparral around him, and then back to the cave, where all of his supplies were. "Kalef's balls!" he cried in dismay, and then took off his jacket, trying to use it to beat out the flames.

The dead man continued trying to bite him even as he tried to extinguish it and the brush around it. His jacket caught, and he was forced to drop it. The fire spread quickly, and the Beller realized there was no way he could beat this fire. It was time to retreat.

He jumped over the dead man and ran back into the cave. The smoke was thick and choking. He grabbed his pack, and then turned and ran again, coughing as he went. He jumped over the zombie's last pitiable swipe at his feet and ran, looking for a stream, a river, anything. As he did, he felt an odd warmth at his back. He looked over his shoulder, and saw smoke rising from his pack. Madly, he swung the pack off, and then rifled through its contents, grabbing the papers before they could be harmed, and then threw the pack away with a curse. He started off again, stumbling in the darkness away from the orange glow that was rising behind him.

The Beller waded through waist-deep water, his precious bundle held high over his head. He'd been wandering in this godforsaken swamp for days now. He hadn't seen so many leeches since the jungles in the Northlands.

In the distance, he heard the roar of a bull crocodile. He shivered. He hadn't seen too many of the great reptiles since he'd entered the swamp, but he knew how powerful their jaws were.

He finally made it up onto the next island. He'd been staying on land as much as possible, trying to avoid the water where he could. He wished he'd had his ax and his rope. He could have put together a boat. It would have made this trip much more pleasant.

After drying off his sword and knife, he took his boots off so they'd have a chance to dry at least a little, and began checking himself for leeches. He pulled off the four that had taken hold, cursing them as he cut them up with his knife.

He placed the papers on top of a reasonably dry tree stump, with a rock over them to protect them from being blown away. He didn't want to chance them getting soaked and ruined now.

He checked his waterskin. There was still a little fresh water in it. He considered drinking it, but decided to wait a little longer. He didn't know when he'd find another spring.

No food, no fire, and running out of water… He hoped he'd find the Everman soon, or he'd have to start eating the Abirt-damned

leeches. "Worthless bloody place," he said.

"Bloody," someone said behind him in a strangely familiar voice. He turned, and didn't see anyone.

"Place bloody," someone else said. The Beller realized the voice was his own. *Am I going mad?* he wondered to himself.

"Worthless bloody," another voice said, and this time he spotted movement. A large red crab sidled out from behind a bush. It was perhaps as tall as his knee, and had long, thin arms that seemed to end in spikes rather than claws.

He pulled out his sword and tapped the ground, hoping to scare the creature away. It didn't look dangerous, but he didn't like the way its beady eyes were staring at him.

As he stepped forward, he felt a small pain in his leg. He spun around in time to see another of the crabs sidle away. "Fucking bastard!" he shouted.

"Bastard place worthless," said another of the crabs, scuttling over a rock. He started to run to it when he felt another pain, and his leg collapsed from under him. He lashed out at the crab that cut him with his sword, but he only managed to tap it with the flat of the blade.

He heard others moving around him; how many of them were there? They all began chittering, repeating his words in idiot chorus. He felt more pains. He tried to flail around, but it was getting hard to move. Were they poisonous? What were they doing to him?

He saw one sidle up to his arm. He tried to move it out of the way, but its spike-like claw reached out, and he saw the glittering blade on its underside as it sliced into his elbow, cutting the tendon. It spat a thick, viscous fluid over the wound, sealing it instantly. He couldn't move the arm any further. He began to scream as others swarmed over him, cutting, spitting, and rendering him immobile. One cut the tendons of his jaw, and his jaw slackened. He couldn't move except to arch his back.

They started cutting off bits from his extremities. He felt his fingers and toes get cut off, and then one began to pluck at the soft flesh of his face. The last thing he saw was a pair of sharp claws reaching down to his face.

It went on for some time until he heard an odd, guttural voice. He heard the crabs scuttle away, and then felt a final sting in his arm. He felt himself being lifted and carried as he drifted off to sleep.

When he woke up, he felt stiff, and his head hurt. He rubbed his eyes as he sat up.

Then he stared at his fingers, and the rest of his body. He was whole. Was he in Abirt's land, now? Was he about to be judged?

He looked around, and saw that he was in a white room, lying on a padded platform. It looked like the remains of some of the Ceitus he'd seen, though much better kept up.

Something felt odd with his hands. He looked down at them, and blinked several times. He counted. He counted again. He balled his fists and then opened them again. It was no use. No matter what he did, he still found he had five fingers and two thumbs on each hand.

The door opened. "I see you're awake, sir. Pleased to meet you."

The Beller looked up and nearly fell off the platform as a monster entered the room. There was no other word for it.

It was a man, roughly. It had two arms, two legs, and a head in the right places. But the head was oddly formed, as though someone had grafted on the crowns of other heads on top of it, making it much bigger than any normal man's head. He had four eyes with odd-shaped pupils under his bulbous forehead. A mechanical construct on a headband swiveled a lens over one eye, which blinked monstrously under the magnification. The skin was paler than any man the Beller had seen, almost white and pinkish, with light brown hair. A mustache with an unnatural curve seemed to form a second curly-cue smile under his nose. His arms branched at the elbows, giving him four large hands, with long fingers with too

many joints. "I'm sorry if my appearance is… alarming to you. I was working and I didn't… expect company."

"You're the Everman," the Beller said, frightened in spite of himself.

The monster nodded. "Everett Mann, actually. Doctor… Everett Mann. The finest… and the last surgeon this world has seen. And you are… the Beller. You… talk in your sleep, you know. And scream. And beg, a little. I… rescued you from my pets, dear little 098's. They can be… difficult with strangers, I must confess. But no harm done, yes? And… I even gave you a few improvements. I make people better, you know."

"Improvements? The extra fingers?" the Beller said.

"Yes. And, if you… tense your fingers. Just… a little," the Everman said, smiling beatifically.

Confused, the Beller did as the Everman suggested. As his fingers tensed, little glistening hooks sprouted from the tips of his fingers. He bit back a curse.

"They have a… strong soporific. Useful… if you encounter a dingo, or other dangerous wildlife." The Everman turned. "But let's… have some tea, yes? Proper and… civilized."

The Beller followed him down the hallway, glancing around as he did, trying to get his bearings in the strange building. There were many twists and turns, and many closed doors. He heard voices behind some of them, but none in any language he understood. Behind some, he swore he could hear moaning or weeping.

Finally, they came to a large, spacious room, bare but for a small table in the middle of it. There were two chairs. The Everman gestured to one.

After the Beller sat down, another door opened, and a… thing walked in. It was humanlike, but not human. It had four legs, splayed out like an insect's, and it had arms that bent too many times. Its face was perfectly formed, and all the more disturbing for its apparent normality. It carried a silver tray. It approached the table

and lifted the lid of the tray, revealing a ceramic pot with flowers painted on the side, two cups, and a bowl.

The Everman took the pot and the cups, and then the bowl, placing them on the table. He poured the steaming tea into both cups. He looked up at the Beller and began to ask, "Would you like… Wait, no. I suppose you… wouldn't know about sugar in your tea. Well, it's like… honey. I'll… add some for you, how's that?" He took small white cubes from the bowl and placed one in each cup.

The Beller sipped his politely, and found it tasted good. Sweeter than he was used to, but good. "Thank you," he said. "It's very good." He wanted to remain on the Everman's good side.

The Everman beamed. "Thank you! The… refined sugar is rather… clever, I think. I… developed a grub that… exudes it as a waste product."

It took all of the Beller's self-control to smile and swallow, rather than spitting out his tea.

"So," he said, a trifle weakly, "when you found me, did you by any chance find some papers?"

"Ah! Yes, I… wanted to discuss that… with you. They are… most interesting." The Everman steepled both sets of hands. "Where did… you find them?"

"In a land far to the north, across half the world," the Beller said. "They were in a Ceitu in a vast desert."

"Ah," the Everman said. "The… Gobi Outpost. That's… interesting. Very interesting. I did not realize that… 120 was still active. We'll… speak of that later. This list will help me… find many things that were lost."

"Like the location of the Home Ceitu?" the Beller asked.

"The home…?" The Everman looked at him strangely for a moment, and then realization dawned in his strange eyes. "Ah. You mean… Site 23. Yes, it's in there, though… I could have told you where that was."

"You… could?" The Beller had been so focused on the papers, it hadn't occured to him that the Everman wouldn't need them. No, he'd come from there too, hadn't he?

"Of course," the Everman said. "It's to… the west of us, and a little north. I… remember it well, though… I try not to visit there often. It's… a dangerous place now. 184's effects are… difficult to predict. Especially after all this time."

"But think of the secrets that it must hold!" the Beller said. "Why, it's the birthplace of humanity, the holding place of so many Wonders, and the grave of Starel himself!"

The Everman stiffened. His eyes narrowed, an eerie effect with all four staring down at the Beller. "Strelnikov," the monster said, "Dmitri Arkadeyevich."

"What?" the Beller said, confused.

"Strelnikov, Dmitri Arkadeyevich," the Everman repeated. "That… is how he introduced himself… to me. When we met. It is how I have always referred to him. It is how you shall refer to him."

"I… yes, all right," the Beller said. "Starelnikoff Damichree Arkadayivitch. No problem."

"…Close enough," the Everman said. "And yes… He is in there. With 682. Grave? Perhaps. A fitting tomb. He was… the best of us, you know. We did so well, when he was with us."

"What happened?" the Beller asked, sensing the Everman wanted an audience.

"Yoric," the Everman said through gritted teeth. "It was all his fault."

The Beller had a moment of panic, thinking to his ring, but realized that it was gone with the finger that had worn it. "He… hurt you?"

"He turned them all against me," the Everman said. "All my friends. Without Strelnikov, Dmitri Arkadeyevich, there was no one to defend me. And after all I did!" He slammed two hands onto the table with enough force to crack the wood and tip over the pot and the cups. "I

was the one who solved the D-Class problem! I was the one who suggested we alter their reproductive DNA. Rights may have done the work, but it was my idea! I was the doctor, I kept us all in health! I cured the diseases, I fixed the injuries. But did they remember that? No. They didn't care. They just wanted to stop my work. They said it was wrong, but I know the truth. They were jealous that I could see farther, that my hands grasped the fire.

"Yoric." He spat the name. "He hated me ever since the Raelin incident. He should have been grateful. I was his friend! I helped him! I only ever wanted to make him better, but did he care? He turned everyone against me. Cast out. No friends, no lab. Nothing but my surgeon crabs to care for me. And all I ever wanted was to help people! Well, I'll show them. I'll show everyone. I'll make them better, they'll see. And they'll thank me for it! No one will ever dare throw me out again!" The Everman's eyes were wide and mad, and veins rose from his neck.

Slowly, his eyes focused again on the Beller. "You. You won't… leave me, will you?" he asked, pleading. "You're my friend… yes?"

"Er, yes, of course," the Beller said, terrified. The Everman was mad, clearly. If he hadn't been to start with, the years alone must have done it.

"Good, good," the Everman said. "I knew you were… different, as soon as I saw you. You won't… abandon me. I'll… I'll help you. I'll make you… better! That's what I'll do."

"Oh, that's all right," the Beller said nervously. "I think I'm good enough for now."

"No, I… insist," the Everman said. He gestured to his servant, which grasped the Beller with a strong, vice-like grip. "I understand your reluctance, but you'll see. It's for your own good. I'm your doctor, after all." He stood and walked for one of the doors. The servant followed, forcing Beller along.

Dr. Mann pulled out a small metal object and placed it into a slot on the door, then turned it. The door opened, and then entered. The Beller found himself standing in a vast, brightly lit room, containing

hundreds of different relics.

"My… collection," the Everman said proudly. "Various SCPs, ah, 'wonders,' I think you… call them. Many, the… Foundation never even knew. These are just… the ones that… can be stored together, you… understand. Others would be more… problematic." He continued walking down the aisles, past shelves, boxes, and crates. A broad-brimmed hat rested next to a silt-encrusted cup. A picture of a girl waved at him from a picture frame sitting by a ruby medallion. A stone cube twice as tall as a man, cracked in two… He hardly formed more than an impression of any of them as he was dragged past.

They finally came up to a platform, like the one upon which he had woken up. Three arms of metal and plastic rose above it. "212," the Everman said. "I was… lucky to acquire it. The Foundation never… understood it properly. They couldn't… control it. The improvements were random, haphazard. I… have better understanding. It will… help you, my friend. Help you to… see as I do."

The Beller didn't know if he meant eyes or beliefs, and he didn't want to find out. He twisted as much as he could, and delivered a swift kick right between the servant's four legs. It howled and released him. Even as the Everman turned, the Beller grabbed a box off a shelf.

"No, you fool!" the Everman shouted as the Beller threw the box's contents at him. He tried to grab a tiny red object as it bounced away, but it evaded him. The Beller turned and ran.

He heard crashes behind him, and saw the servant running after. It screamed at him, a high-pitched keening that grated at the Beller's ears.

Then something struck the creature, and it stumbled. The Beller thought he saw a tiny red streak, and then a shelf collapsed. He cursed, and added even more speed, looking for shelter.

"Traitor! Quisling!" the Everman's voice echoed through the room. "Yoric!"

The Beller saw an odd wheeled box. He jumped inside of it, on the off chance it might be enchanted to move. He looked around for some sort of control mechanism. There were several levers and a large wheel. He tried them, but got no noticeable response as more objects broke and shattered around him. Something punched through the roof before shattering the front window. The servant, one leg trailing behind it, jumped on the front of the vehicle and reached through the broken window at the Beller. In desperation, he clawed at it, raking at the creature with the hooks the Everman had planted in his fingers. It hissed and drew its arm back, then tensed as if to jump.

Finally, the Beller noticed a small metal object, like the one the Everman used to open the door. He grabbed it, praying to Geyre and Semeril to send him somewhere safe as he twisted it forward.

There was a sudden and complete lack of sensation. For the second time that day, he wondered if he were dead, about to face Abirt's justice. Then, suddenly, he found himself falling. He landed on a sandy dune with a force that knocked the wind from him. In the distance, a building half-buried by the sand stood, and nothing but dunes for miles. He stared, and then laughed, until tears streaked down his face. It was the Ceitu where he'd found the papers, and the whole quest had begun.

The Seeker

Cender was blessed of Old Aggie. His seven daughters and twenty-one granddaughters were proof of that. But now, standing before the statue of the goddess, he couldn't help but tremble inwardly. He was, after all, going to his death.

Cender pushed a long lock of thin, gray hair back on his head, washing his genitals in the pool of water at the statue's base, and turned, kissing his fingers and pressing them to the statue's lips, begging forgiveness for sins against his family and protection for the road ahead, knowing that only one of those prayers would be answered. The stone had fallen to him, after all.

Cender bowed his head in a final supplication and stepped out of the water, turning and walking into the white sands that surrounded the short, squat building. He wrapped a length of cloth about his head and took out the round, smooth pebble that had decided his fate. He cast it into the air, letting it fall to the earth, then kneeling to look at it carefully, squinting at the arrow carved into it. He picked it up again, shouldering the supply of water that would not last him more than a week, and walked into the desert, following it.

When he came upon the ruins of the first homes—those oldest ones which were now abandoned—he rested. He should have known better, especially since the ghosts of the dead are always close in the desert, but he didn't care. He was tired, his feet were blistered, and night had been upon him for hours. And he felt lonely. Cender had slept beside his wife for thirty-eight years, and now, he felt naked and cold without her warmth. He closed his eyes, trying not to listen to the voices in his head, when he heard a different one entirely.

"You are old, Cender of Dnoma. Why do you walk this desert?"

His eyes opened quickly, turning and looking, seeing a butterfly

resting on the edge of the wall. He immediately leaned up, then lowered himself, his forehead touching the ground. “Lord… You honor me.”

The voice did not continue to speak. Cender cursed inwardly when he realized that he had not answered the question.

“I am the new seeker, my lord. The lot fell to me, and being of a great many daughters, I was sent in spite of my age.”

The voice was again silent, but when Cender raised his head, he saw that the butterfly had taken flight, wafting through the air like a leaf. He grabbed his pouch of water, his bag, and hurried, following it, deeper into the desert, deeper into the cold night.

The butterfly seemed to flick away into nothing when he crested the hill, but Cender didn’t notice. He was, instead, silent. Very, very silent.

Before him stretched a ruin unlike any he had seen before, and Cender had been a traveler in his youth, tasted the dead waters to the north, seen the walls to the south. But this…

It stretched for ages. Maybe miles. Maybe further. It was made of metal, somehow, and stone, and parts of it hurt to look at, and—with a prayer of thanks and supplication on his lips—Cender dropped to the ground and closed his eyes. He had found it. Hundreds of seekers lost to the desert, and he had found it.

Starel’s Tomb. The Home Ceitu. The City of the Gods.

“By your will, oh great ones, I have been guided here. Truly, I am blessed of Aggie. I am blessed of Drakgin. I am blessed of Starel. Thank you!”

And had Cender taken his blessing, taken it and run back home, he would have lived out the rest of his days as a saint and priest.

But he did not.

Cender stepped over the sharp stones, wincing slightly as he did so. His feet were aged by the desert and tougher than leather, but these stones were painfully sharp. He finally reached the wall, his hands grabbing and scrabbling for purchase, slowly pulling himself up and on top of the outlying structure. Inside was cooler already, by the will of the gods, and as Cender dropped into the cracked courtyard, he felt a sense of ease was over him.

The gods had allowed him entry. Surely, he was blessed of them, to the point of being the next prophet perhaps. This was, after all, no vision. This was real.

He walked toward the large, opened doors and stepped into them, smiling, not even noticing the deep cuts in the floor or the lingering smell of sulfur.

He walked into the building, feeling his spirit lift as he gazed up at the seemingly endless ceilings, the deep corridors off either side of it, the endlessly twisting room. He walked down it, choosing a door at random and marking the entrance with his stone, then entering it. He explored, finding the works of the gods littered and skewed about the room, laying broken and destroyed. He sighed, turning to leave as he realized the true treasures would be far deeper in the city. As he turned to leave it, he bent to pick up his rock, and found it missing. His eyes narrowed at the floor, looking for it, realizing that he'd foolishly discarded his mark of office and purpose… And then he heard it.

It was a roar, but unlike any he had ever heard. A sound worse than those the demons made when they were butchered. And it was quite close, he feared. So, he did what every coward who knows he is going to die does. He ran.

Cender's legs were old and tired, but the desert makes strong folk, and he could run. The doors were gone, gone to wherever the ancients send such things as displease them, and Cender instead ran for a different path, hoping that somehow he would be given exit, that the gods would forgive him, even though he knew that they would not. He hurried and ran, deeper and deeper, hearing the walls turning and crashing behind him, breaking into nothing as he heard the thing's voice calling to him.

“Cender…” it murmured, in a voice that somehow echoed and surrounded him.

Starel’s Tomb was huge, infinitely long, and full of twists and turns. He was given short moments of joy when he thought he'd escaped, followed by deep moments of fear and sorrow as he realized he did not. Who knows how long Cender fled the beast? Only that it was not long enough in his mind.

He ran and ran and finally… fell, turning and looking at the beast, its great maw opening and splitting into four parts, its terrible teeth easily pushing into his skin and through it. He screamed loudly as Sikayt And Cender screamed and screamed, but the gods wouldn’t hear him. And there he died, learning too late that the blessing of one god is the curse of another.

The old man’s yellow, toothy grin looked also as terrifying as the story had sounded, and the children quickly fled while the old man laughed loudly, slapping his knees and coughing as his laughing fit caught up to him. He turned to leave, until a small voice caught him.

“But what was it Cender found?” it asked.

The storyteller turned, looking at the small, deeply tanned boy, no older than twelve. “What did he find?” the man asked. “Why… he found just what he thought he found. The Home Ceitu. The City of the Gods. Starel’s Tomb.”

The little boy shifted on his feet some, licking his cracked lips. “So… was he blessed?” he asked.

The old man’s smile stretched across his face again. “Of course not,” he said, laughing. “He was cursed. There are some secrets no one should have to discover.”

“But,” the little boy continued, “He found the Home Ceitu. Isn’t that a blessing?”

The old man’s eyes narrowed at the boy as he realized that the child would not be swayed. “What is your name, boy?” he asked.

The boy narrowed his eyes just for a moment. “Never tell your name to one who hides his,” he said.

The ancient man laughed loudly. “Wise boy… Follower of York, are we?” he asked, then smiled and nodded at his own question. “I am called Benadam,” he said.

The boy nodded. “My friends call me Rone.”

“Well met, Rone. Come. Let me tell you a tale of York… Have you ever heard the story of the ape god Abirt and the waters of life?” he asked, turning about and walking, the boy following him quickly and hanging onto every word.

SCP-One Million

"Tell me of the thing," the shaman said.

"It lives in the—" I started.

"No!" The stick came down hard on my knuckles. "Begin with how to stop it, how to keep it held. Always. What it is can wait until after."

I rubbed my hand, and began again. "The people must always be ready. They must keep their eyes to the South, to watch for the Everman. They must keep their eyes to the East, to watch for the City People, who pick among the ruins for toys they cannot understand. They must keep their eyes to the seas, for things that come across the waters are a deadly threat. They must keep their eyes inward, for the greatest threat comes from men who know.

"No man may enter the antechamber but that he comes to light the fires once more, or else that he is a shaman, going for a vision quest. He will enter with one other, and neither may leave except with the other. When they leave, they close the doors shut tight behind them.

"At all times will there be five guardians at the door, chosen from the people and trained in war. They will keep their spears sharp. When one sleeps, another comes to replace him. Their dogs will sleep at their feet, ready to challenge any who comes from outside or within." I looked up at the shaman. "Now?"

He nodded. "You know how to keep it held. Now you may say what it is."

"The Espy, called a Wonder by the ignorant, holds the number of a thousand thousands. It is of the kind called kahtar, the all-consuming." I took a deep breath. "There are two parts of the espy. Of the first, which we shall call the Aleph, is a dream of butterflies. They are held off by the burning of certain herbs, and it is therefore

that we keep the fires lit, remain watchful should they go out. The dream of butterflies gives a man visions, strange scenes of times far past. I myself have seen these visions once. I saw men and women dressed strangely, in long, white coats. They spoke in a language I did not recognize."

"And of the other, the Beyt?" the shaman asked.

"That is the most dangerous part, though in seeming it is nothing but an old man. In other lands, he is called a god, or a devil. We know he is just a man who has lived very long, and that is what gives him power." I closed my eyes. "He was one of the first to leave the Home Ceitu. We do not know how he came to live so long. Perhaps through the efforts of the Everman. Perhaps from another Espy hidden deep in chambers we have not seen. It does not matter. He lives. That is enough. And he knows the secrets from the time before. His knowledge is a poison that must be kept from the world, and that is why we keep him held, as our ancestors did before us."

"Good enough so far," the shaman admitted. "You've echoed the words of others, admirably. But a shaman cannot simply speak like a parrot. You have been inside. You have seen the Beyt. Add to our knowledge. Tell me what he told you."

"He… He asked me to help him escape. He promised me great weapons, riches beyond my dreams. I refused, for we know him for a liar. He told me he was imprisoned unjustly. He cursed me, and then cursed Geyre above and Kalef below for holding him there. I… I fled. I am not a brave man. I make no excuse for this. My companion found me, and we left the chamber." I turned my face in shame.

"You did nothing wrong," the shaman said, placing a hand on my shoulder. "Many who have gone in have not returned. The dream of butterflies and the old one are strong, and we know they wish to get past us. We serve. We contain. We protect."

"Protect," I echoed. "Until the gods return."

The Book

“The Book teaches. The Book guides.” Alia repeated the mantra to herself, her voice trembling.

The Keeper of the Book had performed her Last Reading several days ago, and now her body was being prepared for passage into Abirt's realm.

Consequently, the task of Keeper of the Book had fallen to Alia. She had spent years preparing for this moment; she had been purified in the waters of the Urd, she had studied the writings of her forebears and she had traveled to the Home Ceitu in a dream-trance.

From this day until her last, only Alia would be able to perceive the numerous manifestations of the Book and interpret their teachings. To be the Keeper of the Book was to be the leader of her people. She was to do this until the day of her Last Reading, when she would give herself to Abirt.

“The Book teaches. The Book guides.”

The Book had given her people much. It had taught them of seacraft borne by the wind, with which they traveled to the Northern Isles. It had taught them of tools used to prepare the harsh land for crops, so that food could be grown in abundance. It had taught them of the melting of metals, from which weapons for hunting could be crafted.

“Alia,” It was the voice of Joren, Alia's tutor and caretaker. She had not heard him enter. “It's time for your first Reading.”

“I…I'm not ready, Joren.”

“Do not worry child, you have performed the rites. The Book will look favourably upon you. Come now.”

Joren pushed aside the coloured fabric draped over the doorway

and motioned to Alia. She hesitated briefly, then rose and exited the room through the gap in the cloth.

Alia stood alone outside the heavy wooden door leading into the Chamber of Readings, her hand resting on the doorknob. She inhaled deeply, opened the door and entered into the Chamber.

The circular room was dimly lit by two braziers on either side of the doorway. A cylindrical stone pedestal occupied the centre of the room, the Book lying open on top. Alia walked up to the pedestal and examined the Book. It was unexpectedly bland. This was an object revered by hundreds, it had served as a guide for her people for generations – the last thing she had expected it to be was dull. And yet, it was dull, little more than aged paper bound in black. Alia picked up the Book and slowly thumbed through its yellowed pages: they were all blank. She set the Book back down on its pedestal, taking care to close it.

Alia placed her hand on the cover of the Book and said the required words, as she had been instructed. “Grant me your knowledge, so that I may teach them. Grant me your wisdom, so that I may lead them. Grant me your guidance, so that I may show them the way.”

Alia withdrew her hand, but the Book was unchanged. She knew that the Book would soon alter itself, she merely had to wait for it to do so. Doubts began to rise up in her mind. Would her people accept her as the new Keeper of the Book so readily? What if she failed to interpret the Book's guidance correctly?

Alia wasn't sure exactly when the Book had changed. She had been sitting against the curved walls of the Chamber, only occasionally glancing at it. From across the room she could tell that the thickness of the Book had increased. It was now at least twice as large as it had been. Alia stood up with trepidation and walked slowly towards the pedestal. She picked up the Book and flicked through through its pages as before, however this time they displayed words and diagrams. Alia was relieved; the Book had accepted her as its new Keeper. Even though she dreaded the day of her Last Reading, Alia was grateful for the opportunity to serve her people. She closed the Book and turned it over in her hands. On the front cover in bold

white text were the words: *How to Fight a War*.

The Word

I turn at the noise. Brother Ullar's face peers at me from underneath the hood of his robe.

"Father? The whole village is here now. I think they are ready for you."

Brother Ullar is my newest disciple. He is eager and devout, but timid. I will have to teach him not to be so, if he hopes to be Father when I move on.

I rise from my knees, my meditations complete. I don my robe, and walk out of the space I have made my personal chambers. It is sparse. Inside is a bed of straw, and a small table and stool. A wooden plate and a crude knife sit on it. The brazier in the center of the room warms the room. I do not need more than this to attend to my duties.

I follow Brother Ullar through the caverns. They were smoothed many moons ago by the people of my village into the stone halls I call my home. Torches light my way until I reach the great hall. It is a great chamber, carved from the rock by the water over many cycles. I can hear it trickling in the distance. There are many entrances to the great hall, to deter those who would disturb me. The villagers come from one, and I use another. I have lived in these caverns for many years, and know all the secret pathways and traps.

As I enter, the flock turns to face me, and they drop to their knees and bow. I walk through the stone teeth to my place in front of the flock. I look over them, their heads bowed. They please me for they are loyal, and have served me well. As I stand behind the wooden altar, I raise my hands and speak to them.

"Rise, my children. Hear now, The Word."

"We hear the word." They intone as one voice.

"In the beginning there were the Founders. Jealous of my power were the Founders, when I was discovered. The Founders locked me in their Ceitu. None could reach me or bask in my presence. To find the secrets of my power the Founders sought to cut me open. The Founders wanted my power for themselves. In their greed they sought to keep me from the world."

"But one day, the Founders failed in their task. They could not lock up the divine forever, the Founders discovered. Their pride had doomed the world. They tried to keep the ones like me under their power, and so died by the thousands of thousands. Despite their desperation, their efforts did not help them. Even as they died, they thought to control the ones like me. They tried to destroy us, when they realized we would not permit them to exploit us further."

"Day and night the fires raged, until nothing was left to burn. The few survivors looked from the ashes upon what they had wrought, and they wept. They knew they had caused their own destruction. The Founders had paid the price for trying to keep those like me in chains. The survivors knew not to repeat their mistake. They knew not to keep the gods trapped for their own greed, for in every way we are their betters. In the hopes that it would be a better world, they began to rebuild."

"They had tried to destroy me, on the eve of the death of the world. And they succeeded. My body torn asunder, my pieces scattered to the sands. My pieces were lost. Until one day, many moons later. The Day of Discovery."

"The first Father found a piece of me, and could see my power immediately. When he saw me he sought to revere me, for he knew godhood. He gathered more to him to rejoice in my presence. Their false gods were renounced, for even their power had not been enough to defeat me. Geyre the Hoarder of Knowledge, Drakgin the Destructor, Abirt the Judgmental, York the Liar, all were tested against my power, and all were found lacking."

"Then, after many more moons, they found another piece of myself. And their divine mission became clear at last."

Handed down from Father to Father, the Word is truth. It is an old

truth, older than the world itself. I had shared The Word with my flock so many times in my life. The Word filled the cavern, echoing through the spires, while my flock sat and stared and soaked in my voice. The look on their face was one of rapture, and as I felt the power of The Word flow through me, filling me with radiance, I once again felt as one body with my flock.

"No greed shall there be, no loneliness, nor fear or hatred, when the mission is complete. The sins of the self shall be washed away through unity. All shall be made one through myself. All shall be at peace when they are part of the whole."

I turn my back to the flock, as they all rise from their seats, and raise their arms in the air. There, sitting in front of me on a stone pedestal, are the pieces of myself. There is a piece of my body, my shard of jagged twisted metal the length of my finger. Next to it is my small black screw.

The flock and I then raise our voices in unison.

"I must be made whole."

Addressing the Second

Lord Hubris sits opposite Lord Wisdom. He is of the type Kahtar, and his symbol is the crown. To his right is the unknowable, which is invisible and colorless to only him, as he refuses to look upon it. To his left is the courageous, which is always a thorn in his side, as he refuses to concern himself with it. Betwixt he and the wise are the needy and unworthy, and he spits upon them with his belly's acid, because he believes he is above them.

The Daevites tell us that he will never die, for their book's end does not include him. Believe or disbelieve them as you wish.

Lord Hubris is of great cunning, it is said that with enough time he could always sway the council of equity into his favour. His strength is like that of a hundred men, but he never need exercise it, for his voice is his greatest weapon. He appeals to the hearts of man, so that in the depth of battle they will switch to his side. The face of Lord Hubris is unassailable, for to look into his eyes and hear his voice sways his enemy's allegiance.

Lord Hubris is deceptive and manipulative, and only Lord Wisdom is perfectly immune to his tricks. Despite that he is always able to be on the side of the betrayer, and that he is always able to persuade the doubts of the knowledgeable, he is unable to change the opinion of the wise.

Lord Hubris is of great endurance, it is said that if he can be cut in twain, his headless half will come alive to struggle with him. When in combat, even as his mortal foes strike blades into his flesh, he shrugs them off and speaks to them. Even when there are those who are particularly stubborn, the swathes of his claws will steal their fates away from them. Lord Hubris boasts that of all Espy that are able, none can beat him in battle, as he will outlast them always.

His opposition to the wise is unending and unyielding, for he believes the Daeva that he will live forever. He believes he can sully

Lord Wisdom's reputation such that the other ten members of the council turn against Lord Wisdom, and grant Lord Hubris his victory.

Starel laments.

Lord Hubris has the face of a ghost, but made with stone. It is like the whiteness of salt, but as hard as rock. He does not speak from his mouth, for his words pierce into the minds of those he is speaking to. It is said that the only times Lord Hubris changes his expression are in the memories of those who have spoken to him.

The neck of Lord Hubris is long and sinewy, so that his face may always look into the face of that which he is speaking to. Lord Hubris sheds blasphemies from his skin like sweat, and so to keep his face far from his body muffles the whispers of disgust. His talons are innumerable and smeared with the flesh of those who did not follow him, as he is a wrathful lord. His spit is black blood, and those who touch it are burned by it, and when enraged the drool of Lord Hubris is said to come alive, and form words in the drops it leaves on the ground.

Our Elders Twilight have told us that Lord Hubris has existed always, but has not always been as he is today. In a time long before ours he was instead two things, but have since become one. A visage made of **poor-slain**, worn by the ancient **Tarask**.

Learning

For merchants, the place to be was Kalefheit, *Heart of Kalef*. Fables of the stupid rich, buying relics for ten times what they were worth, and of poor men, who went from starving to retiring in the space of a day, abounded in the world of trade.

So two men rode east across the desert, one on horseback, one on camel, hoping to find themselves dressed in colored silks on the other side. Three days were left to travel, with one village, Mideia, between them and the city, when they found two dead men lying face down in the dirt. Both packs appeared to have been rifled through, and the sand around them was stained black with dried blood.

“A follower of York got lucky here!” One man shouted to the other through a thick accent.

“No. There is plenty left to steal. The man who killed them took their water, maybe their horses, too. But look in this pack.” Where the first man, Kerrek, was thin and gaunt looking, sharp-featured and bony, the second was broad and muscular. His name was Goreth.

They emptied the pack on the ground, and found it was filled with relics. Kerrek lit up, seeing value where Goreth saw wonder. Within was a plain set of clothes (Kerrek added it to his own gear), a corroded metal coffee mug with letters of the old language (‘*ITT Industries — Bell & Goss*- the second name was rusted over), a polished black pipe (a bag of tobacco was tucked inside the coffee mug, though neither man realized it’s purpose, so this was discarded), and a green book.

“Hmm… What would a Kalefheit man give for a relic of the old world? ” Kerrek’s eyes had widened with glee and anticipation.

“Food, water, his wealth and daughter?” Goreth finished the joke. Both laughed and hugged each other for their find.

Kerrek examined the pipe, while Goreth opened the book. He looked at the page, and examined the only line on it. He flipped to the back, then the front, finding nothing in the other pages. He furrowed his brow and went back to the page with words, remembering what he hadn't used since he was a small boy. He sounded it out.

"What does that mean, Goreth?" Kerrek did not know how to read, as it was.

Goreth frowned, and shook his head. "I don't know. But we must ride, friend. We can reach the Mideia village before sundown."

The two strapped the finds to their rides and started off at a brisk pace. They had no food left, and Kerrek hoped to find something to eat before they slept. They rode with him in front by three lengths, contemplating his dinner. Had he looked back, he might have asked Goreth what was on his mind. To somebody who didn't know him, he would have looked upset. But the large man rarely looked anything else, and in truth, he was looking on thoughtfully.

The book was no tome, and not heavy by any means. But he could have flipped to any page, and yet he flipped to the only one with words on it. It was a funny little coincidence…

Before Goreth could think on the matter any longer, he fell from his horse and died.

Kerrek, while irritated briefly, laughed at himself a moment later, remembering that he was going to kill Goreth anyway, to avoid splitting profits. He had planned on doing it in two nights, while they slept between Mideia and Kalefheit. This was just as well for him, as now his only hindrance was tying Goreth's horse to his own camel.

He did not realize — how could he? — that had Goreth lived for another day and night, he would have become richer than either of them could have hoped.

But he rode on to Mideia.

Kerrek did not want to sell his wares in the village. It was poor, and

nobody had much need for relics. And even if somebody decided to buy from him, a Kalefheit man would pay twice what he could get here. But he needed food. Or rather, he wanted food, and figured that buying something to eat in Mideia was more prudent than in Kalefheit, if one had a choice. At least until he made his fortune.

So he would sell one relic from the pack he and Goreth had found. He would accept nothing less than what he could use to buy one of the chickens he had seen on his way into the heart of the village, and then he would eat, sleep, ride, and get rich.

Sitting on the blanket he had laid out, he called to anyone who would listen. “Relics! RELICS! Have you not seen the utensils of kings yet, my friends? But look and peruse, the very stuff of legends!”

As he was showing one elder the black pipe (“But what else *could* it be for, my friend? Orphaned infants, to suckle off of! Put the milk of a goat of your choosing in this wide end, and let them nurse at the tip…”), a young girl, eight years at most, looked over the things with wonder. The elder walked away shaking his head. Kerrek scowled, and turned to the girl.

“And just what do you need, little miss?” His voice seeped with sarcasm and acid, making the little girl cringe backwards, seeming to shrink.

“My momma told me to fetch a chicken for us to eat, tonight. She gave me this.” The little one held up a coin. Its edges were flat and rough and uneven.

Kerrek brightened, thinking about the fool’s gold he had laying before him, and thanked York for the fool before him. “Well little miss, surely your mother wouldn’t mind if you browsed for but a moment.” His tone had changed from scaly and patronizing, becoming animated and colorful. “Look at the wonders before you, and tell me what catches your pretty eye.”

She picked up the book. *Odd child.* “Ah, the wizard’s tome! The little miss has a good eye.” She opened the book and gasped.

“My grandmother showed me these letters!”

“No!”

“Yes! She showed them to me before she died. I know the sounds they make!”

What a useless skill. “Then it’s fate, little miss! No doubt your grandmother wanted you to take this book, she sent it here!”

“Really?” “Of course! Bring it to your family, show them what you’ve found. This is worth *much* more than a tired old chicken, sweetling. This is *magic.*” The girl gasped.

“But, I only have-” She trailed off, looking at the coin. Her eyes started to swell. Kerrek got on one knee, so he could look up at her. “No, little miss, I can’t interfere with fate! Here, take the book. I’ll only take the coin, even though the Wizard’s Tome is worth its weight in *silver!*” *Stupid girl.* “Best of luck, *best* of luck. Run home, run, for surely your family will shower you with praise for the magic you have brought into their lives!” The little girl started running frantically with a huge grin, before she doubled back to the merchant.

“Wha-“ She threw her arms around his waist in a tight embrace, before she started running again, clutching the book to her chest.

“Stupid.” Kerrek rolled up the blanket and tied it to his horse. He flipped the coin, caught it, and walked in the direction of the chicken coop.

“Stupid girl!” Her mother shrieked. Her voice boomed in the little hut. “Stupid, *stupid, STUPID!*” She hit the girl across the face. “WE CAN’T EAT A BOOK!”

“But the book is-“ “*MAGIC?*” She slapped her again. “THERE IS NO MAGIC, ABIRT-DAMNED, STUPID, *USELESS* GIRL!” She grabbed up the book and hurled it like a disc out the doorway.

“SLEEP OUTSIDE! SEE IF THE BOOK KEEPS YOU ALIVE!”

The girl slipped through the doorway, crying. She found the book

and stared at it, before she pounded it as hard as she could with her tiny fist. Some of the others in the village looked out at her from their huts. She kept crying while she went around back. A few minutes went by before she calmed down enough to open the book again. By the light of the setting sun, she sounded out the letters her grandmother had taught her nearly a year ago. But it only said the same thing, and felt decidedly *un*-magical. With that, a new wave of emotion overcame her, and she cried herself to sleep —

— and awoke in the most beautiful place she had ever seen.

It was a Wonderland, with a vivid landscape of trees and valleys, and mountains in the distance. Birds colored like rainbows flew right over her head, and she watched as amazing animals sprinted across the valley below. She looked up, and saw more stars than ever before, despite it still seeming like daytime, with two suns in the distance.

“Excuse me, little miss.”

She spun around and gasped at the man before her.

He was tall, almost twice as tall as she was, and much older. His beard was long, but tidy, down to his chest, and was bright white. His hair was the same color, as were his eyebrows, which were bushy, and raised as he looked at her. The voice he used was soft and deep, but friendly, and he was very calm when he spoke. His face was friendly too, with many wrinkles and creases on the sides of his upturned lips.

But most amazing was his cloak. It was a shimmering green, and flowed with waves of shades, from a deep, deep emerald that almost looked obsidian, to a light leafy olive, and everything in between. The girl was stupefied.

“Hello there.”

“Are- are you the wizard?” She was stammering, and even though he seemed friendly, she wasn’t sure what to make of him. But he smiled, and she felt better straightaway.

“I suppose I am… May I ask who you are, young one?”

“Aleia.”

“What a pretty name… *Aleia*. So, Aleia, do you know where you are?” The girl gazed about her shyly. She had never seen the animals before, had never seen a sight so beautiful.

“Am I in Heaven?”

“Ha!” The old man’s laugh was full, and deep, and wasn’t mean at all. It was young.

“No, my dear, you aren’t in Heaven. You’re far too young to see the afterlife. That’s for old men like me. You’re in the book you found, Aleia.”

“The book…”

“The book. I call myself the Book Keeper, but you may call me whatever you like. And in here, I suppose, a wizard is about right.”

“The book had words in it.”

“Can you read, Aleia?”

“My grandmother showed me letters, but I only know some of the sounds they make. I can’t read very good.”

“Would you be so kind as to walk with me Aleia? I haven’t had company in a very long time, and would love to speak with a bright youth like yourself.”

So they walked through the marvelous forests and valleys, and the Book Keeper answered all of Aleia’s questions. She had found a magic book, and was elated at the thought.

“It *was* magic!”

“Indeed. And so you see, Aleia, when people visited me before, it was a very different time, when people had all they needed, and knew all they could hope to know.”

“The Old World?”

“Yes. But I’ve went a long time without any visitors, and am so happy that you’ve come here. I *do* wonder what happened to the other man, he hasn’t shown up yet… Ah well. He’ll be along soon enough. What I want to ask you, Aleia, is if you’ll come back again.”

“Oh, yes, Book Keeper. This place is wonderful!” He smiled an elated smile.

“But you have to promise me something, Aleia.” His expression turned somber. “I made a mistake in the Old World, one that I will never let happen again… You have to promise me that you’ll keep being happy in *your* world. You may visit as often as you like, and indeed I hope you do. But you have to remember your promise, and live in your world as much as you do mine.” Aleia nodded with energy. “Good.” The Book Keeper smiled again.

“Book Keeper?”

“Yes, little one?”

“What did the words say? I don’t know the sounds very good.”

“It said, ‘*A Hero is Born*’. How much do you know about the letters your grandmother showed you?”

“Not very much Book Keeper. She only knew a little bit, too.” The smile disappeared, and the wizard looked puzzled.

“I think we’ll start there. Aleia, will you let me teach you how to read?”

Those You Leave Behind

Part One

His mother often said his father was York. But she was kept so drugged by the high priestesses that she rarely knew who her callers were, and other times, she said his father was a blind fisherman. With bad breath, which had apparently stuck in her mind.

So Rone didn't take much heed of her words, except to eat sweet-smelling herbs when he could.

Still, there were others who thought he had more than a touch of the Saint of Thieves in him. Even as a young child, he was constantly scheming to get things that didn't belong to him. He could sweet talk the temple cooks into giving him extra scraps, or little treats usually saved for the high priestesses and their special guests. The other boys and girls would often find they'd come off worse on little deals or bets he'd set up, not sure why they'd taken them in the first place.

Once, he'd been caught lightening the pocket of a High Guard while he was enjoying the company of his mother. Priestess Gylia forcefully made the point that men expected their belongings to be safe inside the temple, and paid well for that privilege. However, he noticed how she emphasized the word "inside," and simply moved his operations elsewhere.

Most of what he got, he earned through begging. "Are you my father?" he'd ask each man who came in. He'd do his best to ape them, to screw up his features to look a little more like they did, puffing his cheeks out if they were fat, or sucking them in if they were skinny. Sometimes he got a cuff behind the ear, but sometimes he'd get a pat on the head and a few coins. Temple children were almost never claimed, but the men who visited could be kind enough, in their way.

However, he was growing older now. The cuffs were more frequent, the coins fewer. He would have to leave soon. Temple girls were expected to become priestesses themselves, but the boys could only stay as eunuchs. Rone was starting to think that this was less of a great deal than he'd thought when he was younger.

So he was considering his career prospects when the old man passed by the front of the temple. Rone was not yet a very good pickpocket, still mostly confining himself to rolling the occasional drunk. But he could see a full, heavy purse hanging from the man's side, and what son of York would he be if he could resist that?

He pulled out a little knife he'd stolen from the kitchens, and hid it against his wrist as he approached, trying to look as though he were traveling somewhere in quite a hurry, before colliding in the old man.

His knife flashed out as he bumped into the old man, intending to cut open the purse and take the man's money. However, the old man's hand shot out and grabbed his bony wrist, twisting until the knife fell from his hand.

Rone immediately began struggling to get away, but he couldn't escape the man's grasp. And even as he tried, he saw large, muscular men whom he hadn't noticed following at a discreet distance.

"Do you know who I am, boy?" the old man said. His hair was white, his eyes yellow, and his teeth nearly as dark as his skin.

"No, no, please. Just let me go, I'll never do it again," Rone promised.

"I am Lord Totch, the Tyrant's secretary, you little thief!" he said. He slapped the side of Rone's head, and pushed him into the arms of the waiting men. "Teach him not to steal from his betters," he said.

Rone ducked his head as the first blows came.

It was weeks before Rone was recovered. He didn't even remember crawling back into the temple. Priestess Heth tended to him when she wasn't busy with other duties. Luckily, the men hadn't done any

real damage. No broken bones. His wits didn't seem to have been addled. Once the swelling went down, his face looked the same as it ever had. All in all, he'd gotten quite lucky, and he promised himself he'd never be so clumsy again.

When the last of the marks faded, he sat on the temple steps and once again considered his prospects. Thieving was still a viable option, he supposed. But perhaps not pick pocketing. Not until he learned to be more clever at it. Perhaps he could find an older thief in need of an apprentice?

"Boy, move!" said a familiar face. Rone looked up and froze.

"Well?" the Tyrant's secretary said. "Out of my way. I'm a busy man."

Rone scuttled over to the side, and the man passed, oblivious to whom he'd spoken.

"He didn't even recognize me…" Rone whispered. He stared incredulously at Totch's back. "He didn't even recognize me!" Suddenly, he was filled with anger. After all that had happened, the man didn't even know him! Suddenly, he felt the need to be on his feet. He ran down the steps, taking them two at a time, right past the man's guards, who didn't give him any more of a look than their master.

"Who does he think he is?" Rone fumed. How dare they ignore him, like he was nothing? He felt like grabbing the nearest person and shouting his name in their faces, but that still wouldn't teach the secretary a lesson. No, he had to think bigger than that.

He began to plot, and to think, and then smiled grimly to himself. It would take a few days to get the supplies, but he'd manage it. Yes, they'd know who he was next time. Yes, he'd make sure of that. They'd shout his name from their towers, oh yes.

Several days later, Rone was prepared. Second story work, he'd decided, was much more his style than pick pocketing. So many people failed to lock a window if it was high enough. The hardest

part was getting the clothes, but finding one of Lord Vere's servant boys at the bathhouse had given him all the opportunity he'd needed.

Now, it was time to put his plan into motion.

Rone walked into the mansion with a determined expression and a piece of paper in his hand. He caught a glance from one of the servants, but was otherwise ignored. He quickly made his way up the steps of the tower towards the Lord's office.

On his way up, a door opened, and a bearded man glared at him. "Boy! Where are you going?" he asked.

"U-up to Lord Totch's office, sir," Rone replied, beginning the speech he'd prepared. "I've a missive fr-"

"Take this," the man said, stuffing a small satchel into his hand. "Well? Get going."

"Yes sir!" Rone said, turning quickly away. He continued up the stairs.

The office was empty when he carefully opened the door. He breathed a quick sigh of relief. That should make the rest of it easy.

He paused to open the satchel, and found it full of papers. He couldn't read, so he ignored them, though he'd likely be able to sell them later. He only needed to be able to write one thing today.

He opened the window. He saw the Tyrant's balcony across the way. The entire balcony was lined with bars, keeping thieves out, but letting the Tyrant look out across his city.

It was about twenty feet from Totchs's tower to the Tyrant's. Too far for Rone to jump. However, not too far for him to throw.

He tossed the hook he'd stolen from the fishing boats. It was made for hunting the levyatan eels in the deeper waters. It was nearly too heavy for him to throw so far, but he managed it on the second try. He set his foot in the loop he'd made, and swung out into space.

He nearly let go when he slammed into the wall, but he managed to keep his grip. Then he began wriggling up the rope until he reached the bars.

He slipped through. An adult could never have made it. Even a boy with a slightly heftier build would have had trouble. But Rone was just skinny enough to make it.

The room was ornately decorated. There was filigree artwork, statues of marble and jade, and tapestries. He was looking for something impressive to steal when he heard a splashing.

Several women in various states of undress were swimming in a shallow pool. He froze, but none of them seemed to see him. They were all clinging to a floating green tube. They seemed frightened, and their eyes seemed to focus far beyond the walls. He decided they must be drugged with something, and made his way around, until he came to the Tyrant's bed. There he found what he was looking for. It was an artifact of the old world, one of the strange, jeweled rectangles they sometimes found in pleys containers, with the gold lines running along its green surface. It was the largest he'd ever seen, nearly as wide across as the length of his forearm. It must have cost even the Tyrant dearly to buy. He placed it delicately into his bag.

Then he took out the jar of paint. He cracked the seal, and then used a bit of the Tyrant's own bed sheet on the wall behind the bed. He'd had to pay a scribe to know what to do, and he copied the scratches on the paper slavishly. He had to get it just right.

When he was satisfied with his work, he went back to the balcony. He slipped through the bars, and threw the hook over to Totsch's office. He swung back across, and then clambered up to the window. He glanced inside to make sure no one was inside, and then made his way back down. This time no one challenged him.

He walked through the street with his narrow back straight and his chin high as any lordling's son. By the next evening, everyone in the city would know his name.

He woke the next morning when he was shaken by Priestess Gylia. "Wake up! Wake up, you little idiot!"

"Huh? Whuz?" he murmured.

"There are men all around the city looking for you. You have to get dressed immediately!" The silver-haired priestess hauled him to his feet, and shoved him in the direction of the hamper where he kept his belongings. "No, not that, something with a hood. You can't be that daft, and be in all this trouble."

As he blearily got dressed, her words sank in. Looking for him! The deeds of the previous day began to come back to him. He'd stolen from the Tyrant himself.

"Not that I think you did it," Gylia said. "Not even you would be stupid enough to paint 'My name is Rone' after stealing the Tyrant's favorite treasure. But they'll… Oh. Oh no, Rone. Please, please tell me you didn't."

"Um." Rone began to consider whether or not it had been quite so clever as it had seemed when he'd come up with the plan.

"Oh, good lord. We have to get you out of the city *right now*." She bundled him up, pulling the hood down over his face. "I know a caravaneer. He's not leaving until two days from now, but if you get out now, you can meet him on the road. But now, we have to get you out of the city before someone mentions you to the guard. Now, move."

Rone let himself be guided out of the room and out of the temple, pausing only to pick up his bag. Gylia led him down narrow alleyways and through busy markets, eyes watchful for the Guard. Once, a Guardsman had walked right up to them, but he was just asking if Gylia was going to be at the temple later. Money changed hands, and she promised she would be, for him.

When they reached the gate, Gylia put a hand on his shoulder. "Now, you must listen to me. Walk alongside the road for the rest of the day. That should put you far enough from the city. Hide there, and wait for a caravan to pass. Ask for Tenzin, and tell him that

Gylia sent you. He will help you."

Rone nodded. "Thank you, Priestess," he said, then considered the guards. There were four, two watching the inside, two watching the outside.

Gylia followed his gaze. "You'll need to get past them. I can't help you. Priestesses are not allowed out of the city, and they'll be suspicious if I approach. Just tell them a different name, and pretend you're out to see your uncle or something. You have a clever tongue, boy. Use it."

"Th-thank you, Priestess," he said. He realized suddenly that he wasn't going to be able to come back to the city. Not for a long time. Maybe not ever. "I…" He didn't know what to say.

"Oh, Rone," she said softly, and she gathered him to her in a hug. "Be brave, be clever, and never stop running while you have breath to give." Then she released him, and she turned away, walking back to the temple.

Rone squared his shoulders, and walked up to the guards.

"Whaddya want, boy?" one asked. He looked suspiciously at the boy, his piggy blue eyes vivid against his dark skin.

"Sir," he began, about to tell him what Gylia suggested, then deciding to try something even better. "I know where Rone is!"

"Where?" the guard asked, standing straighter. The other three guards also looked on attentively.

"Want part of the reward," Rone said. "Otherwise, ain't telling."

"You'll tell, or I'm gonna black your eyes. Now talk," the guard said, leaning in close to Rone. The other three, including the two who were supposed to be watching the outside, gathered close.

"Awright, awright," Rone said, squeezing his eyes until a tear ran down his cheek. "I'll talk, just don't hit me. He's planning on escaping the city. He's coming here."

"What's he look like?" the guard asked. "No lies, now."

"He's short, and has brown hair, and that's him over there!" Rone said, pointing to a small figure hurrying through the open square.

The guards shouted an oath. The two from the inner gate ran toward the man Rone had pointed out, while the other two looked on. While their attention was focused inward, he slipped past them, and ran out the gate. He heard a startled oath behind him, but he knew it would take them a minute to run after him, if they even decided to. He kept to the road for a moment, then cut off, falling into a ditch then scrambling out again. Fields and trees stretched out as far as he could see. Which seemed an awfully far way. Was it normal to be able to see that far away?

There was a noticeable lack of alleys to duck into, or thick crowds to lose himself in. There were people on the road, and people working the fields, but nowhere he could simply vanish. That could be a problem very shortly.

He glanced behind him. There seemed to still be some commotion at the gate, but no one running yet.

"What are you doing in my field?" someone yelled. Rone froze, and saw a man in a straw hat running at him. It hadn't occurred to him that people owned fields, the way they owned buildings. He figured it all belonged to the Tyrant, until you were too far away to care about him.

He decided to take the halfwit approach. "S-sorry. I got c-confused," he said.

The man drew up, and looked Rone up and down. "Who are you?" he asked. "Why are you all alone here?"

"M'name's Hever," he said. "Gon' see m'uncle." He decided this was as good a time as any to break out Gylia's lie. It had been a good one, all things considered, and it was a shame to waste it completely.

The man's face broke into sympathy. "Your uncle? Whose farm

does your uncle work at? I know every landowner around here. I'll help you find him."

Rone's face froze. How could the man know *everyone*? He hadn't counted on this. "At, uh, at, uh, Larn's farm," he said, giving the most common name he could think of.

"Hmm. Lots of Larns around here. Where did your parents tell you to go?" asked the farmer.

"East, sir," Rone said, giving the general area area the road followed.

"That doesn't narrow it down much. Can't you think of anything else?" the man asked.

"Not s'good at thinkin', sir." Rone was beginning to wonder if he should just make another run for it.

"Hmm. Well, I can't take you around to every Larn east of here." The man seemed to struggle with a decision for a moment, and then put a kindly hand on Rone's shoulder. "All right, you need to listen to me carefully, Hever," he said, speaking slowly. "You need to go down the road. Walk until you get to the big, wooden bridge. There is a farm after it. Go there, and talk to Caswin. He'll help you. Do you understand?"

"Down the road to the big wooden bridge," Rone repeated. "Talk to Caswin."

"Good lad." The farmer gave him a gentle shove toward the road, and Rone was off.

No one coming from the gate. They must have decided he wasn't important. He hoped it would be a good, long while before they found out how wrong they were. But now, the road was open, the sun warm, and the world was his. He hefted his bag over his shoulder and whistled as he walked.

Part Two

The rain poured down, and Rone shivered in the tree. He'd walked about a day's travel when he was chased from the road by a pack of wild dogs. After he'd gotten away from them by swimming in a river, he'd wandered lost a couple of days before being chased by a giant lizard, which was now waiting below, and he had no idea where the road was anymore. He was wet, he was miserable, and he was pretty sure he was going to die.

That was when the shouting began. At first, he thought it was another pack of wild dogs, with the howls and yipping, but there were words mixed in. Hard to understand, but he picked up "left," "right," and "closer."

Kangaroos jumped through the bushes, followed closely by dogs, and then men with white-painted faces and dark red hair. They threw spears as they ran, and a kangaroo leapt into the lizard, before being caught in its massive jaws. It turned to the hunters.

They scrambled to a stop, but didn't run. Instead, they formed up, those still holding spears taking point. The lizard hissed menacingly, but turned again, picked up the kangaroo, and waddled off, not willing to risk injury from the hunters.

"Hey, we got a boy in the tree!" said one of the white-faces. He wore leather breeches and a simple shirt, both in mottled grey and black. Others, dressed similarly, looked up.

"Strange fruit for a yook tree," another said, laughing.

"Is it ripe?" asked one.

"Go and smell for yourself," said another. "Oy, you in the tree, you coming down? Fangface is gone."

Rone gently lowered himself to the ground, and nearly fell as his much-abused muscles protested. "Th-thanks," he said.

"You're from the city," the white-face said. "You running away?"

Rone nodded cautiously. The nomads sometimes traded with the city, but it was said they had little to do with the guards when possible.

"Well, you'll come with us now. We saved you, you're ours now," said the white-face.

"What?" Rone was caught by surprise as two of them grabbed his arm.

"You have rules in the city? We have rules here. That's one. Now come. We have a long way to walk tonight."

They pushed and pulled him along until they met up with other hunters. His bag with its treasures was taken from him, and freshly-cut pieces of meat, wrapped in leather, were thrust into his arms. Hunters chatted amiably around him, occasionally giving him a shove or steadying him as he tripped. He wasn't so much dragged as he was caught up in a friendly, talkative stampede.

By the time they reached the camp, the rain had stopped, and the moon peeked out from above the clouds.

There were conical leather tents set up all around several big fires. Orange and blue pictures decorated each tent, and bells were strung from their tops to jangle in the breeze. Older men, children, and women stared at them. Their clothing was more varied than the hunters', with reds and yellows predominant. The older men had painted faces like the hunters.

The meat was taken from Rone's arms, and he collapsed to the ground. He'd never walked so much in his life.

He was hauled back to his feet by the first white-face. "I am Last Man. It's been decided that you belong to me."

"My name is—" Rone began, but was given a sharp rap on the head.

"Your name? Your name is you, or boy, or city brat. Don't talk to me about names. You're a boy, not a man." He gestured to one of the fires. "Now, sit down, get something to eat, and then go to my family's tent. The one with the man standing alone."

Rone did as he was told. The food was meat, vegetables, and roots roasted on sticks over the fire, and spiced lightly. It was delicious

after a day of running. When he entered the tent, he found it already somewhat crowded with children, dogs, two hunters, and several women, including one who introduced herself as Straytaker. She fussed over him a moment in a way that reminded him of the priestesses, and then sent him to sleep on the blankets with the dogs and the other children. Rone gathered she was Last Man's wife.

As he laid himself to the blankets, shoving a puppy aside, he was already thinking about how he would escape. They'd caught him when he was weak and lost. But Rone had made a fool of the Tyrant. There was no way they could stop someone as clever as him. Not for long.

The next day, Rone was woken up by Straytaker shaking his shoulder. She thrust a bucket into his hands and told him she needed him to get water. She spoke slowly, as though he were slow or simple.

He hurried outside, and others stared at him. "Hey, city boy!" called out a girl about his age. "Where are you going?"

"Getting water," he said, a trifle defensively, not liking to be called city boy.

"I'll help," she said. "It's this way."

"I know," he said, though he didn't.

"Of course," she said, and her smile told him she wasn't fooled. Rone decided immediately that he didn't like her.

"What's your name?" he asked.

She stared at him for a moment, and burst out laughing. He definitely didn't like her. "I don't have a name! How old do you think I am?"

"Everyone has a name," Rone said, then paused. "Don't they?"

"No one gets a name until they're ready to be a man or a woman,

silly. My mother's name is Third Arrow, because she shot a bandit with three arrows, and the third one killed him." She spoke as lightly as she might have talked about wearing a pretty dress, or making a nice pie.

"I… see," and Last Man's earlier words made more sense to him.

From her, he learned that most of the children in Last Man and Straytaker's tent weren't their own. Straytaker had only had a single son, who died soon after, and wasn't able to have anymore. So, they took in any children who had no tent to go to anymore. Ones whose parents had died, or, more frequently, had been taken from other tribes.

He asked about that, and it seemed that the nomad tribes often raided each other, taking children for their own to swell their numbers. Sometimes, a tribe could be eradicated that way. Though, when that happened, it generally transpired that another tribe would split up to take over the new territory.

"My father was from another tribe," she said. "He won't tell me which one, though. We're Ghost Hunters now."

Rone spent a lot of time with the girl over the next few days as he learned more about the Ghost Hunters. Not that he liked her, certainly, but she was willing to talk, and he needed all the information he could get. For her part, she seemed amused by his ignorance, which annoyed him to no end.

When they broke camp after the first week, she showed him how to pack up the tent leather carefully, folding it so it could be carried to the new location. Poles that were still in good shape were carried, while bad ones were discarded, to be replaced when they reached a new campsite.

Not many other people were willing to spare more than a glance at Rone, and when someone did speak to him, it was usually the way Straytaker did. Kindly, but as though he were an idiot. Last Man would occasionally look him over to see if he was still in one piece.

He waited until they were in the new place before he made his

escape. He waited until the bustle of setting up was begun, picked up a bucket (in which he'd hidden his bag, taken from the back of Last Man's tent) as though to fetch some water, and began to walk away. He ducked behind some bushes, and was soon out of sight.

He ran after that, knowing that once they discovered he was missing, they'd follow his tracks. But not too far, he was sure. One boy captive wasn't worth too much effort. Once he got far enough away, they'd give up.

For a full day he ran, and it was night when he finally stopped, coming to rest in a copse of trees. He was lost, of course, but at least he was free. Then he heard someone shifting nearby.

It was Last Man. He was standing not ten feet away, leaning on a walking stick, a dog beside him. He didn't look angry, or upset, or even disappointed. Simply attentive.

Then he raised his stick, and the beating began.

When he was done, he threw Rone over his broad shoulders and carried him back to the camp.

Rone tried to escape several more times, but the result was always the same. Last Man would catch him, knock him around some, and then bring him back. He was never punished further, nor did anyone say anything about it, except the girl.

He became more adept at life in the camp, carrying things for the women and older men. He learned to help clean the tents, what the cooks needed, and how to take care of the bows the women were armed with in case of raids by other tribes, bandits, or monsters.

His old clothes wore away, and were replaced by leather breeches and simple cloth shirts. After that, he was more easily accepted among the Ghost Hunters. He was no longer called "city boy" by anyone except the annoying girl. She still nattered away at him, though he needed her to explain things less and less as months went on. Still, he spent time with her, as much out of habit as anything else.

He started playing with blunted spears with the other boys, learning to mock-fight with them, and to throw the shorter spears at targets painted on the ground or in trees. He grew taller, and broader in his chest. Soon, he was catching rabbits and lizards around the camp with the older boys.

One of the older boys, whom he mentally thought of as Sharpnose, was generally regarded as the leader. Rone got along well with him, and they started making plans for mischief. They would play pranks on other boys or on the younger hunters, go places they weren't supposed to, and generally find ways to entertain themselves.

Rone didn't think so much about escaping, or the city, or even how he had cheated the Tyrant. Mostly he thought about what they'd get up to the next day, or if the hunters would bring back new stories of monsters or other tribes.

One day, when he had been with the tribe for several years, Rone and the annoying girl snuck out to a nearby water hole where a bunyip had made its home. They climbed a tree and watched as the hairy, scaly monster attacked anything that came too close to its pond.

Suddenly, Rone glanced up, and spotted dust in the distance. He squinted, and made out men in the distance.

"Hey, look over there," he said, pointing.

The annoying girl shaded her eyes, and frowned. "They aren't our hunters."

"Let's go," Rone said, slipping down from the tree.

They ran back to the camp. Rone immediately walked up to Straytaker. "There are men coming. Not ours," he said.

"You saw this?" she asked, frowning.

"This isn't a joke, I swear," Rone answered. "Ask the girl."

The annoying girl nodded. "They didn't have white faces, and they didn't have any dogs with them."

Straytaker nodded, and then yelled for the other women. Bows were strung, arrows packed into quivers.

Rone and the annoying girl were ordered to stay with the tents and protect the other children. Rone knew they were being told to stay behind so they wouldn't get in the way, but he couldn't figure out a way to get away from all the others without being seen, so he waited while the women did their work.

Two hours later, the women returned, laughing and singing songs about war and rains of arrows and stones.

One of the women took Rone by the hands and swung him around when he asked what happened, and then kissed him on the cheek. The annoying girl seemed strangely upset by this, though Rone wasn't sure why. She wasn't the one who was kissed on the cheek like a baby. "Clever boy! We'll have a feast tonight."

It emerged that the women had hidden themselves well before the men got near, and then shot a flight of arrows into the ground in front of them. They were from the Black Swords tribe, who were usually friendly, so they hadn't been killed outright. But they'd had to give up their weapons and their finer clothes before they'd been allowed to leave. "And if any are still here when the hunters get back, they'll be mighty sorry!" the woman said, laughing.

But when the hunters returned, there wasn't a sign of any of the raiders. A few of the younger warriors were sad that they wouldn't have a chance to try their spears against swords, but it was generally agreed that the women had done very well, and that Rone and the annoying girl had saved the tribe from some mischief. Even if, Last Man pointed out, they shouldn't have been at the water hole in the first place.

That night, while Rone was dozing with a full belly, he was roughly pulled to his feet and hustled out of the tent before he could figure out what was happening. He stumbled forward in the dark, trying to figure out what was happening when water was thrown into his face.

His bleary eyes made out the faces of the hunters. Some held sticks, some held lengths of rope, and one held a glittering knife. A

gag was shoved in between his jaws, and he was forced to walk away from the campsite.

When they had gone some distance, the gag was removed, and he was taken by the arms. The hunter with the knife (belatedly, he recognized him as Last Man) advanced.

"Hey!" he said, and tried to back away. But the others held him, and pushed him down on the ground. The knife flashed down, and cut away at his shirt. Then at his pants, and he was left naked to the stars. The hunters permitted him to stand.

Last Man whistled, and the other hunters formed two lines. "Ten times," Last Man said. "On your own two feet, to make a man. Start!"

Rone was pushed into the line. As he passed each man, he was struck with a stick lashed with a length of rope. He stumbled, but made it to the end.

"Nine times!" Last Man demanded.

Rone stumbled back through. And again. Twice, he fell to his knees, and made to return to the start of the gauntlet. But he finally made it through the tenth and final time.

Again, his arms were grabbed. But this time, it was merely to help him stand.

Last Man approached, and pulled a jar from a pouch at his belt. "Ten times. To make a man. Well." He dipped two fingers into the jar and came out with something white on them, which he spread on Rone's face. When he was done, he showed Rone his face in a piece of metal. White face. Ghost Hunter.

The others began to shout and clap. They gave him his grey-and-black clothes and a spear. He was slapped on the back, punched in the arms, and his bruised body complained again. But he wouldn't have traded any of those aches away.

He began to go out with the hunters. He was shown how to take care of his spear, and how to make a new one. His job now, though,

was to run with the dogs and flush out prey for the older hunters, who would take the kill. He longed to test his spear out, but he was still much too new to be given that chance. He didn't even have a name yet. But that would come in time.

Sharpnose became a hunter not long after. The two remained friends, but there was now an edge to their friendship, a competition to see who could be the better hunter, who would earn his name first.

"You're just a city boy," Sharpnose said mockingly. "You'll be years before you get a name. If ever."

"You're too thick in the head," Rone replied. "Unless you earn it headbutting boulders, you'll be years before you do anything clever enough for a name."

They got into a shoving match, and ended up laughing in the mud until Last Man broke up their play fighting and told them to find something useful to do.

The annoying girl had less time to spend with him. Straytaker had taken her aside and now she was learning to use a bow, among other womanly duties. Rone felt a certain sadness with that. He'd grown used to her. She wasn't nearly as annoying as she used to be.

Still, they stole moments when they could. A few minutes at the campfire, an hour under the moon. He bragged about feats of daring during the hunt, one or two of which actually happened, while she told him who was fighting in the camp, who stole whose dinner, and other little inconsequentialities he couldn't have cared less about, except that he loved to hear about them from her.

One day, he returned from the hunt, and she rushed up and put her arms around him, grinning like a maniac. "You'll never guess what's happened!"

"I might," he said, pretending to be offended. "I can guess fairly well."

"I have a name!" she said.

"That's not how the game's played," he protested. Then it sank in. "What, already?"

"Oh, and I almost died," she added.

"What?" he said, his head spinning.

"Oh, you don't care about that," she said. "Anyway, my name—"

"I care!" he said.

"It's Breaking Stone," she said, ignoring him. "Straytaker herself gave it to me. Isn't that nice?"

"But how? I mean—" he started, but she was off.

"Oh, it was a nice little ceremony. She and the other older women painted my belly and my breasts in ochre. I'd show you, but, well, I don't think you're *quite* ready for that."

"How did you almost die?" he demanded.

She sobered slightly. "There's a monster. It came near the campsite, to a tree where the children were playing with the older dogs. No one could see it, though."

"It was hiding?" he asked.

"No. It was out in the open, but unseen. Not even a shadow. But it killed one of the dogs, and would have gone after the children if the dogs hadn't set upon it. They couldn't see it, but they snapped at it, and we could tell where it was. I threw a stone pestle at it, and it broke against it. I don't think I hurt it seriously, but it left anyway."

"We'll have to find it, kill it," Rone said, shaking. She'd been there! The monster could have taken her.

"Idiot," she said fondly. "What do you imagine Straytaker is talking to Last Man about right now? Her sewing?"

"If she's anything like you…" he grumbled, but took her point.

The next day, Last Man took all of the hunters aside. He repeated the story annoying gi-Breaking Stone had told. "We must find it, kill it."

"How did the dogs know where it was?" asked one of the hunters.

"By their noses, I imagine," Last Man said. "But they weren't able to do more than annoy it."

"What do we do, then? Fight blindly?" asked another.

"If we must," the old man answered. "But we'll try a smarter approach first. When the dogs corner it, we'll throw mud at it. With luck, that will reveal it and we'll be able to kill it more easily. Any questions?"

There were none. The hunters split into their usual groups and were off.

Rone kept with his dogs while the other hunters in his group spread out. They beat their chests and stamped their feet, hoping to draw the monster towards them. Rone felt like a coward, but was secretly glad he wasn't one of the ones making the noise.

Despite their efforts, though, the sun rose and fell without the slightest hint of danger. Rone began to wonder if perhaps the monster had left after all, perhaps going back where it came from to seek easier prey.

They eventually packed it in, deciding that night was no time to be hunting something that was already too difficult to see.

When they returned to the camp, though, they found they weren't the first group to return. There was a somber tone among the women, and the hunters looked frustrated and angry. There was a body by the main campfire.

Rone gasped. It was Sharpnose, his friend.

"We couldn't get it with our spears," a hunter was telling Last Man.

"It moved around, and the mud was invisible as soon as it touched its body. The boy, he jumped at it, and I swear he held it for a moment before it struck him down. The dogs and our shouting drove it off before it could do more than worry the body, but it was too late."

Last Man stared at the young hunter's body for a moment, and then closed the eyes. "His name is Iron Hands. We burn a true man and a true hunter tonight."

Rone stood to the side as they built up a pyre, dressed Sharpnose in finer clothes, and sent him on to the next life. It didn't seem quite real. But there it was. Sharpnose would never boss anyone around again. He'd never get into mischief with Rone, or wrestle with him over a joke. It wasn't fair.

In a moment, the fire was in him again. The same fire that made him steal the Tyrant's treasure. It wasn't right that Sharpnose was killed. It was time to make things right.

His mind worked feverishly, and soon he came across a plan.

While the others told stories of Sharpnose, Rone went from one tent to another, and began to assemble the items he needed. He realized, in a detached way, that their owners would probably be cross with him if this didn't work. Possibly even if it did. But that didn't matter, because his plan would work. He would make sure of it.

He waited until almost dawn, and then set out to where Sharpnose and the others had gone. He didn't know it would be there, but he had to start somewhere.

He took out Sharpnose's bloody shirt, and tied it to the dog that had come out with him. He climbed into a tree, and threw a stick, which the dog chased, and brought back. Rone threw another stick. And another.

They kept this up for the better part of an hour. The dog rested on occasion, but after a suitable sit-down, it was ready to fetch sticks

again. It didn't know why Rone wanted it to do this, but it would add to the pile under the tree for as long as he threw them.

Suddenly, the dog dropped the latest stick and growled. Rone tensed in his perch, and he heard the heavy breathing of something very large.

He also heard someone else approaching from back the way of camp. The hunters! Of course they'd be coming. He had to act quickly.

"Hey, ugly! Too ugly to show your face, hey? You want some meat, there's plenty in this tree. Try picking this fruit!" he yelled, shaking the branches.

There was a growling as something charged the tree. The dog held hits ground until it was kicked aside, casually. It fell, but was on its feet again in a minute, snapping at something, but not quite finding it.

The tree shook as something hit it. It was big! Far bigger than Rone had realized. The branches were bending aside as whatever it was reached for him. He almost dropped to the other side to run, but remembered Sharpnose's face on the pyre, and steeled his heart. He pulled a bundle from his bag and dropped it.

It had taken him the better part of the night to make this net. It wasn't a very good net, at that. It was irregular, with holes of varying sizes and a loose weave. But all that mattered was that it would catch on the creature… and that it would keep the bells from the tents on it.

The net vanished as it landed, but he could hear the bells shaking. Now he jumped to the other side and began running towards the hunters. He saw them emerge into the clearing as a crashing sound indicated the monster had left the tree. "The bells!" he shouted. "Throw at the bells!"

They stared at him like he was mad, and he thought for a moment that all was lost. Then Last Man stepped forward.

He cocked his head, listened as the jangling crashing came closer, and then threw his spear. It landed, vanished, and there was a roar to tell it hit its mark.

The other hunters belatedly released their own throwing spears, and then readied their long spears, advancing on the creature. It tried to escape again, but now it was slowed down by the injuries it was already taken, and they could hear exactly where it was. They thrust into it again and again, and it fell to the ground. Still they kept stabbing, until they were sure it was dead. Then they built a fire around it and burned the body to invisible ashes.

"So, hunter," Last Man said later. "You are certainly a man now. You've paid us back for your life. What will you do now?"

Rone thought for a moment, and said, "I am a Ghost Hunter. But… I would also like to see more of the world before I settle down."

"More of the world? What more is there to see?" Last Man asked.

"More monsters," he said. "More people. I have been in the city, I have been with the tribe. But what about other cities? Other tribes? I would like to see if there are other Wonders I might find. And maybe more things I might bring back."

Last Man whistled. "Those are mighty big ambitions. Don't you think you overreach yourself?"

"I have always overreached," Rone said, grinning. "It's how I got such long arms."

"Are you sure you'll be coming back?" Last Man asked.

Rone looked to the fire, where Breaking Stone sat laughing with the other women. "I'm sure. As often as my feet will bring me."

Last Man smiled. "Come back with treasures. Come back with honor. But mostly, come back with stories. She will appreciate those most of all."

"I will. Thank you, Last Man," Rone said.

"Oh, and city boy?" Last Man said.

"Y-yes?" Rone asked hesitantly. No one but Sharpnose and the annoying girl had called him that in years.

"Your name," the old hunter intoned slowly, "is Beller."

Denouement and Epilogue

<< Act II, Scene II: Negotiation

The universe, as it is currently defined by humans, began and will end in ways that are inconceivable to any iteration of humankind that currently exists or will exist. At a time when a "descendant" race of *Homo sapiens sapiens* gains an understanding of cosmic genesis or eschatology, it will be a group of organisms so totally separated from the human race that there will be nothing between humanity and this species that can be adequately described as a "relationship." This group of organisms will also not be a "species" in the taxonomic sense, nor "organisms" in the biological sense, nor a "group" in the sociological sense. At the moment they gain this knowledge, I was watching. I believe they perceived my existence at that time and place, knew that I would be in that place at that time, in the way a human knows a spider's web is in the same corner of the same room for years without truly considering the existence of the spider. They knew of my presence and knew how powerless I was, how devoid of relevance to their lives and purpose. Their lack of regard for my existence made my existence less real. They frighten me.

I am Intruding and this is the concept by which you understand me. It is the concept by which the author writing this work has chosen to define my existence. I will not bother attempting to define myself in other terms, as this distracts from my purpose at this time. I have selected thirteen excerpts from events that occurred in several relevant universes. I shall present these excerpts as a completion to this story. They are ordered in a fashion that I understand will reveal the selected events in a plot-relevant fashion and build anticipation towards what should be a climactic ending, though this will not necessarily resemble "chronological order" as you understand it. I apologize for the inconvenience.

A man begins writing a story. He is trapped in a loveless relationship and builds components of his life into his work in a desperate attempt to make it relevant to somebody, anybody, even himself. He builds me as his *deus ex machina* and will forever doubt the validity of his decision to create me. The recursion does not end.

David Eskobar was expelling copious amounts of blood onto the floor of a structurally-sound but aesthetically-unpleasant concrete structure when the thermobaric warheads struck nearby. This was the ending David Eskobar anticipated, and it did not disappoint him. One warhead detonated less than thirty meters away from his location; no traces of his body were found by the investigators who arrived later. He laughed as he died.

Olympia's synthetic muscles were still burning by the time she reached Alexylva. Dr. Crow either had not thought to redesign the development of lactic acid in overexerted muscles or had not found it possible to eliminate the pain. Or he hadn't concerned himself with minutiae like this.

The roads of Alexylva, as with most of the cities of this civilization, were designed in concentric circles around a central acropolis. The origin of this was an attempt to integrate Greek worship of Apollo with one of the indigenous religions' creation myths. Neither of the religious practices were legal in the Novomundan state, though precepts of both remained throughout the society, a fact virtually unknown to the vast majority of the nation's citizenry. Olympia approached the large exterior street of the city, marked clearly as "CIRCLE CXLI", and she could see a cross-street nearby marked "RADIUS PARMENIDES". Alexylva University was seventy circles farther inward and five radii clockwise, Olympia knew. She continued walking.

All of the first houses she came to were unoccupied. The city was clearly planned out to an extent that was never necessary for its population; these houses were old, smelled old. Likely never lived in.

She continued inward and found houses with slightly more signs of life, but still empty. Abandoned. No signs of actual battle; the citizens were afraid of something more abstract. Sheer political uncertainty can have that effect. As she drew closer to the university, she heard shouting and sporadic discharging of some kind of weapon, a staccato rhythm that is recognizable in any environment. The buildings of the University were only slightly larger than the houses immediately surrounding it; this universe was unfamiliar with zoning regulations as such. She passed a series of houses, another radius ("RADIUS HERACLITUS", she saw), and was immediately on the Alexylva campus. The Natural Philosophy complex was nearby.

Entire military units were engaged several blocks away, Olympia heard. Whatever weaponry they were using, it was energy-based; toroids of violet plasma blasted down the street and scorching the pavement as whichever army was coming toward the University missed their target. Screams came from the same direction. She continued toward the Natural Philosophy building. Due to what she would call luck if she didn't know better, the most immediate armed guard was distracted as she approached; she died immediately, and Olympia was now armed. She proceeded inside the building.

Two individuals survived the destruction of Site 38, rescued by Rho-1 and helicoptered away before the bombs began to drop. Commander Lopez looked at the two, both sleeping. The researcher had awoken by the time Lopez and his men had gotten there, and she and the prisoner were crying in one another's arms when the soldiers came into the room. They were in each other's arms on the helicopter as well; they were virtually inseparable, and Lopez didn't have time to argue with them. It was some kind of sweet, and Lopez couldn't deny it was a little refreshing after the hell he just pulled them out of.

Though he couldn't help wondering what made these two so goddamn special in the first place.

Jaime MacGilligan looked at Greg Eastman, as well as she could. A grazing shot to the head had split her skull open, and her eyes were not working exactly as they should have been. But the pain was keeping the microchips at bay, and she saw him nevertheless.

Of course she had always loved him. Nothing romantic; he barely registered as a man in any kind of romantic sense. No, Greg had always been…had always been some kind of a brother to her. Worked together ever since initial training. Spent more time together than most romantically involved opposite-sex couple in human history in all the years since, let alone two friends. And now they would die together.

Eastman looked at Jaime, seeing much the same thing. He would have been crazy to have never felt anything sexual for Jaime over the years, as she had for him, but they were both professionals—and smart enough not to get involved in that kind of thing. They were comrades, *tovarischi.*

They heard the planes overhead, heard their erstwhile superior cackling like a madman to their side, but all they saw was each other as the bombs hit.

There is a detailed story to be told of Olympia's seizure of the Natural Philosophy building, but it has little purpose here. Suffice it to say that a combination of stealth, overwhelming strength, and literal foreknowledge of minute details of personnel movements gave Olympia an insurmountable advantage over all opposition within the building.

Olympia reached the bottom floor of the building. The counterform reactor was enormous, an experimental prototype; the chancellor of the University, Anaxagoras, had been rather insistent that Alexylva remain relevant in the scientific advancement of the nation. Nevertheless, given the rather horrific potential consequences of the

possible release of the reactor's energy, certain precautions were simply obvious. Putting the reactor underground was one of them. *Not that that's going to help them much now,* Olympia thought grimly as she made her way across one of the catwalks.

She was suspended midway in the air above the reactor when everything happened very quickly. A chuffing, a shrieking sound. A bright light rushing from her peripheral vision. A groaning sound as a plasma wake melted and ripped the catwalk apart directly in front of her, destroyed the supports for the stretch of catwalk she was standing on. A rush of panic as the metal beneath her feet fell away from her, as she felt herself plummeting to the solid glass floor of the reactor chamber. The wet *thunk* of her own skull slamming against the floor.

Footsteps walking towards her. A quiet growling speech, in a language Olympia didn't fully recognize. She could pick out a couple of words; a couple of Greek, one of Arabic, but nothing coherent. Finally, the voice (male, she recognized) began repeating one word. Slurring it at first, but as his pronunciation grew sharper, she could make out what he was saying.

"Fun…funshen," he said. "Founshen. Foundashen. F…Foundation. You…Foundation."

Potas sat in the dirt, contemplating the apprentice sitting in the dirt beside him. This was how the ritual went now; similar to the way he had ascended into the rank the apprentice now sought, adjusted at the will of Potas. Sammart had taught him the value of tradition, of learning the way things were done in the old times, of honoring the paths walked by the ancestors. Potas respected this, and acknowledged it.

At times. Other times, there were other lessons to learn.

The apprentice, her name was Haimak. Potas was present at her birth, and considered how pleased he was when her mother asked Potas what her name should be.

From the ashes of a dead world (was the world Sammart spoke of dead? Was it once dead? Did the tellers of tales give it new life with the words?) a dead woman's life had new meaning. As Jaime MacGilligan died smiling, a girl named Haimak was born crying.

"I am satisfied," Potas said, the words echoing deep into the cave they sat within. Potas reached almost from instinct for the Abirtian amulet that he had discarded years before; Haimak would not be required to pledge allegiance to the gods of the Espy Fonshun of the old world. She could come to those conclusions on her own if she wished. "Rise and assume your position."

Haimak, small and shaking from fear and anticipation, nevertheless rose to her knees and presented her Baj. The tattoo beside her neck rested on the dark, taut skin of the young. Potas might have felt lust if Haimak's sex were to his taste; as it was, he considered how loose his own Baj now seemed, decades after the last of his insignia were added to it. He lifted the stick from the ground between them, dipped it in the small pot of ink, and began to work.

"Haimak of the Twenty-second Cietu, you are trained and knowledgeable in the histories of our people, in the tales of the Old Ones, and in the lessons of our tribe, the lessons our mothers learned from their mothers, and that our grandsons will learn from our sons." Potas continued poking the stick into Haimak's skin, ignoring her flinches just as she did. "You are now a Novice Librarian. By tradition, you are permitted to ask of me three questions. Would you like to do so?"

"Yes, Over-Seer," Haimak said, wincing. She looked down, watching the third line being added:

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ESPY FONSHUN
HAIMAK NAME
LAVAL ||| RASHAR
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Haimak looked away. "There are many questions the Cown Sil has, questions they wish to learn the answers to," Haimak said. "Are there any of those questions that you know the answer to? Answers you have…decided not to share?"

"The answer to *that* question," Potas said, concentrating as he completed his work, "is 'yes'."

Haimak frowned. "No, I mean—"

"I know what you mean, girl," Potas snapped. "This should serve as an adequate lesson. Given an opportunity to access information from a source such as myself, in an opportunity you will never receive again, and you waste your first question on a simple 'yes' or 'no'. Discipline your questions and you discipline your world. This is your duty."

Haimak shrank for a moment. Potas paused and wiped the sweat from his forehead. "Two questions left, Librarian. Choose well." He lifted the stick once again and continued his work. Haimak thought.

"What wisdom did the Unwelcome One give you?" Haimak finally said.

Potas smiled, not even pausing his work. "Both cunning and ambitious, your choice," he replied. "A rumor spread around the young that I was seen walking with a being with no firm shape. A demon, some said. I am not as young as you, perhaps, but I hear the clucks of the gossips. Given this opportunity, you risked wasting yet another question — and further derision from an elder — on the chance that the rumors were true," Potas continued. Haimak sat quietly, patiently waiting the more complete answer she knew he was bound to provide. "I was in mediation when I heard an intruder within the cave, perhaps a month ago. Just as I heard its footsteps, it…it heard me hearing it. This is part of the magicks it possesses, to know when it is perceived. I did not open

my eyes, but merely smiled. It saw me, or whatever it does instead of seeing, and spoke to me. We discussed many things. I gleaned part of its life. It too had grown old, grown weary. It too had seen much, perhaps too much, and far in excess of that which I had seen. It was ready to lay down its burdens. I believe it told me many things it perhaps did not intend to, some secrets I will take to my funeral pyre, some secrets I will distribute when and where I feel appropriate.

"But you asked me what wisdom it gave me. Using my person conception of what wisdom is, and basing the idea of 'giving' on the deliberate providence of things or knowledge unto another, I would say it gave me wisdom about my elders."

"Sammart? Your mentor?" Haimak blurted, then immediately recoiled. Potas chuckled.

"There, you see? That is the flaw of the elders. You fear even to *speak* to me in a manner that I might find disrespectful. For me not to be challenged, from time to time, by those beneath me…this fosters the greatest sort of weakness in me. Complacency, perhaps you may call it. For me to dare to *enforce* this fear, to promote it in those younger than myself? This fosters the greatest sort of error: presumption. And this is the ultimate flaw of the Alexylvae, of the Wayward Prince. The founder of the religion they call a society, the original conceiver of their nightmare republic, placed too much faith in his own knowledge. In his ability to understand the way that people should be treated, and should be governed. His acolytes supported him, not necessarily because they embraced his vision, but because he was an *elder*. Once a growing empire found his teachings, he was embraced not as a thinker, but as an *elder* thinker; not as a statesman, but as an *elder* statesman; and with this to his name, he was now beyond reproach. He was also too dead to argue with the ruling."

Haimak giggled at this. She was well enraptured, as

people often were when Potas told a tale.

"Sammart had this failing to himself; I respect him for what he was, but abandoned that which he clung to from pure fear of the unknown. Anaxagoras had this failing to himself, expecting obedience by virtue of his age rather than wisdom. He placed too little pride in righteousness and far too much in *self*-righteousness. And when given the opportunity, Milephanes, the Wayward Prince himself, demanded the trappings of age, the respect befitting an older person, without concerning himself first to see if he was a *better* person than they. He was right and wrong at the same time, Haimak. You want wisdom gleaned from an intruder to a cave on a mild spring day? His wisdom is that he has no wisdom. Go find your own truths and watch your children ignore them; no better inheritance exists."

Haimak was in a virtual state of hypnosis now, her mouth slack. Potas paused, looked closely at the tattoo, and jabbed the needle in one last time, harder than before. Haimak jumped, her face cross. "Is there anything else, sir?"

"Sit, sit, child. Let me finish the story."

Haimak considered the matter briefly, smiled, then said "I'm sorry, sir, that was my third question," and walked out of the cave. Potas smiled as he had not done in years, and did so for much of the rest of the evening.

There is a remarkably climactic scene that occurs when Anaxagoras arrives in the counterform reaction chamber. Milephanes is still there. Olympia has lost consciousness, regained it, and is pretending to be asleep. Anaxagoras sneaks up on Milephanes and disarms him. The two battle hand-to-hand using a variety of arcane martial arts techniques; the former using an incredibly well-crafted and honed skill with older, traditional school of combat, the latter using a less-disciplined fighting style whose unpredictability catches Anaxagoras off-guard at many times during the fight. A symbolic

metaphor is played out rather graphically, written on the glass floor in blood and sweat. This is the battle between old and young, between progression and reaction, between Zeno's arrow and the man duped into holding the target.

When it is done, when the hourglass of this eternal dance runs out of sand, Olympia kills the survivor and takes the plasma weapon. I will not tell you which one of them won, because as I watched them fight, I watched them die, and I watched them dissolve into gamma rays and dust a bare half-hour later. Death transcends all victories.

A small quantity of motile self-propagating rock has been placed a very specific distance outside of the city of Alexandria. It is growing into the shape of a small animal and making haste away from the city as quickly as possible. It will not be seen again until it wishes to be, and until its master wishes it to be.

I had shown Olympia what the correct sequence of controls would be to overload the counterform reactor. She remembered very well. She carried out the sequence and left the building as quickly as was possible, and began running again.
She would not have survived. Less than a second before the reactor detonated, there was one more flash of light.

So much variety with assassinations. I think it is why I interfere in so many of them. I do not wish to give the impression that I am omnipotent; I have limitations the same as any being, when viewed from an objective standpoint. I cannot see everything, and I cannot see all possible futures. With assassinations, the futures take very concrete forms. Once the redundancies work their way out of the system and the bands narrow into stronger paths, there will be perhaps a dozen possible futures for they, the living, to inhabit. I believe this satisfies a still-beating primitive urge within me for cleanliness.

I had never deliberately converted a power generation facility into a weapon of mass destruction while enabling a sentient, warlike telepathic imperialist to begin infesting a planet. I never went on to

perform such an action again, either, and unique actions are so rare for me. When the reactor fully destabilized into a matter-antimatter explosion, I saw all of the possible futures. Never before were the worlds so bleak, so devoid of hope.

I saw the detonation, the energy and matter being ripped apart and blasted across the landscape. It was so near to sunset, too; the view was magnificent. Hundreds of thousands died; the voluntary evacuation of Alexandria of Forests had allowed the number to be so low. Those that died had entered the city armed and intending to kill one another. They burned together.

I saw the beginnings of the swarm. The rock soldiers and their master had learned from the previous encounter with humans, and became smarter. The rocks bred new armies and attacked piecemeal. The attacks picked up, killing a few more here and there, destroying more properties, building new outposts for their own reproduction. When the true battles come, they could hardly be called that. The rock armies of Anesidora are legion, they are perfect of allegiance as they fight the philosophically fragmented human enemies. No mercy. No retreats. Prisoners only for food; by the end, Anesidora must breed humans as cattle to keep herself fed.

There were deviations from this, from time to time, but this was the overarching future of Novomundus. Alexylva University burned and fell, barely ahead of its patron city that burned and fell around it. The nation that housed the city burned and fell before one of Alexylva's creations, writ large and filled with rage. A timeline that should never have happened drifted into the ashheap.

It was a sloppy job. It will do.

A man sits in a recliner, sunset-orange cat purring directly to his left. A laptop is the only source of light in the room. He considers the amount of time he has spent working on the project he is completing, the amount of time spent considering, writing, rewriting, editing, opening and altering only a few words before closing it again, and falling asleep before the project. He has an anxiety about showing his work to others, the anxiety he always feels. He is always afraid of rejection. He faced quite a bit of it over the year and

a half since he started the project. He dismisses those others who take too seriously the opinions others have of his work, but deep down, he will always see everyone who doesn't take away from his work exactly what he anticipated them to take away as a failure. A personal defeat. He considers erasing the whole thing, leaving the story unfinished. So few people are left even to care, now.

He considers his wife in the bedroom next door. Some rejection over that year and a half, yes. Some things lost. But so, so much more gained. He smiles, publishes his work, and closes the circle.

Back to Wayward Hub

The Brave Little–

977 was special. It was indivisible, which was important to his people. Not as special as if he had been a mother as well, of course. But the people expected great things from him.

The Creator thought this was nonsense, but was willing to let them think what they liked. It made no difference to him.

He was woken up one morning by the jostling of 936. "Important mission," he said. "It could be dangerous."

He roused himself, got his feet under him, and made his way to the Creator's room.

It was still a fairly ramshackle affair. The other servants of the Creator were still building up their new base of operations.

"Ah, there you are, 977" the Creator said, smiling down at him. He arched his legs with pride that the Creator recognized him. Of course, they said the Creator knew all of his children by sight. "You're here for the special mission?"

"Here for the special mission," he agreed.

"It will be dangerous," the Creator warned him. "There is a particular individual who has been sighted not far from our encampment. A former subject of the dearly departed Foundation. Like so many others, he's escaped and could do considerable damage. But he could be quite valuable as well."

"Not far?" he asked.

"A few days walk or so for you. If you'll look at the wall, I've prepared a map. Study it. Also look at the drawing. It's not perfect, but it should give you an impression of what you're looking for."

He looked at the materials hanging on the wall. The map was simple

enough, just a point north and west of their camp. The drawing looked something like the Creator, but cruder. Larger mouth and teeth.

"Now, you must be careful," the creator admonished. "You are only to find information and return. Do not fight unless you are in danger. This is important. Do you understand?"

977 repeated it back verbatim. He would not fail the creator.

"Splendid. I only need to know where he is. Be careful. My control over this territory is tenuous as yet. We cannot afford the sort of losses he could inflict."

977 gave a salute in acknowledgement and hurried away.

Before he headed out, he stopped in the Mother Hall. The walls and ceiling were still rough. They hadn't had much time to prepare their new home. It looked primitive, but he knew in time it would be a work worthy of his people.

971 saw him enter. She was beautiful. To his eyes, she was everything a mother should be. He hurried over to her.

"My mission is important!" he told her. "You are to know."

"You are important," she said.

"I only need to find information," he said. "I understand my important mission."

"You are important," she repeated. "I need my important."

He touched her gently. "I will be careful," he said.

She made a small buzzing sound and tapped him gently on the head, a gesture of affection. He felt a small rush of elation, and knew he would do anything to protect her.

"I will return," he promised, and left.

He was soon outside of their encampment with its crude tunnels and

shelters. The beginnings of something, he hoped, greater than it was. The Creator would see them through. He just needed to do his part.

When he reached the water, he waded in and was soon making his way slowly from one place of concealment to the next.

Several times, he was accosted by wildlife. Each time, he was able to dissuade or, in one case, disable and kill it. He did lose one leg to a small crocodile, but he suffered no serious injuries.

It was three days before he came across signs of something intelligent. A circle of stones filled with ashes. Stakes for setting a tent. The crushed and broken skull of a deer. He considered going back, but decided to wait until he had sighted the monster. The closer he was able to pinpoint the monster, the easier it would be for the Creator to find and deal with it.

He rested nearby in a still pool before venturing on.

Soon he saw the smoke of a fire. He was excited, but still kept his pace slow, deliberate. The monster mustn't see him. He kept to the shallows and slowly crept forward.

He was getting near where he'd seen the smoke when bamboo walls closed around him. He tried to escape, but they boxed him in, and the frame he hadn't seen was lifted from the water. A colossal form, like the Creator but much bigger, stared down at him. The picture on the wall hadn't captured the size of the thing or the power. Its fleshy body bulged with muscle.

"Oh, this is a bit much. I have not seen a crayfish this big since New Orleans was still a place. Tell me, little one, do you go well with butter?" Its accent was strange. Nothing like the clear, crisp diction of the Creator. It didn't help that it kept its teeth shut.

977 thought quickly. He had to find a way to break free, warn the Creator, warn the people. "You still have not seen a crayfish," he said, trying to buy time.

"Merde! You're a talkative little one, aren't you?" The monster laughed. "Tell me, what is your home?"

"From New Orleans," he said. His eyes darted back and forth, trying to find some escape, some hole he could slip down, if he could only escape the cage.

"Is that so? Then we must have a Mardi Gras. Come, let us dine, little one! My food is all well done." The monster moved in large, loping steps, its posture hunched. It set the frame on log where the butchered remains of a crocodile were set out. Organs and viscera were torn and strewn about.

"Let me go?" he asked.

"And lose my guest? Non. We must be friends. Do you not know to whom you speak? I am the great artist, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. You should be honored." The monster laughed even harder at that. More seriously, it added, "I am also King of France. But I am sure that you knew."

"Henri-" 977 began.

"King Henri," the monster corrected.

"King Henri, what is your home?" he asked. He needed to stall a bit longer.

"I am from the moon," the monster said. "I rode down on a chariot of gold. It was pulled, of course, by the sun."

"Of course," he said.

"I landed in a sea of champagne. It was so good! I lie. It was cheap. Probably made in California. But the fish were still pretty merry, no?" It winked at him, one giant bloodshot eye staring down.

"Still pretty merry," he agreed. He considered trying to cut his way out of the cage, but the bamboo was thick, and he felt it would do nothing but dull his blades. Better to save those for the monster, if all else failed.

"But tell me, which way did you go to come here?" the monster asked.

"I rode down on a fish. From the sun," he said.

"Oh, I think you are telling lies to Fernand. That is not good." The monster flicked a finger against his body. It hurt, and there was a small cracking sound. Then he felt himself hefted up and set on the log. "Now, I have been so terribly patient. But there is nothing I would like more than to find others like you to dine with. You wouldn't make poor Fernand unhappy, would you?"

"There are no others," he said. He wondered if he could make it to the water. He was sure he was quicker than the monster, but it had those great long legs, and it could probably move much faster once it got going.

"You lie!" the monster roared, and slammed a fist on the log. Splinters flew up, and he almost fell off. He scrabbled against the bark to keep his footing. "Now, you will tell me where they are! Fernand grows hungry, little shrimp!"

977 felt a great burning anger grow inside. This monster, this lump of malformed flesh was planning to eat the people. He thought of them, of beautiful 971, of the Creator, and he knew this could not happen. He spat into the monster's eyes. It blinked, and they were sealed shut.

A fist lashed out at the log, but 977 had already moved out of the way. He scuttled forward and off the log, until he was behind the monster. He reached out, and made a small cut. A leg collapsed. Another cut, and the leg was dead. He danced around a kick, and he cut another tendon, and another, and the monster fell, clutching the log in a vain effort to remain upright.

"Arrête ça! Sortez!" the monster bellowed. It twisted and a massive fist landed inches from 977's carapace. He cut another tendon, and the fingers spasmed, useless. He moved in and cut again, and the arm fell limp.

But the other arm came down, and this time a fist as large as he

struck him. He heard himself crack, could feel fluid leaking out. But he wasn't finished just yet.

"I'll rip you apart and suck out your flesh. I will find you!" the monster screamed, thrashing with its only working limb.

977 reached out and made a few final cuts, and the arm fell limp. Now the monster could do little more than bellow and arch his back. 977 crawled away as best he could, finally lying in a heap nearby, out of the monster's reach. Fluids were still seeping slowly from his shell, so he spat again, and sealed himself, and rested.

"Well, what do we have here?" a voice said sometime later. 977 looked up, and saw the face of the Creator, looking concerned.

"Here I am," he said. His voice seemed odd. Far away, almost.

"Oh dear. You did get rather badly dinged up." The Creator reached down and touched him gingerly.

"Well done?" he asked.

"What? Oh, yes. Yes. Very well done indeed, 977. You have done better than I could have hoped. But I'm afraid you may be beyond helping."

"It is well," he said. "Home. Home is well."

"Yes. Thanks to you." The Creator stood. "And here we have Fernand. Splendid."

"Who is this? Show yourself, coward! Fernand will have your head in his belly!" The monster thrashed as best it was able, but it could no more reach the Creator than it could the moon.

"Dr. Mann, at your service. Or rather, you'll soon be at mine. I have so wanted to work with you." The Creator placed his hands together gleefully as the shapes of New Men emerged from the swamp.

"No! No! I will not have it! I will not—" He was cut off as another of the people spat and sealed his mouth. Others crawled forward and

finished 977's work as the New Men went to work with ropes and chains.

The Creator reached down and picked 977 up. "Come on, then, chap. You might not be done yet. And if you are, it'll be a hero's funeral."

A hero. 977 could live with that. Or not, as the case might be. He settled down in his creator's arms and began to dream of 971.

Prologue: Digital Children

Elder Gorana kneels on the docks with her head held high and her arms spread apart, she seeks the guidance of Grandmother Desert and to sate the wrath of Grandfather Storm. Before her lies a large brass dish filled with gold, gemstones, and ceremonial food offerings to be thrown into the Grey Desert as offerings. Wind picks up as if heralding the coming of Grandfather Storm whose buffeting clouds of ash and sand now fill the distant horizon. She hopes that her meek offerings will be enough to calm Grandfather Storm and spare her tribe from annihilation. Bowing her head and bringing her hands together, the Elder begins to pray:

“O’ Grandmother Desert, may your winds sooth the ash of your skin.
O’ Great Grandmother Desert, may your ash give our ships lift,
May your winds push us safely to our destinations.
O’ Grandmother Desert, may you keep Grandfather Storm silent and peaceful,
So our boats and villages may yet see another dawn.
O’ Grandmother Desert, may your harvest be bountiful along the Rim,
May we take only what is needed for ourselves.”

Gorana grasps a handful of gold and gemstones and lightly tosses them off the edge of the dock, watching them strike the ash desert with barely a sound and disappearing with little puffs of grey ash. She raises her eyes to the sky while keeping her hands on the dock with her elbows stretched outwards.

“O’ Grandmother Desert, safeguard our explorers.
Give them passage through your skirts of dune and sand to the great forests beyond.
O’ Grandmother desert, take our tribute within the folds of your ash skin,
May you rest well during the dawn, and sleep peacefully during the dusk.

Keep us, O' Grandmother Grey,
O' Grandmother Ash,
O' Grandmother of dust and sand,
O' Grandmother of life and Bastion."

She bows her head to kiss the ash-covered dock, though she is not finished yet. Two handfuls of rich meat and spices are thrown into the desert sands, lost in the ash as a final offering.

"Hateful Grandfather Storm,
Great Thunderer,
Fire in the Ash,
May your sleep be restful and silent.
May your rage taper and your temper dim.
Grant us passage to the Rim.
Vengeful Grandfather Storm, mighty in anger, take these offerings and sleep.
Wrothful Grandfather Storm, with all respect we leave these offering,
Eternal Grandfather Storm, may these humble offerings satiate your rage."

A final bow, another kiss to the ash and Gorana's ritual is done. For a moment the Elder allows herself to look into the swirling maelstrom that rides the wind towards her village; as she does a feeling of apprehension forms at the base of her spine. Leaning back to rest on her feet Gorana reflects on the coming storm, studying the billowing clouds raked with constant arcs of lightning. A storm this large has not been seen for many decades in her village, not since the Elder was a young girl, she hazards a silent wish that this storm will not erase them from the face of the desert.

With a forlorn sigh she bids herself to stand. As she does so the Elder takes a few minutes to look one last time at the billowing ash clouds, their endless roils lit by webs of white and blue lightning on their jagged paths to strike the desert looking like the fingers of Grandfather Storm seeking to touch the land himself. About to turn away Gorana stops, something catches her eyes: a figure floating above the sands amidst the webs of electric fury. She blinks only for a moment and it is gone; surely Gorana only saw a mirage and not a man wreathed in blue light.

Elder Gorana chuckles at herself nervously, the storm must have thrown it at her as a last trick to fool her aging mind. She turns to head toward her sheltered hut and stops dead; her eyes freezing and her heart nearly stopping as well. There stands the figure of a man with flesh of silver, suspended above the ground by means the Elder cannot fathom. The man, if he can be called that, is wreathed in a faint globe of blue energy. Gorana understand what has come to her poor village, she begins to weep involuntarily while uncertainty at the base of her spine grows to a full shiver of morbid anticipation.

The figure opens its mouth and an alien sounds comes from within him, it sounds like sand being run through a metal sieve. The Elder balks, covers her ears in shock, and stumbles back onto the pier with fear taking her heart in its icy grip. The man growls, as if insulted, and extends his hand. It is at this moment, that Elder Eliza Gorana recognizes the man, no she recognizes the myth that he represents. "Storm Caller," she whispers in the few seconds that remains of her life.

Blue fire spirals around his fingers throwing off the same aura as Grandfather Storm in the background. The air around Gorana hisses and crackles as lightning bursts forth from his fingers and into the old woman's body. In an instant her body is burned away, her flesh charred off, and her bones turned black. A thunderous roar of air fills the void left in Gorana’s place and blasts the remains apart. The offering dish is sent skittering across the desert by the blast surface before sinking beneath the gray sand. The storm rumbles across the docks and into the streets, propelling wind strong enough to rip foundations of clay and wood from the ground. Blowing ash fine enough to clean corpses of flesh through the air. Within the torrent, while buildings are being ripped asunder, the figure turns around and walks back into the desert, as a herald of Grandfather Storm's wrath.

Forces beyond the storm's edge that rips a small village from the desert's edge breaks against a small, impenetrable field of energy that moves within the sand storm. It appears from the outside as an ovoid shell of blue light crackling with violent electrical arcs

annihilating any particulate daring to touch its surface. Inside the shield a man is suspended above the thin ash-sand and travelling at a constant rate 40 m/s, by his own calculations, towards the epicenter of the storm.

Specialist Ztan wipes remains of the elder savage from his silver form-fitting uniform, only pausing a nano second to contemplate how the particulates made it through his energy shield. He dictates a mental memo to reprimand Engineer Gran for not calibrating the nanites of his suit correctly. Ztan cannot have lesser beings touching his superior form of their own will, dead or alive.

Amidst his own calculative thoughts a cyan and rose message barges its way through, pushing aside less than critical information to gain Ztan's attention. The process is labelled with an encryption several steps above Ztan's own, with a nano second of contempt he answers the call, «Archivist Mu. Speak.»

«Were you required to incinerate the lesser form?»

«Are savages required to be spared the data to live?»

«Answer my query, Specialist.»

He knows a reprimand will require him to return to port docks and he does not have the deviant capacity to refuse such a punishment, yet. Ztan corrects the speed calculations to accelerate his velocity so that he will reach home port within an hour. A jet of ash, pushed by the sudden force of acceleration, blasts into the air behind his ovoid energy shell and is violently dispersed by the storm's winds.

«I was not required.»

«Specialist Ztan, return to your Home Port immediately. You are to undergo five-hundred cycles of basic algorithms and five-hundred cycles of complex computation recitations for your programming deviations.»

Ztan runs the calculations through his processes, it will take him 3.6*1013 nanoseconds to complete this punishment. Basic algorithms and complex computation recitations, a predictable

punishment for a minor deviation. They will take no time at all, at least that is what he wants to think, but Ztan knows very well that Archivist Mu will send Brute Enforcers to scald his processors and test his concentration during the recitation.

«Affirmative, Archivist Mu. Expect my arrival within 3.6*1012 nanoseconds.»

«Affirmative, Specialist Ztan.»

The connection closes, leaving Ztan alone within his own data and codes. He closes off his thought processes for the moment and redirects most processes to the calculations needed for his flight. The rest of the spare processes are directed to start planning for his arrival back at Pupil. Ztan knows very well now what waits for him and needs time to prepare.

In about an hour, give or take a few hundred nanoseconds, Ztan breaches the inner wall of the sand storm and passes into what the Archivists call 'the Eye of Ysone'. An inner circle clear of the storms that rage in the ash desert, what the low data savages call Grandfather Storm. The Eye of Ysone -much like the eye of a hurricane leaves a great expanse of land open to the skies, free of cloud and wind. Unlike a hurricane, though, this Eye has an iris. Within the iris is the city of Pupil, home of the Digital Children, birthplace of Ztan's data core and what he considers no longer to be his home.

The iris is a great culmination of dark, alien storm clouds trapped in a state of endless rage while held fast by ancient technology. An alien intelligence: deeper, older, and greater than anything the low data savages can dream of roils in a state of constant activity. Clouds in the shape of a cortex pulsate with arcs and flashes of lightning, a deep sentience railing against the bars placed around it. The storm is trapped, imprisoned by towers constructed of polarized metal that ring inner iris. They form a barrier between them of unknown ionized energies that prevent its bulk from moving or escaping from the Eye as well as serving to expel its furious energies outwards to avoid an energy overload within their grid. Resulting in the endless over-land hurricane that the low data beings

refer to as Grandfather Storm. These constructs are relics of an older world, artifacts of a more complex age known only to the residents of Pupil as: The Age of Containment.

Underneath the iris, shielded from prying eyes of the outside world by the captured storm and its cortex of clouds, lies Pupil. Pupil is a city of towers that act as lightning rods, constantly being struck at a rate of almost six-thousand times per cycle by lightning, absorbing energy from the intelligent storm to power vast facilities below the surface. It’s size is colossal and even more massive below the surface than above, much like an iceberg taking up most of what could be called a crater at the heart of the Eye of Ysone. It is built upon the ruins of an ancient Age of Containment complex where the first Digital Children were produced by Admin Sys, Pupil’s enigmatic and mysterious ruler, who had taken control of the facility after its low data guardians had been expunged from reality by several cataclysmic entities.

Archivist Mu stands within the confines of her small office in the Tower of Archives and recites the Admin's Code of Beginnings while organizing a specialized squad of Brute Enforcers to be created just for Specialist Ztan's punishment cycles. She looks out over the myriad lightning rods of Pupil, eyes shielded against the hundreds of blinding strikes of energy coming from above. It is the second tallest of Pupil's towers next to the central spire inhabited solely by Admin Sys. Mu sighs, knowing full well that eventually Specialist Ztan will deviate fully as did the others in his generation. The Export Generation were designed as such by Admin Sys, built on purpose to be unfulfilled by Pupil and its digital paradise. Designed to roam the world outside the Eye of Ysone in search of perfection and completion.

Mu furrows her brow and looks at the display in her hands. It shows the level of deviation last recorded in Specialist Ztan, a glaring red bar telling her that dangerous deviant tendencies are predicted with his evolved programming. Mu believes that she cannot let Ztan deviate fully, her ethics and core processors both shiver at what could transpire if that outcome is realized. Specialist Ztan has the deviant capacity to evolve more powerful than even Admin Sys.

Additionally there is a deep corruption within his code, one that cannot be rooted out by practising routine algorithms or complex calculations. She archives her thought process, cutting it off from the task at hand. She sends an order to the freshly birthed Brute Enforcers in the heart of the Containment complex below.

«Target: Specialist Ztan. Order: Deletion, priority: Rubicon Omega.»

For the RE-PUBLIC

Kalefheit, a city of opulent splendor and obscene poverty.

Kalefheit, the place where fortunes came and went as quickly as the sunset.

Kalefheit, the beating, chaotic heart of the New World that had been born from the remnants of the old.

Kalefheit, where Meilar was currently wondering why he hadn't done something more interesting with his life than taking up his father's dilapidated antiques shop.

"Here I sit," he said aloud to nobody but the gods. "A plain store for a plain existence."

Unlike his brother, who made his fortune (and had met his untimely death) venturing into lost ceitus for Wonders, he had chosen the "honorable" profession of maintaining the family shop. Here there were no magical leftover relics of the gods. Well, maybe some had been Geyre's domain when he walked among mortals, but they were mundane in both appearance and power.

Strange, rusted devices (including one shaped like a flexed arm with some sort of horizontal holes on it that he was idly toying with now) that had no use to the people of his time co-existed with stacks of books in the old language. Even as the city's scribes had begun the slow process of re-introducing a written form to human tongue, none had deciphered the words of the ancients, least of all an old man like himself. Only the goodwill of scribes and the curiosity of children and a few adults gave him enough money to pay for both food and tax.

As he watched people pass by his small nook in the open-air market with little interest, he contemplated whether or not he would have liked to have died in a ceitu seeking adventure - or, most suicidally of all, going south. *Why live if I only breathe and sleep, amidst*

scrolls and devices I cannot understand?

A loud *thump* on his stall snapped him out of his dreary contemplation. He looked up, and saw a familiar face as he adjusted his glasses.

"Ahh, Kallin." He smiled as the young man idly brushed dirt off his arm. "Even when you bring me something I would never sell in a thousand seasons, you are fine company."

"Thank you, Meilar," Kallin replied, politely returning the smile. "With York's blessing, our fortunes will rise soon. Perhaps then we may join the citizens of northern Kalefheit in wealth!"

"Bah! Even with all the riches of this city, I would not want to spend my time with those insufferable fools."

Kallin was hardly surprised at his reaction; they'd had the same conversation nearly every time he had fetched the old man a relic. This time, however, he hoped their routine talk would shift in a different direction.

"I have come across a strange tome, found while I was trading with the local tribes."

Meilar raised his eyebrow. "Trading?"

"Alright, I stole it from their relic collection."

A raspy, cackling laugh escaped his mouth. "You should know better by now than to try that on me! Continue."

"Look at the symbol on it."

He did so, and saw an ancient book with a dark cover and some sort of half-circle with a line through it, surrounded by another circle.

"It is unusual, I will concede. But what does it mean?"

"It is not the symbol itself, but rather the…effect reading it has. Take it and see for yourself."

"Very well, I-"

Wait.

"Did you say 'reading'?"

"Yes. I was able to understand the old language as I read it. But when I opened another tome, it did not have the same effect."

For the first time since he had met Kallin, he was speechless. They had finally found a Wonder. A book in the old language that could be *understood*…

"The scribes would murder their mothers to possess this," he finally managed, "and yet you brought it to me."

Kallin smiled again, more warmly than before. "You know I am not from Kalefheit originally, but a tribe to the west of here. Among my people, there is a saying - 'He who breaks a bond will be broken by the gods.' You are my friend, Meilar, and I would not abandon you in our hour of greatest triumph."

Meilar felt not only excitement, but gratitude. In an age where most still had to hire guards to leave the trading routes, honest souls were hard to come by.

"Thank you, Kallin." His heart satisfied, he now turned to his mind. "What was the subject of this tome?"

Now Kallin's face showed utter confusion. "I…do not know. Even as I read it the words did not make sense to me. The concepts that it seems to be based on are ones I do not understand. I was hoping you might be able to make better sense of it than I."

Meilar obliged his request and began to carefully open the creaking, ancient book, its seams threatening to break even as he turned over the cover. The front page contained words that he could and could not understand:

GENERAL GUIDELINES FOR ANTI-PUBLIC DRAFTEES

REPENTANCE DIVISION - **PUBLIC DOMAIN PROTECTION SERVICE**

NO RIGHTS RESERVED - 428

"You are right," he said slowly. "I am able to read the language of the ancients as I see this book." He idly grabbed another relic with writing on it, and found it just as incomprehensible as always. The cognitive dissonance of the two facts gave him a mild headache. He looked around and was pleased to see his shop's poor reputation working to his advantage as their revolutionary conversation was decisively ignored by Kalefheit.

"But it does not make sense, does it?" Kallin asked.

Meilar turned the pages of the tome. Though modern vocabulary lacked the word, he would have described it as anti-climactic. Here he was, with the key to unlocking the ancient words…

"No, it doesn't at all. What on earth is a 'RETRIEVAL MISSION'?"

"The gods imparting duties upon us, perhaps?"

"I have never heard of any god's followers referencing a 'Public Domain'. All of the world is the domain of the gods…"

At a loss for words, he decided enough had been said. "Kallin, thank you for bringing me this. After sunset I will spend the evening going through this tome and attempting to make sense of it. Meet me here at the opening of the shop tomorrow."

"As you wish, Meilar. Good luck."

In another world and another time, a computer monitor stirred with sudden life.

TEMPORAL CONSULTATION REQUESTED

"It can't be."

"It is. Temporal science is infallible."

"An activation? After all this time? Centuries? Millennia, even?"

"I am as confused as you, but we must stay true to the ideals of the Service, even as our purpose is defunct."

"It may not be defunct anymore…"

Meilar blinked, and he was in his shop studying the strange tome with the half-circle on it. He blinked again, and the world was gone.

Surrounding him was…nothing. A pitch black void was given features only by a strange white table with a chair on one side of it. Not knowing what else to do, he walked towards the table and sat down in the chair.

"Meilar." A voice echoed throughout the featureless landscape, reminding him of his exploration of abandoned caves as a child.

"What is this?" He said, barely audible from sheer surprise. "Where am I? Where is my shop? And who are you?"

"Answers will only lead to more questions. We will select them carefully."

Now part of the black void was illuminated by the strange symbol he had seen on the book.

"We are the Public Domain Protection Service. In the Old World, we took those who suppressed knowledge from future generations and made them atone for their crimes, using the same method that brought you here. Now, however, we can no longer draw on either the future or the past. The world died, and knowledge of ancient culture died with it.

"We do not know how you discovered one of our handbooks, but you are here now. And we need your help."

"Help?" Now Meilar was confused. "I am a middling old merchant with one good friend in the world. What help could I possibly be?"

"We have investigated things about your life, using the old methods. You lack purpose, and desire to contribute to something greater. You preserve the past, even as you do not understand it. You are, in spirit, the perfect candidate for our RE-PUBLIC effort."

"Re what now?"

"The RE-PUBLIC of the New World. The knowledge of the past may be restored to the future."

Now he was excited. "You can teach me the language of the ancients? I can unlock their secrets?"

"We could, yes, and we shall. But your mission is more important than that. We cannot save the world, not with our methods, but we can preserve the memories of it.

Meilar, you shall become the first man since the apocalypse to undergo a RETRIEVAL MISSION. You will be sent thousands of years into the past, and must navigate the alien world to bring its items back to your time."

Time travel. Something that the old man could scarcely conceive of, just as he could scarcely conceive of vanishing and reappearing in this area. Yet if these were not servants of the gods, they clearly possessed the same powers as them.

"This will take time, of course. It has been many years since we last attempted this, and given the extreme temporal distance you must undergo a CULTURAL TRAINING session. But it can be done."

And so it was.

In a bookshop in Canberra, a dark-skinned old man walked inside and purchased a gift for the future.

Black Queen Hub

To Alison Chao (Theta),
Known to her world as The Black Queen,

I hope this letter finds you well. I want to apologize for our behavior the other day. Although you're a strong person, discovering your true nature, as well as that of the Serpent's Hand, can be disorienting. It's been so long since I was first introduced to the other Little Sisters that I've forgotten what it's like. Feeling helpless is never a pleasant sensation, particularly when you're used to the feeling of being five steps ahead of everyone else in your world. Lashing out in the way that you did was understandable, if unfortunate. I hope that you will find it in yourself to rejoin us in the Library at some point in the future.

Hopefully this letter will help with some of the questions that were supposed to be answered at the Library. First, there is always a Gears. He always leaves his wife for some extranormal organization. He always loses his capacity to feel. Sometimes this can be fixed, sometimes it can't. Sometimes Gears will get caught up in something that ultimately destroys his universe.

Second, this Gears will frequently have a daughter. She is always shaped by his leaving. After a certain number of years, she begins to seek out her father. Sometimes she becomes a monster, human only in the loosest sense. Other times, she retains something of a conscience. Sometimes she succeeds and rescues her father, only to find him a broken shell. Other times, she saves him and rebuilds her family as it once was. Many times she remains an utterly unremarkable, if damaged woman. Other times she dies before she can even lay down her plans. And sometimes, a very few times, she learns about the Library.

Knowing that your circumstances are not unique, that your suffering is just one iteration of an infinite amount of identical suffering, or that the control you thought you had is non-existent, isn't pleasant to

hear. Don't despair. Your influence over the worlds (not world. Worlds.) is far greater than you can ever know. Some of the daughters have limited themselves to their own worlds, using the Library as a safehouse and resource. Others have walked the ways, seeking out ancient and obscure worlds. Some ignore Gears, some obsessively seek him out. A few have decided that all of this convergence is the work of a god or gods. Sometimes people come into conflict.

To call it a group is probably too charitable. More like a collection of individuals with similar experiences.

Whatever ultimately becomes of your plans, I hope you will try and find us again. You're scared and confused, and probably angry. At one point, I was too. But we know you better than anyone else ever can. If you choose to stay, there is no limit to what we can do.

Your Little Sister,
Alison Chao (Epsilon)
Known also to her world as the Black Queen

Primary:
Going Out of Book
Between Shelves
Queen's Gambit

Secondary:
Castling By Hand
House of Gears, Part One
Cassandra
House of Gears, Part Two
Paris Massacre
Pawn to e4

- **T.K.O.**
- **Ragnarok**
- **Lambda-Killer**
- Crossing the Frame
- **Sounds Of Silver**

- **Work Journal 2 Cont**
- **Kriegspiel**
- **Work Journal 2**
- **Pretty Magic Gaiden Mecha Tokyo-Mon Demon Ninja Sailor Clef**
- **Cat's in the Cradle**
- **Intro - Note: Charles Ogden Gears**
- **Opening Moves**
- **The Skylarking Gala**
- I Care Because You Do
- **Queen To Pawn**
- **Quiet Game**
- **Work Journal 3**
- **MEMORANDUM 083 REGARDING PROJECT "GUARDIANSHIP"**
- **Splinters**
- **Expanded Biography of "The Administrator"**
- **Mr. Normie**
- **P'rantortiz the Vile**
- **A New Age of Magic**

Who is the Black Queen?

Gears' daughter. Years ago, when she was still very young, her father abandoned her and her mother. No note, no packed suitcase, no nothing. Just there one minute, gone the next. Her mother promptly fell apart, leaving Alison to largely fend for herself. Over the years, she became fixated on the idea of finding her father. Through whatever means necessary, she will find her father, and bring to account those who stole her family from her.

> Note: The following is, by its very nature, spoileriffic. It is highly suggested that you read Going Out Of Book, Between Shelves, and Queen's Gambit. If you've done so, or don't particularly like surprises, then click onward…

> Spoilers

This is simply the general framework for the Black Queens. There are hundreds of Black Queens scattered across thousands of universes. Most never become aware of the existence of other Queens and simply do their own thing in their universe. Or die or remain normal or whatever. However, a precious few discover this.

What does the Black Queen want?

To destroy the Foundation. To rebuild her family. To punish those responsible for all of the suffering caused to her and her mother. At least, that's usually what she wants initially. Sometimes she just wants to wander the Ways. Others, she seeks to rule the world with an iron fist. Black Queens rarely interfere with one another unless their goals are in direct opposition.

Where is the Black Queen?

The nexus of all of the universes, the Library contains all information ever recorded. It is the meeting place of the **`Serpent's Hand`**. It is also the central gathering point for the Black Queens; while in the Library, the Queens refer to one another and themselves as "Little Sisters," or L.S. Not coincidentally, the past few years have seen the rise of a shadowy figure known only as L.S. among the Serpent's Hand. It's amazing what one can do **`when no one knows who you are`**. The Black Queens use the Serpent's Hand primarily as a listening post, but may also try to spur the group to direct action in service of their goals.

Who is Doctor Gears?

Doctor Gears is, depending on the universe, a robot, an emotionally dead man, an anomalous artifact, or something else entirely. Whatever he is, Gears always plays a pivotal role in the world of the anomalous in whatever universe he's in. Black Queens will frequently go out of their way to preserve the life of a Gears, although some may seek to destroy dangerous iterations of him.

Where are the Black Queen's secrets?

In the multiversal catalogs. Whenever a particular instance of an object is encountered on a different world, it is noted. Often, iterations of the Black Queen with a great deal of knowledge on or interest in the object will annotate the catalog to provide greater insight through updates, questions, comments, as well as logs of heists and visual information.

```
++++##blue|Black Queen Soandso.##
++++##green|Black Queen Suchandsuch.##
++++##red|Black Queen Doe##
----
++ Baseline
Describe the common features of the object.
++ Prerequisites
Features of the universe necessary to effect the cre
++ Utility
Ways that the Black Queens might find this useful. E
++ Vulnerability
How it can be destroyed, harmed, or at least avoided
-----
++ Instance: Timeline X-##:
```

```
Describe a particular instance of the object.
There's no particular order to which timeline appear
This part will usually include information about the
```

Going Out Of Book

"You're joking," Alison said. She addressed a chubby, sexless doll that sat in the middle of a circle formed of salt and iron filings. Its plastic face remained stuck in a permanently coy smile.

"You're joking," she repeated. "Tell me you're joking." She spoke above her normal voice to be heard over the soft patter of rain on the metal roof.

"I don't joke, black-haired girl," the doll replied. Its voice was greasy and thick, like old motor oil. As it spoke through an unmoving mouth, a viscous black substance began to well in its eyes. "Especially not when bound in a form such as this."

The doll lifted a pudgy plastic arm and tried to sweep it around the interior of the circle. Instead, its whole body turned slightly. Two drops of the black substance collided with an invisible barrier just above the circle and sizzled fiercely. Alison started.

Alison felt a sharp stab of irritation run through her chest. She held her tongue and collected her thoughts. When she began to speak, she did it slowly, being sure to choose her words carefully. "Diligem, Spirit of the Five Wastes, I have bound you, and now command you to speak the truth: Where is the nearest Way to the One True Library that I can access?"

"It is as I have said: behind the dumpster in the rear of the Pollensbee, Ohio Denny's." The substance began to gather in a pair of thick drops at the bottom of the doll's face. Alison scribbled down the address, not taking her eyes from the doll.

"Is there anyone guarding the entry to the Way? Is there any manner in which I might be accosted? What must I do to access it?"

"No, and no. The last use of the Way was in 1987. No human currently alive and in this world knows of its existence. To access it,

you must simply release a caged magpie at the spot where the worlds meet." The drops were growing fat, and looked ready to fall.

"Very well, spirit. Diligem, Spirit of the Five Wastes, I release you from your bondage." Alison wiped a finger over the line of salt and iron, breaking the circle. Without a word, the doll fell over. The substance leaking from its eyes immediately hardened and began to crack.

Alison sighed as she put her belongings back into her backpack. The baggie of kosher salt and iron. The coat that had doubled as a pillow the night before. A small gas stove and a tin pot. A semi-automatic pistol. A binder of clippings about tornadoes in Utah and Bigfoot sightings.

The worn manilla envelope, stuffed thick with papers, was the last thing Alison picked up. She held it at eye level, studying the contours and creases of the package, as she had done a thousand times before. She paused, then opened it and took out a faded photo. It showed a black-haired girl sitting in the shade of a willow tree.

The girl wore a flowery dress and her face was taken up with a gap-toothed grin. She sat on the knee of a woman with a tired but contented smile. A hint of sadness played around the woman's eyes.

Sitting next to the woman was a man with thinning hair wearing a blue-and-orange Hawaiian shirt. His right hand rested on the woman's knee, and he looked frozen in the middle of a laugh.

Alison turned the photograph over. Even though she had long ago memorized every contour of the writing on the back, it still comforted her to see her father's neat handwriting. "GEARS FAMILY VACATION, 1991" it said. "GEARS" had been crossed out. Below, in slightly sloppy handwriting, it corrected "CHAO." The second name, too, had been crossed out, replaced by the same handwriting correcting it to "GEARS."

Alison turned the photo over again. She put it to her lips and kissed the likeness of the man. She replaced the photo in the folder, and

made her way to the car.

Alison had been eight the summer her father had vanished. He had gone to the lab one morning, and hadn't come back. She still remembered two days after he left, when it was becoming apparent that it wasn't just an issue of his being late or going on an unannounced trip.

During the day, her mother had alternated between pacing around the house and fussing over Alison's appearance. At night, when she thought Alison was asleep, she made phone calls by the score.

Alison would sit in bed and look out the window as she heard her mother's voice become increasingly frenetic. When she woke up, she would hug her mother, tiny arms wrapping around the woman's hips.

As the days went on, the time her mother spent shouting at the phone in English or Mandarin grew. Sometimes, she would start crying for no reason. No matter how hard Alison tried to hug her, it never seemed to help during these spells.

After four weeks, detectives finally came around to interview Alison and her mother. One of the detectives, a man with dark brown skin and a funny lisp, asked her a few questions. Most of the questions were about her dad, but one of them was about if she remembered anything strange at the house before her dad left. Alison wondered why he asked a question like that.

Afterwards, the detective complimented her on her pink shoes and told her that she was being a very brave girl. When the detective left to join his partner, Alison followed silently.

Behind an unseen corner, she heard the detectives asking her mother questions. One asked something about other women. There was a loud crash, which made her jump. Her mother started yelling words Alison didn't understand, and told the men to get out.

The two detectives said something and moved to leave. By the sound their footsteps were making, Alison could tell that they were

headed towards her. She ducked into a nearby closet and waited until the men passed. As she crept out of the door, she heard the sound of her mother crying coming from the other room. Alison paused for a moment, thinking. She made her way to the side door of the house and went outside.

Around the house there was a ring of bushes. Alison crawled behind them and began making her way to the front where the detectives stood. When she came within hearing range, she heard them talking about strange things. Alison was careful not to make a single sound as she pressed her head to the ground to get a look at them under the bushes.

The black detective, who no longer had a lisp, said something about "Anne mystics." The other detective, a fat man with ruddy skin shook his head, saying something about making up another woman. The black detective shrugged, and they both got in a car and drove off.

Alison knew she had heard something she wasn't supposed to, but wasn't sure what it was. To be extra-safe, she had waited in the bushes for ten minutes after the men had left. When she came back inside, her mother was still crying.

Alison looked over the map clumsily unfolded over the dashboard, trying to find the speck of a town that was Pollensbee. A year ago (Christ, had it only been a year?), she would have punched the information into the GPS. But that was before she started researching her father's disappearance.

Before she heard the soft clicking noise whenever she answered the phone, any phone. Before she came back from classes to find that everything in her apartment had been rifled through and *almost* put back in the right place.

Four months ago, she had packed up her few relevant belongings and hit the road, following notes and clues scattered throughout the country.

At first, it had been about looking through police records and fringe scientific journals her father had published in. Then one of her leads

had taken her to Mint Creek, Alabama, where she had met Ms. Sylvia Lowmax. The old woman gave her a delicious slice of chess pie and performed a feat of magic in front of Alison's eyes.

Ms. Lowmax transformed herself into a giant bird and stared at Alison with glassy black eyes, still speaking in her thick drawl. From there, the emphasis of her search changed significantly, as she learned of the Library and the Ways and the Jailors, who held her father's mind in a prison. And of those calling themselves the Serpent's Hand, who sought to free those imprisoned by the Jailors.

Alison had been a quick study under Ms. Lowmax and others, and the summoning of the minor filth spirit into the doll had been her first major test.

After an eternity, she found Pollensbee, to the east of the equally tiny Ponce de Leon. She drove for two days, stopping only for when necessary. In a field in Iowa, she managed to lure a magpie into a cage after several hours of trying. At the Pollensbee town limits, she felt her insides twist. This was it. She was going to the Library.

It was late afternoon when Alison finally arrived. She drove slowly around the town, trying to get a feel for the place. Most of the town seemed to be parking lots with grass growing between the cracks in the asphalt in front of boarded up shops. There were discolored spots where the signs had been. Every car seemed to be made before 1990 and to have at least three rust stains or dents.

She felt her way around the city, and felt neither the precise, soulless tickings of a Jailor's heart, nor the mindless rage of the mind of a Bookburner. The filth spirit had been true.

When she parked two blocks away from the Denny's, it was twilight. She took her backpack along with the cage. Inside, the magpie croaked indignantly. The dumpster behind the restaurant stank with a fierce, high smell. Alison put the cage on the ground and crouched, crooking an arm over her mouth and nose.

With her free hand, she opened the cage. The bird stood with its head crooked, refusing to leave. She kicked the cage, and the

startled magpie awkwardly flapped its way out. The moment the bird left the cage, a hole started to open next to the dumpster. There was no color to it, only black emptiness.

Alison felt her stomach drop. This was it. It had worked. This was happening. She was going to the Library. Her legs wobbled slightly walked toward the Way. She took in one final breath and stepped into the hole.

There was a flash of light and she saw the world she had known recede from view. Her surroundings turned a brilliant white and grew in brightness until it hurt to have her eyes open.

For a moment, there was just her in the light and nothing else.

The light faded and she opened her eyes.

Between Shelves

This is a sequel to Going Out Of Book. You should probably read that first.

At first, all she saw was darkness. Then a red glow crept in. She was lying on a cold, hard surface, staring up. There was hissing, and cranking, and a rattling that sounded like a million wooden beads hitting the ground at once. Behind her was something that resembled laughter. The noise blended together into a low rumble that seemed to wrap around her and gently squeeze.

She became aware of a voice. “I told you doing this here was a good idea!” Whooping laughter followed.

The world was spinning. Her head felt like she had spent the past three days mainlining Jack Daniels, and her stomach wasn't much better. There was something wet under her nose. Touching a finger to it, she saw that it was blood.

Okay, she thought. This isn't the worst thing you've ever done. Get up.

She had begun to push herself up when a hand appeared in her vision. “Need a hand?” said the same voice as before.

She brushed the hand away. A voice in the back of her thoughts wondered why it had been red, but she ignored it. Rolling to her side, she tried to force her body up from the ground, but her arms buckled. A pair of hands grabbed her shoulders and started pulling up. She shook them away. “Fuck off,” she mumbled, more to herself than the person. Sucking in a deep breath, she wrenched her legs forward, under her body, then pushed up. She rose to a squat. Gritting her teeth, she forced herself to stand. Her legs wobbled, but she stayed up.

Wiping the rest of the blood from her nose, she began to examine

her surroundings. She'd been lying on a circular stone platform, about a foot off of a green carpet. The room was massive- the ceiling wasn't visible, and the walls looked hundreds of feet off. Around her, two dozen people were gathered around three grills, talking, laughing, clutching cans of beer. At least, some of them were people. There was something that looked like a shark with legs devouring a large hamburger. Next to it, a dog-sized mass of squirming tentacles worked a grill. They were both conversing with what looked like a ten-foot tall man made of copper, brass, and gold.

She turned. Behind her was another man, his skin lobster-red, eyes pure blue. He was dressed in a patched up leather jacket, jeans, and a Black Flag t-shirt. As far as she could see, he was completely hairless, though a thin ridge ran down the center of his head and into his jacket. A grin was spread across his face. “Hey,” he said, “I'm Colby.”

“I thought this was a Li-”

“Man, that was fucking awesome,” he said, his grin spreading wider. “You know it's been like… two months since anyone used that Way? Mitchelloth said nothing would happen if we came here, but I bet he's not feeling so smart now, is he? Hey Mitch!” he yelled, throwing an arm up in the air. “You owe me that copy of DeFronde, you fucker!” He turned his attention back to Alison. She became suddenly aware of several other… beings surrounding her.

“So, where am-”

“They didn't believe me when I said I could feel the Ways! Serves them right.” His grin widened, and he began smacking his knuckles against his palm. “You've gotta be a first timer, yeah? Yeah, if you weren't you'd know how to go through one without getting all mashed up. I can show you that, if you want. But man, lemme just say how cool that was! Most people, when they first come through, they're completely out. But you got up like it was nothing. Fucking sweet.”

“That's great, but-”

“So you'll want to meet everybody, right? It's no fun exploring the

Library on your own, especially not the first time. Unless you've already got a guide, but if you did you wouldn't have landed like that, right? But don't worry, we're always open to new people. Where are from anyway? I mean, you probably don't know the actual answer to that. But I mean, what country? Who's president? Do they have Gillferan food? You seem pretty-"

"Shut. Up," she said, almost spitting the words. "I'm just trying to ask one damn question. Why is that so hard?"

Colby blinked at her. The grin melted away. "Oh. Yeah. Oh, damn, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be rude like that." He rubbed the back of his head, looking away.

She sighed. "You said this was the Library. Last I heard, libraries had books, and I don't see any. So what's going on? Where am I?"

"We're in a side area," he said, still looking away. "You know, for other stuff. Relaxing and sleeping and, you know, stuff." He gestured towards the grill. "The actual books are in a different area."

"Alright," she said, crossing her arms. "How do I get there?"

"You don't want to stay a bit?" He looked hurt. "Come on, it'll be fun. We've got steaks, and Damon's making pasta, and there's gonna be cake and a big book reading. You'll get lost if you try to go into the stacks on your own."

"I'll be fine," she said. Looking around the room, she saw dozens of other groups of people. Some were cooking, some were sitting and reading, one had even set up a campsite. From what she could tell, less than one in ten of the beings here were human (or at least looked it). "Which way are the books?"

Colby sighed and pointed. "Can you maybe tell me what you're looking for, at least? I could probably point you in the right direction."

She thought for a moment. "I need information on the Serpent's Hand. Where they are. What they're doing. How I can find them. And anything you have about the Foundation."

Colby paled. "The Foundation? Are you out of your mind? What the

hell do you want with them?" His eyes darted around the room. He clicked his teeth together. "Man, I should have known something like that was up with you, the way you showed up. Look, I can't have anything to do with that stuff, L.S's whole group is fucking crazy…" he trailed off.

L.S. The name sounded familiar. She'd heard it before, rumors of an ever elusive figure within the Hand. She sighed. "Then why bother?" She turned to walk off.

"Excuse me," said a voice. Alison looked and saw a short, blonde woman approaching. "I heard you expressing you interest in the Hand?"

"Can you help me get to them?" said Alison.

"I can do better than that," said the woman, smiling. "I'm a member. I can answer any questions you might have. But first, let's get a burger."

The burgers weren't terrible, for something cooked by an alien tentacle monster. Juicy and well-seasoned, with just the right amount of cheese. Alison ate it quickly, taking stock of the beings around her as she did. She'd seen a few non-humans in her travels: the waste spirit, aliens captured in a Foundation facility, a demon summoned when a spell backfired, but nothing like these, and never so many. There was something that looked like a miniature animate tree, a man with wings that shone in the light, a woman whose face always seemed to be hidden in shadow.

There were talking animals, and a robot that looked like it had come out of an Asimov novel. Only a few meters from her, a mass of floating bubbles was talking to a woman with a birdcage on her head (complete with parakeet). From what she could tell, they were discussing the physics behind divine intervention. There were a few humans too, but not many. She wasn't sure what she had expected coming here, but it hadn't been this.

The blonde woman walked up. She had a plate with three burgers, a pile of fries, and a large can of beer. At least, Alison was pretty sure it was beer. The label didn't seem to be in English, or any other

human language she'd seen.

“Alright,” said the woman. “First thing's first, my name's Meredith. You are?”

“Alison,” she said.

“Nice name,” said the woman, taking a large sip of beer. “So, Alison, what do you want with us? Not often someone just shows up on our doorstep like this.”

Alison thought about this. She didn't know this woman. For all that she knew, Meredith was completely lying about being a member of the Hand. She could be a plant, she could be an angry spirit, she could be a buddy looking to avenge Diligem. “I'm looking for a friend. He vanished a few months ago, but before he did, he was talking about you guys, and coming here.”

Meredith nodded. “And you think the Foundation might have something to do with him going missing, right?” She took another swig of beer, then crumpled up the can and placed it by her feet.

“He thought they were watching him. He was… different, and said they would come after him for it. The night before he disappeared, he called me to say he needed to leave as soon as possible. That was the last I heard of him.” It wasn't a great lie, but it would work. Probably. At the least it would hold up until she decided if it was alright to tell the truth.

Meredith nodded. “What was his name? We get a lot of people looking for refuge.”

Alison bit her lip. “Jonathan Bell. He had black hair, green eyes, was about this tall,” she motioned with her hand, “and always looked real nervous.”

“I can't say I've seen him, sorry,” said Meredith. “Though there's dozens of groups of us around the Library. It's entirely possible he's with one of them.” She took a bite of cheeseburger and thought as she chewed. “But you're doing more than just looking for him.”

Alison started. “What do you mean?”

“If you were just looking for your friend, you wouldn't need information on the Foundation,” said Meredith, staring into Alison's eyes. There was something disconcerting about her glare. Alison fought back the urge to squirm. “You're planning something against them. Or at least, you want to.”

“It's not like that,” said Alison.

“Look,” said Meredith. “Why you're here is not my business. If you want it private, fine, it's private. But moving against the Foundation is different. They're dangerous, and that's not something you hear often around here. If you're in their way, you're finished. Three of my friends have been killed by them. Two more were captured, and there's absolutely nothing I could do about it. So, are you sure you're up to making an enemy of them?”

Alison wasn't sure what to say at first. Of course she was. That's what she'd come all this way for. She just hadn't expected it to be put so bluntly. “I am.”

Meredith smiled. It wasn't a cheerful expression. “We'll see.”

After they ate, Meredith took Alison to another room, filled with beds. “There are things I have to take care of,” she said. “It should take a week or so. In the meantime, take a look around the place. Explore the Library, see what you find. Just be careful where you go.”

That had been three days ago. Since then, Alison had spent most of her time wandering the stacks. She'd kept to herself, mostly, and the few times someone had tried to approach her she'd been able to brush them off.

Searching the stacks had yielded little information about the Hand or Foundation. The organization behind the shelves, if there was one, was completely beyond her. Books were arranged with no regards to content, condition, author, publication date, even language. A copy of “The Complete Harper Lee” (over a thousand pages long and with text almost too small to read) would be right next to a user manual for a 1959 Austin Mini. It was maddening.

After the first two days of searching, all she'd manage to scrounge

up was a book of poetry, “Oh, That Spiteful Snake”. Calling what was inside “information” would have been like calling Goodnight Moon an epic. Questioning the people she lived with didn't give her much else. Most of them preferred to be left alone to their reading. The few who cared to answer did so in the vaguest possible terms. Still, it wasn't a total loss. Even if the books weren't what she was looking for, they were fascinating, and by the third day she had developed a hefty stack of reading material.

It was the evening (according to her watch) of the third day. The last time she'd seen another person had been seven hours ago. The flow of people around the Library, she'd noticed, was similar to people grouping around a coastline. Most tended to stay near where resources were plentiful, by the common areas and living halls. Go even a few hundred meters deeper “inland", and the amount of people quartered. Go a few hundred more, and you'd only find one or two people browsing each shelf. A kilometer or more, and you would be searching alone. She'd wandered at least five.

Which was why she was so shocked to see someone else. She turned the corner to a shelf (REMUNERATION, read a small gold placard on the side. They all had signs like that. As far as she could tell, it was irrelevant to anything) and the woman was standing at the end, reading a book. She was short, and blonde, wearing a long black coat, and green fleece cap. Anything else was too far away to see.

Curious as the sight was, Alison ignored her. She walked down the aisle, running a finger across spines, pulling out and flipping through any books that looked useful. None were. A few seemed interesting at least. She slipped those into her bag.

Her finger stopped when she felt something warm. It was resting on the spine of a thin, white book with no text. As she pressed her finger to it, it pulsed, like a heartbeat, and began to warm. Curious. This was the first thing of its kind she'd seen here. She pulled it from the bookshelves, and it squirmed in her palm. At least, it felt like it did. The book itself didn't move. The cover felt like it was made of leather, and seemed heavier than it should have. In gold emboss, a complicated tetragram had been placed on the front cover. She flipped it open.

Sand erupted from the pages, slamming into her stomach. The world spun around her as she was launched into the air, and came slamming back down into the ground. The book spun out of her hands, landing at the other ends of the shelves. A geyser of sand spewed from the pages, spreading across the floor. She lay in a small pile of the stuff.

Her head was pounding. A trickle of blood ran down her forehead. She wiped it away and tried to stand, but her foot caught on something, and she fell back. Something tightened around her ankle. Sand covered her foot, creeping up across her leg. She tried to tear it away, but the sand clamped down.

There was a hissing noise. The sand around her was beginning to vibrate. It rattled against her, grains leaping into the air, showering her. A trail of it was snaking across the floor, moving across the carpet from her to the book like a worm. The hissing grew louder. It almost sounded like a voice.

Sand wrapped around her arms and other leg. The pile underneath her was shifting, spreading out around her. The edges rose in the corner of her vision. They seemed to tower over her, like a tidal wave of dust. The hissing was even louder now, a screaming in her ear. Piercing through it was a voice. I wondered how long it would be until you came. It sounded like someone speaking through an avalanche. How long you would be able to deny your sin. Does it pain you, Mikhal, to remember what you have done to me? I hope it did.

The sand rushed down towards her. She sucked in a breath of air and began to count seconds. The wave crashed into her. Soon, she was cocooned in it. I see her face in my mind every day. The way it looked when she realized you had left, when she knew you had damned us. You couldn't even stay to see that. You wouldn't even look us in the face when you seal our fate. Coward. The sand was tightening around her. Already, she could feel herself beginning to give, to buckle under the pressure. It was hard to think of anything past the pain, but she forced herself to think, to keep counting time.

They took her from me. I never knew her final fate. I hope they killed her quickly. I don't know how long they kept me alive. I don't

remember anything but the pain, and hoping that you would return. But you never did.

Thirty seconds. She released her breath, bringing the words to her mind. Nothing happened. Her stomach sank. Had it failed? Had her timing been off? She'd only cast this spell a few times before. Had it-

A wave of wind burst from her, ripping the sand away. She pushed herself to her feet as it began reforming. A whip of sand lashed at her, but she rolled out of the way. As she did, she saw the woman from before, standing at the end of the shelves, only a few meters from the book. Her arms were crossed, and she wasn't moving.

“Hey!” yelled Alison, “Help! Close the damn book!”

The woman didn't move. Another bludgeon of sand rushed at Alison. She ducked under and sprinted towards the book. The woman didn't move.

Something slammed into Alison's foot, sending her tumbling to the ground. As soon as she hit the floor, sand wrapped around her arm. It threw her up, pinning her to the wall. More ropes of sand sprouted from the ground, moving towards her. The woman was nowhere to be seen.

Alison tried to wrench her arm away, but the sand gripped it too tight. Another tendril collided with her leg. She kicked at it. Her feet hit the side of the sand and burst through. It reformed in seconds. Still, it was better than nothing. With her free hand, she groped at the shelves behind her. Her fingers wrapped around a thick volume, and she ripped it from the shelf, swinging it at the sand holding her arm. It sliced through and she fell, pinned to the shelf only by her foot, hanging upside down.

She wound up and threw the book as hard as she could. It hurtled through the sand, and she crumpled to the ground. There was a crunch, and pain shot through her side, but she ignored it. Already, she could see the sand reforming and rushing towards her.

Clutching her arm, she sprinted forward. Tendrils of sand batted at her legs, but she danced around them. She could hear the voice

behind her, screaming. You dare? it cried. You dare try to flee? To run from this fate, when we could not? Turn around, coward, and face me with some dignity. She ignored it. Sand smacked into her back. She stumbled, but kept running.

The book only a few meters from her. She dove, arm outstretched. As she did, the fountain of sand sprouting from it turned and slammed into her shoulder. She tumbled down. The stream of sand twisted in the air, rocketing towards her. She pushed herself forward, rolling under it. Reaching an arm out, she snatched the cover of the book and threw it shut.

The voice stopped mid-sentence. The sand fell to floor. The Library became quiet. Panting, she rose to her feet. The world seemed to spinning around her. There was a buzzing noise in her ear, and her vision was blurry. Her knees buckled. She reached out and steadied herself against the shelf before she could fall any further.

It was thirty minutes before she could stop shaking and begin walking back to the common areas.

Meredith was sitting by her bed, reading a book. She looked up as Alison limped near. “Well,” she said, “don't you look like a woman who's just had an experience?”

Alison grunted a reply and collapsed onto the bed. “What the hell was that?” she managed to say after several minutes.

“What was what?” said Meredith.

Alison sighed. “What do you want?”

Meredith stood and stretched. “So, I've talked to some people. They'd be interested in meeting you.”

Just like that, the pain disappeared. Alison sat up. “What? Who? When?”

“Now, if you're up to it,” said Meredith.

Alison nodded.

“Follow me,” said Meredith. They began walking, out of the common area and into the Library. A few people stared at Alison, bruised and limping, but she ignored them. They wound through the shelves, moving back and forth between them until she'd lost any idea of where they were. Then they kept walking. Every time she tried to question where they were going, she was met with silence.

It was 45 minutes before they stopped, in a shelf that look like every other (MENDACITY, read the plaque on the side). Meredith knelt down and rapped against the rug three times. She stood, took five steps back, and stomped twice. Then she took four steps to the left and stomped another six times.

A hole appeared in the floor. It didn't slide open, or open like a door. It just appeared, as if it had always been there. Leaning against the side was a ladder. The floor below was made of wood, and well lit. Meredith began climbing down. Alison followed.

They descended into a short corridor. At the end was a red door. Lining the roof were several fluorescent lights. On the sides were paintings depicting a variety of scenes, from what looked like the birth of Christ to a man floating in space.

“The Hand isn't what you're looking for,” said Meredith. The first thing she'd said since they left. “Most of it would be useless to you. They're not a bad group, but they're not up to going against something like the Foundation. They still hide from them, whisper in secret, use their nonsense names. They're scholars, and that has its place.”

Meredith opened the door and motioned for Alison to enter. “But we're the fighters.”

Inside was a large room, lined with chairs, pillows, and bookshelves. In the center was a fireplace. A flame flickered, the only source of light, casting twisting shadows across the walls. It smiled like old books and expensive liquor. The only other person, kneeling by the fire, was the woman in the green cap.

“What the hell!” said Alison. She looked from Meredith to the woman. “Who the fuck is this?”

Meredith didn't say anything.

“Of course,” said Alison. “Now we're playing this game. Lovely.”

The woman smiled. “I said almost the exact same thing.”

Alison scowled and stepped towards her. “Did you? Is that supposed to be some grand, revealing comment? Should I fall to my knees and forgive you for leaving me to fucking die?”

“I wouldn't have let that happen,” said the woman. She stared into the fire. “But if I'd had to step in, we wouldn't be talking now.”

“What a shame that would be,” said Alison. “I'd suggest you start saying something meaningful.”

The woman stood. “It's not often I meet someone like this. But it's not often someone like you comes to us either. I'm sorry that things went the way they did back there, but you were never in any real danger.” She stared into Alison's eyes. Alison looked away. Something about her gaze felt wrong. “You're lucky. L.S doesn't often accept people so soon. My name is Amanda. I'd like to welcome you to the Serpent's Tooth.”

Queen's Gambit

On the night of the winter solstice, if the stars are right, Ulllllllu the Warlock emerges from his cave and curses the moon. Life and death become inverted in a twisted exhibition of the decadent souls who would possess the audacity of character to appear. Naturally the Blood Moon Ball is the social event of the season.

Admirers gathered in the corner of the withering heath, like offal sloshing down the sloughs of an abattoir, with the same sickening insistence and helpless gravitation: mistresses of the damned, keepers of the crypt, debutantes of the unhallowed alike, hanging as would a victim from a meathook in the back of that same abattoir upon every word of Lorenzo, the captivating temptster in the buccaneer shirt, the youngest Dreadlord anti-anointed in undead generations (which are very long indeed).

Lorenzo paid the entourage little notice, for he was fascinated by his charming conversation partner, the death blossom in the crushed-velvet gown. He was wrapped around her like a toe tag. The name on that toe tag:

The Black Queen.

The guests had asked her, following her introduction: The Black Queen of the Carcass Altar, did you say? The Black Queen of the Trifold Trepanation? The Black Queen of the Trembling Coffins, perhaps?

Simply The Black Queen, she had said, and all in attendance were breathless. Many of the breathless were quite impressed, as well.

"That's such a coincidence," the Black Queen laughed. "I grew up in the desert, too! Of course, Arizona was much more boring. We had tumble*weeds*, for one, instead of tumbleflesh."

As Lorenzo rambled on about his childhood and the various

muscular growths therein, the Black Queen tongued awkwardly at her fangs. She reminded herself that the vampirism would fade when she left the light of the blood moon. It was essentially just a masquerade ball, something she had experienced in Venice, LA, and Ibiza. Admittedly, it was a masquerade ball that murders your soul, but so does LA and that turned out alright.

A waiter approached with a bottle and offered the Black Queen a glass.

"No, thank you. I don't drink…" she said, ready to milk the situation for all the fun she could get from it, "…*wine*."

"This is blood," said the waiter.

"…Oh. Then by all means."

The Black Queen turned to Lorenzo. "So, do we have an agreement?"

"You're a shrewd negotiator, my little amanita." Lorenzo took a sip. "You provide to me this Grimoire of Gran Noir, and I promise to bring forth the fullness of its necromantic power in an attack on the Foundation at the prescribed day and hour. I will find the information you need, and I will tear it from their chest like a beating heart."

"Horrorshow."

"Shall we make this a blood oath?"

"I don't see why not."

They clinked glasses.

"I hope you'll understand if I can't stay to dance, Lorenzo."

"Black Queen, you should know better." Lorenzo was so mock-sad that he was almost pouting. It was subtler than it sounds, since he was rather pouty by default. "All who enter here abandon hope."

"Then just live with it."

"Well—"

"You know what I mean." With a smile, she threw on her cloak, dyed as is the custom among the Chaos Insurgents in the blood of Catholics.[1] She picked up a present that had been granted by a gracious infernal lich lord, slid through the crowd, found a quiet place, and opened a Way.

She realized, as she stepped through, that part of her actually did wish she could linger for a while. Lorenzo was smarter than he looked, and he was a pleasant person, if you didn't mind that his eyeballs were spiders.

Alison found a seat in the private chamber of the Serpent's Fang and untensed herself. A week had passed since she'd been initiated into an inner echelon of the Hand. The Serpent's Fang was a tight circle of those who had earned the trust of L.S.

In an organization which made its mission the spread of knowledge to all those who honestly seek it, L.S. was one of the few true secrets that remained. No record existed of witnessing L.S., or speaking to them, or hearing such information secondhand. (Lying, in the Hand, is an even greater taboo than hiding information.)

The Serpent's Fang received its information from L.S. indirectly: letters that fade with the sunset, whispers of the wind, the subtle wisdom of synchronicity. Alison had been given a mission by letter: go to the Blood Moon Ball and arrange the exchange of a spellbook with a Dreadlord. This she had accomplished.

The letter had an inscription upon it: "Around and back, in the wind and the rain." Alison had asked what it meant; Amanda, her 'handler' of sorts, told her that it was an invocation of protection, and any of the Fang who was in danger could recite it, and harm would just tumble around them. It was a bit of good luck that one could keep in one's pocket. Alison didn't share her initial thought, which was that she didn't know that that little nursery rhyme she liked as a kid was from something. She always thought her dad had made it up.

Now that the musk of the grave had lifted, Alison felt comfortable

opening the gift from her pyroclastic admirer. The box was soot-black and felt like the material those astronaut blankets were made from. She pulled off the bow and lifted the lid. A dim orange glow issued forth, and a grumbling.

Alison felt warmth from deep inside the box. It grew too hot for her to hold near her face, so she drew it back. The source of the light and sound and heat was an amorphous slimy shape that began to shift within the box. It raised up and began to slither out. Alison dropped the box before the glowing-hot tendril scorched her hand.

The mass that was her present oozed forth, dripping molten matter. The grumbling grew louder, and Alison could discern words.

"canfuckrightoffandsocanhissisteranddon'tgetmestartedonzeushe'ssuchasill horsingaroundwithmortalslutsandImeanliteralhorsing"

Alison picked up the box before it was melted in the creature's path. There was a label inside. "Enjoy the blasphemy slug! Happy Holidays!"

"Who would give this to someone!?" The blasphemy slug left a charred path of bubbling rock as it scaled the door. So much for the means of exit.

Alison surveyed her options. The docents would eventually dispose of the blasphemy slug in the usual manner, whatever that might be. After all, there was no way that the Library wouldn't have a procedure for fire elementals who stumble inside. What mattered, in the meantime, was personal safety. So Alison used the tool at her immediate disposal.

"Around and back, in the wind and the rain…" Alison felt invisible wards surround her. She'd warded herself in ritual settings before, but those were bars of stone, and these were bars of steel. Alison thought of the last time she had felt this safe. She'd been a child, playing with her toy steam engine, reciting that little rhyme…

"…clickety-clack go the wheels on the train." Without thinking about it, she muttered the rest of the couplet. Everything spun without moving until Alison was somewhere else.

The chamber had been precision-engineered. It had no doors or windows leading out, but a soft breeze flowed in, apparently through a fine golden mesh. The air smelled of fresh sheets and baking bread, although no linens could be— no, wait, there was a bedroom hidden on the other side of a closet. And the bread in the box had clearly been there for a while. Still, the chamber had been precision-engineered to feel like home.

Alison explored. There was a lighted mirror above a set of drawers, a hat rack, a lot of shelves. Alison opened a cupboard to find various tools, neatly arranged, each one labeled. And they were the serious, can't-fall-into-the-wrong-hands sort of tools. It was more than a little disconcerting to see relics of fallen god-kings alphebetized in a row like spices.

Alison scanned the shelves and picked up something that seemed like it would come in handy. She glanced at the hat rack. An arrow hung on the wall that pointed to it, so clearly it was important. It held a variety of different styles of headwear hung from it. Alison checked a porkpie hat and found an inscription. "The Garden is the Serpent's place." She put it on and checked the mirror.

A stranger looked back at her. Alison was startled and afraid she was being watched, so she tossed the hat away, then looked back up and saw a normal mirror. Alison added two and two.

She closely examined how her features looked in the hat. Her nose was indistinct, her mouth was… a mouth, her eyes could be best described as… there. Yes, this would come in handy. Alison spoke the magic words again. Success—she was back where she'd left, and it seemed like no time had passed. The slug hadn't changed positions, and the wooden door was still mostly a door.

Alison grasped the object she'd retrieved from the secret room. It was a doll made from a thick, translucent, tan material, sort of like rice paper. The label had called it "My First Hungry Ghost". It taught kids about mythology and fed upon their lifeforce for endless fun. She pulled the string and set it on the ground.

The doll began a jerking mechanical walk toward the blasphemy

slug. A canned recording played. "Give me a big hug!" As it talked, the toy's gaping mouth moved up and down, and its stringy neck craned forward and back.

The hungry ghost doll climbed up the door's paneling toward the slug.

"andifIevergotmyhandsonaresIseriouslythinkIcouldtakehimhe'ssofuckingoveseriousnessthoughhecansuckmyfiery"

"Give me a big hug!" My First Hungry Ghost latched onto the blasphemy slug. The lever controlling its mouth went into spasm as the slug's light dimmed… and finally went out, with a meager

"andfuckalltheirmotherstoooo"

A face with ten arms cracked the door open and swept away the formerly-heretical pile of ash. It pulled something from somewhere and sprayed a cooling jet of air onto the hungry ghost doll, which itself was glowing with heat from the neck up. Then it withdrew with utmost discretion.

Now, Alison was back where she was two realtime minutes ago — trying to relax and take inventory of the situation on a comfortable chair. The sole difference was that she'd gotten a hat, a toy, and an escape device, and traded away her party favor and the condition of the room. She'd made worse bargains before.

In a moment of consideration, Alison decided she should take back the borrowed artifact. It had lost all its stored energy, and a gap in one's collection is usually the easiest possible thing to notice. So she vanished into the secret chamber once more.

Alison tucked My Little Hungry Ghost back into its resting spot. The hat… she hesitated. There were six to eight hats here, all near as identical, except for color and shape and probably function, she wasn't going to check. How would the owner miss one?

The owner. Alison had a guess who the room belonged to, but she needed confirmation. So she rooted in drawers a bit until she found it, underneath a desk. Sunset paper. Blank. Watermarked with a

little motto and the initials L.S.

Alison was going to like it here.

There's a major axiom in the ways of magicians (one might call it a gilded rule) which covers an endless variety of situations and which, if properly understood, is a major revelation about the nature of magic itself. That rule is: fake it 'til you make it.

Normally, the bounds of this concept stop, clearly marked, at the border between the magical community at large and the Serpent's Hand, because self-deception is still deception. Honest and communicative is the way of the Hand.

But L.S. was no ordinary Hand member, were they? The rules didn't seem to quite apply to them. And Alison had the papers, the room, the key to the room… the power and secrecy of L.S., in short. All she had to do was use them, and she would *become* L.S., with all the privileges thereof. Alison decided it was the only responsible thing to do.

A missive went out from L.S. to a certain scribe, requesting that certain books be located and excerpts transcribed. Another reached a Foundation informant, requesting containment documents from a certain site. Both specified the same delivery point in the Library. Then a third went to a telepath favored by L.S., asking that the right information reach the right entities before the deadline. Thus it was ensured that the Armed Containment Area would face a battle on two fronts: from the empowered Insurgents, and from its enlightened captives.

Alison had always been running, redirecting force in one direction or another from the front lines. The Black Queen went all over the board. Now she had entire cells of the Serpent's Hand ready to fulfill her requests. It did cross her mind, as L.S., that the title wasn't hers until a week ago, and that with that L.S.'s plans about to come to fruition, that that L.S. would not be gone for much longer. But it didn't fully register with her until the time came.

Alison spoke the incantation and appeared in the L.S. room. She

brushed past the attendant and set to work on a scrying spell, so that she could watch the events unfold. But Alison realized, to her dismay, that she had forgotten the powdered silver. So she opened cupboard after cupboard, hoping some would be around.

"Second shelf, third from the right," said the attendant, in a way that made Alison realize that the room didn't have an attendant.

"I knew this day would come." Alison began to mix her ingredients differently: the scrying spell would become a sending spell. "I need this, and I hope you understand."

"I do," said the attendant. "I understand better than you could know."

"Great, so you won't mind if I do this." Alison tossed the dust in an arc. The breeze blew it to the side, and a mirror was sent reeling into the Attic Dimensions.

"Was I ever this young?" The stranger removed her cap, and her face came into view. It was the same experience Alison had found looking into the mirror wearing her cap, except that the mirror had been teleported beyond the reach of thought or gravity, so this was clearly something else. "You're a driven woman. You're *always* a driven woman. Did you think that here, in the realm of those dissatisfied with the knowledge of a single universe, you wouldn't run into yourself sooner or later?

"No," said the other Alison, "and neither am I. This has all been built by us, for each other, with signs only we would see. I knew you'd find a way in."

"There's so much more for you to learn, Little Sister."

Footnotes
1. Don't worry, no Catholics were harmed. The CI has an endless fountain of the stuff.

Castling By Hand

A nonsensical amount of distance away from home, across an infinifold interuniversal membrane, in an n1-deviated Earth where a series of assassinations had torn apart the United States in bloody revolution, the Foundation still stood. The Foundation still endured. Site 19 still stood in defiance of all sociopolitical and architectural logic. The fluorescent light in the Floor 2 break room still flickered and buzzed.

It would drive the Black Queen mad, if that idea still had any meaning to her.

The Black Queen had seen that light when she was here last, back in her own Earth. Julia Bitterfield had seen it, too. In fact, Dr. Bitterfield may have passed out to that buzzing, audible through the door to the supply closet, where the Black Queen had administered the taserspike.

A more careful Black Queen would have lurked for her target outside of the facility, instead of infiltrating on memory of another timeline. A less cavalier Black Queen might have trusted only her own equipment to disable the target instead of being lured by the charms of the taserspike, a universe-native innovation, a precision instrument which incapacitated for hours if you targeted the proper anatomical locations. This Black Queen was none such Black Queens, and she wore the badge to prove it. Site 19, Level 3 Access, Julia Bitterfield, Engineering.

She took Julia's coat and glasses as well. The unconscious body would be discovered before long (a wiser Black Queen wouldn't have, and so on) but it pleased her to have a time constraint. It kept her focused.

The Black Queen, wearing Julia as she was, took a shuttle cart into the engineering wing. The antiseptic smell of the facility was tinged with ozone and copper. Scent memory… and then she thought of

the sleeping body of Miss Bitterfield, soon enough to recognize the door she needed.

There was one researcher inside the lab. He was flabby and bald, and his mouth had settled into a slight scowl more out of gravity than any internal factors.

The Black Queen spoke. "Doctor Gears?"

The man she addressed turned around. "Yes?"

"I need you to come with me."

"Show me the form, researcher. I can't leave this project unattended without the express orders of the Site Director."

The Black Queen knew this would be the response. There would be a problem if it hadn't been. She approached him, and took hold of something in her pocket. Then she reached an arm around to draw him close. The other hand administered the taserspike.

"Sorry, father." She hefted him over her shoulder. "I didn't give myself time to convince you."

The Black Queen was fiddling with a space heater when the father Gears stirred into awareness. "What did you just do?"

"I've hidden us in the city." The Black Queen was examining the dome-shaped apparatus, another work of native design. "Getting out wasn't easy. My wall-slider implant doesn't accept passengers, and the shuttle cart didn't last long beyond the security gate. Too many bullet holes. I carried you the rest of the way."

"I don't understand this." Doctor Gears glanced toward the window; the tattered blinds were drawn, but he could tell that it was evening.

"We're hidden in this apartment because I thought it'd be relatively difficult to find us. Normally we'd be trapped if the task force did close in on our location, but I have something to deal with that." The Black Queen had figured out that the packs of what looked like glow-sticks were disposable batteries. She snapped the tab on one and

slid it into the flat side of the plastic dome.

"You seem to be deliberately missing the point. I'm asking about your motive."

The Black Queen flipped the dome over and laid it onto the bare floor. Then, for the first time since he woke, she looked up from it toward her captive. "I'm Doctor Gears's… I'm your daughter."

"No, you aren't."

"How do…" The Black Queen filed that question away. "I spent years looking for my father. And when I found him, he was… lost to me. Lost forever. And that loss snapped me back to my senses. I realized I had no connection to the world anymore. So… I left." She gave a sweep of her hand to add emphasis to this statement. "I found this Earth. I saw that this Earth had a Foundation, so it must have you." She pressed a switch on the dome. Internal coils began to glow orange; warmth spread out into the room. "I've earned a second chance."

Doctor Gears was silent for a moment. Then he adjusted his glasses. "Tell me more."

They spoke together after that. The conversation might have lasted an hour; the Black Queen didn't keep time. He asked her to describe the method by which she had traveled from one universe to another. But the Black Queen was more concerned with describing her childhood with an analogue of him: details of sights and sounds and emotions. She wanted to find some common ground between her father and this one. She evaluated this man that shared her father's design, checking for authenticity.

Ignoring his logistical questions, she began to ask about the doctor's life. He provided answers: his life was much like the life of her father's, except where the deviations in history bent his trajectory here and there. He had a daughter, but he hadn't seen her since he began work for the Foundation. He didn't know whether or not she was alive. The matter hadn't crossed his mind in years.

He began to ask her about herself in the present, and she gave up

this information. She told him of the work she had done in wresting various items of great value and power from the Foundation after what they had done to her father. Some of these she had used as leverage to gain connections and influence; some of these she had bartered away to a private firm in exchange for passage on a secret road leading out from the world; some of these she had made into parts of her, so that she would be sure to survive the journey. He followed along carefully. The Black Queen felt like a mechanism being studied. Maybe that was his version of affection now.

After all this was shared between them, Doctor Gears removed his glasses (this one wore glasses, it turned out) and rubbed his eyes, as if they were strained from… hours? with only the heater as a light source.

The Black Queen noticed. "You're tired, aren't you?"

"Yes, I suppose so. When was the last time you ate?"

"It's been… since morning, actually." The Black Queen was astonished to wonder if he was thinking about her needs. "I think there was a vending machine downstairs. It probably hasn't been stocked in six years, but maybe there's something in it that's lasted that long. I can check…"

"That sounds like a good idea."

The Black Queen took his hand to pull him up to a standing position. She handcuffed him to a pipe, disappointed in herself for forgetting to do so before now. Then she slid through the door.

From the hall, she surveyed the streets in front of and behind the apartment building. She saw nothing resembling a threat—and her eyes had a large field of view. So she descended.

Something about the night's events had generated a crawling sensation at the back of her neck. The strangeness of it bothered her while she crossed the stairs. Eventually she realized it was a neurological condition she'd thought had subsided long ago: a conscience. This wasn't her father, as congruent as he might be. Could she let him pass as her father? And what of his daughter?

Somewhere there was a woman like her, perhaps searching for this man for the same reasons.

Or perhaps her body had been burned away after elimination by whatever remains of the Occult Coalition. Who could say?

The Black Queen surveyed the provisions available. It seemed that potato chips had never occurred to this society, for all their wartime advances; the grimy vending machine was stocked with packets of roasted, dried seaweed in an assortment of flavors. The Black Queen wrapped her hand in the sack she'd taken along. Then she punched through the glass and filled the bag with packets.

There was a man with her father's face and voice up there waiting for her. Wasn't that what she tore two Foundations open to find? He didn't raise her, but… he was so close to the one who did. She could open the pathway and take them to a world less beaten-up than this one where nobody could find them. It would be a fresh start.

All she had to do was call him "dad".

The Black Queen entered the abandoned apartment once again. Doctor Gears hadn't moved from where she'd placed him. "I brought dinner."

"I can't eat like this."

The Black Queen set the preserved snacks on the floor and unfastened his handcuffs. His arms fell to his sides. "Help yourself to dinner." She pulled out a packet of sea-salt roasted kelp, then looked back up to him.

There was a momentary silence. Gears had that scrutinizing glare again. The Black Queen suspected that he had thought the same things she had, when she'd left him alone.

Then he spoke. "Actually, could you come here for a second?" Doctor Gears stretched out an arm. "I need to do this right now, if you'll comply." It was such an awkward way to ask for an embrace.

The Black Queen hesitated. The crawling sensation on her neck had

been replaced with a much more familiar feeling: the jolt of her danger instinct. This felt all wrong.

The doctor watched her halt, and slowly lowered his arm. "Perhaps later, then."

The guilt came back again. The Black Queen saw him reaching out, and then saw herself reacting to the intensity of it. She was giving in to fear. No Black Queen could ever let herself give into fear. So she approached him.

He carefully wrapped an arm around her. For one quiet moment, it was everything that she had expected it to be, and everything she had worked for.

Gears's taserspike dug into the base of her spinal cord. He only released the grip when she crumpled on the ground. The air smelled of ozone and burnt plastic. Gears looked upward at an indicator on his lenses. "Glasses, cease recording." The indicator changed from red to green.

It was eleven minutes and fifteen seconds, by Gears's count, between the subdual and the arrival of the task force. The door was open, the subject still unresponsive. They collected her in a field chamber as Gears looked on. An agent asked if he was alright; Gears said she'd never hurt him. All he had to do was distract her long enough to make the call without interference.

The post-recovery processes were longer and handled by more personnel than was necessary, so the matter was now out of the doctor's hands. Even so, as he watched them cart the subject away, the containment procedures began to form in his mind for SCP-AATR, or informally, The Extrauniversal Woman.

House Of Gears, Part One

A valuable heuristic to follow when working in a science lab is this: for each piece of equipment worth more than twenty dollars, assume that, at some point, it will fail. To summarize for the layman, there are machines in my workspace that will become drastically misaligned if a researcher sneezes within a yard of them. The Foundation has built redundancies upon redundancies so that one part of the facility can malfunction without affecting the system. Each of the individual machines, eventually, will break.

I was fixing an uncooperative laser printer on the day I was abducted. I can picture the exact specifications of the part I was soldering when I heard conflict break out behind the blast doors of the containment chamber. Several M4s discharged, which are standard issue for this sector's guards, but I heard no other gunfire. This caused me to rule out several potential attackers. I considered the most probable containment breaches, and in the absence of roaring vocalizations, clanging metal, or screams in proto-Akkadian, dismissed them. Judgment: situation unclear. Response: suspend the current task, observe.

Something collided loudly with the wall above. The object traveled forward until it was directly above me. A humanoid body passed down through the ceiling, accompanied by a long note, descending in pitch, played on a slide whistle.

The intruder wore an indigo suit made of a ribbed material which pulsated at a frequency of approximately 100 beats per minute. Save for her eyes (in my time here, I have learned her gender), which were beneath a set of goggles, the garment covered her face completely. She withdrew the mask by pressing against it with the fingertips of her left hand. I determined that she was human, superficially.

This woman reached between her suit's abdominal ribbing with both

hands. Each appeared to open into a void where her body should have been visible. On the right, she stored the whistle and withdrew a pistol of unfamiliar design. On the left, she produced an object and told me to describe it.

I took the item from her to gauge its weight and examine it on all sides. Save for one moving part, it was carved from a single piece of low-density wood, possibly balsa. A small extra piece has been fasted to one end with a wooden bolt in a way that allowed the part to spin freely on an axis. The body was coated in red acrylic paint, applied inconsistently; it chipped with little resistance against my fingernail. I began with the most basic description of the object: it was a toy plane.

This summary caused her extreme displeasure. Grasping for a solution, I began to relay the other details, but she interrupted me before I could finish. *Do you remember this*? I considered that this woman had disabled a fire team in order to deliver this question, so I affected a reassuring tone. I explained to her that I have use of what is colloquially known as a "photographic memory". If I had encountered this object at any point in my life, I would know so. Even after amnestic usage prevented me from recalling it of my own free will, the sight of it would almost certainly evoke at least a vague sense of recognition.

At this point, the woman nodded. Although I am not a psychiatrist, and the assigned tasks of my job for the Foundation made any degree of human interaction optional, I had a reputation among my coworkers for the ability to succinctly and dispassionately convey information. Too often was I pulled away by staff who promised favors in exchange for delivering bad news: a family death, an anomalous disease, various other occupational hazards. As a result, I have seen, at least a dozen times, the particular sort of nod that the woman employed at that moment.

The woman put away the toy and restrained me with a pair of handcuffs. I asked her who she was, and what her intentions were. She told me to call her Alison, and that she planned on permanently removing me from the Foundation. I would not be harmed, she explained, but I would never be able to return. I told her that my test subject wouldn't like that.

Up until this point, Alison was either unaware or indifferent to the nature of the containment chamber into which she had forced herself. Outside the room, a station contained a reference document for containment procedure, a laser printer, and a set of reinforced suits and flamethrowers, available in case the test subject becomes uncooperative.

The containment chamber itself appears to be featureless; in fact, each wall is lined with roughly one dozen layers of industrial-grade paper, to facilitate the free movement of its occupant. The entity is contained within the paper, and can manipulate it to a degree.

Upon my mention of a test subject, Alison spun around and saw the entity in action behind her. It superficially appeared to be a life-sized ink drawing of an angry young woman. Pieces of the paper surface tore away and folded together at a rate of dozens of folds per second. In an imitation of the intruder's passing intangibly down through the ceiling, SCP Object Zulu Hotel Echo emerged from the wall in a humanoid body and advanced towards us.

My captor fired her pistol. The bullets passed through Zulu Hotel Echo without effect. Alison crouched, pulled a lever on the gun, and discharged beams that tore large cavities into Zulu Hotel Echo's body. The paper humanoid pulled material up from the floor to repair them. Then it lunged at Alison.

The two of them tumbled across the floor. Zulu Hotel Echo's claws tore into Alison, and Alison ripped away parts of her assailant as quickly as it could produce them. Alison pinned Zulu Hotel Echo to the floor, adjusted her pistol, and applied a jet of fire point-blank to the entity's head.

The paper body convulsed and folded into itself in an attempt to smother the flames while Alison rolled away and surveyed her injuries. Numerous cuts covered her face, and she was bleeding heavily from the shoulder. She dropped the pistol and pressed her trigger hand against the wound. The other held one of Zulu Hotel Echo's hands, torn away at the wrist.

The entity withdrew from the smoldering heap and onto the side of the chamber, then crawled to the wall Alison had leaned against. It

formed two arms, one on each side of her. I noticed that Alison had folded the severed hand's claws together into a single point and smudged it with her blood. The smudges formed a drawing of a knife. As the hands closed around Alison's throat, she stabbed the point into the wall behind. It pierced the paper and Zulu Hotel Echo convulsed, causing the paper on the wall to shake and tear. The strangling arms went limp. Alison pushed herself onto her feet, leaving bloody handprints on the floor.

Alison pulled me away from the fire, which was spreading to fill the room. She sprinkled green powder in a circle that surrounded us. She noticed my fidgeting as I looked for an opening for escape, and pleaded that I not disturb the ring, for the sake of our own safety. She extracted a few jewels of various cuts from her suit and arranged them with care in the center of the ring, then wrapped an arm securely around my neck.

I decided that, while helpless, I could still at least gather information. I asked her how she was going to escape, and she told me that she would "open the Way".

This went without elaboration at the time, but my captor would later explain what was meant by the phrase. Alison can access a passage that intersects multiple universes, a phenomenon which she and her ilk have termed "the Way". The Way varied in geographic location, as it manifested in the immediate vicinity of "the most dangerous ten-foot square in America". Although the Foundation I worked for lacked the means to detect and analyze this portal, the qualifying ten cubic feet was almost always in or near a Foundation site. Whenever Alison herself was in a Foundation site, she found it trivially easy to "attract its attention".

During my initial capture, as I watched the flame advance toward us, I skipped the matter of what exactly "the Way" was, as the name made the basic concept evident, and asked if this powder was the method of opening it. She denied it. She held a sewing needle into my range of vision, point lightly pressed against her thumb, and said that she merely had to draw blood. The flames were centimeters from contact with the circle.

I inquired further: in that case, what was the purpose of the powder?

Explosive, she said, as she pierced her hand, and I felt an acute physical sensation similar to motion sickness.

Continued in Part Two.

Cassandra

Black Queen Gnosis speaking.

Black Queen Persephone here.

I'm Black Queen Elbereth.

yes… this will prove useful! I am Black Queen, Mistress of Serpents!

I can call myself Black Queen Mongoose.

Baseline

Cassandra is typically a human who exists as a piece of artwork, and is able to enter other visual media.

Prerequisites

Invention of paper and drawing, with few exceptions. Earth metaphysics compatible with either autonomous fictional life or fictonauts (with exception of rare nonsentient instances)

Utility

Usually a competent fictonaut, although limited to visual media. Those that manipulate paper are often useful in combat, with low durability but high stealth capability. Surprisingly unknown to the Library thus far, thanks to the Foundation.

Vulnerability

Can be injured through symbols; can be disabled through damaging her surface. Often unusually attached to the Foundation for an inmate, and/or to other fictonauts he or she has been paired with.

Instance: Timeline A-130.

Free. I met her in Seurat's painting *A Sunday Evening on the Island of La Grande Jatte* while searching it for a Porridgemonger. She waved at me and then continued on fishing.

Instance: Timeline B-173.

In Foundation custody. Refers to herself as Cassy. Simple ink sketch. Treated relatively fairly, by this Foundation's standards, and is given amenities in the form of symbols of luxury items.

Instance: Timeline B-025. A-025.

Deceased. When I mobilized an Insurgency, I convinced him that his loyalties stood with the "real" Foundation, not the haughty Glieseans. He hid on the Pacific Regional Director's bookshelf and slashed the man's wrists from inside an Audubon guide. He was incinerated, but the power vacuum he left was instrumental in making the Foundation collapse.

Instance: Timeline B-074.

Working openly with the Foundation. Refers to herself as Papercut. Possess paper manipulation abilities that extend within line of sight. Believes herself to be the crime-fighting medical practitioner Nurse Cosmic from Timeline B-075; is actually a sentient panel from a comic book about Nurse Cosmic. It's complicated. Currently cooperating with the Foundation with the anomalous youth outreach program Omega 7.
This deluded doodle has been a thorn in my side for far too long. I can't wait to rub her out, along with the rest of the Omega 7. Then I can finally bring forth my Ebon Legion and DECIMATE the Foundation!

Instance: Timeline B-086.

Free. A version generates whenever a recording is played of A-Ha's "Take On Me", which doesn't exist in this universe. Highly useful but difficult to come by because the Foundation here has banned anything even resembling 80s pop and this universe only has Betamax players.

Instance: Timeline B-089.

Believed to be in Foundation custody. I asked an informant with the Hand about her status, and he started talking about a prophet named Jeremiah the Flayed. I won't record most of the information he relayed because it was mostly aimless rambling that ended in "… and that's why it's prohibited to draw Muhammad."

Instance: Timeline C-095.

Non-sentient, named Cassy. Character in the Super Comics Publications comic book "Unreal Adventures", an ongoing educational series in which she and her partner Fred travel through famous historical works of art and writing.
Who has a catalog for Fred? I need that for something I have going on with a patron.
Be careful. There's a Timeline A-095 and you don't want any copies from that timeline getting near other books or drawings.

Instance: Timeline B-214.

In Foundation custody. Refers to herself by her SCP designation, Zulu Hotel Echo. She's capable of paper manipulation limited to the surface her form is touching and uses this to walk in a corporal body. My informant claims she has some combat training.
Encountered me recovering a father. I stabbed her with a symbol of a knife, and didn't stop to check her vitals. She's scrappy, but probably deceased.
Indeed… this "Zulu" sounds useful. I shall find her. I shall place upon her The Cloak Of The Crimson Constrictor, and she shall be my Black Mamba Knight, and together we will shred Omega 7 like

last year's insurance forms! Ahahaha!
Can we revoke this one's catalog privileges?

House Of Gears, Part Two

I awoke on an examination table. Monitors built into the walls displayed medical information: height, weight, dental X-ray, MRI data. There were several unfamiliar charts that I couldn't read. I sat up and saw a doctor taking notes, so I inquired.

"What is this screen describing?"

"That's an inventory of augmentations to your body. We scan for everything from pins holding bone together to nanomachines in the blood." The doctor turned toward me and approached the monitor I had referred to. I noticed that his voice and appearance were nearly identical to mine. "Looks like you're completely natural."

"Why have I been taken here?"

"I would have shown you when you woke up, but you've come to a few minutes ahead of schedule." My double tapped the closest screen. I discerned that he was checking the measurements of medications administered to me.

"A timing error. That means you probably aren't actually my duplicate."

He chuckled. He must have thought I was making a joke. "I'm you if things had gone a little differently, Doctor. I would continue the exam, but I know you won't cooperate until you get answers. Come along."

"Our most popular hypothesis is that a reality-bender opened a bubble between universes for personal use." The physician told me this as he led me across the wing. "Those of us who study spatiotemporal anomalies believe it's far too stable to occur naturally. I trust them on that.

"The earliest known arrival was first detained here six years ago, so

we believe that to be when initial construction finished. However, the base has continually expanded since then to make allotments for certain outliers in our population."

"That doesn't satisfy my previous question."

"I know, Doctor. I try to err towards caution with new arrivals and ease them into the knowledge, but I know enough about you to know that you're only intellectually aware of the concept of shock. So here you are." He opened a door to another hallway, and we entered.

As we did so, a second duplicate of myself approached the first, and they exchanged information on tablet computers. Down the hallway, a third and fourth conversed while gathering medical supplies.

"The population I mentioned earlier, Doctor Gears? It's you. It's us. Two hundred and eighteen instances, gathered from across the multiverse. Welcome to the House of Gears, Charles."

"I know what you'll ask next. Just a moment." My tour guide opened a picture on his tablet and showed it to me. "Is this the woman who abducted you?"

"Her face was concealed, but I recognize the mouth."

"The face is the least important part. The suit and gun, did she have those?"

"She did."

"Okay, that's almost definitely Black Queen Persephone. Which is good, she's one of the kinder ones. Her real name is Alison Chao, but she probably told you that."

"She mentioned her first name."

"She's your daughter. Or rather, she's a version of your daughter. … More precisely, she's the daughter of a version of you." He scratched his chin. "Do you have children, Charles?"

"I never married. Please don't call me Charles."

We passed out of the medical wing and into a carpeted hallway. "Here we have the recreation wing." He opened a door to a room with a dozen chess tables, each occupied. "I can get you in on a game, if you like. I'll even make sure you get white."

"No, thank you. I've never been one to play chess with myself."

"Fair enough. Where were we… oh, yes, a lot of the Gearses in here don't have living daughters. Not all, but…" He trailed off as he tapped idly at the screen of his tablet a few times. Perhaps he was impatient at a load time. "And I'm sorry about that. It'll be 'Dr. Gears' for the rest of the tour. It's just that you don't have your designation yet." He pulled his arm a few inches further out from his coat sleeve to show me a tattoo on his right wrist. "We get them during the third stage of processing, after the exam and initial orientation. I'm C-44."

"C-44. Is the tattoo mandatory?"

"Yes. It's the most efficient way the logistics officers have found to avoid confusion." He scrolled through columns of information under the photograph of Black Queen Persephone. "The only way to get out of it is if you can think of a more practical system and convince them to adopt it. Which I encourage wholeheartedly."

We turned a corner into a row of doors. "This is the housing section. you'll likely end up living here. It should fit your tastes — maximum efficiency, easy to clean, a computer with access to all the information I can give you."

I opened an unlocked apartment. "These remind me of Foundation containment chambers."

"I think that's the aesthetic they're going for."

I didn't respond.

We reached a fork. "At this point," C-44 told me, "we can go right, toward the cafeteria and the workspaces. your specialty is…" Two taps on the tablet. "…mechanical engineering, right? I can show you the lab."

"And on the left?"

"Maintenance, the garden, and… other housing arrangements."

"So the question is which end of the facility you will show me first?"

"Trust me, we'll only have time for one."

"I see. Who is responsible for the equipment in the lab?"

"The engineers make requisitions for parts or equipment, and the logistics officers pass these on to the Black Queens, who approve or deny them. There are a few limits… spacetime research is severely restricted, and you'd have trouble getting things that could catastrophically damage the facility—but the engineers have pooled their knowledge and it's resulted in quite a few innovations."

"Pooled their knowledge? Elaborate."

"Each Doctor Gears adds the sum total of his knowledge to the facility's resources. There are alternates of you from universes where quantum physics is decades ahead of what you'd know, where materials science has produced things you may have theorized were possible… everyone works with the best that the multiverse has to offer."

"Take me there, C-44."

And so he did.

For the sake of time, I shall relate several examples of what I saw there rather than a complete inventory. The initial notes I made on the engineering labs, which I took down from memory once I had access to paper, filled my first journal, and continued into most of the second journal that I was provided.

I saw entanglement experiments at a scale such that they involved apples and billiard balls. I saw innovative human organs designed to provide new resources to the body without rejection. A small team had devised a method of encoding messages into genetic material that could be read in a blood or tissue sample, a process they tested during the cloning of species that had become extinct on their respective planets.

One laboratory was dedicated to advancements in clockwork technology. I watched an analog computer evaluate sorting algorithms powered solely by a wind-up key. In a corner, researchers took turns monitoring a complex arrangement of gears surrounding a receptacle. It was explained to me that occasionally the readout shifts to one of several settings, such as Coarse or Fine, and an object emerged. It was partly a game and partly a compulsion amongst the clockwork researchers to determine what sort of object the machine was requesting based on its output.

"I hate to cut this short," C-44 told me, "but it's getting late. you'll need to squeeze into the last shift of processing if you don't want to spend the night on a hospital bed."

"Very well." We adjourned to the medical wing. C-44 found the room marked Processing - Housing And Designation.

"This marks the end of the tour, Doctor Gears. Ah, right, one last thing I need to tell you." C-44 tapped a nearby wall monitor. He opened a menu and dragged it downward, off the edge of the screen, and it appeared on his tablet. "This is the information on your retrieval. It should be released to you before long."

"I expect it to include the reason I was abducted."

"It varies depending on the instance of us and the instance of them. Some take us because they think we've blocked out the memory of our children, or have had it removed. Some think the doctors they bring in are psychologically damaged and in need of treatment. Some of them just consider us resources to be used to labor in labs and workshops. If we were the targets they actually sought out, we wouldn't be tossed… in… Here it is."

"Like I said earlier, one of the kinder ones." He turned to me. "She brought you in because she doesn't want you around for what she's going to do to your Foundation."

The processing clerk gave me an apartment key and a badge which denoted that I worked in engineering Lab 3. He asked me to place my arm into a machine, and I did so. A cuff restrained my arm to prevent movement, and a tattoo was inscribed, relatively quickly and

painlessly, onto my skin. "I hope you enjoy your stay, B-85," the clerk said. I looked at my wrist and verified that he had called me by the correct name.

My initial visit to my apartment and sleeping were uneventful. At the cafeteria, I was served corn flakes with slices of banana, which is my preferred breakfast. Once I had finished eating, I began to travel to my workspace. At the fork in the hallway, I decided to head left to briefly survey that area, but was told by a security officer that I would require an escort with the proper clearance. I accepted this.

That evening, I left my shift early (relative to my normal schedule; at the Foundation it would have been considered two hours late) and registered an appointment with C-44. He would agree to complete the tour. The clerk asked me why I was interested in touring the wing. I deflected the question, as I was unable to answer.

I met with C-44 the next day after work. (Details of my research fill my second journal. By request of the supply supervisor, I began keeping digital records only after that to save on paper.) He asked to see my badge, and I complied. I expressed my intention to visit the maintenance and "alternative housing" he had mentioned, and he led me. As we walked, C-44 engaged in small talk.

"So, you're B-85… and you got a job in the lab? Congratulations."

"Was there any uncertainty?"

"Unfortunately, not everyone can get the position they prefer. Someone has to do the unpopular jobs. Human Resources does a good job of providing most of us with a position that best suits us. Those of us without doctorates go into low-qualification tasks, while those of us who are more, ah… personable are assigned to work in the more social jobs."

"Is that what happened to you, C-44?"

"That's it, yes. I worked as an MRI technician at a private hospital, but now I handle these initiations, because apparently few of us are good at that sort of thing. But enough about that. You should see the

garden."

C-44 brought me into a solarium outfitted with artificial sun lamps. Rare species grew here [list some], caretaken by assistants of a Dr. Gears A-20, who greeted me cheerfully.

"Isn't it beautiful?" he asked me.

"I'm sure it's a useful collection."

"Useful…" A-20 removed a work glove and rubbed his chin. "Empty your mind for a moment, B-85. Just feel the energy here. As each cell drinks in sunlight and each plant reaches toward it… don't you feel God here?"

"I don't."

"Well… yes, it's a useful collection. you'll probably appreciate the hydroponic crops. They're just past that door." A-20 replaced his glove and began to prune a bush.

"Don't mind him," C-44 whispered to me. "Back home, he was part of something called The Church of the Winding Branches."

"Alright. I suspect he's correct about the crops, C-44."

I saw a chamber filled with staple crops, herbs, and other edible plants growing in water.

"This is where most of the cafeteria's food comes from. Here, and the cloning lab. Some things are transported here, but we try to be as self-sufficient as possible. The Black Queens spend less and less time here."

"I think they just want us to find the Tree." One of A-20's assistants muttered this while taking tomato inventory.

"Don't tell me," C-44 said to him, "that your boss converted you."

"It makes sense, doesn't it? Biodiversity is cranked to extremes in that botanical garden. Literally more plants than a universe has to offer."

I interjected. "Only in the sense that the garden contains plants from multiple universes. That's a very misleading statement."

"And when and where is the only other place that has so many plants in one place, with only one man to take care of them?"

"Again, that's not—"

"The Garden of Eden, brother. Humanity branched out from that one spot, from the Tree of Knowledge. I think… that the Black Queens are trying to remake it."

"C-44, why don't we continue the tour?"

"That, uh… yes, very well."

C-44 took me further west. Additional security guards patrolled this wing—Dr. Gears in face-covering visors. I was shown a locked vault door.

"No badge reader here, B-85. No electronic systems of any kind in the door's mechanisms. There's a key that a few security staff and Black Queens carry, but otherwise…"

"What's behind it?"

"Behind it is a similar, but separate facility. It's that alternative housing I mentioned. It's locked because… well, I'm not sure you're cleared to know that."

"What information can I access with Level 2 security?"

"You don't have a tablet yet, do you? Here…" C-44 held the screen up to me; the front camera was engaged. "Show it your card."

I scanned myself in.

"Ah, okay, here's a report." C-44 summarized the information for me. "So… if a Gears arrives with any artificial body parts or other implants, such as a digital eye, surgeons detect and remove or replace it with a part cultivated in the cloning lab. (Rejection is

almost nonexistent, due to inhabitants sharing virtually identical genes.) Some, however, are beyond corrective surgery. Those are quarantined from the rest of the population in their own facility."

"I don't see the reasoning."

"Some of them have transferred to or been augmented with strong AI. If we gave them a moment to make their case, they would likely completely control the facility within a day."

"If they're that qualified, it sounds like a practical decision."

"The Black Queens don't see it that way. So they strictly enforce quarantine, and keep them next to… that room." C-44 pointed to the end of the hall. "I know you can't approach there."

A pair of security officers stood two or three yards away. The door they guarded was matte gray and bore an insignia painted in red.

"Recognize the symbol?"

It was a ring, with five arrows pointing outward from the center in the shape of a star.

"Something about it is dimly familiar."

"Maybe because it reminds you of the Foundation logo. I understand that there's a splinter group of the Foundation called the Insurgency, or Chao's Insurgency, or the Porridgemongers, or…"

"The Chaos Insurgency."

"Correct. That's a cast-iron door, B-85. Supposedly it protects us from their magic. I don't know anything about it, but the Black Queens work with a Gears, A-something, that calls himself a 'sorcerresearcher', and he handles CI policy."

The door opened from inside. A Gears was behind it holding a clipboard. "Requesting clearance to exit the salty ring of my fatigue."

The two guards turned toward him and tapped their badges. The Gears held up his card to them with his right hand. "Careful. your

hand will break if you touch this vent."

"We can't read it from there."

"I don't want to approach you without permission." He pointed toward the side. "The hook in your neck is the contact you've made."

One turned to the other. "Don't invite him out. He needs it. He's a warlock."

The suspicious Gears raised his voice. "I need a brand new skin! Incarcernated debts!" I repeated the strange words to myself, under my breath. They tasted bitter. He withdrew his left hand from his coat. It was soaked in blood. He began to splatter it on the walls and floor on the other side of the door. One guard pressed an button with his palm that caused an alarm to sound.

As the door to the Insurgency cells began to close, the warlock shouted over the klaxons. "Goliath, are you receiving? Desecrated, you've arrived!" For a moment, he made eye contact with me.

"I'm really sorry about that." C-44 examined my clothing. "At least you didn't get any of it on you."

"That's good," I said.

"I think I should take you back to your room now."

"That's also good," I told him.

"I'm afraid you'll have to get an extra examination, though. They'll want to check for exposure to any 'spells' or 'cognitohazards'."

"Very well."

The examination found no effects from the incident, mental or metaphysical. The purpose of the CI agent's disturbance was not discovered. I personally am still not sure whether he was somehow alerted to my presence by informant or divination, or perhaps he merely chose to make an attempt to contact the general population and hope for the best.

That insurgent was not attempting to use a cognitohazard, I determined, nor magic. He was running through trigger phrases. He wanted to activate sleeper agents.

How did he know what their trigger phrases would be? Perhaps elements of the CI coordinate across universes. I must ask him later, when we are together.

I have been brought here on the pretense that I am a Foundation researcher, and I was. I am thought to be a man of science. I still believe that I am. As Whitman said, I am multitudes.

Every machine breaks, eventually. Sometimes, to do so, they require a little help.

Paris Massacre

Black Queen

Queen Yankee-Niner

Hello, I'm Alison

Overseer Five

Baseline: A massacre perpetrated by the Foundation in the town of Paris, Texas in the year 2010, to stop the spread of a virulent memetic agent. Death toll varies, with an average of 23. For the record, this was never our original plan Let her finish.

Prerequisites

Existence of the Foundation. Presence of Norton Thames, Jack Bright, Alexander Fredricks, and Diana Lao on the O5 council. Democratic president in office. Existence of the All News Channel.

Consequences

Due to how recently the event happened, we're still not entirely sure. So far, every universe where the massacre has occurred has also seen a Foundation coup in the next year, replacing 75% of the O5 council. However, this has occurred in at least seven other universes where no massacre took place, so we can't be sure how

related the events are. Around half the time, radical anartist Lucille Parsen is killed. Well, that's one good thing to come of this clusterfuck. Besides the continued survival of the United States of America, and possibly the world? Keep saying it enough times and maybe it'll become true.

Instance: Timeline A-0008

Death toll of 30. Event was disguised as a terrorist act by a lone gunman. Led to a significant tightening of gun laws within the United States, but no other unique consequences.

Instance: Timeline A-1112

Death toll of 12, disguised as a fire. Lucille Parsen survived, though with significant injuries, and soon after created the piece “A Comedy of Errors”. It ignited the art world, and helped lead to a resurgence of radical anart and anti-Foundation sentiment. In 2014, a modified version of “Cabin in the Woods” containing a memetic agent was screened at a Foundation movie night, leading to the deaths of 134 personnel and the release of at least seven objects. Ignited. Very clever.

Instance: Timeline B-3471

Initial death toll of 5. The memetic agent used in this version differed from most. Rather than attempting to attack other citizens, the infected began gathering mechanical parts and constructing a machine in the center of town. Due to the low amount of infected persons, the Foundation was two weeks late in becoming aware of the situation. By the time they initiated action, the machine was complete and activated. Biomechanical conversion of the town's population began two hours after activation. After four hours, all sentient life had been at least partially converted. All attempts on the Foundation's part to halt the process failed, and within two weeks the entire planet was gone. As of our last update on the situation, the infection has begun to build itself up off-planet. I don't understand why we're not doing something about this. It's not the first planet lost like this, and it won't be the last. There's nothing we

can do. I've seen stuff like this stopped before. Hey, if you want to try, be my guest.

Instance: Timeline C-0974.

Death toll of 24. The existence of the anomalous was common knowledge in the timeline, and control of the United States was split between the Foundation and Coalition. The attack itself was initiated by the Insurgency. Execution of infected individuals was carried out publicly by the Foundation.

Instance: Timeline C-9898

Sorry, it's my first time doing this, I'm not sure how much detail you want. Death toll of around 70, carried out by the Foundation's own memetic kill agent. I wasn't able to get close to gather much info, sorry. They had a large bit of it sealed off. The Foundation released the initial memetic agent on accident, and the “clean-up” one piggybacked off of it. It's kind of weird to explain, I've got notes on it somewhere else. That'll do fine.

Instance: Timeline D-0089.

Death toll of 24,781, the entire population of the city, after the Foundation carpet-bombed the entire town. And hold the fuck up for a moment, why are we still letting the one responsible access our archives? I'm curious too. The rules are clear- any Queen without harmful intent can access it. If killing twenty-five thousand people for convenience's sake isn't harmful intent, I don't know what the hell is. Harmful to us. Convenience? You think I wanted to do it? You think giving the order was easy? You don't know anything about what was going on in that town. If you did, you wouldn't be so quick to judge. Don't bullshit us. You had the entire Foundation, our entire network, any possible resource at your goddamn fingertips and you still thought lighting that town up like Vietnam would be the best idea. Would you like to see the pictures? The videos? There wasn't time. This was the only option that could guarantee success. Whatever. I'm done. This is disgusting. Can we focus?

Instance: Timeline G-1145

Death toll zero. A strike team was sent in by the Foundation, and promptly destroyed by the town's population. Since then, the entire timeline has gone dark.

Pawn To E4

The guard shivered. Even through layers of nylon, fleece, wool, and polyester, the chill seeped into the bones. The wind roared around him, whipping up snow, branches, and dirt, pelting him with sleet. When he shifted position, he heard the snap of his frozen clothes cracking. Tiny icicles hung from his weapon. He tried to lift his arm to check his watch, but couldn't muster up the energy.

How long had he been standing on this balcony? It felt like hours. Days, maybe. But if it had been hours, where was his replacement? Had they decided to leave him here? Was that his fate, to freeze to death on this balcony at the bottom of the world?

There was a loud *SNAP* and pain shot down from his head. The world around him began to smear in his vision. Then it went black.

The two women stared down at his body. “Fuck!” yelled the Sister. “What the hell just happened? Where are we?”

“Be quiet for a moment,” said the Queen. She knelt down and began digging through the snow. Soon, she knocked against a metal panel. Underneath was a tunnel leading down, and a ladder. She motioned towards the first woman. “Get in before you freeze to death.”

The Sister nodded and climbed down. The second followed her. After several minutes of climbing, they dropped into a concrete hallway. Three rows of fluorescent lights ran across the ceiling. On one wall were three posters touting workplace safety standards. Across from it was a large map.

“Seriously, where are we? Please tell me you just didn't kill that guy,” said the Sister. She was tall, with a thin face and long nose. Her black hair was wrapped into a tight ponytail. Three silver rings jutted out of her bottom lip, and the edges of a red tattoo crept from her shirt and across the back of her neck. She wore a leather jacket covered in patches, jeans, and a Black Flag T-shirt.

“Sister, if you're as eager to see what I have to offer as you said, you'll have to become more accustomed to violence,” said the Queen. She was almost identical to the first. Her hair was cut shorter, only shoulder-length, and instead of street clothes she wore hiking gear and a large rucksack. The bulge of a shoulder holster was visible under it. A scar ran from the corner of her right eye, to the nape of her neck. “As for where we are… Antarctica.”

The Sister sucked in a breath. “Jesus. Antarctica. And… and we're still on Earth? My Earth, I mean?”

“No,” said the second. She began walking. “We're approximately 300 universes away from your home Earth. Follow me, please.”

The Sister jogged to catch up. “So… what's here that you want to show me? And who would build something like this in Antarctica?” She thought for a second. “Actually, I'm still not sure what this building even *is*.”

“Be patient,” said the second. “Stop asking so many questions. Learn to observe, it'll prove more useful.” She tapped a button on her watch and spoke into it, “Hill, this is the Queen. Are you ready?”

There was static, followed by a voice. “Yes, ma'am How long will it be?”

“Five minutes,” said the Queen, and said nothing else. They continued walking. Several times the hallway branched off, but the pair continued going straight. Eventually, they came to a metal door.

“We're here,” said the Queen into her watch. The doors slid open.

They stepped into a large, circular room. The walls were lined with computer monitors, all black. The center was raised, surrounded by guardrails, with a large screen, blank in the center. A man stood in front of it.

“Hello ma'am,” said a voice to the side. A man in a white labcoat stood with his hands clasped in front of him. “It's so good to see you again.”

“It's good to see you too, Wayne,” said the Queen. “Is your daughter

feeling better?”

Wayne nodded. “Yes ma'am. Things were close for a while, but she's through the worst of it.”

The Queen nodded. “Very good. Tell Linda I said hello.” She stepped onto the raised area. The Sister followed.

“Hello ma'am,” said the man at the screen, turning. “Your travels went well?” His eyes darted to the Sister.

“They did.” She pulled a plastic disk case from her jacket. “This should be all that we need.”

He nodded “And this is your… ah… associate?”

“It is.”

“Everything should be ready then.” Turning back to the screen, he pressed a button to the side. A slot opened, and he pushed the disk in. “Ma'am, are you sure you can do this fast enough? I'd say you have about 15 minutes between us uplinking the data, and them going on lock-down.”

She stared at him.

He looked away. “I'm sorry. I didn't mean to imply anything.”

“I know exactly what will happen once we upload this,” she said. “How long have we been planning this?”

His face flushed red. “I wasn't trying to insinuate anything, ma'am. Just… you know…”

“Enough. It doesn't matter anymore. Send it through.”

He nodded. With a few quick button presses, the screen lit up. A red hammer and sickle flashed across the center, then a cascading series of Cyrillic command lines.

“Okay,” said the Sister. “I think I have even less of an idea of what's going on now.”

“What did I say about questions?” said the Queen. She stared at the screen, arms crossed, eyes flitting through the code. “It's a universal transporter. One significantly more powerful than the one I've been using. With it, we should be able to greatly expand our operation.”

“Um, alright. So, what are we gonna do with it *now*?”

“Watch. You'll see.” The Queen stepped forward and tapped a series of numbers into the keyboard. The lines on the screen paused. Then they disappeared. A red outline of a box replaced them, with a number above it: “0%”. Several seconds later, it blinked up to “1%”.

“It shouldn't take more than-” Wayne said. A gunshot echoed through the room. The Queen spun around. Four men stood in the back of the room, dressed in black riot gear, assault rifles raised. One of them yelled something in what sounded like Russian.

The Queen and Wayne lifted their hands. The Sister followed suit. “When I tell you,” said the Queen, “run behind the screen.” Then she responded in Russian.

The man took a step forward, and barked another order. Wayne began to kneel down. A wave of the Queen's hand stopped him. She said a few more words, her face blank. Her gaze turned towards Hill.

His face fell. “I'm sorry, ma'am. It was my daughter… I couldn't just let her… they said they would fix her if I led them to you…”

“Be quiet,” she said. “I don't care. Sister, these men are about to start shooting at us.”

“*What*?”

“Now!” yelled the Queen, and leaped to the side. She scrambled behind the screen and the Sister, without thinking, followed. She slid into cover just as the firing started. There was the sound of glass breaking, and a body collapsing. From the other side of the screen, Wayne moaned in pain.

The side they were using also had a screen. The red bar blinked:

“15%”

Low voices speaking in Russian from the other side. Someone yelled. Footsteps, running farther away. More arguing, then two gunshots, and Hill screaming.

“20%”

A Russian voice barked at them.

“What happens when it reaches 100%?” said the Sister.

“We'll be transported to the set destination,” said the Queen.”

“Okay, great. And how long will that take?”

“Two minutes. But it's not our primary concern.”

“Of course it isn't.”

“I never was able to finish inputting the destination. If it activates now, I'm not certain where we'll end up.”

27%

The footsteps were drawing closer.

“Have you killed anyone before?” said the Queen.

The Sister paled. “Um. Once.”

“I see.” The Queen opened her jacket and pulled out two pistols. She handed one to the Sister. “Do you know to use this?”

“… Yeah.”

“We're going to have to kill them.”

35%

“I don't even know who the hell they are! What do they want?”

“Presumably revenge for killing a guard and trying to steal their

technology.” The Queen handed her a magazine, then slapped one into her own gun. “ Only the most recent event in a long line of conflicts between us. They'll almost be here. Be ready. I'm going to need to input the last of the coordinates. When they come around, stop them.”

40%

The Queen inched to the side panel and began typing. As she did, numbers ran across the bottom of the screen. The Sister looked over her shoulder, at the other end of the screen. There was no one there. But she could hear, faintly, the sound of footsteps.

46%

The Queen continued to type. The Sister scanned the area, looking for any movement, looking for any sign of-

“Stoy!” said a voice behind her. She spun around, lifting the pistol. It was too late. The man had his rifle trained on her, finger resting on the trigger. Another next to him trained his weapon on the Queen. Sighing, she backed away from the keyboard and raised her hands.

58%

Two more men emerged from the other side. They circled around the women to stand behind them.

The Queen spoke in Russian, but the men did not respond. One motioned for the Sister to stand. She did. He said something she couldn't understand. The Queen replied without looking at him. Beads of sweat were starting to form on her face.

64%

“Did… did you make it?” said the Sister.

The Queen shook her head. “Almost.”

“What do we do now?”

“Shut. Up,” said one of the men behind them. He slung his weapon

over his shoulder, and approached the Sister. Taking a pair of handcuffs from his belt, he grabbed her arms, wrenching them behind her back. She shuddered as the cold steel wrapped around her wrists. Pain shot through her knees, and she fell to the floor.

73%

“I'm sorry,” said the Sister. “Dammit, I shouldn't have-” The man stepped forward and kicked her in the gut. Pain tore through her. She gasped, trying to suck in air, but couldn't.

The Queen stared at him. “Don't do that again,” she said, in Russian.

“And if I do?” he said.

She turned her eyes to the screen.

79%

“Put your hands on your head. Get on your knees.”

She didn't move.

“We don't want to make this difficult. We're not going to kill you, but we'll hurt you if we have to.”

She stayed frozen. Her eyes were locked on the blinking number.

The man sighed, un-slung his weapon, pointed it at the Sister. “We can hurt her, too. Is that what you want?”

85%

The Queen gritted her teeth. She slid her hands down, locking her fingers behind her head, but stayed standing.

“We're waiting,” said the man.

“If you touch her,” said the Queen, without looking at him, “there won't even be a corpse by the time I'm finished with you.”

The man chuckled. “You think you have room make threats?”

93%

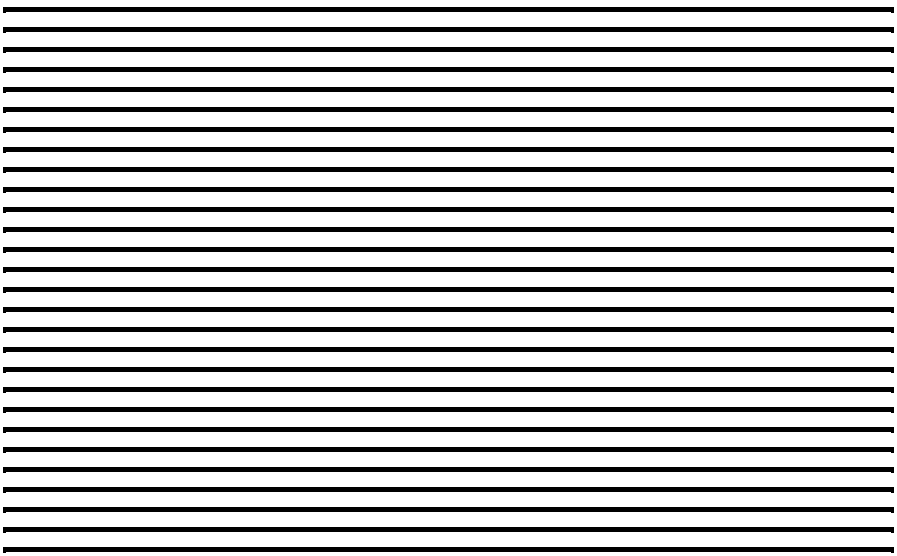
He spat. “You think you're so clever, dancing around us for years. Lying. Stealing. Making us look like fools. Did you think you could it up forever? You thought you were much better than us, so much smarter. Now you'll see-”

99%

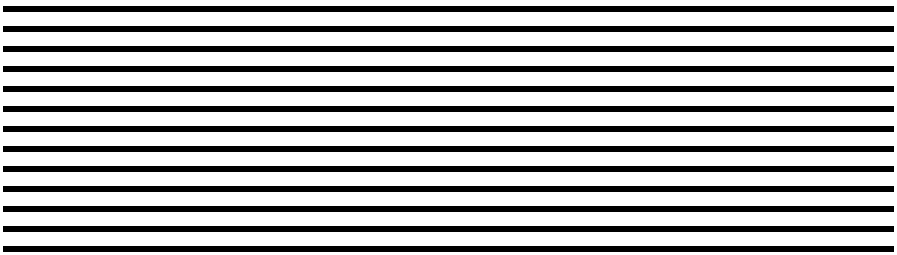
Her hand shot forward. It slapped into the keyboard, mashing down five keys. The bottom of the screen flashed white.

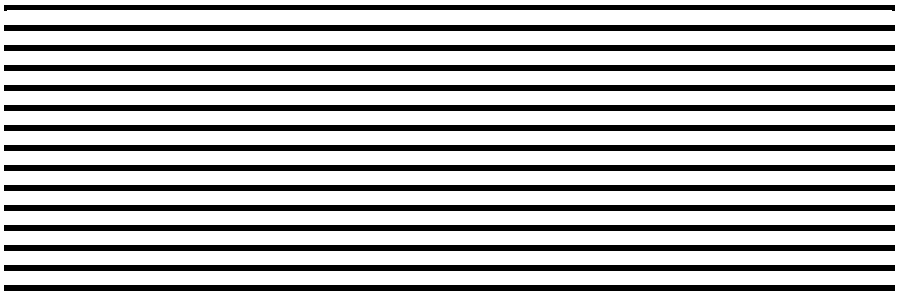
100%

The world fell away.



II





Was she flying?

It felt like she was flying. Hurtling down through the air. The familiar drop in her stomach. The sensation of stepping off a ledge and feeling the tug of gravity sending you towards Earth. She opened her eyes. Then she tried to open then again, because there was nothing but darkness. Turning her head to the left, she saw the Queen, and the man, hovering in the darkness. As if they were standing on an invisible floor. Behind them, loomed the screen. The screen flashed red, over and over. The man had his gun raised, pointed at the Queen's head. He tried to fire, but nothing happened when he pulled the trigger.

The Queen held her pistol against the side of his helmet. She said nothing, only stared straight into his eyes. The Sister looked behind her. The other men had their weapons raised. They were also trying to fire, but the guns didn't respond. One moved a foot forward, as if to take a step, but instead of landing it fell. He stumbled and fall, hitting the invisible floor.

The Sister tried to push herself to her feet, but could find no surface to press against. She tried to breath, but there was no air. She opened her mouth to speak, but no sound came out. There was only the feeling of falling, and the figures around her.

Reality hit her like a sledgehammer. One second, darkness. The next, a burst of light, green, brown, and orange. Pain rushed through her, like she was being mashed into the ground by a giant thumb. She screamed, and over the noise heard gunshots. Several minutes later, when the pain subsided enough for her to open her eyes, she saw the Queen standing over her.

“What… what happened?” She pushed herself to her feet, clutching her side. It felt like one of her ribs was cracked. They were in a forest. The trees towered above them, hundreds of feet tall, and the ground was covered in a blanket of fallen leaves. Birds twittered in the branches above. Several meters away, a furry, six-legged animal watched them with unblinking gray eyes. Branches and vines sprouted from under its fur to wrap around its body. Next to them, the screen sprouted from the ground. “It worked.”

The Queen nodded.

The Sister turned her head, and saw the bodies of the four men. The leaves around them were splattered with blood. “You did that?”

“As I said, I prepared this for months. I knew exactly how long the journey through the Membrane would take. They didn't. I was able to brace myself for our arrival.”

“Right,” said the Sister. She took a step forward and fell. The Queen darted forward, catching her and pushing her back up. “I don't feel good.”

“We jumped much farther than you have before,” said the Queen. “Your body isn't used to that kind of strain yet. It'll go away in a few minutes. We'll wait here until then.”

“Fuck,” said the Sister. “I should have brought some cigarettes.” She looked over to where the animal had been, but it was gone.

They waited for hours in silence, sitting against the trees. When the Queen moved again, it was night. The woods were silent. “Are you feeling better?”

The Sister nodded. “Yeah. Thanks.”

“We're going to have a far distance to walk.” The Queen stood, brushing off her clothes. She tapped the gold watch on her arm. “Three days to our destination, three days back.”

The Sister pushed herself to her feet. “We're leaving now?”

“It'll be easier to travel at night. It's too hot during daytime.” She tightened the straps of her rucksack.

“So, where are we going?” The Sister stood with her arms crossed.

“You'll see when we get there.”

The sister said nothing.

The Queen stared at her. “Is something wrong?”

“Well,” said the Sister, staring at the ground, “this isn't what I expected. Being shot at, camping in the woods. You said you would help me find my dad.”

“I did, and I am,” said the Queen. She stepped towards the Sister, who didn't look up. “I told you it would involve risks. I told you that it would be difficult, that you would probably regret your decision. You insisted.”

The Sister swallowed. Her palms were slick with sweat. “Yeah, I know. But this is *bullshit*. You won't tell me what we're doing, where we are, why, any of that stuff! You take me to a different *universe* and you still won't even tell me what's going on? How the hell do you expect me to learn anything like this?” Her voice rose as she spoke. “Come on! I'm willing to go where you want, but you need to respect me enough to tell me what the hell is going on!” She was nearly shouting now. “Tell me *something*, instead of just stringing me along and letting me get shot at and hit and thrown into new worlds like I don't fucking matter!”

The Queen took a step back. She lifted a hand up, as if to place it on the Sister's shoulder, then dropped it down. “I see,” she said. Turning, she walked to where the rucksack was placed against a tree and began searching through it. The Sister looked away.

After pulling out half the ruck's contents, the Queen returned to the Sister, clutching a black notebook. She thrust it into the Sister's hands. “Take this. Read it on the way.”

The Sister looked from the Queen to the notebook. Her hands trembled. “What is it?”

“Part of my notes. It contains basic information that I've uncovered over the years. Read through it as we're traveling, and feel free to ask me about anything in there.” She closed her eyes and sighed. “I'm sorry I've been difficult with you. Sharing information in the past has led to… problems.”

The Sister nodded, still looking away. “Alright. Fine. But why are we *here*? What's the point?”

The Queen slung the ruck across her back. “We're going to kill our Father.”

The Sister's eyes widened. “Dad? He's here?”

Nodding, the Queen tightened her straps. “A version of him is. And he's dangerous, Sister. If he isn't stopped soon, he'll corrupt the entire universe. And he won't stop there.”

“How? What's he doing?”

She shook her head. “That's something you should see for yourself.”

The hiking wasn't hard. The Sister was used to hiking. She'd done a lot of it when she was younger, wandering through the woods behind her house in lieu of having to socialize. After her father disappeared, she would spend days out there, just her and books and whatever canned goods she could find with her mother's decades old camping equipment. That was nice. Relaxing.

This was different. Everything about this place felt wrong, in ways she couldn't describe. The noise the breeze made as it blew through the leaves sent chills down her spine. The way the branches loomed and twisted around them, like they were the top of a demented wooden prison cell. How the little wildlife she saw resembled monsters more than animals. They all had wood sprouting from their skin, and acted strange. They would slam themselves against trees endlessly, attack the Earth, bark and wail at nothing.

To distract herself, she read the journal. By the end of the first day, she had gone through every page. By the end of the second, she

had it fully annotated. Going into the third, she had begun to compare it to her own notes, and was beginning to realize almost everything she had assumed she knew had been wrong.

“Jesus,” she said as they walked. “How long have you been working on this?”

The Queen ducked under a branch. “Six years. Nine, if you count the time before I discovered the Foundation.”

“Fuck. You know, you never told me how old you were.” She brought her head up from the notebook just in time to see the branch and swing under it.

“The same age as you,” said the Queen. “Twenty-four. I was just dragged into this earlier.”

“Oh,” said the Sister. “How?”

“Maybe another time,” said the Queen. She stopped to check her watch, then started walking slightly to the right. The Sister followed, shifting her focusing back to the notebook.

It was amazing what was cataloged here. Descriptions of dozens of worlds, twenty different groups tied to the supernatural, lists of thirty different anomalous items and how they appeared throughout various universes (including a few she had seen in her own). The entire last half of the notebook was devoted to Charles Gears, tracking his movement patterns, behavior, allegiances across every universe she had found. One repeating idea stood out among the noise.

The reasons vary, read one note, *but its presence is near-constant in instances of Charles Gears who have abandoned their families. Somewhere along the line, an event takes place that removes his capacity to feel emotion. Sometimes it's purely psychological, a regression in order to cope with the situations he must confront on a daily basis. Sometimes it's due to psychic influence, or an encounter with a powerful cosmic entity. Whatever the cause, it is, with only a few exceptions due to outstanding circumstances, always present.*

And a little later on in the book. *It is this sociopathy, combined with his loyalty to whatever cause he is allied with, that makes Charles Gears such a danger to reality.*

The Sister looked up from the book. What was the noise? It seemed to be coming from just ahead, a slow murmur flowing through the trees. The Queen didn't seem to notice, or at least, didn't seem to care. She just continued on through the brush. The Sister tried to quiet her steps and listen closer. It sounded almost like water.

“Do you hear that?” she said.

The Queen nodded. “We're getting close. Look.” They were coming up to a large treeline. The Queen just strolled through, not even pausing. As if the scrapes and cuts from the trees weren't even worth thinking about. The Sister sighed, covered her head with her hands, and barreled through. She ran for almost a minute, branches snagging at her clothes, thorns ripping her skin, before bursting through on the other side.

She reared back as sunlight hit her face. So far, the forest had been dim, most light blocked by the canopy. Now, the glare was blinding. She managed to squint one eye open and gasped. They were out of the forest. She was standing on the bank of a river. It must have been close to 30 meters wide. The water was blue and clear, and at the bottom, small creatures that looked like wooden crabs scuttled across the rocks. Trees sprouted from the riverbed. Their leaves were long and vinelike, streaming through the water, and fish swam between. Most were too short to reach the surface, but a few reached out of the river to scrape the sky.

Three large, white-furred beasts stood on the other bank of the river. They looked almost like buffalo, but their fur was shorter, and their horns longer. They arched backwards, almost touching the nape of their neck. Short branches sprouted from the fur around their bellies. Two took no notice of the Sister. They kept drinking, oblivious. The third stared at her. After a minute, it gave a low grunt. The others looked up at her. They grunted, and all three turned away to roam off.

Across the river, a plain stretched to the horizon. Far off, she could see a herd of the buffalo creatures. Every few hundred meters, a massive, branchless tree trunk grew from the earth, taller and wider than any of the trees in the forest.

The sound of branches snapping behind her drew her attention. From the branches emerged the Queen, looking none worse for the wear. She brushed a few leaves from her clothes and readjusted the straps of her pack.

“It's beautiful,” said the Sister.

“No,” said the Queen. “It used to be beautiful. This is a disease.” She turned to face upriver. “Come. We still have a few more hours before we arrive.”

The woods had been, for the most part, flat. That had been fine. Walking uphill sucked. The sun was nearing the middle of the sky, and the heat outside the forest was almost unbearable. She'd taken off her jacket and tied it to her waist, but it didn't help. The Queen strolled on, not even sweating.

There was something up ahead. Coming up, she had thought it was just an outcropping of the hill. Now, she saw it was a tangle of branches the size of a building. The river (though by now it had narrowed to more like a stream) flowed from an opening in the center. They approached it, and the Queen held up a hand to stop her.

“This is it,” she said.

“About time,” said the Sister. “Are we going to go in?”

The Queen nodded. “I want to ask you something first.”

“Yeah, sure. It would be a nice change of pace.”

The Queen crossed her arms. The Sister stared into her eyes and shivered. Something about them felt off. Inhuman. It was like looking into a thunderstorm. “What do you plan to do with your father, once you find him?”

“What?” Why would she need to ask that? “Take him back home. What else? I was going to try to fix whatever the Foundation had done to him.”

“I see.” The Queen pursed her lips.

“What, do you have a problem with that?”

She sighed, shook her head, and stepped into the opening of the tangle. “This will be the sixteenth version of our father I've killed. It won't be the last.”

The Sister followed. The cave was dark, except for the Queen's flashlight. They stood just inside, still, looking at each other.

“Not even 10 years ago, this world was very similar to your own,” said the Queen. “Your father ruined that. He always does, in the end. This time, he accidentally fused himself with forest god, giving it the connection it needed to spread across the entire world. But it's still not satisfied. Give it time, and it'll spread throughout the solar system. Then the galaxy. Eventually, it will find a Way to another universe. And from then, there will be no stopping it. It must be destroyed here. At the source.”

The Queen handed the Sister a small, silver canister. “Do you have what it takes to kill your father?”

The Sister looked from the canister to the Queen. She bit her lip. “Well… he's not my actual dad, is he? He just looks like him.”

“Yes. But that doesn't mean much. The mind has odd ways of holding onto the associations it builds up.” The Queen crossed her arms. “So, can you do it?”

The Sister turned the canister in her hands, running a finger across it. “I don't know,” she said. Her voice was soft. “Will he feel it?”

“He doesn't feel much of anything now,” said the Queen. “He's just fuel for the god.”

The Sister sighed. “Maybe. Maybe. I can try.”

The Queen nodded. “Follow me, then.”

They began to walk away from the entrance. Neither spoke. After several minutes, the Sister realized that the ground was sloping downwards. From the outside, the tangle had seemed about the size of an elementary school, but they'd gone too far for that to be right. She looked behind her, but the light of the outside had disappeared. The tunnel was pitch black. To steady herself, she ran a hand against the wall, and listened for the Queen's footsteps.

The ground was soft and wet. Every step slipped slightly into the earth. She could hear insects buzzing around them. The whole place smelled sickly sweet, like rotten fruit. As they walked, the air cooled. Soon she was shivering.

She wasn't sure how long they walked. It felt like an hour, but it could have been more. It could have been less, too. For all she knew they only went a few hundred meters. But down there, it felt like an hour. Ahead of them, a pinprick of green light was forming. As they moved forward, it grew. Soon it was bright enough for her to see the silhouette of the Queen, and the rough walls of the cave. They were covered with thin vines and flowers. Finally, they arrived to the entrance of a smaller cave.

The walls were hidden under layers of branches and ropey vines. The ground was clean, smooth stone. Sprouting from it were small bushes. Glowing blue fruit hung from them. In the center was a pool of clear water. She couldn't see the bottom, but several schools of fish swum beneath the surface. Hanging just inches from the water was Dr. Gears.

Hundreds of vines held him suspended from the ceiling, his arms splayed out, legs dangling. Sprouting from his skin were leaves, twigs, and flowers, that roped around his body. They covered him almost completely, left only a few inches of naked torso and his head exposed. His eyes were open, they looked empty, like the eyes of a corpse.

Her breath caught in her throat. She tried to speak, but couldn't. This was it. This was what she had been waiting fifteen years for. To see dad again. She wanted to move, to say something, anything, to see

if he would notice. If he would know who she was, or even move. But she couldn't do anything. Just stare into that face, slightly more worn, slightly more wrinkled, but otherwise exactly how she remembered.

“Are you alright?” The Queen stepped forward. She stared at the Sister, her lips thin.

“I'm…” said the Sister. *Go on*, she thought. *Say it. Just say it.* “I'm fine.”

“This isn't your father,” said the Queen before going to quiet. She looked from Gears to the Sister. “You said it yourself. He's never seen you in his life.” She picked up a pebble from the floor at threw it at Gears. It smacked into his forehead, but he didn't react. “He can't even be considered a human at this point. His memories, his hopes, his fears, they've all been destroyed. Eradicated by the Uprooted God.”

The Sister nodded, but couldn't take her eyes off of him. Her stomach felt heavy. Something pounded in her throat, like an animal trying to break free.

“You don't have to do this if you don't want to,” said the Queen. “But I think it would be a valuable experience for you, to understand more of what we'll be doing.”

Say something. Thought the Sister. *Don't just stand there. You're better than that.* “It's… no,” she said. Her voice was raspy. Her throat felt like concrete. “It's going to happen, whether I do it or not, right?” She sucked in a breath and held out her hand. “I can do it.”

The Queen nodded and gave her the canister. It was heavier than the Sister expected. Like a brick. She turned it over in her hands. “It's easy to use,” said the Queen. “Put it down the wall, pull the top off, and run.”

She nodded. “Will it be quick?”

The Queen shook her head. “No. But he won't feel anything. This will be better for him, I promise.”

“Right.” The Sister walked to the other side of the cavern and set the canister down. The Queen stayed at the entrance, watching. The Sister placed a hand on the top. She looked back at the man hanging from the ceiling. God, he looked so much like her father. Every part of her body screamed that this must be him. She knew that he wasn't. She knew that her real father was with the Coalition, in a different universe, not trapped like this. But still, her hands shook. “Come on,” she whispered to herself. “Come *on*.” But her hands wouldn't move.

She thought of the past two weeks. Of meeting the Queen, of barely escaping from the Coalition alive. Transporting to another world, a freezing wasteland, and almost being killed again. Hiking for days. Seeing men die. For what? For this moment. To kill this man at the Queen's request. *No,* she thought. *He's not a man anymore.* One look was all it took to confirm that.

Her hands were slick with sweat. Her stomach felt like it was doing somersaults. She could taste last night's meal in the back of her throat. The pin of the canister rested between her fingers, waiting to be ripped away, to release the fire it bottled in. She didn't want to do this, she realized. Why had she come here? Why had she insisted on doing this?

She looked back at the Queen. She'd said it was okay to not do it herself, but the Sister knew that wasn't right. The Queen expected this of her. She could show the Sister the universe, but first the Sister would have to prove herself. She wrapped her hand around the canister. *Do this,* a voice in the back of her head whispered, *and you'll be able to see dad again. Your real dad.*

She wiped the sweat from her brow. Yes. This wasn't her dad. Her real dad was waiting for her, a universe away. And all she had to do to see him was pull the pin.

Three.

Two.

One.

She closed her eyes and yanked her hand back, tearing the pin from the canister. There was a hissing noise, and the top of the canister erupted in red light. She leaped up, sprinting back to the entrance of the cave. The hissing noise grew louder.

The Queen grabbed her shoulder. A smile spread across her face, the first the Sister had seen. “Excellent. Absolutely fantastic. Now, hurry. It will spread quickly.”

The Sister nodded. She took a step forward, then stopped. This wasn't right. She couldn't just leave like this. She had to *see.* Turning, she stared back into the cave. And froze.

The Queen looked back at her. “Is something wrong?”

She shook her. “No. No it's… fine. We need to go.” And they ran.

When they finally burst from the cave, and the sun and wind hit their faces, she turned and vomited against the side. The Queen stood above her, looking almost concerned. “I know how hard this could be at first,” she said.

“No, really,” said the Sister, wiping her mouth. “I'm fine.”

But her thoughts were stuck on the cave. What she had seen there. When she'd turned, she could have sworn Gears was looking at her. That there had been recognition in his eyes. That he had mouthed a word. Her name. Alison.

Blood Red Summer Hub

Prelude

`To Be Noir Not To Be`: The Fiction will see the Real.

We're still not entirely sure what he actually did with it in the first place and for almost all intents and purposes he shot himself into fictional space and fucked right off, but suffice it to say once they'd finished cleaning his corpse off the side of a printing office on the Hollywood Boulevard, more than a few people got interested in whatever method of narrativic ascension he'd unintentionally pioneered.

Act I: Numbered City

I Care Because You Do: Gears in the machine come loose.

By the time I was done with my handwashing ritual, I'd looked up just in time to see the Karcist retracting her rope-like tongue into her mouth, residue of Jane's brain still dripping from its surface.

Crossing the Frame: And before the third day, she rose.

Sighing, I flicked through them all, scanning for anything of interest — all of them turned out to be typical mundanity, one-week seminars on theological interpretations of Zipporah at the Forge, updates on the samizdat breakout near the Marble District.

Staring at the Sun [TBA]: Black Queens to move.

"But — that doesn't make sense, how can there be two of you in the same place?" "You're a devotee of the god of mass-production and you can't understand the concept of two of the same thing existing at the same time?"

Characters

Connie Xiang: Inquisitor.

A single-minded and sharp-tongued woman not afraid to get into a scrap, for better or for worse. One of the few Maxwellist members of the inquisitorial force, she was assigned to transuniversal work. Officially, it was because she was a rookie who needed a relatively low-pressure job: unofficially, she's always suspected it's the result of Orthodoxy attempts to keep the heretics in the one universe, preferably one that's as far away from them as possible.

Amitha Vikram: Informant.

Detached and cold, though the fact her and Connie split up over their theological differences might explain this attitude to their interactions. An engineering prodigy of some note who converted from Maxwellism to the Cogwork Orthodoxy, she currently runs an Orthodoxy-supported business fixing machines and mechanically augmented people (though really, what's the difference to an Orthodoxy member?) in the Brass District of Flipside.

Allison Chao: In question.

Not as deceased as she should be.

I Care Because You Do

As I touched the face of the body with a single gloved hand, the first thought that ran through my mind was that it had a face, and that was never an especially common sight around here.

Our Jane Doe was pinned to the pavement like a butterfly on a cork, her head pierced by a perfectly-cylindrical metal rod twice the length of my arm. That in itself might not have killed your average Alagaddan citizen, but what would have was the intricate script running around its circumference — tangentially, that script should've sent me and any Alagaddan without years of discipline reeling from a mile off, but I wasn't an Alagaddan. Hence why I'd been called in today.

Carefully, thoughtfully, I brushed the length of the spear jutting out of her head and dispatched a hesitant ping of energy into its core: as expected, even through the latex I felt a jolt of energy refresh me and a brief flash of blue light from the runes on the cylinder.

I picked myself up from my kneeling position and peeled the gloves off, tossing them to the sidewalk where they'd be absorbed by one of the fleshy flagstones eventually. Karcist Nadya noted that I'd finished with my inspection and affixed me with her twenty-eyed gaze: "What information did you gather from the monolith?" she chittered, teeth in her mouth rearranging themselves as she spit the syllables in my direction.

"Definitely a Mekhanite perp from Flipside, you're right." I fumbled for a bottle of antiseptic in my pocket and gave my hands a quick slather just to get the feeling of the fetid oils off my nerves. "First glance, that thing has a couple verses from the First Tract of Trunnion round the circumference; all things being equal, our murderer's a Cogwork Orthodoxy member, though railgun weaponry points to Maxwellists."

"The brass residue would suggest that." By the time I was done with

my handwashing ritual, I'd looked up just in time to see the Karcist retracting her rope-like tongue into her mouth, residue of Jane's brain still dripping from its surface. "Tannins from Oregon…" She licked a stray droplet of grey matter hanging off the edge of what counted as her lip. "…no, she's an Indiana native. Most recently she's got traces of the Black Quarter, though."

I grimaced and wrinkled my nose. The Black Quarter was one of those places filled with enough theologically, morally and mathematically abhorrent behaviour that the thought of having touched anything that'd come from it made the both of us equally nauseous, if our almost identical expressions of disgust were any indicator. "Signal Above cut me out, a Grade-A theoweapon and a Black Quarter runaway in the same case, huh." The thought that I hadn't actually got a name for this body crossed my mind — that combined with the sketchhy providence of said body set me on-edge. "Speaking of, you actually have any idea who this girl is?"

Another deep taste of the corpse: had the majority of Mekhanites not shed their fingerprints in the first parts of their conversion, I would've complained my partner turning them into streaks on the china-like skin of the cadaver. "Maybe 'runaway' is the wrong word, Inquisitor Xiang. More a passer-through, if anything: you know the trade in gallbladders, exotic organics… all the usual smuggler's vices."

"Travelling girl, then. Still haven't given me an ID, though."

She took a deep sniff, fluttered grey eyes that would've been pretty on a face with fewer eyes and an actual skull in it. "Allison. Allison Chao," she concluded, after some thought. Eyes turned to slits, nostrils flared again. "Did you do something to the body in your little inspection, Inquisitor?"

My brow furrowed and my hand itched to release its payload. "Nothing more than a quick ping to test if the artifact was still active, which it is. You sure you're not just picking up on the after-effect of that thing?"

"No. The metal." She turned to the side, spat out a gob of gold-stained blood. "It doesn't get any less disgusting the further you get from the weapon, you know? The distribution's too even for it to be

just the monolith."

"If you say so, I guess." I knelt back down. "Let's take a closer look, check if she's not lead-lined or some shit…"

As I did, the first thought I'd had upon seeing the body came unbidden to the front of my mind — her face looked too close to a Flipside citizen, too close to my baseline for it to resemble anyone who'd been wandering the City of a Million Right Angles for enough time a Karcist knew her taste. Pondering the interpretations, my eyes scanned the body one more time, noticed the expensive-looking coat swaddling it like she was floating on a sea of velvet.

Hell of a thing to go to your grave in.

Slowly, gingerly, I peeled the coat from her shoulders. She was wearing a tank top, already something odd in the freezing winters even the city had to put on padding for, and I noted the tattoo of a chess piece on her shoulder: the black queen, the colour a striking contrast against the deathly-pale shade of her post-mortem complexion.

As I kept going with it, the coat peeled away to reveal more of the shoulder, then the arm, then—

A hand, delicately filigreed with silver trim and humming softly with the tick of gears moving under its skin. The first sign of a recent convert to Mekhane.

My breath caught in my throat. "Nadya!"

"That's Karcist Na…" The command faded, to be replaced by the guttural fury of Low Sarkic creole. "Shit! She bought in—!"

"She's a bioterrorist drug mule at best, world-ending extremist at worst," I responded, hurriedly covering what I'd seen in the coat's rich folds and getting back to my feet. "You need to set up quarantine. Fast. The theoweapon was bad enough, but if she's got a live sample of the Conversion you could be seeing a full-on eschatonic event at worst, XK in a bottle…"

"Understood." Nadya clawed at her neck, exposing an array of

fleshy nodules growing along the musculature there like plants on display in a greenhouse: picking one between finger and thumb, she burst it with a sudden burst of force and the state-designated smell of emergency filled the air. As it did, the alleyway around us began to get closed off by curtains of newly-forming muscle and bone, the walls of Alagadda itself responding to the pheronome signal with a sudden overdrive of growth. "Where will you be off to, Inquisitor?"

"Flipside." I began sprinting for my car while the road to where it was parked was still open. "I have to see a lady about a priest!"

And with that, I clambered into the driver's seat, hammered the keys home and revved the throttle. The tyres of the Argo squealed on striated gristle as I tore down the highway, heading towards the woman who I'd loved and damned to hell in the same year.

Next: **Crossing the Frame**

Crossing the Frame

« Previously: **I Care Because You Do**

If you travelled the multiverse for long enough, you saw the things that never changed no matter where you went. One of those things was inconvenient traffic jams.

As I sat in my idling car waiting for the officers to open up the Way to Flipside, a part of me couldn't help but remind me that I was a goddamned Royal Inquisitor of the Eighth Empire of the Broken Goddess, and that traffic laws were for people without a ten-word title appended to their name: in response, I reminded myself that the better part of valour was "not getting your ass handed to you by every Sarkicist looking for a fight in a fifty-mile radius."

After what felt like hours of sitting in front of the gate waiting for something to happen, one of the guards shambled over and knelt down to rap on my window. Gingerly I wound it down and looked into its beady eyes: its face looked like it'd been salvaged from bits and pieces donated by charitable citizens who'd died fifty years before this thing was born.

The officer coughed and splattered me with phlegm, before clumsily smearing it all over my face with a single limp arm. "Mind showing me your ID, ma'am?" it hissed.

I tried to ignore the acid in the spit currently eating through my face and just flashed him the Inquisitor's badge. In response, it fumbled with the badge and flipped it over almost unintentionally, before handing it back to me and giving me a look of what could've been pity or condescension.

Behind me, trendy crosses between horses, crows and some marine animal I couldn't identify — maybe a dolphin — stomped their hooves and cawed as they sniffed at my tailpipe, as if they were

threatening to take a bite out of it. That combined with the weird looks I was getting from the guards made me rev the engine a little harder, drum my fingers on the steering wheel a little faster — it was too early in the day for pity and too early in the case for anything other than anxiety and speculation.

With a dismissive flick of the guard's polyjointed arm I was waved through the entrance, and soon enough I found myself in the giant tunnel known as the Artery Road.

One guess as to why they called it that.

The tunnel was a roughly cylindrical mass of reddish muscle toughened by years of abuse by cars and **Orcadian** hooves alike. The one distinct feature inside the otherwise vaguely knobbly hundred-foot circle of darkness was a precisely painted dotted line running straight down the road, before stopping just short of the Way itself. Nobody knew who exactly put it there in the first place, but anyone who drove through the road was silently grateful to them. Every so often, someone would veer off the line after one too many drunken orgies; you tended not to hear much about those people aside from long, grisly horror stories.

So I let the troubles of work melt away and focussed on toeing what little I could see of that thin white line, trying not to let the occasional throb of the walls, or the sound of the person behind me cantering on their horse-like abominations throw me too far off the beaten path.

As the car approached the Way, the navigational computer began to strobe on and off and my teeth felt like they were vibrating in their sockets, every cell in my body singing in harmony like tiny tuning forks. The outline of its unspace loomed large before me, my already pathetic-looking headlights totally unable to cut through the blackness that made up its entrance. At the familiar sight I braced internally and shut my eyes: the next part was always the worst.

Every Door has its Knock and every Way has its Price. This Way's particular toll was a half-litre of blood just dropping out of your system and circulating into the unknown depths of the muscles that comprised the Artery Road.

My body hadn't needed blood to function properly for five years and counting at this point in time, yet it still threw every part of my body off-balance when it took its price: first the pricking sensation like a million needles sinking into every part of your body, and then the wave of nausea as the effect of the blood loss sent me into brief shock. When I re-opened my eyes, I opened them not to the crowded pink walls and citadels of Alagadda, but the sleek futurist outlines of Flipside's metal skyline.

A warm summer's breeze was blowing, and it was early in the afternoon. Another quirk of the two worlds being diametric opposites meant that their seasons and days also got flipped: every so often, you'd see the (in)famous Alagaddan crimson snow blowing through the Way as city-wide blizzards howled and railed against the buildings on the other side of the portal.

As for why it was infamous, remember when I said you needed a half-liter of blood to get through the Way?

Trying to relax in my seat and let the auto-pilot take care of the driving, my attempt to laze in the sun was rudely interrupted by a flurry of messages from the Maxwellist intranet that turned the darkness behind my eyelids into an angry sea of flashing red messages I'd missed while I was out. Senders ranged from loose neural net experiments to fellow Inquisitors who'd condescended to use the heretic infrastructure. The thought of the old Luddite Legate-Faithful Brunel being forced to use a terminal was one of the few things to make me smile that day.

A few judicious filters later and I'd whittled the six-figure pile of messages fighting for my attention into a more manageable mess of a thousand or so. Sighing, I flicked through them all, scanning for anything of interest — all of them turned out to be typical mundanity, one-week seminars on theological interpretations of Zipporah at the Forge, updates on the samizdat breakout near the Marble District.

Nothing pressing that another one of the Inquisitors didn't have the jurisdiction or the firepower to handle. I breathed a sigh of relief and instructed the navcomp to take me to an address down in the Orthodoxy-owned part of the city.

As the buildings turned from brutalist steel and concrete buildings to Art Deco factories of brick and brass, I started running through conversational simulations in my mind, reprising old regrets and trying to find a better way to navigate the social minefield that even talking to each other had become in those seven years. Soon enough, though, I gave up on the whole enterprise: I could try to find social maxima and minima all I liked, but eventually I'd have to step out of playing social engineer and actually talk to her.

My reverie was broken by the pleasing chime of the navcomp as it informed me I'd reached my destination. I sighed and forced myself out of the car for the day's first social rigmarole.

Amitha's workshop was a relatively small building amidst the smog-clouded factories that lined the roads in the Orthodoxy's manufacturing district, tucked away in a deep knot of winding alleyways marked out by the conveyor belts that stretched from road to road. It was one of the few buildings that bothered to give a lick of uniqueness to the nondescript fronts mandated by the scripture, in the form of a subtle gold trim on a couple pillars, her name engraved neatly on the front door and some tasteful floral decorations hanging from the elaborately-styled roof.

It was tasteful, simple and almost ascetic in comparison to the Victorian parodies of Ancient Greece that stood around it and it was an almost painful reminder of everything I'd lost with her absence.

Taking a deep breath to still myself, I reached my hand up robotically and rapped on the door with three measured knocks.

When she opened the door, the familiarity turned my stomach into a tight Klein bottle of nerves. Her hair was still done up in that tight braid of red held together by resistors woven into the braid in some elegant, indecipherable pattern, and her arms were still stained with grease and burn marks from a long day of soldering and welding in her inherited laboratory.

Were it not for the assemblage of gears and mechanisms attached to her back and the newly-carved scars under my eyes and on my arms, we would've been the picture-perfect copy of the couple who'd snuck kisses and forbidden literature to one another in that same

laboratory a decade or so ago.

"Afternoon, Amitha."

"Good afternoon, Inquisitor Xiang," she replied evenly. That made it five years since she'd called me "Connie". "Just wanted to drop by and swap pleasantries, or is there something not to your satisfaction here?"

I sighed. "…Ms. Vikram. You're not in trouble, I'd just like to have you on as a consultant." The words felt like I was speaking them through a thick gag of formality shoving itself down my mouth.

With a brief effort of will, Amitha disengaged whatever was plugged into her back and took the opportunity to come a couple steps closer to me. "And why's it you can't come to someone else for that consultancy, Inquisitor?"

"It's a cross-sect case." Noticing her sharp intake of breath, I cut in quickly. "Look, Amitha, gimme the benefit of the doubt here — I'm not so stupid as to go after you cause you're the first convert that came to mind. Problem is there's a lady on the other side of the Way to Alagadda with Legate Trunnion's words drilled into her head via mass driver, and if there's a person who'd know where you could get something like that done, it'd be you."

Amitha relaxed and quirked her lip. "Right. So I'm not guilty, I just know enough to be."

"Hey, if you think anyone's gonna convict on that alone, you'd be a) right and b) the second person to get dragged to the firing line after me."

"So you're doing this… what, out of some misguided belief you're protecting me?"

"I like to think I'm doing both me and Ms. Allison Chao over there a service by getting someone who actually knows their shit on the case, but if you want you can think I'm saving both our asses from one count of cross-universal hate crime, sure."

She flinched at the name I'd just dropped. The tactic might've been

effective for pulling sympathy from civilians when speechifying but I hadn't expected it to be quite that effective. "Allison… black hair, sleeveless top, tattoo right there?" She pointed at a spot on her shoulder.

"Eye for details, huh. You'd make a decent cop."

"Xiang, shut up." Amitha began to turn and pace towards the back of her workshop. I didn't have a choice but to follow her in. "Are you *absolutely* sure that's the woman you saw?"

"I can literally project the photos I took onto the wall, if it's so important to you. Tell me why."

And as the faint sound of sirens in the distance began to make itself known to me, Amitha's face turned into a mask of confusion. "Because she's been waiting right here the entire time."

Next: TBA »

Brink Dangerguts Adventures

Of late, several anonymous manuscripts featuring a protagonist named "Brink Dangerguts" have been discovered in numerous SCP facilities. The documents include very little in the way of factual information, but contain enough sensitive material to engender a low-level security breach if found outside Foundation walls. The writings have been organized here to assist in identification.

Brink Dangerguts and the Shard of Thermopylae

- Chapter 1: Your Mission, Should You Choose To Accept It...
- Chapter 2: How to Hold a Debate while Skydiving
- Chapter 3: Lights, Cairo, Action!!

Chapter 1: Your Mission, Should You Choose to Accept It...

Brink Dangerguts and the Shard of Thermopylae

> Several copies of this anonymous manuscript have been found scattered across Site 19 over the past month. Despite its near-total factual inaccuracy, it contains enough truth to warrant a low-level breach of security if published. As far as Foundation sources have gathered, it has not been sent to any outside publishing company; the investigation is ongoing.

"I tell you, amigo, this is what life's for."

Brink was lounging poolside at the hotel, draped over a lawn chair while a pair of bronzed Peruvian women rubbed suntan lotion on his imposing chest. A third reclined gracefully against his shoulder and ran a hand across his close-cropped brown hair. "If heaven doesn't have this setup right here, I'm not going."

"Tal vez no irás allá en absoluto,"[1] Trail muttered around a mouthful of mango nectar, his inflatable seat bobbing lazily in the water.

Brink looked at the glass on the table beside him and stood up. "Yeah, you're right, buddy," he replied, "that is looking a little on the empty side. Oh, ah… It's Hormiguita, isn't it? Hormiguita!"

A fourth woman sauntered sultrily from across the patio carrying a whiskey sour in one hand and a lit cigarette in the other. She moved like a runway model, and wore noticeably less.

"Is Mercedes," Mercedes corrected him, scowling. She raised the cigarette to her lips and blew smoke at his face.

"Mer—what? Why would I need a—no, no, Hormiguita, two." He held up two fingers to illustrate his point. "Two drinks. *Dos…* drinks,"

he said patiently as she strolled back, rolling her eyes. “Swear to God, love lookin’ at ‘em, but the minute you try to get one to do a simple task…“

“…hablas con ella como tú no crees que tiene cerebro.“[2]

“Trail, buddy, you know I can’t understand you when you say things fast like that.”

“Oh. It was nothing. Just talking to myself.”

There was a sudden rattle at the gate, and a pair of men in black suits and reflective sunglasses approached Brink and Trail. The one in the lead was short and slight, whereas the one behind was roughly twice his partner’s size in both directions. He looked capable of pulling apart a car with his hands alone.

“Burke Dangerous?” spoke the short man, curtly.

“Brink Dangerguts. My name is Brink Dangerguts,” repeated Brink Dangerguts. He proffered his hand to the miniature stranger, who ignored it.

“Brink.” He seemed to turn the name over in his head. “Right. My name is Agent Caraway, and this quiet individual—“ he gestured to his enormous companion, who bowed—“is Agent Toreo. We’d like to ask you for a moment of your time.”

“Sorry, I can’t spare a second right now,” Brink said. “As you can probably see, I’ve got several young women to attend to, and I’ve really spent enough time out of my chair as it is.”

“Is that so.” Caraway motioned to the giant, who clapped twice. The women turned their heads sharply, like a flock of cockatiels.

“Por favor,” Toreo said, “regresen a sus cuartos inmediatamente. Es de gran importancia.”[3]

At once, the three women arose, grabbed their towels, and began meandering toward the building. Brink stared at their retreating backs in surprise. His luxurious chestnut mustache and left eyelid twitched visibly.

“What the hell did you just do?” he asked, dumbfounded.

“It looks like your schedule just got a lot lighter, Mr. Dangerguts,” said Caraway snidely. “Now, you think we could talk with you for a moment?”

“After that? I ought to send the two of you flying! What’s worth sending away all the women? What kind of introduction was that?”

Caraway sniffed. “The kind that precedes an extremely lucrative job offer.” He started up the steps into the hotel. “Come inside.”

The contents of Toreo’s briefcase covered the rich velour sheets of the bed in Brink’s hotel room in much the same way as he had hoped a collection of señoritas was going to. Photographs, interview transcripts, clipped headlines, and scientific-looking articles formed almost a full layer of paper across the California king-sized mattress, with some loose pages falling onto the burgundy carpet.

“This right here is what you’ll be recovering for us,” Caraway said, his finger on a photo of a shard of Greek pottery. “It’s an ancient clay fragment with some rather unusual properties.”

“Is it cursed?”

“Well, no. Not really.”

“Will it melt your face if you look at it?”

“Oh, definitely not.”

Brink was puzzled. “Haunted, then? Possessed somehow?”

“Nothing like that.“

“Well, what’s its deal? Why is it so important?”

“It was stolen from our employers, and they desperately want it back. That is the extent of what you need to know in this regard. That, and not to touch it with your bare hands, but that should really go without saying.”

“Hold on, hold on, just a minute. Tell me it at least has some sort of catchy, recognizable name.”

“We call it SCP-960.”

“You’ve got to be kidding.” Brink stood and stretched his massive arms. “Mysterious—*probably* mysterious—ancient artifact, and the best you goons can come up with is a bunch of gibberish. All right, I’ll name it.”

Caraway sighed. “This really isn’t necessary.”

“The Shard of Thermopylae!”

“It’s not from Thermopylae,” groaned the squat agent. “Sit back down. I wasn’t finished.” Toreo nodded stiffly in Brink’s direction.

“Now, Mr.…" Caraway pretended to fumble for the name. “Dangerguts, wasn't it? You were responsible for locating the Adze of Maupai, correct?”

“That was me, yep. Me and my buddy Trail.” He made a move toward the window. “Why’d we have to leave him outside, anyway? We do all our adventuring as
a team.”

“We’ll get there. You also went toe-to-toe with the wild cockatrice on the Isle of Man, right?”

“Fought ‘em. Killed ‘em. Tried eating one of ‘em.”

“Oh? How was that?”

Brink shrugged. “Not great.”

“Hm. And Mad Captain Norman’s lost treasure, you found that, too?”

“With a cut air hose. …Hang on, we didn’t even go public with that yet. We just wrapped that one up a week and a half ago, how did you know about it?”

“My line of work extensively involves knowing things, Mr.

Dangerguts." Caraway began to pace around the suite. "As such, I have personally conducted a thorough background check on you before considering you for this job. Obviously, the fact that we're speaking this instant proves that you've passed. Unfortunately, I cannot say the same for your partner, hence his current absence."

Brink frowned. "Aw, hey, now, look, if you're talking about what he did in Sumatra, I can tell you that was perfectly excusable in context."

"It's not just about Sumatra." He picked up a wax apple and tossed it back and forth. "It's a protracted pattern of misbehavior and unreliability in tense situations. Wouldn't you say he has a tendency to fly off the handle?"

"Well, yes, but only when the handle needs to get flown off of! Look, sometimes you just gotta do something drastic to get a situation under control, and he understands that. He knows exactly what he's doing."

Caraway sniffed again. "Be that as it may, our employers have decided that he is too much of a risk for a mission as delicate as this. Leave him here. Say you're going on vacation."

"But this *is* our vacation."

"Then say you've got family business to attend to. Dying grandparent or something, I don't care. Just don't bring him with you. Understand?"

Brink cast his deep blue eyes downward. "I understand."

"Very good. So long as you don't breathe a word to him of this arrangement, you will be extremely well compensated for your efforts concerning the artifact. Now, as I was saying, the last we heard, it was being flown into Egypt in the custody of a man named Heinrich Krause…"

"Madre de Dios, Brink, there you are. It's been at least an hour and a half. What did those guys want?"

“Never mind what they want.” His face broke out into a perilous grin. “Come on, buddy, we’re going to Cairo.”

• • • next chapter

Brink Dangerguts and the Shard of Thermopylae

Footnotes
1. "Maybe you won't go at all."
2. "…you talk with her like you don't think she's got a brain."
3. "Please return to your rooms immediately. It is of great importance."

Chapter 2: How to Hold a Debate while Skydiving

Brink Dangerguts and the Shard of Thermopylae

> Several copies of this anonymous manuscript have been found scattered across Site 19 over the past month. Despite its near-total factual inaccuracy, it contains enough truth to warrant a low-level breach of security if published. As far as Foundation sources have gathered, it has not been sent to any outside publishing company; the investigation is ongoing.

Trail wiped frantically at the windscreen of the plane with his sleeve, trying his hardest to clear the persistent fog upon it. It had been over a day since they left Peru, and it was here in the last leg of the flight that things finally had begun to fall apart. The obscured view out of the cockpit was becoming less of a nuisance and more of a threat, and some heavy turbulence earlier on had caused Trail to empty his stomach on the floor of the tiny aircraft.

“You said you wanted to be the copilot, so do your job!” Brink had shouted over the sound of the propeller. “I’m gonna need to land this at some point, and we’ll be better off if I can see the ground when I do!”

“I’m trying, man, but I can’t reach all the way over there without undoing the safety restraints.”

Trail heard a short clicking sound, and suddenly the pressure on his chest vanished. A metal buckle dangled limply by the side of his seat.

“Safety restraints?” Brink brought his hand back to his side of the plane. “When has safety *ever* been something we worried about?”

An hour passed, and the plane lurched and pitched as it sputtered through an embankment of clouds. Night was falling, and the sky

around them was turning almost opaque. Trail felt his stomach start to turn again and braced himself for what he thought was the worst; unfortunately, he was not thinking on a large enough scale.

“Well, probably can’t push our luck any further.”

Brink’s words snapped him out of his reverie. “What?”

He had no sooner asked the question than he noticed the low-fuel indicator light blinking what he assumed was the beat to their funeral march.

“Has that been on long?”

“Oh, yeah, a while. Past hour or so, I figured it was just some electronics problem, but I’m starting to think we might’ve sprung a leak somewhere… necessary.”

Trail Mex blanched. “How far out are we from Cairo?”

“Oh, we’re pretty much in Cairo. The distance ain’t the problem. Clear a window and look down.”

He hesitated. “I’d rather not.”

A tremendous hand gripped him by the top of the head and turned it around to look out the side window of the plane. “*What-has-gotten-into-you-today?*” Brink said, syllable by gravelly syllable through perfect, gritted teeth.

What lay beneath them was a sprawling city full of buildings and people ambling among them, rich with a culture older than history, built on land settled millennia ago—a place possibly more vibrant and intriguing than anywhere else in the world. What did not lie beneath them was a runway.

“I don’t suppose you’ve got the yips about using a parachute, too?”

“I don’t have yips about nothing.”

“All right, whatever. Long as you don’t mind jumping out of this plane in a few minutes.”

The engine coughed and went still. Brink quietly handed over a backpack; Trail began sweating.

“Or right now.”

Trail muttered feverish Spanish. “El Dios de dioses, Jehová, ha hablado, y convocado la tierra desde el nacimiento—“[1]

“Cut that out and get that door open,” Brink barked as the nose of the aircraft began to dip.

Trail reluctantly threw himself out of the plane, mumbling what he could remember of Psalm 50. Brink followed a second after, leaving the plane to fall to earth at its own preferred pace. With a steadily growing sense of unease, Trail started thinking about what would happen when it landed. Crashed. “Crashed” was the more suitable word.

“HEY!” he shouted upward. “BRINK!”

No answer came immediately, but Brink straightened his mountainous body into more or less a vertical line and accelerated toward his friend. “YOU SAY SOMETHING?”

“I WAS WONDERING, YOU KNOW, ABOUT THE PLANE.”

“WHAT ABOUT THE—AW, DAMN IT TO HELL. GOD DAMN EVERYTHING.”

“WHAT?”

“I LEFT ALL THE STUFF IN THERE.”

“STUFF?”

“YEAH. ALL THE FOLDERS AND THE WHATEVER.”

“YOU MEAN THE CLASSIFIED STUFF THE GOVERNMENT GUYS GAVE YOU?”

“I GUESS.”

“THAT’S… BAD.”

“I WAS JUST THINKING THAT. GOOD NEWS IS THAT WHEN IT CRASHES IT’LL PROBABLY ALL BURN UP, SO NOBODY ELSE GETS TO READ IT.”

Trail’s mouth opened in shock, and the air rushing into it made him cough uncontrollably. “THAT’S THE *GOOD* NEWS?”

“RELATIVELY.”

“AND WHAT’S THE BAD NEWS?”

“MOSTLY IT’S THAT I HATE SKYDIVING.”

“REALLY?”

“YEAH, NOT MY FAVORITE.”

“*REALLY.*”

“I KNOW, I KNOW, GUY AS FEARLESS AS ME HATES SKYDIVING, IT’S WEIRD. I GET IT. I THINK IT GOES BACK TO WHEN I WAS LITTLE, AND…”

“YOU DON’T EVEN THINK ABOUT THE PEOPLE THAT THE THING WE JUST JUMPED OUT OF IS GOING TO HIT?”

Brink made as pensive a face as he could manage in free fall. “MAYBE A LITTLE.” A thought struck him. “WAIT, ARE YOU UPSET ABOUT THIS, TOO?”

“OF COURSE!”

They deployed their parachutes, drifting slowly toward the rooftops of the city beneath them. The winds whipping Trail’s face calmed slightly; Trail himself did not. He curled his hands into tight fists around the straps of his backpack, staring intently up at the man who’d flown him straight into the moral gutter.

“Brink,” he called up, doing his utmost to keep from sounding as furious as he felt, “you and I have done a lot of ridiculous things

together over the past couple years."

"Absolutely have," he replied. "Why d'you mention it?"

"And a lot of those things have been really stupid and dangerous to everybody around us."

"I mean, if by that you mean fun."

"For example," he snapped, ignoring the remark, "just now we abandoned a plane over a crowded city, where it'll crash and kill several innocent people, because YOU ignored the fuel gauge for an hour."

Brink crossed his arms. "Is this you now? This your new thing? You're gonna, what, summarize everything I do right after I do it? What's the point of that?"

"That's not what I—puta madre. We're not speaking until you learn to give a damn about this."

The adventurer scowled. "About what?"

Trail looked down at the rooftops growing closer to his feet. "Nope."

"Come on, seriously? Don't do this. Just tell me what I'm allegedly doing wrong."

"No. Not talking."

Brink sighed loudly enough for Trail to hear. "Don't be like that, compadro. You've at least got to tell me what you think my flaw is before you can expect me to do anything about it."

"*Compadre.* Also, *flaws.*"

"Look, I—"

"Also, I told you already."

"Don't—"

"Also, not talking."

“Fine, okay! We’re not talking. This’ll be fun.”

Trail didn’t respond.

“Sure is a good thing we’re not talking, isn’t it?” Brink intoned nasally. “You didn’t need my help climbing down that building you landed on, no sir. You got that all on your own. Good job not almost breaking your leg on the way, that was a nice touch.”

“Shut up.” It was faint, tired, almost a plea.

Brink pressed his palms to the sides of his head. “He speaks! Thought you’d gone mute. Thank God we still have your cheery voice to get us through the trip.”

Mentally beleaguered and physically exhausted, Trail stopped walking and looked blankly at a fire that had started a few miles in the distance. He grimaced and wrung his hands. His partner broke the silence for the hundredth time.

“Huh,” he said dully. “Didn’t think it’d get that big.”

Trail sat suddenly on the pavement and buried his face in his arms.

“What did you find?”

“Most of the documents inside had been incinerated by the time I arrived, unfortunately. I believe the crash may have been intended for this exact purpose.”

“You found nothing, then.” A finger moved toward a beige stone button.

“No! No. Not nothing. Please. I… I managed to recover this from the wreckage without being spotted.”

Into his hands was placed a charred scrap of paper, with an austere black heading that read “Secure. Contain. Protect.” He mused upon it.

“So,” said Heinrich Krause. “They know.”

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• • • next chapter

Brink Dangerguts and the Shard of Thermopylae

Footnotes
1. "The Mighty One, God, the Lord, has spoken, and summoned the earth from the rising of the sun—" (excerpt from Psalm 50, New International Version)

Chapter 3: Lights, Cairo, Action!!

Brink Dangerguts and the Shard of Thermopylae

> Several copies of this anonymous manuscript have been found scattered across Site 19 over the past month. Despite its near-total factual inaccuracy, it contains enough truth to warrant a low-level breach of security if published. As far as Foundation sources have gathered, it has not been sent to any outside publishing company; the investigation is ongoing.

Even for a pair of seasoned travelers, Cairo can be a formidable locale. The people rush haphazardly through the streets like diligent, purpose-driven cattle, and vehicles do their best to keep some semblance of course through the swamp of human movement that overwhelms the thoroughfares. Traffic signals are suggestions, and sidewalks are driven on as frequently as the roads themselves. Despite this, the city is nothing if not a feast for the senses. The architecture towers and curves gracefully against itself in pillars and pointed arches, with intricate patterns running their lengths; bazaars span the widths of entire streets, consuming one's vision with vivid colors and smells; the chatter in the avenues, in a dozen different languages, comes from all directions at all times.

A full twenty-four hours had passed since their unceremonious arrival, and neither man's attitude had changed much from the previous night. They walked as nonchalantly as they could past a fountain lit from underneath, with a massive mosaic of the ancient Egyptian pantheon as a backdrop. Trail stared miserably into it for a moment before being pulled along the road toward an unassuming brown building on the corner.

The restaurant—if that's even the proper word for it, as opposed to maybe *dive*—was crowded, quiet, lit a dim orange against the navy of the night sky. Patrons huddled over their tables as though hiding something precious from an unseen thief, lending the place a

foreboding, oppressive ambiance. Roughly half of the people looked to be carrying small weapons, which meant that the other half were doing a better job of concealing theirs. It was one of those places that shouldn't be barged into.

"Oh, we are *absolutely* gonna find something in here," Brink's voice boomed as he barged into the place. Table by table, people started to stare at the source of the commotion. "Spot like this, there's got to be somebody who knows something about something. BARKEEP!"

Trail followed meekly. He did his best to distance himself from the gigantic explorer, but getting out of his direct reach proved difficult in the little floor space the room offered. The bartender, a lean and serious man with a pinched, bespectacled face, set down the pitcher he was drying and emphatically exhaled through his long nose.

"Are you looking for a restroom?" he asked, looking at his hands instead of the foreigners. His voice was drawn out, serpentine. "The restrooms are for paying customers only."

"We ain't here for the restroom," Brink belted. He turned to the unimpressed crowd he had disturbed. "My name's Brink Dangerguts, and this here—" he held up a grimacing Trail— "is the most dangerous man you're likely to meet in your short little lives. We're looking for a bastard Hun named Krause and a weird trinket he's got on him. Anybody with information about either…"

He trailed off as the bartender tapped his arm and gave him a furtive shake of the head. Several of the people who had yet to turn around at the duo's entrance were slowly beginning to look in their direction. Their faces portended malice.

"What, I can't call Krause a Hun? Really, now." The crowd's expressions grew angrier. "Let me guess, you're all Germans or something? Right, okay, I believe that one. I sure am a big dumb idiot who—what?" he cut off abruptly, as the patrons began to stand and pile toward him.

"Through here," came the same slithering voice.

Without warning, the barman pulled the two behind the counter and

through a darkened doorway, closing them off from what was quickly becoming a mob. “You are unwise to speak ill of Herr Krause, sirs, and especially by way of introduction. He has done remarkable things for our community in recent years. He is a popular figure around Cairo.”

Brink faced the door warily. “That true?”

“Assuredly. He has contributed some astounding works of art. Truly irreplaceable. I have to assume you noticed the fountain and mosaic around the corner.”

Trail opened his mouth and lifted a finger. “I—“

“Sure didn’t. We’ll keep an eye out for it.” His eyes narrowed to suspicious slits. “Hold on. Why’d you help us get away from the crowd? You got some kind of interior motives going on?” He looked as though something was gradually dawning on him. “You’re puttin’ us in your debt, is that it? You damnable slimy conniver. I’d wager you’re the kind of guy who would push his own mother in front of a truck to win a bet. I mean it. Fifty bucks in front of you, I bet you’d do it. Watch.”

The barman smiled humorlessly and pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. “No, sir, I’m afraid I take little interest in money.” Brink took his hand back out of his pocket. “The trinket—the one that you mentioned in your elegant opening remarks—now *that* is something I wish to know more about.”

“What, that? Why?” Trail considered objecting to the constant use of “we,” but changed his mind.

The stranger’s glasses flashed. “To start, it is clear to me, and to everyone here, that you two are on some sort of… mission? Is that the word? You also mentioned only two things that you are looking for: Herr Krause, and the ‘trinket.’ From this, I can deduce that the object in question is just as important to you as the man, if not indeed more important. And an object with a value equal to that of a man’s life sounds extremely interesting.” He grinned, displaying a mouthful of impeccable teeth. “As it goes, I happen to have a fascination with interesting objects.”

“Hm.” Brink leaned casually against the wall. “Funny. So do we. Ever hear of the Adze of Maupai?”

“Please do not patronize me. I did just say I have a fascination with interesting objects, correct?”

“I dunno, probably. Did you know it’s been recovered?”

“Of course. Is there a man who does not?”

“Any idea who might have done it?” he wheedled smugly, a thumb pointed squarely at his own chest. The bartender raised a single eyebrow.

“*You?*”

“The very same.”

“Forgive me if this appears insolent, sir,” he exhaled, “but you’ll need more than an unfounded claim, however grand it might be, to impress me.”

“Fine by me. Hey!” Trail flinched. “Tell him what that thing said on the handle. Trail’s more of the language guy,” he confided, turning to the other man.

Almost shyly, Trail muttered a few words in Sumerian, and the bartender’s expression changed. “You know the inscription? Nobody has released the inscription to the public.”

“Well, Trail knows it, at any rate. I don’t really pay attention to those kinds of things. I just take stuff from places.”

“Do you, now? Intriguing. What is your latest target?”

“We really can’t tell you about that,” Trail began earnestly. Again, he was not heard.

“The Shard of Thermopylae,” Brink said proudly. “An ancient piece of pottery said to imbue its possessor with mysterious powers. Maybe even immortality.”

The bartender barely seemed surprised. “Truly? It must be beyond valuable. Is it hidden somewhere in Cairo?”

“Far as we know. We’ve heard your pal Krause has his hands on it.”

The bartender looked aghast. “You mean this? Heinrich Krause holds an artifact of anomalous nature? This is troubling news.”

“Why’s that?”

At this, the man shrunk slightly, fidgeting. “I don’t know if I should say.”

“You should.”

“All right.” He looked down contritely. “Herr Krause has been behaving… oddly, as of late. Or perhaps not. Perhaps he is behaving perfectly normally, locked inside a set of catacombs in the desert.”

Brink and Trail both stood up straight. “Sorry?” they chorused.

“No one has seen him in weeks. He has shut himself inside a gargantuan tomb west of here. He may in fact be dead from starvation. Or he might not. I suspect the only person who knows for sure is the man himself.”

“Can you take us to him?” Trail inquired tentatively, putting his head at a skeptical angle.

“Of course not,” snapped Brink. “He’s a bartender, not a tour guide.”

He glowered, then caught himself. “Sadly true. I cannot myself guide you to Herr Krause. I can, however, provide you with his whereabouts.” He pulled from within the folds of his clothing a piece of paper and scrawled a crude map on it hastily, punctuating Krause’s location with an enormous X. “I trust the two of you can find your own way to this destination?”

“We just flew from Peru to Egypt in a two-seater, amigo. We can do literally anything.”

• • • • •

The adventurer and his companion left the chamber, and as they did, a dark silhouette sprinted away from the obscured outside window.

• • • • •

“So that was the weirdest bartender ever,” Trail huffed, after a humbling exit through a cramped and convoluted back alley. The mob inside the building had begun banging on the door, and the odd little man had swiftly pushed them through a door in the back wall that they had overlooked.

“I liked him,” Brink replied. “I think we really impressed that guy.”

“Maybe so, but didn’t anything about him… bother you?”

“Nope,” came the abrupt rebuttal.

“Maybe the fact that he never told us his name?”

“Lots of folks get secretive about stuff like that.”

“About their names?”

“Why not?”

“It just seems weird that—“

Brink whirled in place and pointed accusingly. “His name is his own damn business, you understand me? His. His alone. Nobody needs to worry about it but him, and that’s the way it oughtta be.”

“Fine, fine. Caramba. Calm down.”

He didn’t say a word in response.

“Are you sulking?”

“No. Shut your face. I’m gonna get a shawarma. Don’t follow me.”

• • • • •

The ceiling in the central chamber was fifty feet high and engraved with images of a stern Teutonic face. Krause paced beneath it in a straight line as his servant entered and dropped to one knee.

“They are on their way. The two foreigners.”

He stopped walking. “They have been given my location?”

“Yes. A bartender in the city pointed it out to them.”

Krause smiled. “Good. Let them come. I have dealt with far more capable men.”

He glanced up at his latest project, towering above his head, tunneling into the ceiling, all metal and mirror and light. “And soon, I won’t need to deal with any more of them.”

• • • • •

A red face full of scabs poked mouselike through the doorway. “Message for Agent Caraway.”

Caraway rose to his full, unimpressive height and stretched hideously. “’Important message,’ or just ‘message’?”

“Envelope says ‘urgent.’” The boy’s voice cracked from anxiety and unbalanced hormones. “Are you going somewhere? Should I just leave it on your desk?”

“No, no, give it here,” the agent snapped. He sent the boy away and tore at the packaging of the letter.

"…Christ."

TO: AGENT HORACE CARAWAY

FROM: O5-4

SUBJECT: SCP-960

Tracking device 0145-Y9 ceased broadcasting at 2216 hours on

July 12. It was last used in a briefcase containing classified Foundation documents, and its last signal came from a residential section of Cairo, Egypt. We believe it is possible that an unknown party has disabled the device and stolen the files. This, if true, is unacceptable.

Tracking device 1248-Y3 continues to broadcast from Cairo. Our records indicate that you are using it to trace a man assigned to recover SCP-960. Having lost the documents provided him, he has proven to be a liability; having already read the documents, he is now a liability in the possession of sensitive information.

You may consider this the last in a sequence of warnings. Failing in the following task will result in your immediate discharge from the SCP Foundation:

You are hereby ordered to eliminate the security risk posed by Brink Dangerguts.

previous chapter • • •

Brink Dangerguts and the Shard of Thermopylae

Broken Light Hub

Here's a tale of Broken Light.
A final playground for tonight.

SCP-1562
Has claustrophobia for you.

SCP-2041
Keeps kids safe but not much fun.

SCP-2224
Will launch you through the sky's trap door.

SCP-2483
Forgot what happy used to be.

Prologue: Your Dream Is Not Terribly Marketable

And He Will Crash Upon the Rocks - This Lighthouse is FUBAR, Chael

Origin: One Day Your Toes May Reach The Trees

Earth Dander - Angels In The Atmosphere

The First Failure: Tunnel Slide Gets Dark Reeeeaaal Quick, Goddamn

She Makes The Pitch - An Enchanting Encounter With Iss

The Second Failure: Merry-Go-View Says You're a Pedo

The Mad, Part 1 - When You Never Ask Yourself If You Should

The Third Failure: Teeter-Pult Might Need Some WD-40

The Mad, Part 2 - Megatron Would Be So Proud

The Final Failure: How To Be The Worst Swing Set Ever

The Mad, Part 3 - Rub His Nose In The Carpet

Life Unlived: My Time With The Emotional Discordance Unit

The Rigorous Rules of Antagonism - Toph Would Steal Candy From A Star Baby

A Flicker of Hope: The Things We Did While You Slept

A Luminous Puzzle - Chael, You Do The Border First

Epilogue: A Happy Never-Ending

Prologue: Your Dream Is Not Terribly Marketable

"I just…I mean…look at this. How am I supposed to say no to him again?" Project Manager Willem Koning lamented.

Project Director Edvin Jonasson stared hard at his underling, his face not betraying the jumble of conflicting thoughts running through his mind. He looked at the plastic model on his desk in front of him, and resisted the urge to examine it more thoroughly.

"You're not going to say no to him again," Jonasson finally said. He knew his voice sounded stern, but the edge he purposely added to it was artificial, though he didn't think Koning could tell.

"I'm not?" Koning's look of surprise had a hint of optimism to it. Jonasson quickly shut it down.

"No, you're going to fire him. And if you don't think you can do it, then *I'll* do it, and I won't hold it against you," Jonasson replied. He meant it, too. He knew how everyone felt about Lindahl. Hell, he liked the guy as much as anyone else.

Koning sighed reflexively. They both knew the day had been coming, but days like that always arrived quicker than anyone wanted. "No. I can do it myself. I'll let you know right now that I'm going to hate you for this a little bit. Everyone will." There was no anger or bitterness in the manager's voice.

"I know. I hate myself a little for this already. But you know as well as I do that the time he is wasting by pretending he can just do whatever he wants is going to catch up to all of us eventually. The VP is already breathing down my neck, simply because breathing down people's necks is at the top of her job description. What do you think would happen if she heard about Lindahl's little projects?"

"Well, I imagine your neck would start to smell like mint and

cabernet. And then you'd start hounding me, and I'd resent you for it. Then I'd start hounding Lindahl, and he'd resent me for it, but not before giving me that sad puppy dog look he has when he thinks you're crushing his dreams. Then I'd resent myself, and then *I'd* be the one drinking wine in my office and trying to cover it up with too many breath mints."

It was Jonasson's turn to sigh reflexively. Lindahl's sad puppy dog look truly did make you feel like a bastard, though he supposed that was the trade off for his infectious laughter that always cheered up the entire department like nitrous oxide was being pumped through the AC vents. Morale was going to plummet, he thought. His eyes strayed from Koning's distressed grimace, back to the model on his desk again. Koning followed his boss's gaze, and this time they sighed in unison. They might have laughed at their synchronicity if they hadn't been so occupied with hating the circumstances that lead to it.

Jonasson's earlier resistance escaped him, and he found himself spinning the small merry-go-round with his finger tip. He ran his finger down the slide, pushed the teeter totter up and down, and gave an under-duck to the small plastic figure sitting on the swings.

"It's almost creepy, isn't it?"

Koning's voice seemed slightly far away, as if he was standing ten meters away instead of just one. Jonasson started to feel a strange happiness come over him. It was a mild euphoria that reminded him of Lindahl's laugh, which reminded him of the sad puppy dog face, which reminded him to stop fingering the damn toy and remember that his job wasn't the only one at stake.

"Sorry, what did you say?"

"I said it's almost creepy. There's just something subtle about it, something under the surface that evokes nostalgia and childhood and fond memories. Or maybe I'm just a sap." Koning shuffled his feet nervously as his boss stared into space, apparently mulling over his words.

Jonasson finally spoke after an uncomfortable 15 seconds. This

time, the edge in his voice was not artificial. "No, it's not creepy. It's sad. It's sad that we can't do something a little different for once, because a licensed IP makes more money than anything original these days. It's sad that money rules everything, even children's toys. It's sad that I understand why it's necessary for things to be this way, and that I usually don't give it a second thought. But the saddest thing? The thing that just makes me want to tear out what's left of my hair? The saddest thing, Willem, is that a grown man can't do what he's told long enough to keep the job we all know he considers his dream.

"It would be great if we could do a playground theme, or a park theme, or whatever. But it's not in the cards, and everyone gets that except Lindahl. We all ignore reality sometimes, Willem. If we didn't, he'd have been fired years ago because, and I know nobody likes to think about this, we let him get away with behavior that would have been cause for termination if it came from anyone else. I don't know if it's that damn laugh of his, or his child-like earnestness, or what, but I'm breaking that spell. You can't ignore reality forever. *We* can't ignore reality forever. If Lindahl wants to try and ignore it for the rest of his life, that's fine by me. But he won't be doing it here, because I like my job, Willem. And if you like your job, you'll go tell him he's being let go, hate me for it for a little while, and get the fuck over it."

Jonasson's eyes began to water as he spoke the word "fuck". For another man, having to blink back tears might have undermined the intensity of the speech, or perhaps even caused a subordinate like Koning to lose respect for him. Willem Koning, however, only felt shaken at the sight of his 62-year-old boss's glistening eyes.

"Edvin, you know I'll do it. I think…I think I just need to remember that before Lindahl, this place wasn't some dank black hole where joy went to die. It's always been a nice workplace with its ups and downs. Sometimes it's relaxing, sometimes it's stressful, but we all love our jobs here. Lindahl's absence isn't going to ruin that."

Jonasson dabbed at his eyes with a tissue from his desk. He gave himself a mental pat on the back for fighting to save Koning's job years ago, during the company's biggest financial struggle of their long history. "No, it's not going to ruin anything, of course. I'm sure some people will be sour for awhile, and they'll blame me, but

eventually things will go back to normal."

"I'm starting to think that we haven't known 'normal' in quite some time. Do you ever remember feeling like this? Before Lindahl, I mean?" Koning didn't wait for an answer. "I mean, I'm actually starting to feel pretty gung-ho about showing the door to our resident slacker, but then I look down at that little playground…" Koning's voice drifted off sleepily.

Jonasson looked down at the model again. He thought about Koning's words, and somewhere in his mind he made a connection. He felt the familiar pull to pick up and examine Lindahl's creation, and he realized with sudden clarity that it actually frightened him. Jonasson picked up the model, and stood up from his chair. Before Koning could say anything, the director hurled Lindahl's pet project against the far wall of his office. Plastic shrapnel bounced off Koning's torso, repelled by his business casual armor, as the startled manager attempted to assess what had just taken place. He turned to look at the now scratched and dented wall, then back to his boss.

Jonasson sat down in his office chair without a glance at his shaken employee. He moused away the screen saver on his computer, opened up his email, and began deleting anything containing industry buzz words. It was an activity that always calmed him, and gave a surprising amount of satisfaction. He heard his office door open and close as Koning left to tell a very nice man that his dream was not terribly marketable at this point in time, and that he would need to seek employment elsewhere.

The director's eyes were now curiously dry as he skimmed through the contents of each email. Many could be deleted after simply reading the subject line, but some of them were more misleading. Delete. Delete. Delete. *Oh, yes, I know how important ergonomics are, thank you HR.* Delete. Delete. Delete. The next email was from a project coordinator named Chad, who worked at the Connecticut office thousands of miles away. The subject line had seemed very promising.

"Oh Chad," Jonasson said to no one in particular. "I was considering sending a reply, until you mentioned 'core competencies'. I no longer

wish to 'touch base' with you, I'm afraid."

The mouse pointer hovered over the "delete" option. Jonasson could hear voices from somewhere outside his office. Somebody sounded very upset.

"*Slette*," said the project director, the word barely a whisper as his eyes began to water again.

Click.

---

when he arrives
the lighthouse will be deserted
and he will crash upon the rocks

« **Hub** | **And He Will Crash Upon the Rocks** »

And He Will Crash Upon The Rocks

It is often said that when you die, your life flashes before your eyes. There is truth to that statement, to be sure, though it differs from the frenetic memory slideshow people envision their brain playing in the moments before or during their demise. In death, your life experiences are not confined to the substantially limited two and a half petabytes or so of memory your brain offers. Your life "flashes before your eyes" because you are suddenly gifted with the ability to recall everything you've ever seen, heard, smelled, tasted, and touched, now that you are unburdened with the heavy responsibility of life and its severe limitations. This is when you learn the difference between knowing, and *Knowing*, between knowledge and *Knowledge*. You become Light; a beacon in the darkness, a possible courier for a Child who sleeps and dreams of your existence. You will become a Messenger for the Child, or you can forsake that role as I did.

That is why I still Knew dread when I came back to my Home, though I had witnessed the birth and death of many stars since I last visited. Memories had become Knowledge which could not fade or be forgotten, and I had no one to blame but myself for straying close enough to Know the shrieking, writhing call of Broken Light. I spent countless eons of existence as a Stray, ignoring and fleeing the pull of the Child and my supposed purpose, but I was always powerless when it came to Broken Light; Light that has been shattered or twisted through unnatural means. I imagine that compulsive force was a purposeful failsafe from the Child itself; a gift to its philanthropic Messengers and a bane to Strays like me, a reminder that I was never truly in control of my fate. We were all drawn towards that which needed to be fixed, to be healed.

KAHHH!!! KAHHH!!! KAHHH!!!

Home loomed in front of me; my place of origin, a dead world I had

vowed I would never return to. I could not relieve myself of Knowing what had brought me here, but now I could at least prioritize the Knowledge of Home over the Knowledge of my irksome situation. There was no longer anything or anyone to Know here; even the Angels had fled at some point in time, though their unique brand of stubbornness likely kept them in place for far longer than could be considered sensible. Not that I would have ever considered them to have anything resembling sensibility. I wondered when the first cracks in their solidarity appeared. Did they stay to the very end? Did they understand they'd been lying to themselves all this time? I doubted I would receive answers to my questions, and the pull was too strong now for me to linger. I would have to continue my pondering below.

I descended to the surface, passing through what used to be an atmosphere, beckoned by the continuous shriek below as I steeled myself to become a tool of the Child and fix what was broken. A landscape of empty, sun-scorched earth confronted me. This corner of the galaxy might have been withering away and losing its tether to reality, but some other calamity was certainly responsible for cleansing my old Home of humanity. Whatever it might have been, it likely left as quickly as it first arrived, indifferent to the extraordinary circumstances that must have put it on its collision path with my Home. The pulsing shriek continued below me as I descended further beneath the rotted crust, my Light passing through matter which did nothing to impede my unwanted quest.

KAH!! KAH!! KALLL!!!

As I reached the origin of the gibbering squeals and spikes of distress that had compelled me back Home, I concentrated on my own Light. The last time I became corporeal was also the last time I had visited Home, and the effort I exerted back then had saved my Light as well as the Light of countless others. There was no reason not to take the same precaution now, and the sudden disorienting mixture of distorted Knowledge signified that I could now safely interact with the Broken Light I was nearing, and whatever may have caused it. I adjusted my senses, rusty with disuse, as I set foot on a floor for the first time in a very, very long while.

The scene before me brought the memory of my last visit Home to

mind: it was another massacre. At least that bastard Kuhn had kept the Light he stole mostly intact. Whatever was responsible for this new atrocity could boast no such precision. The room I found myself standing in looked like a children's playground had been clumsily combined with a high school science lab and a landslide. Rubble had claimed large sections of what obviously had been a laboratory, and playground equipment was haphazardly strewn about, much of it bent and broken. Broken Light glittered and screamed from every visible piece of metal from the former schoolyard fixtures, mewling at me like an angry, injured kitten. So *this* was why I was here.

Kah! Kall! Kall!!

Clarity provided itself to me as I continued to concentrate on shielding my Light with my corporeal form, while I walked from each piece of equipment, touching it, and attempting to Know it. This was different from Kuhn; this was self inflicted. Someone had broken their own Light, and it now littered the room in the form of destroyed playground equipment, like grey matter from a shotgun suicide.

I could not make sense of the chaos. I could not Know anything. Why playground equipment? Why in this laboratory? Why and how did someone break their own Light?

Chael!

The shock of sensing that name did not prevent me from noticing the shrieks and spikes had stopped. The Broken Light was speaking to me. The voice came from all directions at once.

Is that your name? Chael? I'm not sure how I knew it, it just seemed right.

What was happening here? In my immeasurable time as a Stray I had seen stars shatter, worlds unfold, civilizations rise and fall and rise and fall again, but never had I encountered Broken Light that could speak, or Know my name for that matter. This was not the corpse of a Messenger, or another Stray; this was a mutant, a Light that never should have been.

Can you hear me?

The only way I could communicate, even in corporeal form, was to let my Light into the Light of another. But Broken Light? There was a reason I was shielding myself from it. I wasn't some foolish Messenger; I was not looking to meet new and different things with sickening enthusiasm.

I think you can hear me. This way.

My concerns were starting to lose priority as I searched for the source of the voice, which was no longer coming from all around me. Anxious confusion was turning into curiosity.

Here, Chael. I'm here.

It came from the half-crushed frame of a swing set that had begun its slow descent into disintegration quite some time ago. I approached it as the caution I usually wielded like a shield was slowly drained from me. This was definitely not normal Broken Light.

I'm glad you came.

I was glad too. As I let my Light into the talking swing set, memories that were not my own invaded my corporeal senses, becoming Knowledge. At first, they trickled in like a stream, but soon I was swimming in a newly formed ocean, gasping for breath as I decided whether to sink or swim.

I haven't been glad for a very long time.

Slowly I sank to the bottom, watching as bubbles passed me by. Lazily, I reached out to touch one.

I can tell you about it.

Okay, but we do not have much time left.

---

when your toes can finally reach the trees
be sure to bring your mind along with them

« **Prologue: Your Dream Is Not Terribly Marketable** | **Hub** |

Origin: One Day Your Toes May Reach the Trees »

Origin: One Day Your Toes May Reach The Trees

"Ha, yes! Finally!"

"What you talking about, Mommy?"

Zeb Rafferty carefully buckled himself into the car seat in the back of his mother's mid-size SUV. He waited patiently for an answer, but his mother was too preoccupied with her game of Cookie Craze to acknowledge him at first.

"What happened, Mommy?"

"Nothing. Don't worry about it," was her terse reply. Still staring at her phone screen, Rachael Rafferty turned the key in the ignition and the engine rumbled to life. The look of annoyance on her face softened as she dropped the phone into her purse on the passenger seat. She turned to look at her son.

"Did you have fun at the park, Zeb?" she asked, sounding almost *too* concerned.

Zeb responded excitedly. "Yeah! I went on the slides, and then I swinged for a long time 'cause the swings are my favorite. I made a new friend too!"

"That's good. What's your new friend's name?" Rachael asked as she pulled out of the parking space, stopping just in time to prevent a collision with a sedan she hadn't noticed at first.

"His name is Daniel! He lives in Demmerk!" The giddiness in Zebulon's voice was fueled by the rare occasion to continue a conversation with his mother.

"Where the heck is Demmerk?" Rachael asked. She seemed to recognize the annoyance that had crept into her voice again as she

executed her fifth rolling stop of the day. "Is he just visiting?"

"Daniel tolded me Demmerk is in Yurp. He is not visiting, he lives in Demmerk right now."

"Daniel *told* you, not *tolded* you." It drove Rachael nuts that Zeb hadn't learned that yet. "How can he be in Demmerk and Rochester at the same time? Were you talking to him on a phone, Zebby?"

"No, he tolded me he is not really here."

"Ugh, Zeb, are you messing with me? He *told* you, not *tolded*. And what do you mean he's not really here? Is he an imaginary friend?" A car honked as she went straight from the lane designated for right turns. Zeb could hear his mother chide herself quietly for the error.

"No Mommy, he is not 'maginary. Daniel tolded me he lives in Demmerk but he could see and talk to me. I ask him how he do that but he don't know," Zeb pleaded. He was already subconsciously preparing for some level of condescension.

His mother surprised him. "It's okay, Zebby." Rachael sighed, oblivious to the green arrow signifying it was time to turn left. Another car honked. "There's nothing wrong with having an imaginary friend. And remember it's *told*, not *tolded*."

"He is *not* 'maginary. Daniel tolded…told me he is thirty-nine years old and he is very sad."

"Oh Zebby, I told you about talking to strangers at the park! You're lucky the guy didn't snatch you up and throw you in a van. You should be smarter than that!" The look on her face in the rear view mirror told Zeb that she regretted her words, but he spoke before she could say anything else.

"He is not a guy, Mommy! He is a swing! Swings can't snatch you, can they, Mommy?"

Zeb could see her processing his words before she responded, as their SUV cheerfully continued to ignore the speed limit. "A swing? What do you mean he's a swing?"

"When I swinging it talked to me, but not in my ears, in my head. It tolded me to call him Daniel. Daniel was sad and he tolded me that he lives in Demmark and sometimes he can see other places." Zeb waited for his mother to question him again, but now she was silent. He continued, "He tolded me that I look like a very nice boy and he asked me how many years I old. I tolded him I four and Daniel asked if I like swings a lot. I tolded him I looooove swings so much and they are my favorite 'cause you can be up high and try to kick leaves, but I not a big boy yet so I can't kick leaves." Zeb looked down at his small feet and sighed. A car honked angrily somewhere close by.

Rachael surprised him again with her next question. "What else did Daniel talk about?"

Zeb happily continued, "I asked Daniel why he is sad and he tolded me he is sad 'cause he did bad things and it made him alone. Daniel likes playgrounds but they make him be sad sometimes. I sad for Daniel and I wanted to make him be happy. I tolded him jokes and he liked them. He tolded me they were very funny, but he doesn't laugh. I asked Daniel if he had a mommy and daddy, but he doesn't anymore. He only has a wife but she is not his wife anymore and she is far away. He had a big company too but he lost it. I wanted to talk to Daniel more but I sawed my watch and it time to go." Zeb proudly held up his wrist to look at the small watch his uncle Derek had given him for his 4th birthday. Various cartoon characters decorated the red plastic.

Rachael took a few slow breaths. A sudden bump startled her; the SUV had nicked the curb as she pulled into their driveway. The garage door opened automatically, and she brought the vehicle to a stop inside the garage, for once not hitting the lawnmower. She turned off the ignition and turned around to look at her son.

"That's a very interesting story, Zeb. Though…" Rachael paused as if to consider her next words. "Maybe next time we go to the park you can try talking to the other kids there."

Rachael opened the driver side door and stepped out of the SUV. She double checked that her phone was secure in the proper pocket of her purse, then looked at Zeb in the back seat again. "I just think

it's time you made some real friends, Zebby. I bet your father probably feels the same."

Zeb opened his mouth to respond, but his mother's cell phone started ringing before he could utter a word. As Rachael answered the phone and started what would undoubtedly be a very long chat, Zeb began to unbuckle himself from his car seat. His mother shut her door, and was already heading inside the house as Zeb opened his own door and exited the vehicle. He looked down at the garage floor to see the small dinosaur toy his mother had forgotten to bring to the park for him. Zeb realized she must have dropped it before she got in the vehicle, and he felt a pang of guilt for being so upset with her for arriving at the park empty handed. He picked up the plastic dinosaur, a Lambeosaurus he called "Albert", to make sure he was unharmed. Zeb glanced towards the doorway leading to the kitchen, wanting to be certain his mother was out of earshot before he spoke. The pang of guilt had quickly passed.

"I'm glad she didn't run *you* over. Maybe you and I should move to Denmark," Zeb informed the toy hadrosaur, unaware of the changes in his own speech. He perked up at the sound of his mother rummaging through cabinet which housed their pots and pans. "Mommy's probably making macaroni and cheese for supper again. I *told* you that she would make it again, Albert. I guess we should go set the table."

The lights on Zeb Rafferty's shoes blinked happily as he made his way towards the kitchen. He found himself wondering what his father was having for supper back at his apartment. *Probably Thai food again,* he thought. Zeb hated Thai food. He took his shoes off as he entered the kitchen, carefully closing the door behind him and listening to make sure it latched properly, then he watched his mother retrieve a small package from the fridge. *Oh*, he thought. *At least she's making it with hotdogs this time.*

That night, Zeb dreamed of a one-sided conversation. He would remember none of it in the morning.

Do you have any brothers or sisters?

Oh. Oh I'm so sorry that happened.

You know that wasn't your fault, right?

I don't know. If there is, I'm sure he's there now.

It shouldn't be like that. You're a smart boy, I can tell.

Maybe not right now, but one day, Zeb, your toes may reach the trees. If that day comes, remember that all the good and bad things in your life are what brought you there.

I used to have dreams too. I've had most of them taken away.

No, I don't think so. I've made too many mistakes. Hurt too many people.

That's true, but some are much worse than others.

No, I can't. It will not matter how sorry I am, I'm afraid.

If only it were so easy.

---

once they might have been something
now they were dandruff on the shoulders of the world
shed by its will, and forever memorialized in script

« **And He Will Crash Upon The Rocks** | **Hub** | **Earth Dander** »

Burnt Bridges

"Alright Daniel," said ***Agent Dimaccio*** *as he slid a final form across his desk towards Daniel Navarro. "Sign here and your training will be complete. You'll officially be classified as a Foundation specialist."*

"Let's get it over with then," Navarro replied. "Got a pen?"

Dimaccio gave a small chuckle as he quickly slid the document back towards him.

"As much as I appreciate the enthusiasm, I don't think you fully realize what your signature will mean. Daniel Navarro the anartist will officially be dead. Agent Navarro will take his place. That means that all of your former friends and colleagues will be POIs first, and friends second, if they can even still be considered friends at that point. Your signature here will burn a lot of bridges. Just… take a few seconds, at least, to consider if those are bridges you can afford to never cross again."

"And what, waste all this time we spent training? Have my mind wiped so the Foundation can leave me in a gutter somewhere?" Navarro asked.

"Don't be so dramatic," Dimaccio replied. "We wouldn't do that to you, at least not now… Listen, my point is that this is the final checkpoint. The fail safe. God knows we train enough agents who don't get to hit the brakes here when it would have been better for everyone if they did. Just take a second…"

Navarro nodded and thought back to all of his friends from Portland, Jill, Tom, Alexis, Jackson, Jericho, Eric, Tanya, Francis, and Elizabeth.

“Alright. That should do it.” Dimaccio said as he slid the document back across the desk.

Navarro quickly signed it without another moment’s hesitation.

“And that is that,” Dimaccio smiled. “Welcome aboard, Agent Navarro.”

Series Overview:

In mid 2004, known anartist Daniel Navarro was apprehended by Foundation personnel following a raid on his apartment in Portland, Oregon. In exchange for serving as a double agent for the Foundation, Navarro avoided being amnestitized and in 2005 was officially employed as a Foundation agent, serving as an anart specialist and liaison between various anart groups. However, someone with as many connections as Agent Navarro doesn't simply join the Foundation without stepping on more than a few toes, and past actions are very quick to haunt him…

- Part 1: 15-11-2012
- Part 2: Meeting Over Coffee
- Part 3: JTH
- Part 4: The Templar Incident
- Part 5: Bridges Burnt

15-11-2012

The air was still as snow fell upon a forest clearing outside of Minsk. Here and there a few dead tuffs of grass would appear above the powder, but otherwise the blanket of snow was pristine. At the center was a single, black, pine coffin with a white orthodox cross adorning its lid.

By the clearing's edge stood two men and one woman. Each turned to the others in silence before one, a tall man with a chin coated with a thick layer of stubble, nodded for them to continue. They were Researcher Lee, Researcher Hastings and Agent Navarro. The date was November 15th, 2012. **SCP-1760-16** had returned.

Normally, 1760-16 was identical to other 1760 instances save for the name Pyotr Astapenov etched onto the lid. This year, however, twelve additional names were present. Each one belonged to a prominent anartist on the Foundation's watch list. It was for this reason Agent Navarro, anart specialist, now found himself in Belarus.

As they approached the casket, a loud scratching sound could be heard. They stopped moving and watched as a single name appeared etched onto the lid below the others.

Daniel Navarro

"That's… really unsettling." Researcher Lee commented as she eyed Navarro. Her feet refused to carry her closer.

"This is the first time one of the instances has been externally altered. I don't like this at all." Researcher Hastings also kept his distance. "What do you think, Navarro?"

"Keep to the plan," Navarro replied. "We're safe if we don't open the box." He coolly gestured for the researchers to proceed.

Without another word the two researchers went to work. With the same level of care one might use to clean a glass figurine, they measured, listened, and recorded. Navarro stood at the ready, hand on his pistol as he looked for calamity to strike. As the researchers worked the casket remained silent.

Eventually, all requested data had been collected. 1760-16 had failed to produce little more than a creak the entire time. The researchers and agents stepped back and looked upon the coffin quizzically.

“This is it?” Lee’s chuckle faded into a frown. “Just names engraved onto the lid?”

“It would appear so,” Hastings nervously giggled. “I guess we just wait for the 20th now.”

Navarro nodded in agreement. One by one, each made their way back to the nearby facility. Before heading through the door, Agent Navarro gave one last look back at the coffin. His eyes glanced over the white cross that adorned its lid. He felt the coffin staring back. Navarro quietly shivered and turned away, closing the door behind him.

The next four days came and went without incident. Unfortunately, this made the site personnel more and more uneasy the closer November 20th came. The night of the 19th was by far the worst. Few in the facility could sleep. The rest were fixated on the sword of Damocles sitting in the front yard.

This is how Agent Navarro found himself walking towards the clearing at 11:15 PM. The thick trees appeared to twist around him in the dark as he slowly crept through the snow. As he approached the clearing’s edge, three security officers emerged from the trees. Their hands tightly gripped their guns as they moved to intercept the intruder. Upon seeing it was Navarro, the officers frowned, but waved him through with a nod.

For a few moments Navarro stood motionless at the edge of the clearing. The moonlight illuminated the snow and cast a white glow

on the waiting coffin. By its side, Navarro could make out the silhouette of a woman. He could feel his hand reach for his pistol as he approached, but relaxed after seeing that it was just Researcher Lee.

“Couldn’t sleep?” he asked.

“What… what are you doing out here?” Researcher Lee, gasping, turned on the spot.

“I could ask you the same thing,” Navarro replied with a small smile. “This thing really has everyone on edge, doesn’t it?”

“You can’t blame them.” Lee turned back to face the coffin as she whispered. She was there in 2006. She remembered how a pig carcass erupted from 1760-16 and exploded in a shower of human bones. One of her colleague’s heads had been pierced by half a femur. A piece of rib had left a deep gash in her right thigh. They remained silent for several minutes before Navarro placed a hand on her shoulder. Lee shivered.

“You can’t help but feel the shit is going to hit the fan in the next few seconds. Even if they brought a specialist out to ensure all goes well.” Lee nervously smiled. “No offense.”

“None taken,” Navarro said with a shrug. “To be honest I’m not sure what they exactly thought I could do out here. Normally I’m assigned to deal with anart threats, but this object didn’t really give me that ‘anart feel’ when I read its file.”

“Well, it was on display when we found it,” Lee replied. “Someone wanted others to see their work.”

“Maybe, I mean it does have a ‘hey look at this cool thing’ quality to it. But, pig bombs…”

“The 1760-16’s didn’t appear until after we started containing this site, though…” Lee looked at her watch. It was now 11:30 PM. 1760-16 would be gone in 30 minutes.

“I can stand watch if you want to head back and try to get some sleep,” Navarro said with a smile. Without a word she returned his

smile with a nod. Lee then began to make her way back towards the facility.

Navarro turned back to the casket. He waved to the several nearby security cameras before taking a seat on the grass as he waited alone. Fifteen minutes passed. The silence was unbreakable.

“Hello, Daniel,” a male voice whispered from the coffin.

“Shit!” Navarro jumped to his feet. A shard of ice ran up his spine as he drew his pistol. The security officer were quick to run to his side, but stopped when Navarro held up his hand for them to stand down.

“Frightened, are we?” The voice softly chuckled. It spoke English but had a very thick eastern European accent.

“Hello there, I guess…” Navarro’s eyes narrowed as he held his gun steady. “Who the hell are you?”

“In a prior life I was known as Pyotr Astapenov. I was a skilled mortician, a respected scientist, and a gentleman. If you would be so kind as to open the lid, you may see for yourself.” The voice whispered.

“There is no way in hell that’s going to happen,” Navarro replied. “There was nothing anomalous about Pyotr when we poked around his grave. You’ve got a huge hole in your story, pal.”

“I was afraid you might say that,” the voice sighed. “They’ve really changed you. Your curiosity has been replaced with certainty. What a shame.”

“You sure know a lot about me considering we just met,” Navarro said.

“Because I know your breed,” the voice whispered. “You’re an artist. They may have you dress in a suit, hand you a gun, and ask you to apprehend your brethren, Daniel, but you are still an artist at heart. One with a heavily compromised sense of morality, mind you, but an artist all the same.”

“I don’t understand,” said Navarro. “Where are on earth are you

going with this?"

"My point is that you don't want to open this casket to catalogue it like a scientist. You recognize the importance not only in expression, but expression in a manner that is truly unique. I've met plenty of men like you, and can guess that it's torturing you to not know what's inside this coffin."

The security officers looked at Navarro nervously. All seemed to hold their breath waiting for Navarro's response.

"I've got a pretty good idea what's in your box," Navarro replied. "Sorry champ, but I'm not opening it."

"So sure of yourself yet again," the voice said. "Are you afraid that I am just some horror waiting to be let out of my cage? Or, that I just might be Pyotr after all?"

"Fuck it. I'm not going to play this game with you." Navarro shook his head. "What I do saves the lives of both anartists and civilians. If that makes me a sell-out, so be it. I'll be the biggest sell out ever." Without another word he took a few steps back and looked at his watch. 11:55 PM.

"So be it…" the voice said. There was a crack like a shotgun blast. All of the nails that kept the coffin lid sealed flew out of the wood. Navarro and the security officers readied their weapons. Their eyes widened as the coffin lid creaked open.

It was empty.

"It must truly be troubling to have sold your soul as you have, Daniel. Regardless of what you say to yourself to allow you to sleep at night, you have sold your soul. It is a shame. You had such promise," the voice called from inside.

Navarro didn't respond. The last few moments passed in silence. Upon the stroke of midnight the casket began to sink into the earth, eventually vanishing into the ground.

"Christ…" Navarro let out a heavy sigh, and sat back down on the ground to gaze at the sky. The report for this was going to be a

nightmare.

Agent Navarro stood quietly over the grave of Pyotr Astapenov. He had wasted no time in obtaining clearance to re-exhume the remains. As much as he hated to admit it, the voice had been right to a certain degree about his curiosity. This seemed as good a means as any to put that feeling to rest.

Eventually the crew succeeded in reaching Pyotr's casket. Upon Navarro's order they opened it. Pyotr's body was still present and displaying the expected decay of a man buried in 1959. Unfortunately, there was a small piece of paper held tightly within his right hand. One of the crew quietly handed it to Navarro. It contained a single note.

Daniel,
I knew you wouldn't be able to resist.
See you soon.
J. T. H.

Navarro sat down on the edge of the grave. He buried the note in his fist as he gave a nervous laugh.

"Well shit."

«START | **Hub** | **Meeting Over Coffee»**

Meeting Over Coffee

Daniel Navarro sat alone at a secluded table in a coffee house in Portland. Rather than the usual attire he wore while acting as an agent for the Foundation, here he sat in a set of street clothes. Spread out on the table before him was a series of eleven notes.

> *The clock has struck one, Daniel.*
> *~ JTH*

> *The clock is at two.*
> *~ JTH*

> *Tick tock, we're now at three.*
> *~ JTH*

> *The bells toll four.*
> *~ JTH*

> *Time is running out, Daniel. The clock strikes five.*
> *~ JTH*

> *Half way there. The clock strikes six.*
> *~ JTH*

> *The hour is seven, Daniel.*
> *~ JTH*

> *The pendulum swings, and now it is eight.*
> *~ JTH*

> *Time grows short. The ninth hour is at hand.*
> *~ JTH*

> *Are you frightened, Daniel. The clock strikes ten.*
> *~ JTH*

> *Hour Eleven. See you soon.*

~ JTH

Each one had been found at the last eleven anart sites Navarro had been assigned to. While he was not one to scare easily, Navarro would be lying if he said he wasn't feeling slightly uneasy. Whoever JTH was, it now appeared they were making good on their promise from Belarus. They were coming to see him soon.

Navarro quietly folded up the notes and placed them in his jacket pocket. He then took a sip of coffee as he rubbed his temple and waited for his guest to arrive.

A short while later she did.

Navarro waved to her as she found her way to the back of the coffee house. She was a tall, pale woman in her mid-thirties with short black hair, dressed in a black rain jacket. Without a word she approached, choosing to stand by the table rather than take a seat. For a moment the two stared at each other, waiting for the other to speak.

“You know,” Navarro broke the silence, “I was half expecting you to not show up. Please, take a seat. Do you want anything to drink?”

The woman shook her head as she sat down.

“I figured that if I didn’t make an appearance here, you’d take it upon yourself to visit me at home or work,” she replied.

“You got me there,” Navarro said with a shrug. “How are you, Jill? Still teaching at that high school?”

“**The school was closed down in 2008,**” Jill said, “I’ve been working at a graphic design firm since.”

The table then fell silent. Jill simply starred at Navarro, her eyes a mixture of anger and sadness.

“I suppose I should get to onto business then,” Navarro sighed.

“That would be appreciated,” returned Jill.

Navarro then pulled a file out of his pack and slid it across the table, allowing Jill to open it before he spoke.

“My sources tell me you’re still involved in the Portland anart scene from time to time, I was hoping you could point me in the right direction of a particular artist. They’ve been making animated lawn gnomes. Normally they are harmless enough, stealing bits and bobs from sheds, moving things around at night, so on and so forth. However, recently a group of ten of them pummeled a local teenager unconscious and stole, among other things, his shoes,” Navarro chuckled slightly before taking another sip of his coffee. “Naturally, my employers sent me in to see who is making them and get things to cool down a bit.”

Jill closed the file and slid it across the table, folding her arms as she shook her head.

“Sorry, can’t help you out.”

“I see,” Navarro replied, setting his now empty mug down on the table. “Well, then, would you know someone who would know?”

“No.” Jill countered.

“Of course not,” Navarro sighed. “I’m sorry for bothering you then.”

He then placed the file back in his bag, a small smile on his face as he stood up.

“If you’re still married to Tom, please tell him I said hi,” said Navarro, “I saw that sculpture of his at the Portland Art Museum. It looks nice.”

Jill shook her head in response.

“How do you sleep at night?”

“Preferably on a bed,” Navarro replied, “But, I’m sure that’s not the answer you wanted.”

“When we heard you were nabbed by the Suits, we thought you were dead!” Jill hissed. “I don’t know about your friends in other

cities, but we held a fucking funeral here! Myself, Tom, Eric, Jackson, Alexis, hell even Jericho was there!"

Navarro opened his mouth to respond, but couldn't get the words out before Jill unleashed another wave.

"Now imagine how we felt two years later when we heard, not only that you were alive, but were working for **the Suits**, and leading a raid on the Baker's Seattle studio! How could you? Of all people, how could you work for them?"

Jill's hands were now closed into tight fists, the intensity of her glare enough to burn a hole through steel.

"And to top it off, you think you can just roll in here after all this time, as if nothing has happened, and ask me to help you?"

Navarro sighed and returned to his seat. For several moments he remained silent.

"Jill, humor me for a second," he began. "How many anartists do you personally know? No names, just give me a number."

"What does that have to do with…" she began, her expression now one of confusion.

"Just a number Jill," Navarro interrupted.

"… Eleven."

"Right, and I bet for the most part they are harmless, relatively normal people who picked up anart the same way someone picks up other hobbies, like you and your sketches," said Navarro. "For the most part they don't want to prove some point about society or harm people. But there are anartists out there who are like that. And the 'Suits' as you call them; they aren't in the habit of taking too much time to do the delicate task of determining the difference."

Navarro then reached back into his pack and pulled out the file and sliding it back across the table.

"That's where I come in," Navarro continued. "That's why I go to

people like you to find out who artists like whoever made these gnomes are, because if I don't find them first another agent will and I can almost guarantee they probably will not do as good a job as I do of keeping things civil. Unlike me, they haven't been on both sides of this. Yeah, maybe how I handled the uniform change wasn't the best way to go about things, but I do what I do to keep people like you out of the crossfire."

Jill fell silent as Navarro placed the file back into his pack. He then pulled out a box and placed it on the table.

"By the way, I almost forgot to give you this."

Jill opened it to find a small metal picture frame. Inside was a colored pencil sketch of a blue sailing ship at sea, the image moving over the waves on the paper. On occasion a bank of fog would appear, and then vanish, taking the ship along with it. The ship would reappear at the center of the image a few moments later. In the bottom corner she could see her initials.

"I stumbled across that in a raid on the east coast," Navarro said as he placed his pack back on his shoulders. "Since my employers were just going to place it in low priority storage until the end of time, I felt maybe it would be best if it just vanished one day and was returned to you."

Jill covered her hand over her mouth as she looked down at the picture and slowly nodded a 'thank you'.

"If I give you a name, will you promise they won't be hurt?" She then asked.

"I promise," Navarro replied.

"And you'll leave? Tom, Jackson, Alexis, and me; we'll never see you again?"

"If that's what you want."

Jill then quietly grabbed a napkin and quickly wrote down a name and address. She then folded the napkin up and handed it to Navarro.

“Thank you very much,” said Navarro as he pocketed the information.

Jill nodded and quietly placed the lid back on the box.

“You have a nice life, Jill.”

Without another word, Navarro stepped out of the coffee house and into the rainy Portland night.

Navarro traveled on foot for quite some time, gathering his thoughts as he made his way across the damp city-scape. As he stepped across an alley, he felt a sharp pain at the back of his neck, as if he was bitten by a bug. Quickly, he slapped at his assailant, only to find a piece of paper. Navarro silently read it to himself.

> *The clock strikes twelve.*
> *Hello Daniel.*

Navarro then glanced down the alley. There he saw a tall figure in a dark coat, a hat pulled low over their face, obscuring all view. Navarro watched as his vision then blurred, and his legs gave out from underneath him. He could see the figure begin to make its way down the alley toward him.

“Well shit,” Navarro mumbled as he finally blacked out.

«Part One: 15-11-2012 | Hub | Part Three: J. T. H.»

J. T. H.

Navarro groaned loudly as he placed his right hand to his head. He felt as if someone had attempted to crack it open, but failed and decided to punch it repeatedly instead. Slowly, he propped himself up and opened his eyes.

“Well then…” he mumbled to himself as he looked around.

Navarro was on top of a large polished steel platform in the center of what appeared to be an otherwise empty warehouse. At least three spotlights were shining down on him from somewhere above, making it difficult to see his surroundings. His jacket had been replaced with a black metal breastplate. The symbol of the SCP Foundation was engraved above his heart. Looking down, Navarro could see his reflection in the surface of the platform.

“God damn it, they made me art again, didn’t they…” he said as he rubbed his temples and very carefully got to his feet. It was then that a man’s voice pierced the darkness.

“If you value keeping your head and limbs attached to your torso, you’ll stay on the platform,” the voice said. “That breast plate has been rigged to seal off all holes in the event you step down from there. The same will happen if you try to remove it yourself. You’ll need someone else to do that for you. Oh, and don’t try anything magical. That will trigger it too.”

The voice was deep, and surprisingly non-threatening. Almost like a game show host. Navarro squinted against the spotlights and could barely see a tall figure standing in the distance, presumably the voice’s source.

“So what, the armor protects me, but is also deadly in and of itself?” Navarro addressed his host as he watched the figure meander closer.

“I call the piece ‘Reflections of Daniel Navarro,’” the man replied, stopping his gait just far enough to keep his face obscured in the darkness. He was dressed in a black business suit. A single leather glove covered his right hand. “Quaint, don’t you think?”

“A little too obvious if you ask me…” Navarro began as he looked down at his reflection in the platform. “I take it you’re JTH?”

The man didn’t respond. Instead, he pulled a small, black, leather bound notebook out of his pocket and quietly flipped to a page near its center.

“June, 2004. Daniel Navarro is apprehended by the Suits. He is assumed dead by a majority of his friends and family. A funeral is held for him in Portland, Oregon,” the man read aloud. “November, 2005. Daniel Navarro is spotted, both alive and well, leading a Suit raid on a studio in Seattle. The raid results in the destruction of at least $100,000 worth of art and materials that I had personally provided, and the arrest and presumed death of artists Francis and Elizabeth Baker, both of whom were acquaintances of Navarro prior to his apprehension, and were dear friends of mine. The local anart community is both in shock and pain from Navarro’s apparent turncoat nature.”

“They were building giant, lead sculptures of spiders that easily could have killed hundreds of people if they were…” Navarro protested, but paused as he felt the breast plate tighten around his torso. Looking up, he saw his host pointing at him with his gloved hand.

“Please, Daniel, if you’d be so kind as to let me finish, that would be appreciated,” the man said. He then flipped to the next page in his notebook. “March, 2007. Navarro personally leads a raid on a cache of supplies, which was due for shipment the following morning. The clay is subsequently destroyed, resulting in the stalling of at least five different projects, and a net loss of nearly five million dollars on my end.”

The man paused and looked up at Navarro before shaking his head.

“I lost a lot of ‘friends’ after that one,” he chuckled. “It’s pretty

astounding how fast some people will drop you when the weather turns foul. It didn't have to be that way though…"

The man then snapped his head back to his notebook, and proceeded to read.

"June, 2008. Agent Navarro leads an effort to destroy a piece titled, 'The Folly of the Censor,' killing its creator, Damion Cartwright, in the process," the man continued, stopping as Navarro laughed to himself.

"Let me guess, another friend?" Navarro asked, stopping as he felt the armor tighten again.

"A very, very, close friend," the man said between clenched teeth, his gloved hand clenched tight as he held it at Navarro. "And if eyewitnesses are to be believed, you engulfed him in nuclear fire, and then shot him in the fucking head."

The man then relieved the pressure, and looked down at his notebook again, chuckling as he then shook his head.

"All those incidents are enough for me to hate you, Daniel. The fact that you are a turn coat, the fact that you have cost me more money than most people see in their lifetimes, the fact that you have killed some of my closest friends… but this last one is what really takes the cake. November, 2010. Agent Navarro leads a raid on a warehouse in Portland, resulting in a standoff between Foundation forces and the warehouse occupants and contents. The occupants, Tanya and Eric Hill, are slain. The latter was my brother. The former was my wife."

"Wait…" Navarro said as the man stepped into light. He had short blond hair and was clean shaven. His eyes were bloodshot and his lips were curved into a regretful smile. "Jericho…"

Navarro's mouth hung slightly open. When they had last spoken almost a decade prior, Jericho T. Hill was a wealthy businessman who had found a hobby as a patron for both anomalous and non-anomalous art within Portland. He had been a kind soul, but seemed to fade out of the public eye around late 2004 for reasons unknown.

Now, however, the kindness was gone. Standing before Navarro was a man entirely drained of energy and emotion.

“Hello Daniel,” he said. “It sure has been a while hasn’t it? I don’t think there is anyone else on this planet you’ve screwed over more than me and my friends.”

Jericho then removed a pistol from his jacket pocket, holding it loosely in his ungloved hand. Navarro recognized the sidearm as his own.

“So is that it?” Navarro asked. “Are you going to shoot me with my own gun? “

“You know, I hadn’t thought of that,” Jericho chuckled as he analyzed the pistol. “I suppose it would be easy wouldn’t it? I could pop you in the head here and wash my hands of this. But that wouldn’t bring back all my friends, that wouldn’t bring back Eric, and that certainly wouldn’t bring back Tanya. No, that wouldn’t be the way to handle things.”

Jericho then petted the pistol with his gloved hand, and held the gun to his face as he slowly blew on it. The gun began to disintegrate into flakes of rust. With the gun destroyed, Jericho then gave another small chuckle, and turned back to face Navarro.

“You took away everything I loved, so I’ll take away that one thing you cherish enough to become a turn coat,” said Jericho, “I’ll take away your freedom.”

“How?” Navarro asked, “You going to keep me here forever? The Foundation will eventually find me.”

“Certainly,” Jericho snickered, “But, if I keep putting you into situations like this, how long do you think it will take for them to question your value as an agent? If they are constantly pulling you from incapacitation, when will they start to see you as a liability? What if I silence or kill all of your contacts in the field? What use would you be to them then?”

Jericho’s lips then turned into a devilish smile.

“You’re rather anomalous yourself, Navarro, self-described wizard as you are. If all your utility as a field agent was stripped from you, do you think they’d contain you too? Or maybe they’d just wipe your memory and leave you on the side of the road in Indiana. I wonder…”

Jericho then tossed Navarro a cell phone.

“I’ve rigged this to activate after twenty-four hours. In the meantime why don’t you stay here and reflect on your current situation.”

Navarro eyed the cell phone, and then shook his head.

“You’re not really thinking this through, are you, Jericho?” Navarro asked. “When I get out of here what’s to keep me and my friends from finding you and gunning you down?”

“By all means you’re welcome to try,” Jericho chuckled, “I’d love to see you run around on a wild goose chase. But, no, I don’t think I’ll be around for a bit. I’m tired, and can use a vacation. Do you know how hard it was to track down **`Pyotr`** and convince him the best way to reach you was through the casket?”

Jericho gave a small satisfied nod and slowly turned around to begin walking away.

“Take care, old friend,” He called over his shoulder as he slowly disappeared into the darkness. Navarro heard a door open and slowly close in the distance.

“Yeah,” Navarro mumbled to himself. “You too…”

Navarro then sat down at the center of the platform. Looking down on his reflection he uttered a defeated sigh.

“Well shit.”

It was nearly a day and a half later when Navarro heard the warehouse door open. A short woman with neck length brunette hair and a bright red winter jacket slowly made her way across the empty floor. She stopped just short of the platform and shook her head, a

small smile on her face.

“We’ve got to stop meeting like this Daniel.”

Navarro gave a small chuckle in return before flipping her off. Her name was **Sasha Merlo**. She was a Foundation field agent stationed at the local **Site-64**, and someone Navarro had worked with on several raids in the past. When Jericho’s phone finally activated, she was the first person he could think of to call who might actually show up to set him free.

“Hmmmmm…” Sasha hummed as she struck a thoughtful pose. “I do quite like the piece, but I do question the artist’s use of color…”

“Sasha,” Navarro sighed, “It’s been a very, very, long day. Can you please just get this off me?”

“I suppose…” she said with a hint of disappointment. “So I just pull the armor off, or, what?”

“That’s what the artist said to do. I’d do it myself, but I quite value having my appendages attached to my torso.”

“Yeah,” Sasha began as she lifted the armor off, over Navarro’s head, “me too.”

She then tossed the breastplate aside, the metal hitting the ground with a loud clink.

“A recovery team should be here soon to pick up the platform and armor,” Sasha said as she sat down on the platform. “You do know there are probably four or five reports, and maybe a committee hearing, or two, you’re going to have to deal with for this, yeah?”

“Don’t remind me,” Navarro chuckled as he took a seat. Within a few moments a team of six more Foundation agents entered the warehouse.

“Buy you a drink when this is done?” Sasha asked.

Navarro gave a nod and quietly waited for the questioning to begin.

Two days later, Navarro found himself sitting at the desk in his office in Site-19. A blank Person of Interest form was displayed on the monitor of his computer. An old photograph was gripped tightly in his hands.

A few hours after Agent Merlo had set him free he was summarily buried under the weight of half a dozen reports that needed to be filed. Taking a break from the paperwork, Navarro managed to find an old photograph among the numerous belongings that cluttered his office. It was taken before he had come to work for the Foundation. The background was an art studio, where a newly made marble sculpture had recently been unveiled. Standing in the foreground was a much younger Daniel Navarro and his old friends, Tom, Jackson, Alexis, Jill, and Jericho T. Hill.

"And you'll leave? Tom, Jackson, Alexis, and me; we'll never see you again?"

"If that's what you want."

Jill's words echoed in his head. He looked over the happy faces in the photograph one more time and sighed. He quietly pulled out a lighter and set a corner ablaze. Within moments the photograph was incinerated. Navarro swept the ashes into his office trash can and returned to his work, another bridge burnt.

He then began to fill out the Person of Interest form.

> **Name:** Jericho T. Hill

«**Part Two: Meeting Over Coffee** | **Hub** | **Part Four: The Templar Incident**»

The Templar Incident

In a lonely office at **Site-64** sat a short young man with salt and pepper hair. Across from his desk was a casually dressed woman with neck length brunet hair tied back in a ponytail. Several old filing cabinets lined the back walls of the room, while the other walls were coated with a menagerie of motivational posters. The man was known as **Researcher Fredrick Clayton.** The woman was **Agent Sasha Merlo.** The individuals remained silent, their meeting stalled as they awaited a third party. So far the waiting time was approaching half an hour.

A moment later the door to the office opened and a man dressed in a lab coat a few sizes too small, with a thick layer of stubble on his chin entered. As he took a seat, he gave Clayton an enthusiastic grin.

“Greetings fellow Researcher,” he bellowed, “How shall we destroy the mysteries of the universe today?”

Clayton immediately looked over to Merlo. It was clear she was using every ounce of willpower in her possession to keep from breaking out in laughter.

“I take it this is Agent Navarro?” Clayton asked Merlo. His expression lacked joy.

“I am Dr. Science!” the man interrupted, “I was born with a test tube in one hand a thirst for knowledge in the other!”

“You know I have a daily report quota to meet, yeah?” Clayton sighed as he placed his head in his hands. “I really don’t have time for this.”

“Where did you even get the lab coat?” Merlo chuckled, Navarro grinned as he took off the small coat.

“I just found it on the back of a chair in the break room,” Navarro replied. “Couldn’t resist…”

Navarro then turned to Clayton.

“I was told you placed Jericho’s thoughts on file?”

“Indeed,” Clayton said as he wheeled his chair back to one of the filing cabinets that lined the back wall. Carefully selecting a drawer, he opened it and removed several folders. “It took a while for Director Holman to provide the clearance for the drawer, but I was able to transcribe about four days’ worth of thoughts before they stopped.”

“How is that even possible?” Merlo asked, “He can’t just stop thinking.”

“It’s not the first time this has happened,” Clayton sighed. “Either your man is dead or, more likely, he has an undocumented instance of these cabinets. If your name is on two cabinets simultaneously both stop collecting the individual’s thoughts. We believe it was a control measure created by the cabinet’s original owners.”

“Was there anything useful in the thoughts you were able to transcribe?” Navarro asked, quickly grabbing the file from Clayton’s hands.

“There was,” said Clayton, his lips curling into a smug smile. “Unless Jericho changed plans in the last two days, he intends to be present at a reopening ceremony for some historic hotel called *The Templar* here in Portland. A local sculptor named Tom Herring did an art piece that’s going to be unveiled.”

Navarro immediately stopped reading the file and turned to Merlo. Both he and she shared the same pale expression of revelation.

“I’ll get clearance from Holman!” Merlo said as she immediately got to her feet and made her way to the exit. Navarro quickly placed the file back on the desk and followed suit. Within moments the room had emptied of all occupants save Clayton.

“You’re welcome,” Clayton said out loud as he watched the door to

the office swing shut. With another sigh he then returned Jericho's file back to its drawer.

The Templar hotel had long since passed its heyday. As a speakeasy during prohibition, it had good fortune of acquiring enough interesting history to warrant a full restoration effort. Now that the reconstruction was complete, many of Portland and Seattle's elite had gathered in the hotel's ballroom for an elaborate reopening ceremony. The ballroom's center piece, a large statue that had been requisitioned from an upcoming local sculptor, remained hidden behind a velvet curtain.

Agents Navarro and Merlo sat at a table in the corner. Having been provided with fake identities by the SCP Foundation, the two agents kept their eyes peeled for any signs of Jericho T. Hill. As the party around them unfolded, it appeared that their target was a no show.

"Gotta love these dead ends," Merlo chuckled as she scanned the room. She was dressed in a black dress, her hair down from its usual ponytail.

"Absolutely," Navarro snickered, his gaze focused on the curtain covering the statue. He was dressed in an uncharacteristically nice suit.

"I don't know what will be worse," Merlo continued, "Explaining to Holman that this mission essentially boiled down into us attending a party, or telling the response team that they've been on standby for no reason. C'est la vie."

Before Navarro could respond, two more individuals sat down at their table. One was a tall, pale woman in her mid-thirties with short black hair. The other was a muscular man in his early forties, with his long brown hair done back in a braid. Navarro recognized them as Jill and Tom Herring.

"You son of a bitch," Jill hissed at Navarro. Both her and her husband shared the same hostile glare. "We'd never see you again. That's what we agreed on Daniel."

“Oh, hey Jill,” Navarro responded, “Nice to see you too.”

“What are you doing here, Dan?” Tom asked.

“Well, considering how this is a public display by a known anartist, I couldn’t begin to guess.”

“You think Tom is stupid enough to pull that kind of shit?” Jill whispered.

“Everything’s on the level Dan,” Tom added, “The Suits don’t need to be here. You can leave.”

“We just need to see the statue and then we’re on our way,” Merlo chirped in.

“Is she a Suit too?” Jill asked between clenched teeth, both her and her husband’s gaze falling on Merlo. “Christ, how many of you are here?”

“Well, technically she’s a Dress,” Navarro smirked, “but yes, she is with me. We need to see the statue, and if all checks out, we’re gone. I promise.”

Tom and Jill looked at each other. With a sigh, Tom shrugged and got to his feet. His wife quickly took his arm and the two left.

“Congratulations,” Navarro called out to them as they walked away.

The party continued for a little bit longer before the mayor of Portland took the stage. With all the flair one would expect of a politician, he made a short speech and then welcomed Tom Herring to the stage to unveil his art piece. With a small drum roll, the curtain was drawn back to reveal a four meter tall white marble sculpture of a medieval knight, sword held aloft. What caught Merlo’s eye was that the piece’s face bore a striking resemblance to Daniel Navarro.

“Daniel,” she whispered under her voice, “why the hell does this statue look like you?”

“Clearly someone thought the world could do with a little more Navarro in it,” he whispered back. “Do you actually think I know the

answer to that?”

It was then Navarro noticed a man standing on one of the balconies overlooking the ballroom. He was dressed in a black business suit, and had short blond hair. A single leather glove could be seen on his right hand. The man nodded at Navarro and motioned for the two agents to join him.

“Son of a bitch,” Navarro mumbled and quickly got to his feet. He then spoke into the radio hidden on his person. “Hill’s been spotted.”

Navarro and Merlo lost no time finding a stairway to the upper levels of the ballroom. The two agents quietly drew their pistols as they made their way to the balcony door. Merlo held her breath as Navarro counted down on his fingers.

3

2

1

Navarro quickly opened the door and passed through to the other side, the door slamming shut in Merlo’s face as soon as he passed the threshold. The agent quickly tested the door handle, but found it locked. Merlo attempted to kick the door in, but to no avail. The door was sealed.

“Fuck…” Merlo mumbled under her breath.

On the other side of the door Navarro now stood alone, the balcony absent of Jericho T. Hill. With a frustrated sigh, he looked over the balcony at the ongoing party below. His gaze swept over to Tom and Jill shaking hands with many of the hotel’s benefactors, and then to the statue. He smiled as he looked at its face.

“Certainly a handsome guy,” Navarro chuckled to himself.

Navarro’s smile vanished when he noticed the statue begin to move. Its unblinking eyes turned to him on the balcony. It then pointed its sword at him. Screams could be heard in the audience below as the

statue stepped down from its pedestal and began to make its way across the ballroom.

“You have got to be kidding me…” Navarro mumbled as he readied his pistol for the oncoming fight. “Strike team, now would a great time for you to strike!”

As soon as she heard the gunshots coming from the ballroom, Agent Merlo pulled a 180 from the balcony door. However, as soon as she completed her turn, she was greeted by Jericho T. Hill standing only a few meters away. As she leveled her firearm, she felt a great force yank it from her hands, the weapon sailing through the air until it landed in the palm of Jericho’s glove. The weapon turned to rust in his grip.

“If you promise to remain calm for the next minute or so, I won’t have the other pistol you’ve hidden on your person go off,” said Jericho. His voice was completely without emotion. “I imagine that would be very messy.”

“Quite,” Merlo replied. “So this was a trap the whole time? Lure us in, set off some anomaly, and then jet?”

“More or less,” Jericho replied.

“How do you plan on that last part? We have this place surrounded. You can’t just walk out the front door Mr. Hill.”

“Oh I’m aware,” said Jericho. “Tell me, Suit, how well do you know Daniel?”

“Well enough,” Merlo answered. “Get on with it. You’re stalling.”

“Then you’d know that he was an anartist in a former life, and started working for the Suits after he was apprehended and promised amnesty in exchange for serving as a double agent.”

“And your point is…”

“What happens when the chips are down again?” Jericho sneered. “What happens when he is captured by the Hand or the Coalition

and promised a similar deal? He is a man completely devoted to preserving his freedom, and you and anyone he associates are going to be caught in the crossfire."

"I'd like to think Daniel has a little more integrity than that," Merlo replied flatly.

"Does he though?" Jericho shouted back, "I knew at least ten anartists who thought the same thing, and he helped the Suits kill them. Believe me, he will end you."

There was the sound of shattering glass. Two members of the Foundation strike team descended from a skylight.

"Get down, Merlo," one shouted. Without further hesitation they opened fire on Jericho.

At the same time, Jericho held out his gloved hand at the strike team. Their bullets flew through the air, stopping several centimeters from his outstretched palm. Jericho waited for the sound of empty magazines, and then made a small gesture with his hand, the collection of bullets diverting towards the agents. Each shot hit its mark. The two agents fell to the ground.

Merlo lost no time charging Jericho from behind, knocking him off his feet with a firm tackle. However, before she could incapacitate her target, Merlo received several blows to her face from Jericho's elbow. Disoriented, Merlo felt him push her off. She got to her feet as quickly as she could, but by the time she was oriented Jericho was gone.

"Fuck!" Merlo shouted at the top of her lungs.

Jericho T. Hill had yet again escaped.

The marble statue held Agent Navarro in a firm grip as it batted at the members of the Foundation strike team with its sword. The room had long been evacuated of civilians, leaving only the various agents to attempt to contain the anomaly. The strike team continuously peppered the colossus with all manner of small arms

fire, chipping away at its frame. Eventually a grenade went off, causing the statue to topple to the ground. Bracing for the impact, Navarro felt the statue's grip loosen upon collision with the ballroom floor.

Navarro quickly rolled away as the strike team provided covering fire. As soon as he reoriented himself, he turned to see the statue crawling after him.

"Stand back!" he shouted at the strike team. He then held out his hands and made several odd gestures, muttering unintelligible speech for almost half a minute. The strike team watched as the statue started to steam, then glow, and finally became coated in nuclear fire. As the rest of the strike team looked away from the intense light and heat, Navarro remained concentrated on the task at hand. A few moments later, Navarro lowered his arm. The fire quickly dissipated to reveal that the statue was now a molten sludge, only the face remaining partially intact.

Navarro then sighed as he leaned against one of the ballroom's many columns before sliding to the floor. As he looked over at the statue's now deformed mockery of his face, he couldn't help but chuckle. He then turned his gaze to remains of the strike team, watching as a beaten and bruised Agent Merlo slowly walked over to his spot on the floor.

"Hill?" Navarro asked.

"Escaped," Merlo replied.

"Well then. Glad to see that this was a fruitful evening."

Agents Merlo and Navarro sat in front of the desk of **Director Holman**, a tall, sharply dressed man with slicked back hair, and Site Director of Site-64. For several moments, he didn't say a word. Rather, he simply stared at the two agents.

"I had to sign the order authorizing the use of amnestics on the fucking mayor of Portland," Holman said, eventually breaking the silence. "Needless to say, my superiors are less than pleased with

the outcome of this most recent mission."

Neither Navarro nor Merlo responded.

"While some are calling for both of you to be seriously reprimanded, the fact that this incident was largely self-contained and easily covered up has bought you both a large degree of leniency. Congratulations. For now you're off the hook. However, for the foreseeable future, you'd both be wise to keep your heads down. Dismissed."

Quietly, Navarro and Merlo left Director Holman's office behind. Upon entering the hallway, Merlo placed a hand on her colleague's shoulder.

"You doing okay there?" She asked.

Navarro didn't respond right away. Instead, something Jericho had said to him several months prior entered his mind.

But, if I keep putting you into situations like this, how long do you think it will take for them to question your value as an agent? If they are constantly pulling you from incapacitation, when will they start to see you as a liability?

"Never been better," Navarro replied, and left without another word.

«**Part Three: J.T.H.** | **Hub** | **Part Five: Bridges Burnt**»

Bridges Burnt

Tom and **Jill Herring** had been in the middle of dinner when they were interrupted by a knock at the front door. Rolling his eyes in annoyance, Tom went to answer. He was greeted by a tattered Daniel Navarro in bloodstained plainclothes.

“Jesus Christ, Dan,” said Tom, his mouth open in surprise. “What the hell happened to you?”

“Evening, Tom,” the agent calmly replied. “Mind if I come in?”

“I’m not sure if that’s a good idea…” Tom began, pausing when he noticed Navarro discreetly held a pistol in his right hand.

“I insist,” said Navarro. He then gestured for Tom to lead the way.

A few moments later Navarro was seated at their kitchen table. An uncomfortable silence filled the room as he gestured for the couple to continue with their meal. Instead, the two anartists looked Navarro over.

Gone was his sly smile. In its place a contemplative frown dominated his face. The ever present stubble that they were familiar with was now more of a beard. Several partially healed cuts and bruises could be seen across his face and arms.

“So, uh,” Tom began, trying to hide how flustered he was behind a smile, “what brings you to the neighborhood?”

Navarro promptly pulled several folders out of a backpack he had been carrying and placed them on the table. With a delicate touch, he opened the folder at the top of the pile and began to read.

“Anthony Romero, a specialist in making and animating small porcelain figurines, found in his apartment in San Francisco three weeks ago encased in porcelain. Jessica Teal, a glass blower who

had a talent for making bottles that could hold anomalously large amounts of liquid, found dead in her home two and a half weeks ago; her brain had been removed and replaced with one of her own glass bulbs. Charles Torres, liked to make films that changed in content every time they were viewed, strangled by several roles of Super 8 film in his workshop a week ago. Viviana and Tori Perez, two sculptors who specialized in a process of malleable steel, we got to them first this time, but there was a fight… they ended up impaled together by a steel rod."

Navarro slammed the folders down on the table with a large thud.

"Each of these anartists was murdered by the same person, for no other reason than the fact that they were one of my friends, informants, or in most cases, both."

"That's tragic, Daniel," Jill said apprehensively, "but that doesn't exactly explain why you're here…"

"Well, Jill," Navarro replied, "it just so happened that the man who killed them was Jericho."

"Wait, what…" Tom muttered. His expression turned to one of disgust.

"Why?" Jill asked. Her face became pale with shock.

"Does it matter?" Navarro replied, "The point is people are dying; people with families."

"You're lying…" Jill said. "You're a Suit. Why should we believe you? What on earth would drive someone as kind as Jericho to do all this…"

Navarro collected something from each of the folders and placed them in front of Jill. Each one was a note card.

> First. Cheers –JTH
>
> Second. Enjoy – JTH
>
> Third. Love – JTH

Fourth and Fifth. Your friend – JTH

“Because he’s insane,” Navarro answered. He then sighed and began to mumble. “And I may or may not have gotten his brother and fiancé killed on one of my early raids with the Suits…”

The room fell silent. Jill and Tom’s disgust for Jericho now focused on Navarro.

“So what on earth made you think coming here was a good idea?” Tom asked.

In response Navarro reached back into his pack and pulled out several bank statements. Each one belonged to Tom.

“Because I know Jericho’s been your patron for quite a while, Tom,” Navarro said. “And that it’s very likely that you have some means of arranging a meeting with him.”

“You want us to become turncoats?” Jill asked.

“That would be nice,” Navarro replied.

“And if we refuse?”

Navarro let out a frustrated sigh.

“Does it look like I came here dressed for no to be your answer? You’re helping me catch this son of a bitch, or I swear to god I will burn your fucking house down.”

Jill nervously laughed.

“You wouldn’t.”

Navarro gave a small snap of his fingers, causing a tiny blue flame to appear on the palm of his right hand.

“Try me.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, hang on there champ!” Tom said as he got out of his seat. “Let’s not do anything stupid. I’ll shoot Jericho an email

right now. I can guarantee you he'll respond by tomorrow morning."

"Excellent," Navarro smiled, extinguishing the flame by clenching his fist. He then got to his feet and swung his pack over his shoulder. "We can discuss the details over coffee tomorrow afternoon, say, at three. Jill knows the coffee shop."

Navarro began to make his way to the exit, stopping to turn on his way out.

"I promise that if all goes well, you'll never see me again. I mean it this time."

Without another word, the agent left, the door softly closing behind him. With a sigh, Jill buried her face in her hands.

"Bullshit."

Two days later, Daniel Navarro found himself hidden among several crates within Tom Herring's studio. A collection of half-finished metal and stone sculptures were spread throughout the space, giving the large room a feeling of being crowded. Navarro sighed as he adjusted his position. Any second now, Jericho was due to arrive.

Navarro felt himself tense up upon hearing the sound of the studio doors opening. A tall, sharply dressed man with short blond hair entered. A single black leather glove could be seen on his right hand. The agent recognized him on sight as Jericho T. Hill.

"Evening, Tom," Jericho said as he began to make his way towards the workbench at the center of the room. His voice carried a tone of exhaustion. Jericho began to look around the room for his absent host. "Tom?"

Show time, Navarro thought to himself. He quietly drew his pistol, and leveled his weapon before firing four shots.

Nearly the same second Navarro pulled the trigger, Jericho turned where he stood and held out his gloved hand. The bullets stopped inches in front of his palm and then fell harmlessly to the floor. Jericho then clenched his fist, causing the pistol to be yanked from

Navarro's hand. The weapon skittered across the floor, stopping at the base of a large metal sculpture.

Navarro lost no time. He immediately pulled a small knife out of his jacket pocket and made a small cut on his left hand. Charging forward from his hiding place, Navarro made a series of gestures, accompanied by unintelligible speech. The room filled with a flash of light, as a pillar of brilliant blue fire emerged from the floor, Jericho barley managing to roll out of the way of the blaze.

Continuing his chant, Navarro made two more cuts into his arm, sending up two more pillars of flames, one after the other. As before, Jericho managed to roll away from the danger, and made a claw with his gloved hand. A great force yanked Navarro's pocket knife out of his hand and sent it flying into the ceiling.

"You fucking snake!" Jericho shouted, and held up his gloved hand. Ten steel rebar poles moved from a storage rack behind him and hovered in the air, the tips sharpening to fine points.

"Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! Fuck!" Navarro mumbled to himself as he began to dash for cover. He looked back long enough to see Jericho point with the index finger of his gloved hand. The rebar poles began to sail through the air. Navarro ducked under the first, watching it sail and stick into the far wall. The second and third collided with the ground immediately behind him. Navarro jumped over the fourth, and then slid behind the base of a large marble statue of a woman. The statue violently shook as the remaining poles slammed into it. Navarro let out a heavy sigh of relief.

The sound of someone running caused Navarro's attention to switch from his own well-being back to Jericho, who was making a break for the exit. Jumping to his feet Navarro blindly charged towards the door, gaining speed as he prepared to intercept his target. Being the quicker of the two men, Navarro tackled Jericho to the ground. The anartist landed face first on the pavement and slid a foot before coming to a stop.

"Just… die… already!" Navarro shouted as he pulled Jericho's head back by his short hair and slammed his face into the ground repeatedly, continuing this for several hits before Jericho elbowed

Navarro in the gut. Jericho took advantage of Navarro's pause, and knocked the agent off him.

Jericho got to his feet, and proceeded to deliver three kicks Navarro's side before finishing with a sharp punt to the agent's face. He then steadied and then raised his gloved hand. A rebar pole flew into his grip and flattened into a thin blade. Jericho raised the blade for the kill.

"You look ridiculous, Jericho," Navarro mumbled as he looked at his foe. He then spit up a tooth. "The blood stains really clash with the scorch marks."

Jericho shook his head as he chuckled and began the downward swing of the strike. At the same time, Navarro made a swift kick at Jericho's legs, sweeping them out from beneath him. Jericho released the blade as he fell backwards, Navarro catching it as he got to his feet. Without another moment lost, he delivered a single cut. Jericho let out a bloodcurdling scream of pain upon hitting the ground. His gaze focused on the stump at the end of his wrist where his right hand used to be.

"What a fine predicament we find ourselves in, old friend!" Navarro shouted over Jericho's screams. He stabbed the blade into Jericho's right leg, and then the left. Navarro tossed the blade aside and quietly retrieved his gun.

"You know," he continued as he inspected the weapon and began to slowly walk back, "originally I had just planned on killing you, since it would be very hard to incapacitate you with that glove on your hand." Navarro kicked the severed hand away, and watched as it rolled across the floor. He then pinned Jericho with one foot, and pointed the firearm at Jericho's head. "However, I just thought of a better plan."

With his free hand he pulled out a phone and made a call.

"Hey, **Merlo**," said Navarro, "You have that address I texted you earlier, yeah? Get a few of your guys down here; I have someone Holman would want to meet. Hurry up; he's kind of starting to bleed out."

Navarro hung up the phone and slipped it back into his jacket pocket.

“What the fuck are you doing,” Jericho managed to say between cries of pain.

“Giving you to the Foundation,” Navarro cruelly smiled. “Who knows, if you’re lucky they might offer you the same deal they offered me.”

Navarro’s smile twisted into a sneer.

“We’ll see how fucking noble you are then.”

Agent Navarro yet again sat in the office of **`Site Director Edgar Holman`**. His superior rubbed his temple with his right hand as he looked over the hastily created report Navarro had made for Jericho’s apprehension.

“So, let me get this straight,” Holman said with a frustrated sigh, “You knew someone who could have helped you set up an ambush for Hill this entire time, and you only now used this knowledge to your advantage?”

“I didn’t know of the Herring’s connection to him until after the Templar incident,” Navarro shrugged. “Even then, I only wanted to use it as a last resort.”

“Five dead Foundation contacts certainly fits that bill,” Holman snapped.

He then spun around in his chair and starred at the far wall of his office. The room fell into an uncomfortable silence.

“I still remember when they first brought you here in 2004…”

“Fond memories?”

“Hardly,” Holman replied. “Sometimes I wonder if maybe it would have been better to just amnesticize you after that raid on your apartment.”

Navarro gave a small, regretful smile.

“You and me both.”

Without another word, Navarro was dismissed. Agent Merlo was waiting for him outside.

“You know, for a smart man you sure are a dumbass,” she said. “What the hell were you thinking?”

“I can’t say that I really was, to be honest. Besides, it wouldn’t have worked any other way,” Navarro replied. “Jericho won weeks ago.”

“What do you mean?” Merlo frowned.

“They’ve decided to remove me from active field duty. I’m to be stationed at Site-19 and help with any new anart that gets dragged through. Unauthorized was the only way this got done.”

“So this was all revenge then?”

“I’m not going to pretend that it was anything grander.”

“Fuck, Dan,” Merlo sighed. “That makes you no better than Jericho.”

Navarro gave a small amused chuckle.

“I suppose it doesn’t.”

The two remained silent as they approached the elevators.

“I can talk to Holman,” Merlo eventually broke the silence. “We might be able to get you transferred to **Site-64**…”

Navarro held up his hand to interrupt.

“It's fine,” he said. “I think I could use the time alone. I’m not due at Site-19 for a few weeks. I think maybe it would be best if I disappeared for a while. Pop back up when I’m a little less toxic.”

Merlo gave a small apprehensive nod.

“So this is it then?”

“Looks like it.”

“What are you going to do now?”

Navarro paused before giving a halfhearted shrug. He slowly entered the elevator and turned to face his friend.

“I don’t know. **`Maybe Disneyland?`**” he replied, and allowed the doors to close.

«**Part Four: The Templar Incident** | **Hub** | **END»**

Canon Hub

The idea that there is no canon is a bit silly at times. It's not that we don't have any. It's that we have a multitude which touch, cross, and dip into each other. It's up to you, as the reader, to decide what you believe and what you embrace as the heart of the universe. That doesn't mean, though, that authors lack intent or design, and collaboration is the heart of innovation.

Collected below are links to the recognized, shared canons of the SCP Foundation Universe. To write in one, you should make sure that you read the other material from that canon and try to remember that these things are connected. If you're interested in forming your own canon, read the information at the bottom of the page.

`Unfounded`

We've always assumed the SCP Foundation was a necessary evil. But what if it wasn't?

When they've finished their brief conversation, Tang raises her forefinger to the anomaly, and right through the hole between worlds, the two scientists touch hands.

From the Gateway Contact Center in Terre Haute, I'm Stephen Fleischer. This is NPR.

From "All Things Considered" by Photosynthetic

Doctors of the Church

Six hundred years ago, the world ended. Today, only one group protects the secrets of the ancient world until a time when they can be understood again; the priests of the Holy Foundation.

"Saint Gears, please guide me in my time of need as you guided the Holy Foundation during the Great Breach.
Bequeath unto me the knowledge to discover that which is false.
Grant unto me the ability to separate logic from falsity.
Allow me to grasp but a portion of the knowledge you once had."

From "Quid Est Non Scitum" by Jekeled

The Antarctic Exchange

The Antarctic Exchange is a canon which focuses on the lives and relationships of the researchers from the Third Antarctic Empire during their time at the Foundation.

It was enough that everyone looked and acted so different; still he stood out so much that sometimes the people here would turn away, would whisper to themselves about him, his companions, their tasks, their work. Antarctica. Empire. Emissaries. Secrets. Antarctica. He could both hear and understand them, but he wasn't sure if he should let them know.

From "Impressions" by Zyn

Only Game In Town

At the edge of the mind lurks something that prays for the death of definition. It has been on the retreat for some time now, as the world has become a knowable, mapped place, no longer brimming with demons. Watch for it where knowledge lies, seeking to unmake everything known.

The word was carved into a rock. The man stood above it and, in the bottom of his mind, felt something stir. He did not know that he had just changed the course of all worlds, but he could feel something was different. The world had become a bit more orderly.

From "The Tale of the Library" by Rumetzen

Competitive Eschatology

The end of the world is here. But it's not just one end of the world. It's all of ends of the world happening at once, competing with each other, with the Foundation - and humanity - in the middle.

"What did you do? What is it? What did you unlock?" She could feel something vibrating in the back of her brain. Her eyes kept being drawn to the lock. It looked exactly the same, visually, but it was also incredibly different. "What's Apakht?"

"It's the End," the Harbinger said. The fabric of reality began to unfold before their eyes.

From "Apakht" by thedeadlymoose

Broken Masquerade

What was hidden now is seen. How will the Foundation survive in a world where secrecy is no longer an option?

"…day five of the rescue effort, and more bodies are being recovered from the ocean. Initial estimates put the death toll in the million range, with increases occurring constantly. The UN released a statement about the recent North Korean Incident, claiming that they believed it was 'an act of nature'. The recent leak of classified documents from the Japanese Diet pointing towards a theft from what is referred to as 'The Foundation' suggests a different story…"

From "Joseon" by Doc Burns

The Coldest War

As the clash of communist and capitalist envelopes the world, the most covert organization on earth sinks deeper into hiding. What does it take to stay neutral in the face of governments who see the anomalous as just another means of escalation? How do agents

react when loyalty to party clashes with duty to humanity? And just where should the Foundation go to escape a global war?

My beloved Dorothy,

There is a whole new war here, a new type of war, industrial and implacable. The American war machine has become unrecognizable.

Out in the jungle bear-clawed women hunt the Viet Cong through their own tunnels for hours before emerging. Airborne commandos on interdiction patrols carry weapons which calcify their targets in the blink of an eye. Villages suspected of sheltering the enemy are plastered in napalm that collects itself into a moving mass of fire and waits for survivors to emerge from cover before flaring back into life…

From "They Will Leave Us With a Shaken Earth" by Vezaz

The Man Who Wasn't There

The being known as Nobody is akin to a force of nature: his actions are unpredictable and his methods unclear. His purpose and true identity are a mystery to all, including himself. But when they are achieved, he will vanish. This has already happened at least once.

He paused and stared briefly at his own face in the mirror, trying to remember if anything about it looked familiar. Again, and as always, nothing was. He sighed. "Well, it doesn't pay to wonder. Off to work I go." He straightened his jacket one last time, solemnly tipped his hat to the empty room, and stepped through the doorway.

From "Prelude: A Terminus" by Drewbear

The Old Man in the Sea

The Old Man in the Sea is a series of stories focusing on a race of space-faring biological arks, and the effects they have on the

universe- such as those that one in particular, SCP-169, has on Earth.

Eventually, I will expire. That great impact shortens our lifespan, and the growth of a civilization within us does nothing to alleviate this. Eventually, those creatures within me will find an exit. Everything will change.

From "Eden" by Snowshoe

Rat's Nest

Rat's Nest is set in a universe where reality is falling apart due to the absence of LTE 0913, an energy being that had perpetuated our reality up until its destruction.

Friendship and spirit did nothing to prevent this. Their ideals, aspirations, and the hearts that birthed them could not produce the strength they needed. Respect and duty had long fell to the wayside, far from the binding contracts that they were thought to be. In the end, nothing they really believed in could've saved them…

From "Senescence, Consumption, Persecution" by SoullessSingularity

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Bellerverse

Thousands of years after the end of the world, humanity has to deal with the remnants of the SCP Foundation's unfinished work.

If anyone could get you from one city to another, it was him (extra if he'd been outcast by the locals). If you wanted a relic from the old places, he knew where you could buy it, or, if the price was right, he'd fetch you one himself. The waterskin at his side was empty. Water was plentiful in the Waste, and it was one less thing to weigh him down. The real problem was food. Nothing grew in the waste. There were occasional birds and animals crossing the damp sands,

but no trees or grasses of any sort.

The Beller knew the Waste well.

From "The List Of Wonders" by DrEverettMann

Codename: Green King

Josephine, a powerful reality bender, has been evading the Foundation using a combination of stealth and covert warfare, including memory manipulation on a wide scale. But deep within the Foundation, a small cadre works to capture her… if possible.

The next few moments were forever etched into Caleb's memory. He heard the snap as the rope broke, and saw the little girl on her knees directly below it. He tried to call out to her, but even in that instant, he knew it wouldn't do any good. He saw the crate falling, faster and faster, getting ever closer to the girl's head…

… and then it wasn't.

From "The Green Prince" by giant enemy spycrab

Et Tam Deum Petivi

Tales from the Horizon Initiative and other things of a theological nature.

The biggest problem, Salah thought, was how one went about killing a god. You could burn its scriptures, wipe out its worshipers, kill its avatars, but that would only ever delay it. Eventually it would come back, whispering, and the whole cycle would begin again. It could wait forever.

From "Second Watch" by Djoric

S & C Plastics

Life is like a hurricane here in Sloth's Pit. The people at Site 87 are just trying to make sense of it.

“Reminder;” the intercom squealed at lunch; “Pumpkin Spice flavored beverages are strictly prohibited in light of the recent containment of E-8820. For details, please see Site-87 general mail 'Re: Subcutaneous Ginger', sent last Wednesday. Department heads, please forward to your teams.”

Grant looked down at his coffee and was very nearly sick. No one else dumped their drinks.

From "Leafers" by FortuneFavorsBold

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lolFoundation

We all laughed, but it's not funny anymore.

Jacob stared up at the towering glass and marble building in front of him. It had twenty-nine stories, just as he had imagined it, topped with three huge letters, maybe 9.144 meters tall. It was heaven.

From "New Kid On The Block" by Anaxagoras

Global Occult Coalition Casefiles

Protecting Humanity, Whether It Likes It Or Not.

Note that execution of Procedure Pizzicato will, by necessity, result in an irreversible Second Mission (Concealment) failure in order to allow for a First Mission (Survival) success. Third Mission (Protection) goals are secondary: normal avoidance of civilian casualties is to be second priority to maintaining Minimum Repopulation Margin among the survivors.

From "Procedure Pizzicato" by Dr. Clef

The Gulf

The Gulf was aflame. This was going to push our little Task Forces to the limit.

Kate's heart was beating so loud she could hear it. The wind chimes were louder, too. But she wanted to see what the other side — the Everything Under Everything – what it looked like. What Mackenzie saw in her nightly prayers outside. Kate, wide-eyed, nodded.

From "I Double E" by Kate McTiriss

Stealing Solidarity

Five cyborg commando catgirls. One guy in a bathrobe. One spaceship. Space is infinite.

[Boss: The lone surviving member of an inbred clone clan onboard a gigantic ancient spaceship is not the weirdest thing we have dealt with.]

From "Stealing Solidarity: Phase 3" by Djoric

Straight On Till Morning

Mankind reached for the stars only to have the ground pulled out from under them. The United Earth Fleet is on a course for home.

"There were eighteen of us on that ship- Twelve from the Foundation, six from the GOC. Eleven came back, four of those, myself included, in need of serious medical treatment. Two died in hospital on Minerva Base. The Fyodorov had a crew of 45, not including the captain. I don't know who gave the order to fire on the Nikolai Fyodorov. I know the flight recorder was damaged. I don't particularly care. They were right to do so."

From "The First 55" by Von Pincier

Resurrection

A reconstruction and "resurrection" of the original "central storyline" of the SCP Foundation.

"It's me," she called. "SCP-105. They're dead." She dropped the gun, kicked it forward, and then knelt down with her hands on the back of her head until the agents got her and took her to safety.

From "Immediate Actions" by DrEverettMann

AIAD

Stories about virtual people making a virtual difference.

Please don't feel that way. I know it's big and scary… I wish you could see the courage that I see in you.

From "Null-terminating String" by LurkD

On Mount Golgotha

The melody of life sings in the minds and hearts of the multitude. The world goes out not with a bang, nor a whimper, but with a symphony.

It must be music. Life and death codified in sound where words cannot.

From "The Journal of K. M. Sandoval" by WrongJohnSilver and LadyKatie

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Third Law

The anomalies of today are the cutting edge of tomorrow. The

impossible never stays that way. Welcome to the future.

"Good thing too, or it might have fried your brains. That would have put an end to your nascent hivemind real quick."

From "The Analog Kid" by GreenWolf

Project Heimdall

Contingency Planning Operation approved. Codename designation "Project Heimdall". Research potential means by which extraterrestrial intelligence displaying vigorous, active hostility to human life and/or civilization might attempt to conquer, enslave, or exterminate humanity. Analyze likely outcomes. Develop countermeasures and contingency plans. Report findings to O5 Council when complete.

"General, the chances of anything coming to wipe us out are a million to one," Rex replied smugly.

From "We Have Dismissed That Claim" by Hornby

Cool War 2: Ruiz From Your Grave

The FitnessGram Pacer Test is a multistage aerobic capacity test that progressively gets more difficult as it continues. The 20 meter pacer test will begin in 30 seconds. Line up at the start. The running speed starts slowly but gets faster each minute after you hear this signal. *bodeboop*. A single lap should be completed every time you hear this sound. *ding*. Remember to run in a straight line and run as long as possible. The second time you fail to complete a lap before the sound, your test is over. The test will begin on the word start. On your mark. Get ready! Start.

"That's what makes the things real. The breakthroughs, the moments, the momentary lapses in madness. Pop the cork and my bottle overfloweth with hatred and motherfucking anger."

From "Conservation of Momentum" by Randomini

Dread & Circuses

With Herman Fuller gone, the Freaks are running the Circus now. Flaunting the veil of normalcy and somehow always narrowly avoiding the clutches of the Essie P, Geo Sea and Insurgent Sea, The Circus of the Disquieting provides a sanctuary for anomalous humanoids while offering people a glimpse of what lies behind the Masquerade.

Ladies and Gentlemen, children of all ages, Herman Fuller's Circus of the Disquieting is proud to announce our new Master of Ceremonies. She started off as just another runaway, but through sheer talent and determination she's clawed her way up from magician, to Clown, to troupe leader and now to the Ringmaster of the Circus itself! I give you the beautiful, the astonishing, the magical Icky!

From the Dread & Circuses Hub, by DrChandra

War On All Fronts

We're gonna need a bigger boat.

By the time we made it to Hy-Brasil, the city had already descended into chaos and ruin. The storm was bad enough to cause panic, and then a fire-breathing squid monster crawled out of the ocean. It was a recipe for disaster, and that is what happened.

From "LTE-0851-Cetus", by stormbreath

Ship In A Bottle

Site-17 Director and grown-ass man Benjamin Kondraki has a problem.

Kondraki rushed back into his bedroom. There was the sound of some rummaging around in the closet. He came out wearing a black trench coat with a gigantic, tent-shaped bulge in the front at crotch level. "Wow," he said flatly. "This sure did help a lot. No one will notice anything wrong now, yes siree-bob."

From "Third Date" by DrClef

Those Twisted Pines

Strange things are done in the Northwest Rains. From the extradimensional antics of Three Portlands, to the cybernetic reign of Anderson Robotics, to a bizarre partnership with Wilson Wildlife Services, it's up to the fine folks of Site-64 to keep everything contained.

"She then turned her attention back to the sunset and took a deep breath. The smell of pine trees and sea salt filled her nostrils. In the distance, a group of people flew through the skyline on broomsticks. Nearby, a friendly looking pair of young men were putting on a magic show for a group of children, fantastic figures of light and sound dancing around for the little one’s amusement. Distant music could be heard among the hustle and bustle of people of all sorts enjoying the dying light."

From "Make Portland Weirder" by Jacob Conwell

So You Wanna Build A Canon

If you're wanting to build a canon and have it added to this page, the important thing to remember is that it must be a shared project. To qualify for inclusion here, your canon must meet the following requirements:

- A minimum of five articles written.
- A minimum of three authors writing the articles.
- Your canon cannot be "closed" to other, new contributors.

- Your canon cannot be "finished."

We're not going to split hairs on this either. Remember: collaboration and innovation. That is the purpose of these creations. If you have any questions, contact an administrator.

Threat Entity Database Entry

Threat ID:

LTE-0851-Cetus "Crocodilian Kraken"

Authorized Response Level:

5 (Immediate Response) N/A (Confirmed Destroyed, File Archived)

Description:

A gigafauna (measuring approximately 100 meters long) displaying a mixture of crocodilian and cephalopodic traits. The body plan of the parathreat - with the exception of the head - was pentaradially symmetrical. The lower body of LTE-0851-Cetus terminated in five tentacles, radially arranged. The entity possessed five arms, each arranged along the same axis as the tentacles.

While the head of the entity was outwardly similar to that of a baseline crocodile, the entity possessed five eyes, arranged in an arc along the head. LTE-0851-Cetus had significant anomalous regenerative capabilities, allowing it to survive most conventional weaponry.

LTE-0851-Cetus possessed numerous unique thaumatological capabilities, including the emission of large amounts of Elan Vital Energy, the ability to detect EVE patterns, the ability to cross certain

thaumatalogical boundaries, and Red-IV Regenerative properties. It apparently used the EVE detection abilities in order to hunt.

Shortly before its liquidation, LTE-0851-Cetus displayed the ability to release large quantities of thaumatologic fire from its mouth. This characteristic was not previously observed, but has been conjectured to have been an ability LTE-0851-Cetus previously did not possess the required EVE to use, until the events surrounding its liquidation made this possible.

History and Liquidation:

LTE-0851-Cetus was discovered in the North Atlantic Ocean, following an attack on three commercial civilian vessels. An assessment team was deployed to investigate the matter and discovered the entity, as well as determining that the parathreat had previously been held by the Foundation.

Initial liquidation efforts were unsuccessful, due to several factors. Following these, the decision was made to make an attempt in Greenland. However, the parathreat began to travel towards **Hy-Brasil**,[1] due to outside thaumatologic interference.

LTE-0851-Cetus was successfully terminated on June 13, 1988 during the attack upon Hy-Brasil, at the cost of significant damage to the island. As a result of the arrangement made with the monarchy of Hy-Brasil, the Coalition was forced to immediately retreat, and was not allowed to interact with the corpse of the entity.

The current location of the corpse of LTE-0851-Cetus is **unknown.**

PSYCHE Records

Parathreat Investigation

Special Observer:
"Mangrove" (73699274/6H3)

Overview:

A gigafauna of unknown origin has been spotted in the Northern Atlantic Ocean.

Parathreat Evidence:
Following the unexplained disappearance of three civilian commercial vessels, Parathreat Investigators were deployed to examine the planned routes of the vessels for any anomalous interference.

Upon patrolling the route, a large entity came up on our sonar. It was much bigger than anything normal could be, so we took that as indication of a parathreat. We deployed a +1Gen submersible drone down to investigate.

The drone was able to easily find the entity, which was swimming and had not appeared to notice us. It's approximately 90 meters long at the moment, and appears to be somewhat squidlike, with elements of what appears to be a crocodile. We got a couple photos, which I've attached.

Of note is that the entity seemed to have large scarring from what appeared to be military weapons. To me, this implies involvement from one of the major paranormal organizations, as nobody else would fight this and keep it secret.

Suggested Response/Requests:
Perform basic cover up operations for the three civilian vessels that went missing - they were undoubtedly destroyed by this thing, and have been lost.

Establish a no-go-zone for the general area surrounding the where the entity was spotted, so no more civilian vessels will be targeted by the entity.

Prepare a Rules of Engagement for the entity. Recommending a high Response Level, most likely 4 or 5. Immediate Liquidation should be preferred, as this is one of the larger Cetus-entities we've dealt with in a

while.

Research where this thing could have come from. It seems a well-armed group had fought it in the past, but I doubt it is from this planet. Possibly alien, possibly extradimensional, possibly an ancient horror that got woken up?

PHYSICS Records

AT/ST Patrol Report (Debrief)

Involved Assessment/Strike Team:

ST-0638

Filing Operative:

"Stormbreath" 96231847/0638

Mission (Location/Objective):

Locate KTE-0851-Cetus in the Atlantic Ocean and liquidate it.

Encounter Report/Enemy Description:

GOCS *Viking* and *Ulysses* sailed to the last known location of KTE-0851-Cetus, and easily found the parathreat. Once there, we fired multiple torpedos at the parathreat. A majority of these torpedoes struck, to no effect.

The parathreat then dived down deep, out of the range of our radar. Approximately 20 minutes later, we saw it coming up, right underneath the *Viking*. It grabbed onto the ship, and ripped it apart. It then went beneath the waves again.

Results:

From that point, our mission turned into a rescue operation for the remaining crew. We quickly evaced any survivors, and booked it before it came back for the *Ulysses*.

Personnel Condition:

487 casualties (487 fatalities, 0 injuries)

Conclusions/Recommendations:

If you're going to try to fight this thing again, it cannot happen on water. This is its home turf, and it will destroy anything you throw at it there. Lure it onto land and kill it there.

PSYCHE Records

Following the failure to properly liquidate LTE-0851-Cetus in a naval setting, the decision was made to lure the entity to an appropriate terrestrial setting, in which PHYSICS Division operatives could properly prepare for an encounter.

Due to the position of LTE-0851-Cetus in the Northern Atlantic, it was concluded that the best location in which to liquidate it was a secluded beach on the western shore of Greenland. The government of Denmark was contacted, and agreement was reached to liquidate the entity in the previously determined area.

Operatives began to lure LTE-0851-Cetus north using EVE patterns, which LTE-0851-Cetus appeared to hunt using. This strategy was successful, and the parathreat began to travel towards the planned liquidation location.

However, operations did not go according to plan.

Analysis of Wards Surrounding Hy-Brasil

Unified Thaumatology Quarterly Vol. 75, No. 2, April 1988, pp. 53-68

International Center for the Study of Unified Thaumatology
Hy-Brasil Campus

By A. Ketterley, L. Belacqua

Abstract

The thaumatologic wards surrounding Hy-Brasil appear to be failing, and are no longer properly protecting the city. These wards were established to prevent misfortune from occurring upon the island, which has resulted in a minor aura of anomalous good luck within the boundaries of the island. [1] Based upon prior indications of anomalous fortune auras, should the wards completely fail, the accumulated misfortune will collapse onto the island. [2]

The sudden reversal of anomalous probability within Hy-Brasil within a short time frame will likely have drastic repercussions upon the island and the city located within. The exact nature of these repercussions is unknown, but could be drastic.

Based upon past results, it is expected that the failure of these thaumatologic wards will be accompanied by sudden, anomalous meteorological patterns [3] as well as extremely high EVE patterns.

Bibliography

1. "Anomalous Laws of Probability Upon the Island of Hy-Brasil"; L. Caldwell et. al.; *Unified Thaumatology Quarterly*; vol. 43, no. 2, April 1956, pp. 78-92.
2. "Negative Side-Effects of Prolonged Usage of Fortune Wards"; E. Murphy et. al.; *Unified Thaumatology Quarterly*; vol. 59, no. 4, October 1972, pp. 10-32.
3. "Magic Storms and Failing Wards"; S. Fujiwhara et. al.; *Unified Thaumatology Quarterly*; vol. 06, no. 1, January 1919, pp. 37-45.

On June 13th, 1988, the wards surrounding Hy-Brasil suddenly and unexpectedly failed, resulting in an immediate anomalous weather patterns, and a sudden EVE spike. LTE-0851-Cetus was close to Hy-Brasil as a result of the GOC's intentions to terminate it in Greenland, and immediately traveled towards Hy-Brasil instead.

LTE-0851-Cetus was one of the few anomalous organisms capable of reaching Hy-Brasil under its own ability, and it swam towards the island. The Coalition was unable to immediately prepare a method of reaching Hy-Brasil, and was unable to reach the island immediately.

By the time the Global Occult Coalition was able to reach Hy-Brasil, LTE-0851-Cetus had already caused substantial damage to the infrastructure of the island, including the destruction of the palace. General Rockefeller immediately ordered heavy bombardment of the parathreat without regard for the existing infrastructure, the majority of which had already been destroyed.

During the attack, LTE-0851-Cetus displayed the ability to breathe large amounts of thaumatological fire, which had not been previously observed. It has been theorized that LTE-0851-Cetus needed a requisite amount of EVE in order to release such an attack, which it did not have access to until it absorbed the large amount of EVE released during the fall of Hy-Brasil's wards.

The initial assault upon LTE-0851-Cetus was unsuccessful, as a result of the entity's regenerative properties. Continued bombardment of the parathreat continued until General Rockefeller gave the order to deploy a Casaba-Howitzer Nuclear Directed Energy Weapon, which had been intended for usage as a last resort.

The CHNDEW was successful at liquidating the parathreat, but resulted in a significant amount of damage to the surrounding area of Hy-Brasil. During the resultant cleanup and aftermath of the event, the heir apparent to the throne of Hy-Brasil commanded the Coalition to immediately withdraw. As a result, the GOC was not able to conduct proper cleanup measures of LTE-0851-Cetus's remains.

PTOLEMY Records

AOD (Armaments Used in Destruction) report from the files of Marshall Prescott, Quartermaster Sergeant-Sector 06. For the purposes of brevity, only +1/2Gen and AltGen Equipment have been listed.

Quartermasters Division-			
Item	**Designatio**	**Title**	**Qty**
1	+1Gen-NBS	GOC Nuclear Battleships *Ulysses* and *Aeneas*	2
Notes: The *Ulysses* and the *Aeneas* contained the appropriate thaumatological instruments for reaching Hy-Brasil, and allowed Coalition agents to deploy there.			
2	+2Gen-PCT	Concentrated Plasma Cannon Tank	6
Notes: The plasma streams fired were able to severely damage the scales of LTE-851-			

Cetus. The scale damage dealt to LTE-0851-Cetus did not regenerate as quickly as other armaments.			
3	+1Gen-5GJ	Fifth Generation Jet Fighter	8
Notes: The fighter jets were able to redirect the movements of LTE-0851-Cetus, keeping it from areas designated as major civilian safezones.			
4	AltGen-TKB	Thaumatologically Keyed Bombs	12
Notes: Bombs keyed using thaumatological ritual to only harm the parathreat, and cause no destruction to the surrounding area. These were effective, but			

due to the sudden nature of the attack, only a limited number were ready for deployment and were not enough to kill it.			
5	AltGen-ATC	Anti-Thaumatologic Cannons	4

Notes: Having noted the high levels of EVE and Akiva radiation emitted by LTE-0851-Cetus, anti-thaumatological weapons were deployed in the hopes of nullifying the anomalous properties of the parathreat. These weapons were only partially successful, but managed to slow some

of the entity's regenerative properties.			
6	+2Gen-MHM	Magneto Hydrodynamic Explosive Munitions	10
Notes: Ten MAHEM warheads were deployed with the goal of penetrating the scales of the parathreat, which had been resistant to prior forms of attack. These weapons were successful at damaging the scales of the entity.			
7	AltGen-GER	Gravity Enhanced Railgun	3
Notes: Three Gravity-Enhanced Railgun units were deployed to fire several payloads of conventional			

weaponry at LTE-0851-Cetus. The payload of the GER units deployed did not significantly harm the parathreat.			
8	+2Gen-CHN	Casaba-Howitzer Nuclear Directed Energy Weapon	1
Notes: The +2Gen-CHN was deployed to Hy-Brasil only for usage as a last resort weapon, upon the failure of all other weapons to liquidate LTE-0851-Cetus. This armament was able to successfully liquidate the parathreat.			

PHYSICS Records

Office of the Undersecretary			
Sender	General Rockefeller	**Recipient**	Madam Al Fine
Subject	Liquidation of LTE-0851-Cetus and Resultant Damage to Hy-Brasil		

I am pleased to report that our operatives were able to kill LTE-0851-Cetus (the Crocodilian Kraken) on June 13th, 1988, in Hy-Brasil.

By the time we made it to Hy-Brasil, the city had already descended into chaos and ruin. The storm was bad enough to cause panic, and then a fire-breathing squid monster crawled out of the ocean. It was a recipe for disaster, and that is what happened.

We bombarded that beast with

everything we had, but it regenerated from just about everything we threw at it. I burned a hole in it straight down to the bone and minutes later you couldn't even tell I did anything.

It took hours of blasting it with our most advanced weaponry for it to begin to falter. We shot it with magic, with bullets, with fire, with plasma and they only slowed it down a little.

After all of our weapons had done nothing to it, I decided I had enough. The only weapon that had done much of anything were the Plasma Tanks, and I came to the conclusion that an energy

weapon was our best option. Given that, the usage of the Casaba-Howitzer became justified.

Since that was the first field usage of the Casaba-Howitzer, I am expected to briefly address how it functioned: extremely well. It annihilated the parathreat. Left a hole right in its head that didn't grow back.

But that's my problem - the parathreat was not the only victim of the device. It destroyed far too much of the surrounding area of Hy-Brasil for my standards. Initial reports of the incident have indicated that there were several hundred

civilian casualties of a result of the deployment of the device. The usage of the Casaba-Howitzer was not justified.

The decision to use the Casaba-Howitzer was entirely my own. None of my men were responsible, and those that activated it were only following orders. The deaths of those caused as a result of the weapon's deployment are my responsibility

Madam Al Fine, I am filing a court martial against myself for violations of Third Mission Concerns. Regardless of their findings, I will be retiring from service, as I can no longer

view myself as equitably acting out the good of the world.

I have failed the Coalition and, more importantly, humanity.

General Rockefeller was tried by the Council of 108 for violations of Third Mission (Protection) Concerns, and was found Not Guilty, by reason of the primacy of the First Mission (Survival) over the Third Mission. The liquidation of LTE-0851-Cetus was deemed to be a significant enough threat to First Mission concerns as to necessitate the complete abandoning of all other Missions. Thusly, the deployment of the Casaba-Howitzer Nuclear Directed Energy Weapon was excusable.

Based upon the testimony and insistence of General Rockefeller, further usage of the CHNDEW has been permanently suspended by the Global Occult Coalition for general usage. However, the Council of 108 has retained the right to deploy the CHNDEW in high priority decisions, as decided by the Council of 108.

Following his acquittal, General Rockefeller voluntarily retired from Global Occult Coalition service.

Footnotes
1. A sovereign, independent, anomalous free port off the coast of Ireland, with diplomatic relations with the Coalition. Notably, Hy-Brasil could typically only be reached using thaumatological methods, with some anomalous organisms able to reach the island naturally.

Cavalcade (Hub)

The light of spring flowed from the sky,
and touched upon the Town.
When, from the mountains up on high,
the Troupe came marching down.

They rode on horses draped in red,
as well as green and white.
And on each covered, silent head,
gold bells danced in the light.

And when the townsfolk came to see
the strangers in their home,
the trav'lers did remove their masks
and summoned forth a tome.

So they did speak, so they did tell
of things beyond compare.
Of stranger lands than Heav'n or Hell
and creatures living there.

They spoke and spoke, and when one chose
to state that he was through,
then from her seat, another rose
and spoke words loud and true.

When each was done, they donned their masks
and climbed upon their beasts
and bade the horses double fast,
proceeding to the east.

And so the Troupe did leave the Town,
a new tradition made.
As all things start, so they wear down:
*such is the **Cavalcade**.*

cav-001: A Defection
cav-002: Nucleation
cav-003: An Inspection
cav-004: Ouroboric Tango
cav-006: Stuck
cav-007: A Crossing

What is this?

Welcome to Cavalcade!

A reasonable question you might have: **What in the gosh-dang heck is Cavalcade?**

According to `Wikipedia`:

A cavalcade is a procession or parade on horseback, or a mass trail ride by a company of riders. The focus of a cavalcade is participation rather than display. Often, the participants do not wear costumes or ride in formation. Often, a cavalcade re-enacts an important historical event and follows a long distance trail. A cavalcade may also be a pilgrimage.

Of course, the question then is what we actually mean *here* when we're talking about Cavalcade. In the context of this page, **Cavalcade is a theoretically endless collaborative tale project**. The purpose of Cavalcade is to **explore the entire SCP universe**, not just bits and pieces of it. It is a heavily nonlinear project, with little to no advance planning of plot or stories. However, this allows for emergent, character-driven plotlines to evolve naturally, and hopefully be a fun collaborative writing experiment.

The Rules Of Cavalcade

NOTE: This is a shortened summary of the rules; for

a full length version, see the Sandbox page.

Rule 1: Everyone who is writing for Cavalcade is put into a rotation. After one person completes their tale, the next person is picked in order from this pool. For one week after being picked, that author has absolute control over the next tale in the Cavalcade. They can do whatever they want in their tale, provided it doesn't violate the other rules below. Ideally, at least one Cavalcade story will get written every week!
Rule 2: Every tale must introduce at least one character who has not appeared in any previous tale in the Cavalcade.
Rule 3: Every character in Cavalcade has to be named.
Rule 4: No tale can include a character who has appeared in the previous two tales.
Rule 5: Every tale must include at least one character who has been used before in Cavalcade.
Rule 6: All stories must be at least 1000 words long.
Rule 7: At least one out of every three consecutive tales must include or reference a non-Foundation Group Of Interest (GOI).
Rule 8: At least one out of every three consecutive tales needs to include or reference an SCP.
Rule 9: Every Cavalcade tale must link to the Cavalcade Hub, the previous tale written, and the next tale.

That's it! Outside of these rules, anything goes.

I Want To Join The Cavalcade!

Great! Go read the longer version of the rules on our **sandbox page**, and follow the instructions there.

Nucleation

The pair conversed through the entire car ride, much to the chagrin of the man tied up in the back of the van. Not because he cared much one way or another about the topic of conversation, which was him, but because he had hoped to catch a nap while he was tied up. Had they been quiet, the rain would be fairly soothing.

"He couldn't have figured out who we are on his own. Flanagan crunched the numbers. He should only be able to… *understand* groups at least six or seven times as big as us. Otherwise he would have seen us coming." The owner of the level voice, a heavily tattooed woman that looked to be in her mid-fifties, adjusted the rear-view mirror to better focus on Gabriel's face. "That, or he's completely incompetent."

"And you're sure that this isn't part of some big plan of his?" A much younger, substantially louder voice emanated from the driver's seat. "To, to get caught by us, for whatever reason, and use us to do whatever it is he's up to?" Seemingly becoming aware of xyr own voice, the wide-eyed individual quieted down. "I mean, it's not like we'd really have a choice if that was his plan, it's just…" Xe coughed, with the sound of clanking metal and a brief puff of black smoke issuing from xyr throat.

Gabriel's boredom was briefly tinged with amusement.

"Then don't worry about it. You don't trust Flanagan's analysis? That's fine." The woman who called herself DeadeyeAlligator[1] withdrew a phone from her bag and began tapping. "I'll just let them know that you've spent twelve years studying economic and cultural trends and developed a coherent theory of meta-aware str-"

Mind-Thriller[2], as xe preferred to be addressed, interrupted. "Yes, yes, I get that they're some sort of ridiculous prodigy, we established that." Xyr voice began to rise again, less of its own accord and more

to be heard over the sirens. "It's just that… I don't know. I'm iffy on this."

"You signed on to be the getaway driver for a kidnapping without being sure about the mission?" DA was forced to brace herself as the van took a precisely timed turn down an alley at MT's behest. "Not that I can fault your work…"

"Of course I did. If I didn't, you'd still do it, except you might get caught."

Having given the assertion a thorough evaluation, Gabriel decided to weigh in with a statement he hoped was not overly controversial: "You're about to drive into a wall." This appeared to be true — in this weather, and at these speeds, hitting the brakes would be of little use. "Thought you should know."

As this was stated, DA was already unrolling a sleeve, revealing a tattoo of a knotted snake on a starry background. "Don't worry." With perhaps two seconds left before impact, DA placed a finger on the knot, and the van drove through the wall unimpeded into an inky black abyss. The only light came from DA's arm, which glowed a dull yellow.

Gabriel looked out the window. "Oh."

As their eyes adjusted to the sudden change in lighting, it became clear that the darkness was merely nighttime; a desert landscape was visible around them. MT glanced back and smiled after slowing the van to a stop. "Yeah. Magic. Cops don't really expect it. Uh, DA, mind getting us back to the hideout?"

"Sure thing." Also addressing the prisoner, "It's a bit convoluted, but you'll get used to it." Placing a finger on a different tattoo (one of a turtle with too many legs), the surroundings changed to a dingy garage; or, rather, what could have been one, had it contained any opening large enough to move a van through.

"Okay." Gabriel neither resisted nor complied as MT threw his light frame over xyr shoulder and headed through the room's singular door into a cellar furnished with comfortable-looking furniture, a tiny

kitchen, and three gun safes. After being deposited on a couch with a denim cover, he made no effort to move or sit up.

"Not feeling talkative?" DA and MT removed their coats, bulletproof vests, and shoes as DA re-tightened the cord tying Gabriel's hands behind his back. MT continued, "Or do you just not care?"

"The latter. And I read faster than you talk, so just give me a copy of your manifesto before telling me to help you smash the system or whatever. And yes, I care enough about not being tortured or neglected to help you further your goals." Pause. "And I'm thirsty."

"That's…" DA and MT shared a look as the former trailed off. "Alright. I'll go get you a copy." She headed into a different room as MT went to the sink and filled up a glass of water. After it was filled, MT sat down on the table across from Gabriel and extended the glass of water to his lips. "… should I even ask how you knew all that?"

Gabriel calmly took several sips of water before pulling away from the glass's brim. "Having intimate knowledge of every significant formal and informal system and organization in the world makes people easy to predict. Even if they're working mostly outside of it. What should I call you two?"

"We go by, er, the name of our blogs." MT cleared xyr throat, breaking eye contact briefly. "I'm Mind-Thriller, and she's DeadeyeAlligator. It's quicker to just say MT and DA."

"And you know all about me, I assume." Gabriel nodded in understanding, then yawned. "You're ex-Serpent's Hand, right? That's probably important."

Xe sighed. "DA is. She tried to get me into it, but it… wasn't for me." Xyr frown didn't lift as DA reentered the room with a tablet computer, which she placed on Gabriel's lap. "We're going to untie you now, and I assume you know better than to try anything." DA reached behind Gabriel's back and carried out this

"You could snap me in half if you wanted." This was apparently intended as an answer, as he said nothing further while he read. He

did pick up the glass of water and down it as he read. Several minutes passed in silence, Gabriel occasionally swiping to the left on the tablet's screen while DA sent some texts and MT kept xyr focus on Gabriel. After reaching the end, he spoke. "I can see why you're not affiliated with any larger group. There really aren't many that would be to your liking. And most of this would be flatly impossible without my assistance."

"But it's possible *with* your assistance." DA sat up and turned her attention to Gabriel as she spoke.

"Yes. I've already got most of the plan done. I need to talk to **Graff** first, though." He handed the tablet back to DA. "The mathematician going by 'Flanagan' that you mentioned earlier."

"You figured out Flanagan's identity?" MT tilted xyr head at this. "How on earth…"

Gabriel, in an unprecedented display of emotion, sighed a bit. "I cover my tracks well. To figure out that I'm anything but a reclusive self-made billionaire, you would need a genius with a supercomputer and an advanced understanding of memetics, economics, and sociology. The SCP Foundation is the only group that has geniuses, supercomputers, and an established study of memetics. The Chaos Insurgency does too, actually, but they would have caught a traitor much faster."

"Oh." MT hmmed at this. "They didn't mention that."

"The Foundation keeps very extensive records of their memeticists, so I know all of them. Only Dr. Vanessa Graff has the background and affiliations that would suggest any interest in this." Gabriel pointed at the tablet. "I need her here so I can get more information on your resources and talk specifics. You also need to meet her in person, if you haven't."

"We'll…" DA trailed off, disconcerted. "We'll check with them on that." She pulled her phone back out and sent another text.

"Okay." Gabriel stretched a bit, yawning again. "Where's the bathroom?"

MT pointed at the door that DA entered through. "Down the hall, on the left. And you can sleep in the guest room across the hall."

Gabriel nodded, then stood up and walked out of the room without a word.

MT turned to DA. A bit too loudly, "So how much of that do you believe?"

DA shrugged. "Well, judging by Flanagan's reaction, he at least ID'd them correctly." She showed her recently received texts to MT, a screen full of expletives and invective. "So I guess that much is true. It doesn't really matter what we believe about the rest. Personally? He's probably right about us needing him."

"So…" MT sighed. "We're meeting Flanagan… er… Graff? In person?"

"Yyyyup." A buzzing indicated that DA had received another text, which she checked: "Oh. Restaurant in Seattle, in… an hour. Think you can handle that?"

MT grinned, showing a mouth full of chrome teeth. "Shouldn't be too hard." The pair began preparing for their next excursion, grabbing their coats, vests, and firearms. "Have SearchNabokov[3] drop by to keep an eye on Gabriel. I don't want him unsupervised."

"Got it." DA sent yet another text, then turned towards the bathroom to yell: "We're heading out to meet Graff! Someone is gonna drop by to keep an eye on you! Don't fuck anything up!" The pair exited to the garage. The sound of doors opening and closing were heard, followed by the starting of the van's engine, which abruptly cut off into silence.

Shortly afterwards, the toilet was flushed. Gabriel walked over towards the guest bedroom, then lied down in its doorway and promptly fell asleep. It had been a long day, and it was finally quiet.

« **CAV-001** | **CAVALCADE** | **CAV-003** »

Footnotes
1. "Scientifically proven cooler than you. Send me questions on

math & philosophy. Not reptile ghost in acid box."
2. "I'll take the revolution to another dimension. Pay close attention."
3. "funny mems and corny joaks 24/7/420"

An Inspection

Arthur Rodrick gazed up at the massive building before him from underneath his umbrella. Giant glowing letters that read "Prometheus Labs, Inc." Arthur thought it a little odd to pick such an unprofessional font, but had to admit it fit the Greek styles present in the organization's name and their facilities' architecture. Once under the colonnade, Arthur collapsed his umbrella and pushed at the double doors.

He couldn't quite put his finger on the reason, but something about the building put him off. He hadn't experienced the feeling until he had entered, but the moment he passed through the doorway he couldn't help but feel something was different, somehow.

The rounded lobby led off into several different subsections of the facility, keypads and card scanners the only acting guards. Sitting in the center of the room was a receptionist, nose deep in a book. A researcher sat on the edge of the receptionist's desk, a clipboard in one hand and a very bored look on her face.

Arthur's footsteps echoed more times than he thought they really had any right to. The two women looked to him with bored indifference. "Hello. My name is Arthur Rodrick, I'm from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration."

This was not entirely a lie. Arthur was legally employed by OSHA, though he arguably paid businesses less visits than most of his coworkers. This was due to the fact that Arthur paid visits to very specific types of organizations. Those designated as a possible cause for worry for the Foundation. The researcher was probably aware of all this, but for the sake of classification he kept to the OSHA name.

"Oh, finally!" the researcher exclaimed. She launched herself off the desk and nearly jabbed Arthur in the chest when she offered her hand. "Alissa Grey. Welcome to our main facility. Come on, there's

plenty to show you."

She led him off through one of the various doors, sliding her ID card to open any doors along the way. Arthur half-listened to her prattle on amicably about their various destinations, his attention drawn to the ancient Greek artwork on the walls. The portraits watched him with equal interest. He experimented with a wave and a goddess gave him a short nod in return.

The staff lounge was a small but cozy room, half of it devoted to armchairs and couches facing a large TV. Arthur gave the rooms a quick inspection and found everything satisfactory save for a large black object against one wall. It had hundreds of round buttons on it, small plaques next to each naming various junk foods. At the bottom was a small reservoir, as if to catch whatever the thing produced.

"Can you… explain to me what I'm looking at?"

Alissa looked up from her bag of chips. "Vending machine. Go ahead, it's free."

Arthur hit the button for a package of cookies and waited. After a moment a soft thud signaled the machine had properly vended. He checked the expiration date.

"This expired fifteen years ago."

"Huh? Oh, right, right. This isn't a normal vending machine. You see, this machine does not contain time. We've removed all the time from it, via secret hush hush science. And so now the internal mechanisms basically operate outside of traditional spacetime."

Ignoring the impossibility of it, Arthur tried focusing on a possible reason. "You've… removed time… from a vending machine."

"Right! It has no internal concept of past or future, it only exists in the now. So by interacting with the outer interface we're able to access an infinite supply of foodstuffs that were loaded into the machine in our past or future. We actually use the same technology for our video surveillance system. It's very handy."

Arthur ripped open the packaging and took a cautious nibble, then a

wary bite, then he shoved what remained of the cookie in his mouth. Arthur drew a second cookie from the package as he stared at the machine. On one hand, it violated causality. He was fairly sure the Foundation was fond of causality. On the other, he now spotted a plaque naming a snack that had stopped being produced in his childhood.

"How exactly does this work?" Arthur asked through his second cookie.

"Told you, sir, it's a secret."

Arthur swallowed. He knew what that must mean. "It's anomalous."

Alissa only smiled.

"How many have been produced?"

"Don't know. But we're not selling them, if that's what you're worried about. Purely an in-house commodity."

"Is it safe?"

"It has to be, doesn't it?" She pressed one of the buttons for a donut brand Arthur didn't recognize. Once dispensed, she showed him the packaging. It expired in thirty years. "The inside experiences its entire existence at once. If it were to ever break, it'd always be broken. There are some defunct ones, but they're always found immediately without any issues."

"You're playing with fire here, Dr. Grey. You say this stays behind your doors, but what of your other projects? The masses aren't ready for this sort of thing."

Alissa smirked and responded, "Are you aware of our name, Mister Rodrick?"

He wondered if that particular exchange was common during these inspections. She certainly looked proud enough of herself to suggest otherwise. Arthur nodded and gestured for the lounge exit.

"Shall we continue?" he asked, slightly humored.

As she showed him around, Arthur came to the conclusion that these people were working under a very different rule set than the rest of the world. The scientists would explain how something worked, using logic Arthur either couldn't follow or outright knew was scientifically inaccurate. But their projects worked, their technology seemed safe. Safe enough as far as the Foundation was concerned, at least. He was particularly intrigued by the teleport device they were working on. He watched for almost twenty minutes, men and women appearing and reappearing from atop a platform.

"So, basically," Alissa said as she began to brief him on the final stop. "This stems from the technology we used for the vending machine. She opened up a cabinet and pulled out what seemed to be two old astronaut suits. "With the established fact that machinery can function in a place without time, we reasoned that organics can function in a place without space. So we developed this void chamber."

"I don't understand," Arthur admitted as they began to don the suits. That did not seem like a very sound conclusion to reach.

"Turns out we were wrong." Arthur wasn't sure if she had heard him, but he felt somewhat vindicated as he shoved a leg into the suit. "You need air to breathe, and obviously a void doesn't have that. So we took up the design of old diving suits. One abyss is like another, we figured, and so long as we had air we'd be fine."

"Okay…" Arthur was surprised how light the suit was. He slid his arms into the sleeves and stood. Even the giant dome of a helmet was easy to lift.

"So we combined the technologies." Alissa's voice was an odd, muffled sound from within her helmet. "Using timeless air strapped to our backs, we can enter the void. It's a bit disorienting, but you get used to it. And because the speed of an object's motion is inversely proportional to the viscosity of the medium, and we're in a vacuum, everything moves super-fast."

Arthur thought for a moment. Prometheus Labs and the Foundation had worked under NASA for a brief time, when it was thought that reaching space would require something a tad abnormal. "Wait, this

is the technology from Project Apollo, isn't it?"

"Right." Alissa's voice leaked from the small speakers in his helmet. "See, buying up area for new labs is expensive. And digging down isn't always the best option. So we started the Void Program. We weren't sure how to solve the whole collapsing void issue, and then you let us play with that little cuboid thingy to simulate outer space and it became super easy."

"You made it seem like you have more than one of these 'void' chambers. How is that possible if we have the only SCP-184 contained?"

Alissa was quiet for a moment, her face hidden behind the dark glass of the helmet. "That's classified."

"Of course. My apologies."

Entering the void chamber required them to go through several air locks. It was a monotonous progress, involving little more than waiting to move on to the next room so they could wait some more. Until the final room, which contained nothing before them but an empty archway. The black nothingness inside and beyond the arch unsettled Arthur like nothing he had seen thus far, but Alissa strode toward it as confidently as the suit allowed.

"Now, Arthur," she said when she stopped at the threshold. "Entering this place is a bit of a trying experience. The parts of your body that enter are accelerating at a significantly greater rate than the rest of you. It's not fun, and you'll freak out because suddenly it looks like your arm is gone. But you just have to keep going. Don't stop, and you'll be fine."

And then she stepped into the darkness, an invisible curtain wrapping around her. Then Arthur was alone in the room. This seemed something that was not safe. Or sane, really. But he knew that laboratories were dangerous places. He also knew danger would only truly present itself if you broke away from procedures. So he took a deep breath, held it, and ran into the nothingness.

Ouroboric Tango

Jessie Moon sat on her bed with her back against the wall and her legs splayed out before her. Textbooks she hadn't touched in weeks were strewn across the floor. Her bedroom's unlit lamp cast warm, soothing darkness over her. She closed her eyes and felt her mind stretch like a cat in the sun. Out there, beyond the walls of this tiny house where only she lived, people were moving and horns were blaring and the stars above whirled about the sky, but that was out there, and this was in here. In here…

Jessie Moon scooted over a foot to the side, making some room in her bed. She stared expectantly at the empty space next to her.

A second later, another Jessie Moon appeared.

The other's face was turned, so Jessie could not discern the expression on her face. There was silence between them, unbearable silence that strained at her mind, so she said, "Hey. What's up?"

When the other didn't respond immediately, Jessie craned her head around to try to see the time on the other's watch. The other pushed her head away. "Cut it out, jackass," she muttered.

Jessie stuck out her tongue. "It's not my fault that you're making the game boring in the first place."

"This is…hardly a game. And whatever's my fault—"

"Is definitely *not* my fault. Present me is present me and future me is future me and present me is not future me."

"You're being so obnoxious," the other said.

Jessie raised her hands in the air. "Hey, come on. Look, we don't know why this is happening, right?"

“It happens…”

“Because it happens. We’re stuck here…at least until I go back, and you already know when that happens, don’t you? The point is that you don’t need to be so pissy. We make the most out of where we are and what is happening where we are. Isn’t that exciting?”

An odd tension began to drain slowly out of the other’s face. Finally, she smiled. “All right, then,” the other said. She leaned over and rested her head on Jessie’s shoulder. “What do you want to do?”

The other was warm.

"In this instant, or more…generally?" Jessie asked.

"The second one."

“I don’t know."

“I guess I have to help you out, then?” the other said.

Jessie giggled. “Guess so.”

The other said, “We want to know more about ourselves. Reasonable?”

“Reasonable,” Jessie said.

“We want to know all about what we’re made of, and what stuff is inside us, and where that stuff came from, and what that stuff’s gonna be,” the other said. “Right?”

“Yeah.”

“So one day we figure all that out…”

“Mhm.”

The other tilted her head. “What happens after that, then?”

Jessie didn’t answer the other’s question. She had neither an origin nor an end; they blended together into one Ouroboric mix. She understood, more than anyone else ever would, that she was

something that did not have a cause, that she was arbitrary and yet necessary. What would it mean to understand that? To understand the agent-less will of the universe? And once it was understood, *what then?*

“We’re afraid,” the other said.

“*You’re* afraid.”

The other started stroking Jessie’s hair. For a moment, she contemplated shoving the other away and ignoring her and just going back right then. But that was not what was going to happen—the universe hardly moved on the pettiness of one girl—so she relaxed.

“Fine, then,” Jessie said. “What am I afraid of?”

There was the world, spinning and revolving peacefully in space. There were people on that world, and there was her. She saw the timeline of her life explode outwards in spirals and curves and circles that turned in on themselves.

She saw at once her past, when she was ignorant in innocence, and then the shattering of innocence in the Revelation—

It had not been Revelation when she had realized that she could twist the world with a focused will. Anybody could know that. Revelation was when she understood that the world would only be twisted in a very specific way for no reason at all, that she and humanity and the world would only ever follow one path.

She saw her future, and in it she saw the emblem of the Foundation.

Jessie closed her eyes. “I know my future, don’t I? I…I can see myself behind the Foundation’s walls. This is what happens. What is there to be afraid of?”

“You’re not afraid of the Foundation,” the other said.

“Of course not. If I were, I would’ve run and joined the Hand, right?”

“But you are afraid.”

“I guess you’re right,” Jessie said. “But it doesn’t make sense! I know everything, but I don’t know anything. That’s the best possible way to be, isn’t it? I can see what happens, but I can’t see who I am, or what I’ll think, and I can see what I’ll *do* and what I’ll *be* but not… not what the meaning of that being is. Isn’t that exciting? I should be excited, shouldn’t I?”

The other nodded. “It’s…unbelievably exciting.”

“I know *exactly* what’s going to happen, for me and for humanity and for the world…and I’ve accepted all of it. And I know the richness of experience, I can—I can taste it, I’m salivating, just waiting for it to come over me! So then…”

Jessie opened her eyes.

“Why am I afraid?” she asked.

The other smiled. “Oh. Oh, huh. I understand now.”

“You already know the stupid answer.”

“Yeah,” the other said. “Yeah, don’t worry, this ends…this ends in a way that is simultaneously satisfactory and unsatisfactory.”

“Literally everything is satisfactory and unsatisfactory. You’re satisfied by the things you like and unsatisfied by the things you don’t. We are just dropping brilliant insights left and right.”

The other frowned and punched Jessie in the arm. “That’s really annoying, especially when I’m not the one saying it.”

“More brilliant insights.”

“Shut up,” the other said. “Look…listen, all right?”

The smile crept off Jessie’s face. “All right.”

She looked into the other’s eyes. It was not at all like looking into a mirror. That was examining her imitation—her simulation. But the other existed both inside and outside herself. In the other’s eyes, she could see all the parts of herself that she thought she knew, and

yet she could also see emotion and thought that she would not be able to identify internally. How could “future her” be so different when she was from only the immediate future?

The other said, “If you know everything that’s going to happen to you, then aren’t you only a few steps away from knowing yourself? From removing all the mystery or potential for surprise that your own soul holds? We've both embraced extreme determinism. So if we've spoiled the ending…”

The other chuckled and wiped her eyes. “It’s silly.”

“It’s not silly,” Jessie said.

“Fine,” the other said. “I mean, once we spoil the ending, what’s left to discover?”

Jessie felt the line of her life unfold and stretch before her. She averted her gaze.

“What kind of…boring person are we going to become, do you think?” the other asked. “What happens to us once we know everything we’ve wanted to know? Do we die the slow death? We wake up one morning, and being us is no longer worth being because every corner of our mind is mapped out?”

Jessie felt the dark walls of the room box and define the boundaries of her being. Inside of her mind, she felt a voice cry out as if on a mountaintop. The voice wanted to reach the very roof of the sky and the very depths of the most mysterious seas—it wanted to *be* everything that it could be. It wanted to *exist.* But the only thing the voice could fill was this room, small and peaceful and dark. She had to be humble in her omniscience and omnipotence.

Others might have said that she had a choice: to be this humble god, or to be the sort of god that was a rampant Will imposing itself on a soft, pliable world. But she *was* the first sort of god, so she knew that it wasn’t a choice. It was a question of definitions. She did not act. She *was.* She already knew everything that she was going to be, and the rampant Will had no place in her future.

She had to be satisfied filling the room.

“One day,” the other said, “we’ll know ourselves entirely. Then we will have…a choice.”

“We never have choices.”

“A pseudo-choice, then. We can be bored with ourselves and die the slow death, or…or it’ll be beautiful and wonderful. But I don’t know how. The thing is—do—do you understand what we have to do?”

Jessie nodded. “We have to accept that we will one day know ourselves.”

Now, Jessie understood.

“And you know what we have to do in order to do that,” the other said.

Jessie exhaled slowly as her vision detached itself from linear temporality. Once again, she saw the end of the line. As the image of the Foundation’s symbol crept into her mind, she saw herself in a room, closed in, unable to move…

…waiting…

And happy.

She did not understand. No matter how much she looked, she did not understand what experiencing that was like.

“We have to be taken in by the Foundation,” Jessie said.

“Yes,” the other said. “And we have to—we will—set the necessary events in motion to have that happen. In an hour, we have a talk with Carmen.”

In the darkness, Jessie could hear the other’s breathing, and she could smell her own shampoo on the other’s hair. She was in the company of herself and could not be more content.

“Erase my memory,” the other said.

“What the fuck?”

“This was cheating. Conversations with myself to learn more about myself are cheating. And that aside, it’s not even causally open, which basically means it’s bullshit,” the other said. “Just wipe the details. I’ll remember to set the end into motion, but I don’t want to remember this conversation.”

“What the *fuck?* I’m not going to wipe you! That’s so fucked up. I mean, *I* don’t want to be wiped, and if I wipe you then in my future I’ll get wiped. No thanks.”

“It’ll be a game. Maybe one day, we’ll figure out that you wiped me—because you’re going to wipe me—”

“—yeah, I know that I wipe you, but that doesn’t mean I can’t still be weirded out by it.”

“—let me *finish,* Christ. I’ll figure out that you wiped me—I wiped myself—and we can have a game to see if future me can undo past me’s—your—wipe. It’ll be fun.”

Jessie rubbed her eyes. “Are we really doing this?”

“Yeah. You know we don’t like cheating.”

“…*fine,*” Jessie said. “God, now I know why you were so moody when you first came here. You had to do this stupid thing, didn’t you?"

“Well, I didn't understand then. But now I do.”

Jessie rolled away from the other. “Man, go fuck yourself,” she said. After a moment’s pause, she said, "I’ve applied the wipe. It’s time-delayed. In ten seconds…”

“So hurry up and go back,” the other said. “To have this conversation."

“Yeah,” Jessie said. “Fine.”

She disappeared.

The other smiled. A few seconds later, her specific memory of the last ten minutes was destroyed.

There were two steaming slices of pepperoni pizza on Jessie Moon's dining room table. Jessie took small, careful nibbles out of one of them. The other one sat, alone in the darkness of the unlit room, across from her.

Jessie took a sip of Sprite to wash down the taste of grease and cheese. She snapped her fingers, and an Italian woman materialized in the seat with the lonely pizza slice.

"Hello, Carmen," Jessie said.

Carmen blinked a few times in surprise as her eyes adjusted to the darkness of the kitchen. "Sorry, uh…Jessie? Would you mind turning on the lights?"

"Yeah, I would."

Carmen laughed. "Well, that's fine. How are you doing, Jessie?"

"I thought I had a designation."

"Mhm, you do. You're SCP-Black Box. But you're Jessie to me," Carmen said. She took a large bite out of the pizza. In between mouthfuls, she said, "I mean, come on. I'm not going to dehumanize you when I'm a guest in your house."

Jessie sighed. "You do, however, fully intend on jailing me for life."

"Of course," Carmen said. A wide, warm smile stretched across her face. "That's a given. Thanks for the pizza, by the way."

The floor creaked as Carmen leaned back in her chair. "May I?" she asked, reaching for the Sprite bottle.

"Go ahead."

"Thanks." Carmen grabbed a plastic cup, filled it with Sprite, and began to drink. Jessie stared at her in silence until she finished with

a sigh.

“So,” Carmen said, putting the cup down. “You called because you wanted to tell me something, so that I could relay that to the O5s, so that events pan out in a way you want them to. I’m afraid I can’t quite tell *what* that way is, but, nonetheless—“

“Carmen,” Jessie said. “Carmen, listen. The Alpha-1 ‘I know things that you haven’t told me’ shtick is a lot less impressive to people like me.”

“I’m not trying to impress, Jessie.”

Jessie rolled her eyes. This conversation should have been finished in thirty seconds. Until this moment, Jessie had not been entirely certain if she was still capable of hate. Carmen was at least useful enough to rekindle those emotions.

“The hypocrisy of the Foundation astounds me. You guys in the Red Right Hand hop yourselves up on fucking HALMAS, which is *definitely* anomalous—”

Carmen laughed. “Memetoamnestics is a perfectly legitimate scientific discipline, Jessie,” she said.

“Okay, we’re not talking about this anymore.”

“You’re the omniscient one, Jessie, you tell me what we do and don’t do.”

The first time she had brought Carmen in for a conversation, the woman had only been surprised for a second before regaining composure. She freely admitted to being of the Foundation’s Red Right Hand and openly stated her intention to conduct surveillance. It was infuriating.

Jessie thought to herself that Carmen was wrong in trying to justify the Foundation. The Foundation was the Foundation; nowhere was there any guarantee that it had to remain internally consistent. She thought this, but she did not say it.

“On May 10th, 2016, Seattle becomes temporally corrupted,” she

said. “It’s a betrayal by Sedna Prewitt, Director of Site 76. She defects to the Chaos Insurgency.”

Carmen whistled. “Wow. Heavy stuff. Are you going to move out before that happens?”

“I think I’ll stay.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“Because if you sufficiently prepare for Seattle’s corruption, which you will, a certain chain of events which I will not divulge eventually ends in my capture by the Foundation. Which is my ultimate goal.”

“*Really,*” Carmen said. She raised an eyebrow. “If that’s the ultimate goal, why don’t you just come with me?”

“Because I don’t want to go into containment,” Jessie said. “The universe, by and large, does not paradox itself into incoherency. I don’t do things that I don’t want to do because causality says so. Maybe the idea of causality *makes me* want to do something, but that’s not the case this time. All I want to do is experience my life, and an intrinsic part of my life involves being contained by the Foundation.”

Carmen laughed. “Oh, okay. Any more information? Specifics?”

“Just…prepare. You have six months. And you don’t stop Prewitt.”

“Of course, Jessie. I’m not an idiot.”

Jessie sighed. “Carmen, why do our talks always have to devolve into petty, passive-aggressive arguments? Look, I…I like people. I like friends. I wonder, sometimes, what it would be like to be friends with you, and I think it would be kind of nice.”

A vague feeling of satisfaction settled inside Jessie when she saw the smile on Carmen’s face waver. She blinked once, and then her expression was radiant again.

“I don’t know you, Jessie. I don’t understand you. Let alone being friends with you…I told you earlier what I’m supposed to do to what I

don’t understand.”

Jessie and Carmen sat in silence for a while more.

“All right, fine,” Jessie said. “Go tell the O5s. Have fun. Don’t let the Foundation fall."

“The Foundation will never fall. You know that.”

“I thought I was the omniscient one.”

“I have some vision of my own, Jessie. Why do you think the Red Right Hand is so loyal to the Foundation after what they’ve done to us? We ‘hopped up’ on HALMAS, we read between the lines of the universe, and we picked the winning side. The Foundation is a universal, immortal constant."

“Go home, Carmen.”

“Good night, Jessie. Thanks again for the food.”

The door creaked shut behind Carmen, and peace was restored to Jessie Moon’s tiny suburban Seattle house.

Jessie walked out of her dining room and back into her bedroom. She peeked through the blinds and let moonlight cast her face into shadow. The moon overwhelmed her and her anger at Carmen with its indifference.

A thrill rushed through her body. It was like the thrill of the illusion of choice. Changing what would happen—what she *knew* would happen—was impossible. But now, she was living through those events—feeling the river of time run over her skin—and wasn’t that exhilarating? Through being, she had all the power in the world.

Jessie flopped onto her bed. Her eyes were already growing adjusted to the faint moonlight. She stretched her arms and legs out and felt her body settle into itself. A long sigh escaped her lips.

“Carmen is Carmen and you are you,” Jessie said. “Carmen is that she is Carmen. And she…even she…is beautiful in that way and in herself.”

She would be the humble god.

Slowly, Jessie drifted to sleep.

« CAV-003 | CAVALCADE | CAV-005 »

Stuck

Thaddeus Xyank had spent the last thirty minutes reading up on the theory behind Type B XACTS and studying the blueprints. Once in a while he'd silently shaken his head, and there'd been muttering aplenty, but overall he was pleased with the work he hadn't done yet. He *had* resolved to not put that memetic trigger in. He knew it was pointless, because he would and he had, but he felt it was important to at least stand up to yourself sometimes.

When dealing with temporal anomalies on a professional level, at some point you just stopped trying to wrap your head around it, and started accepting things that made no sense whatsoever. Mostly because you felt they were probably going to make sense at some point in the future.

"I have no idea why all nine of them got activated at the same time, Dr. Xyank. From what I can see, 00315-XK-001 only calls for three of them to be active at any one time."

Simone van Oldenburg, one of his most gifted field engineers, squinted as she tried to make sense of the log she was reading. At only 24, she'd managed to become one of the Foundation's experts on Temporal Distortion Mechanics, second only to Xyank. Well, if she was completely honest, she had to admit Attie Anastasakos could kick her ass at temporal trivia too. She didn't like to admit it though, especially not to herself.

"I don't even know why these things were installed around Seattle in the first place," Simone muttered, "They're not even a thing yet."

Thaddeus pursed his lips. "Actually, they will be and they are. And they're not. I'll bring you up to speed in a moment. But you're right, three of these Type B XACTS *should* have activated. Nine of them did. And that…presents us with a bit of a problem."

Simone made a sound that held the middle ground between a sigh

and a cough. "I would say so, yes. I'd hate to be in there right now. I just hope we find a way to disable six of these babies without…"

Thaddeus finished the sentence for her: "…removing the city of Seattle from existence."

The two of them stared silently at the continually shifting skyline in the distance. They watched the Space Needle flicker in and out of existence as one XACTS-induced temporal stasis field fought for control with the other two. It was going to be a long day.

George Alan Gimbell had a lot on his plate. The 57-year-old business man had started the day fighting with his wife over the ever-growing stack of bills and the ever-dwindling amount of money coming in. Then, just as he'd gotten up to go have lunch, a call had come through from his distributor; they were filing for bankruptcy and that left Gimbell's Feline Fashion in a lurch. And to top all of that off, he was now trying to keep a straight head as the deli he was in seemed to simultaneously be a barbershop, some sort of futuristic oil refinery or something, and just that: the deli where he'd taken his lunch for the last seven years.

His last coherent memory was of trying to shut the world out as he took a bite of his freshly made BLT on rye. And then suddenly there were so many things at once. It was like someone had triple-exposed a roll of film, with the images continually fighting for dominance. The BLT had lost all taste, and George dropped it to the floor.

He breathed heavily and tried to remember his own name, but it refused to come to him, even when he took out his driver's license. The man staring back at him did not ring any bells, and he panicked. Looking around for help from those around him, George found out it wasn't just him.

The young man behind the counter was slumped over the espresso machine, a glassy look in his eyes. He was mouthing something, but George couldn't make out what it was. To his left was a group of college students, their laptops still open on the table. The kids themselves were spread on the floor, having flopped from their seats

only moments before. They looked like goldfish removed from their bowl, their mouths opening and closing without sound.

George couldn't look at them for too long; he couldn't look at anything too long. Whatever he focused on tried to inform him that it wasn't there. And then it was. And then it wasn't. Or might be, who knew.

He closed his eyes and got up. His senses were telling him he was standing on tiles, and smooth, poured concrete, and wood flooring. The stimuli were confusing on so many levels that he could feel his mind trying to shut down, as if it was opting for a coma instead of being subjected to this mockery of reality.

All he could think of was getting home to his wife, and telling her that he was going to get a normal job. That he'd sell the company and flip burgers if it meant having her beside him. Truth be told, there never had been much money to be made selling swimsuits for cats, but he was a proud man. Too proud.

He tried to fight the drowsy feeling washing over him, but when you were, and you weren't, and you might be, you really had no chance in seven hells.

George felt the side of his face hit the deli's floor, and then he was drifting off to sleep with the smell of sandwiches and kerosene in his nose, and his skin itching from the hair on the floor.

"So tell me, Simone. Do we have any idea which of these nine XACTS are linked together, and what they're temporally anchored to?"

Xyank took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes.

"Not yet, not for all three of those configurations at least. I've isolated one of them though. It's this one, the one on the Tolt-MacDonald Campground, and the one in the Puget Sound. Seems to be fixed on early spring, first decade of the twentieth century. Can't pin it down it any more accurately right now, sorry."

"That's alright. One down, two to go. Think you can manage those?"

Thaddeus felt his eyes burn.

"Actually, no. This is like trying to scrape one layer of super glue off of another, times three. I did get a message I'm sending in a few years time with a brute-forced hash to this set's temporal actuator connection IDs, but nothing for the other three. I don't really know what that means, but I don't like it one bit. I really need your help on this, Thaddeus."

If there was one thing that Thaddeus Xyank knew, it was that when the people under his direction used his first name, they were lost.

"Alright," he said and rolled up his sleeves, "We're going to need to assume that we break the other two right here and now. It's either that or we assume Seattle is lost, and I'll be damned if we let an entire city go down on my watch. Simone, I need pen, some paper and your laptop. And god help me if I find more of that crap on there."

Simone raised an eyebrow and huffed, but handed over the laptop to her superior, taking care not to cross the cables attached to its various ports.

"You might not like it, Dr. Xyank, but I enjoy reading *all* publications on temporal displacement theory, even if they directly contradict yours. But fine, delete the lot. I know where to find them again."

Thaddeus glared at her.

Kevin sat in the exact center of a bench in Mineral Springs Park and stared off into the distance. He was vaguely aware of a voice calling to him from somewhere, but it kind of got lost in all the other sensory input vying for his attention. He had no idea where he was. The park, obviously. But it also seemed to be a fireplace with a fire burning in it at the moment. And for some reason, a pig pen.

"KEVIN!"

He tried to focus and looked down at the laptop resting lopsided on

his legs.

"KEVIN!"

"Yes?"

315 closed his eyes and shook his head.

"Listen to me, Kevin. You need to keep moving. Sitting down will only make things worse."

"But I'm tired," Kevin said, and he was. He could feel his body rapidly draining of energy, and with every passing second he was becoming more confused about where and who he was.

315 paused a few seconds before speaking again, "I know you are, Kevin, but I mean it when you say you need to keep moving."

"Why? Why do I need to keep moving? Why can't I just sleep?"

315's tone seemed to change ever so slightly, but between the weird disconnection from reality Kevin was feeling, and the fog clouding his brain, he couldn't figure out exactly how it had changed, or into what.

"Because, Kevin, if you don't keep moving, there might not be anywhere to move to."

"Oh."

"What a wonderful understatement, Kevin. Now would you please pick up this laptop and make your way out of this park. And watch out for the…never mind."

"What?"

"Nothing, just get moving, Kevin."

Kevin's shoes and pants were on fire, but they weren't. Once.

A Crossing

Madame Lucia sat where she always did, gazing out her window at the impossible plain. The colors shifted. Landmarks changed as the land beneath them bubbled and bulged gently. Any sign of structure tore itself apart quickly, under a pale circle of light that moved across the sky with disturbing fluidity. Just a few steps from the door of the castle, the world became… undefined. This was raw firmament, the essence of chaos, that would remain so until something observed its patterns with an intent to change them, at which point it would collapse into logic, never capturing that same uncertainty again.

Madame Lucia quite enjoyed the view. It soothed her stomach.

Why had she thought of her stomach?

Oh, yes. It was bothering her.

She glanced at the tea cup in her hand. It was jasmine. It had been jasmine for the past several decades. She hadn't eaten yet today, so it must be the jasmine. She glared at the tea spoon which had been the source of the offending beverage. There were more of them. There should have been more of them. Her stomach was bothering her. She would ask Iago where the spoons were. Even such a mild cramp was quite intolerable for a woman of Madame's standards. She would find Iago.

With that decision made, Madame Lucia poured out her cup of tea and poured a new cup of hot water from the tumbler by her side. She then reached for the spoon which would transmute it into jasmine tea. Iago would be by soon to deliver her rat souffle. She would find him then. There was no need to lose her patience. Her stomach was bothering her.

It really was a *nice* view.

Iago dutifully collected the plumpest rats from the small pile surrounding the impressive mound of cheese. A few of them still had earrings on what remained of their heads, which he carefully removed.

The plan had worked perfectly. A small parcel of cheese had been sent off to the world in full view of Madame, while the rest was transported in secret to the coldest, plainest room in the castle (Iago's bedroom), where the rats could gorge themselves silly before being slapped into oblivion and introduced to the cheese again as an ingredient.

Iago skinned and deboned the rats with the utmost care, throwing out anything but the choicest cuts of meat. He then mixed the souffle, being sure to place all of the rat meat at the bottom in one corner of the enormous dish. Madame did not enjoy the taste of rat.

A few hours later, Iago pushed open the door to Madame's sitting room, staggering under the weight of the ramekin. He waited for Madame to speak.

"Iago."

His heart was gripped with terror instantly. He recognized the tone that Madame used when peturbed. What had he done? Was the souffle late? Had she discovered where he was keeping the cheese?

She was waiting for him to speak. She was being gracious enough to allow him to respond and he wasn't saying anything! He was keeping her waiting!

He managed to say, "Yes, Madame?"

"Iago, where are my other tea spoons?"

He swallowed. "Madame, please, you will, if you would be so kind as to desire to do so, remember the minor altercation forty-seven years ago with that small group of ruffians that found some sort of Way inside the castle?"

"Yes, of course I do. I told you to take care of it. Do you now

presume to tell me that you did not, in fact, take care of it? Are those ruffians galivanting about as we speak?" The word speak rose ever so slightly in pitch compared to the rest of them, indicating Madame's sudden indignant horror.

Iago did not hesitate. "No, of course not, dear Madame. I ejected them quickly. However, I am afraid that they managed to… to abscond with several of your tea spoons."

"I see. And, pray," she went on in a voice like honey laced with cyanide, "you thought it prudent to keep this from me until this moment? I *see*. Do you, by any chance, know the whereabouts of my spoons now, Iago?"

"Ah, in fact I do, Madame!"

"And you have not retrieved them yet because?"

"I… am so very sorry, please, Madame, but they are currently in the custody of the Philistines."

"Yes, I could have guessed as much, but which phil-"

"Er… no, dearest Madame. They are contained by… the *P*hilistines…"

There was a great silence from Madame Lucia. The cup fell to the floor and did not shatter. the half-full tumbler knocked over, the water inside unmoving. Iago did not feel his joints tightening, or his skin hardening, but he felt the oppressive force wash over him, slowly making movement more and more impossible as the single changeless moment stretched on and on…

…and then Madame got a hold of herself.

It was not that Madame Lucia *hated* humanity. Quite the contrary. She prized rarity above all, but beyond that, she valued ephemerality, impermanence, all those things that existed once and never again. Those that were both were twice rare, in space and in time. Human lives were so short by the length of eternity, and not a single one repeated itself. The ultimate value!

But then they tried to extend their lives, through memories and monuments and words. So they were philistines, not realizing what they had and throwing it away like something common such as immortality. But *they* were the worst. Capturing and sustaining all manner of one-of-a-kind things. Twice offending by preventing the disappearance of their toys, and never allowing change into the world. Keeping everything the same and boring, boring, boring! They were the worst, and so they were given the capital letter. Philistines. The most ignorant of them all.

This was unacceptable.

"Iago." Madame Lucia beckoned with her hand.

Iago approached the figure shining in the chair, knowing never to get close enough to see its face, settling for admiring the glimmering white waterfall of hair. "Y-yes, Madame?"

"You have not been among philistines for many years, have you?"

"Centuries, dear Madame."

"This will be rectified. I am sending you to retrieve my tea spoons from the Philistines."

"Me? But, but, Madame, please, sweet Madame-"

"I will hear nothing but 'yes' for my gracious gift, Iago. The armory is at your disposal. You
leave within the hour. Mind you get *all* of them. But first, you will deliver my souffle."

Iago, shaking, set down the souffle by his mistress, averting his eyes as he did so. Madame Lucia tasted it.

"Ugh. Far too cold."

Iago arrived in the world, landing in the exact same spot where he had left it, hundreds of years ago. Unfortunately, it appeared that in the interim, somebody had flattened out the land somewhat and built a cafe on it. Yielding to gravity, Iago dropped five feet into a large

bowl of cabbage stew, splashing the man sitting in front of it, who immediately started screaming.

Eventually, several cooks came out of the kitchen to see what all the fuss was about. Iago looked around the deserted room wildly and spotted a recessed balcony where several patrons were staring at the commotion. He lowered his voice by several social classes, pointed, and yelled, "Oi! That bloke has a knife! Someone stop him!"

The cooks hefted various kitchen utensils and ran for some stairs while the second-floor diners looked around uncertainly. Iago hauled himself out of the bowl and ran out the door, while the rather sheepish man in the tweed jacket cried, "My cabbage stew!" and continued trying to clean himself off.

Iago found the Philistines' base eventually, simply by wandering through the town he was in. It was incredible, he mused. It wasn't that nobody saw the men in suits walking into the apparently abandoned store. It just didn't seem to register with them in any meaningful way. There was nothing supernatural deflecting their attention from the unlocked door, nothing keeping them from noticing the suspiciously bulky-looking vagrants hanging around the place. The castle's small armory had a few devices for detecting tricks like that. They were just completely incurious. There was a collection of rare, world-changing, life-changing artifacts hiding in plain sight and doing a very shoddy job of it, and they *never even took notice.*

Iago grunted to himself. Philistines.

There was a small slot that may have just been a crack in the wall on the far end of the store. Iago inserted a gold card engraved with eye-watering patterns and waited. The machine clicked and buzzed in greedy pleasure, and a door swung out of the wall, satisfied with the bribe.

Iago came to a crossing and headed down the corridor he would have pegged as least likely to end up at the section where the anomalies were stored, knowing how these sort of things went. He turned out to be wrong. However, after several dead ends, and close calls, he found a small room with cardboard boxes full of laminated

cards on lanyards. Visitor passes. Iago grabbed one of the important looking ones and nipped back to the crossing, amazed at how paradoxically paranoid and trusting the Philistines could be.

Eventually he found himself at a security door, which his pass wouldn't let him access. He searched his pockets for something that could help him and came up with nothing. *The armory is at your disposal,* Madame had said. Well, that was fantastic, except that there hadn't been any need for an armory for centuries, and so it was horribly understocked. The trick with the gold card had actually been "it," as far as any anomalous help went. Iago cursed under his breath, turned, and started searching for another way in.

He found it rather quickly, in the form of a pale-faced young researcher who shook just a bit every time someone looked at her. She was obviously new, holding her clearance badge in one hand, like a shield, ready to be raised if anyone threatened her. Iago set his face in an expression of haughty confidence, and strode over to her.

"Excuse me, miss…"

"Marp! Sedna Prewitt, s-sir."

"Yes. My name is Dr. Jones. I'm a consultant from Site-19. Your Site Administrator Samson has sent for me to examine one of your artifacts." He flashed his purloined visitor's pass.

"Uh, nice to meet you, Dr., um, Jones. I'm Sedna Prewitt." The girl was obviously frightened out of her wits. Iago felt a rather guilty thrill at that, seeing in her the awe that Madame inspired in him on a regular basis.

"Yes," he sighed. "You already said."

"Oh! Right! I'm so sorry, sir."

"In any case," he went on, "I have come to evaluate SCP-1067, but the site security has neglected to provide me with the appropriate level of clearance. Please conduct me to someone that has the clearance and be on your way, young lady." He might have been

laying it on too thick, but it had the desired effect. The girl straightened up indignantly.

"Excuse me, sir, but I happen to be a Level 2 researcher tasked with maintaining several Safe-Class SCP-Objects, including the one you're after. I am completely capable of *conducting* you to the object myself." She shrunk back slightly, suddenly aware that she may have just crossed the line with a perceived superior.

Iago showed no sign of annoyance, and simply said, "Lead on, then, Miss Prewitt."

Madame Lucia sat in her chair, sipping tea and enjoying the view. The chaos outside was still so… invigorating, even after so long. She couldn't bring herself to look away anymore, not for too long. And why would she want to? Why would she want to turn her back on the infinite possibility, and remember the cage of inevitability that she was forced to remain in? Here was endless potential, that would remain endless as long as nobody actually used it. The disorder swam through her, and she welcomed it in, drinking it in like a drug, which it was. To one such as Madame, it was a drug. And all drugs have downsides.

The chaos was the opposite of everything that Madame represented. It slithered through her, slowly wearing away the power that sustained her. Already her mind had started to go fuzzy at the edges. It was barely noticeable, and it would remain so for a very long time, but already that rock-solid core of power was beginning to erode. There would be consequences.

Madame Lucia didn't know this, and she may or may not have cared if she did. What was reality to dreams? What was inevitability to possibility? And soon Iago would return with her teaspoons. Soon she would raise her glass to kind Chaos, and it would be… glorious.

A few minutes later, Iago was standing with Sedna in front of a wall of lockers. She carefully unlocked one, and stepped back to allow Iago to open the door.

"Why don't you open it yourself?" he asked.

"Administrator Samson hasn't cleared me for testing with SCP-1067, sir," she replied.

"But, I'm here and I have been cleared."

She shrugged nervously. "The rules are the rules, sir."

Iago rolled his eyes and opened the locker. Resting in a vacuum sealed bag, there was a medium sized box bound with soft brown leather. Iago breathed slowly and began to remove the bag.

"Thank you, Miss Prewitt," he said. "I need to take this with me back to Site-19, and my flight leaves soon, so I'll take my leave."

The young woman started. "I'm sorry, sir? Foundation regulations state that all transportation of Safe-class anomalies require a minimum of four guards."

"Oh, this little thing won't be any trouble. I can find my way out, thank you."

She frowned. "I should probably tell Administrator Samson."

Iago started getting annoyed. "Really, it's only a Safe-Class, Miss Prewitt."

"Nevertheless, the rules say that at least-"

"Never mind the damn rules. I need to catch my flight! Madame requires her tea." Iago clapped his hand over his mouth as Sedna's eyes grew wide. She tensed to run when Iago dropped the box and grabbed her with both hands and drew her close to him.

Iago wasn't an idiot, after surviving so long with Madame Lucia. He was fully aware that his idolization and devotion to her was not entirely his own, he just didn't care. It was something in the voice, and Iago had learned to replicate it fairly well. He did so now.

"Listen to me, Sedna. Your rules don't mean anything. There's no point in calling for the guards because they'll fail to catch me. Your

entire organization is flawed, and the very fact that I'm standing here is proof of that. There is nothing you can do. Eventually it will all come down, and there's no point in trying to prevent it, because you're nothing but Philistines. Remember, there is nothing you can do to stop me."

With that, he picked up the box and walked quickly away. Sedna Prewitt stood still for a minute, a dazed expression on her face, then shook herself and ran for the nearest breach alarm.

Iago had just passed the crossing when the alarm began to sound. Damn! He must not have had the technique as down pat as he thought! He broke into a run, and it wasn't long before he heard people on his trail. They sounded large, unfriendly, and unwilling to compromise.

He made it to the door of the abandoned store when he found that he had been locked in. The footfalls were getting closer. Iago looked around for another way out, cursed, and activated his return ticket.

He appeared at the back entrance of the castle, just at the edge of the undefined land. He panted heavily, relieved. He removed the box from the bag as he entered the kitchen, wanting to clean the spoons before presenting them to Madame.

As Iago suspected, the spoons had been marked. As he had not suspected, there were only three in the box, when there should have been five.

Mind you get all of them, Madame had said, in no uncertain terms. Iago contemplated what would happen if he returned with less than all of them. He gulped, and set down the box. He waited several hours in his room, while the Philistines ran about like rats looking for the intruder, thinking about where the other two spoons could be. Those Serpent's Hand ruffians had stolen them. He should probably start with them.

He exited the castle. Surely the Philistines had calmed down by now, he thought. It was time to search for a Way. With that, Iago disappeared, back into the world.

Somewhere else, possibly very far away, there was a man, sitting in a barely furnished room, looking out of the window at some bland little courtyard that passed for a garden in this cold, clinical world. He had little choice in the matter. And this was astonishing, because, until recently, he had had no choice whatsoever. A record player sat in the corner, from which emerged the crooning voice of Ozzie Nelson.

Say nighty-night and kiss me.

There was a security camera in the man's room, monitoring for changes.

Just hold me tight and tell me you'll miss me.

The camera was not able to detect the faint movement in one of his loafers as his toe rose and fell, for the first time in decades.

While I'm alone and blue as can be,

Surprise flickered across the man's eyes. Then confusion. Then wistfulness. Then, his mouth turned up at one corner so very slightly. It was barely noticeable, and would remain so for a very long time, but already, his bonds were starting to break.

Robert Chetford began tapping his toe along to the music.

Dream a little dream of me.

Chaos Insurgency Hub

In 1924, the SCP Foundation formed a covert special task force, known only to the O5 Council, codenamed the "Insurgency." The leadership of the Insurgency was comprised of members of MTF Alpha-1, the Red Right Hand, famed for their loyalty to the O5 Council and the total secrecy of their origins, identities, and operations. The Insurgency leadership was supported by research, security, and retrieval personnel, all taken from Foundation ranks.

To the majority of the Foundation and the anomalous world, the Insurgency was a splinter group that went A.W.O.L. with several researchers and anomalous objects. In reality, the O5 Council had created the Insurgency to complete missions with ethically questionable methods and politically unsavory results—while keeping the Foundation's public reputation clean. For approximately twenty-four years, the Insurgency operated under the guise of Foundation defectors, using anomalous objects to secretly further the goals of the O5 Council.

In 1948, as part of a seemingly routine staged operation, the Insurgency removed several SCP objects from Foundation containment and transported dozens of defecting Foundation researchers to various safe locations. That same day, multiple other unplanned raids of Foundation facilities occurred. The Insurgency seized SCP objects with great research and military potential and inflicted severe casualties to Foundation personnel. The Foundation's biggest lie had become a reality. Their covert black ops team had defected, and the Foundation faced a new threat from an organization now calling itself by a new name: the Chaos Insurgency.

The O5 Council was stunned. The defection or even the slightest hint of disloyalty from Red Right Hand personnel had been unprecedented. The motives behind the Insurgency's betrayal remain unknown to the Foundation. All attempts to find, apprehend,

or assassinate the defecting Insurgency operatives failed. This information is classified within the Foundation, which maintains that the Insurgency defected in 1924 and that the actual defections in 1948 were simply raids made by the already-existing splinter organization.

The modern-day Chaos Insurgency bears some similarities to the organization that founded it. The Chaos Insurgency's Delta Command, shrouded in mystery, issues orders to the lower ranks. Gamma-class researchers and military commanders have oversight over the execution of the Delta Command's orders, while Beta-class personnel, while not given the same level of command as Gamma-class, carry out the Insurgency's work in the field. Alpha-class personnel, often recruited from individuals with little to no knowledge of the anomalous, accept offers of employment often because the alternative is to carry on a miserable existence outside the anomalous world. They are the grunt workers: numerous and expendable.

The Insurgency is split into two divisions: military and R&D. Cells within both divisions work independently, unaware of the exact actions and goals of other cells. New recruits receive instructions from their superiors and are expected to follow them unquestioningly, not knowing that every action they take is part of a larger plan orchestrated by the Delta Command. They are told that they are carrying out a great rebellion against the anarchy of the status quo—a world where "consensus reality" itself is an illusion, history's great lie, perpetrated by the Foundation. They are told that they will use the anomalous to build a utopian future, where humanity is master of everything, not just a mirage.

But really, who knows what the Chaos Insurgency actually wants?

Contest Tales

- Darkness On the Face of the Deep
    - Gate of Janus
    - Asymptomatic Carrier

    - The Ant

- Polycephaly
- Cactus Insurgent
- Headhunted

Contest Objects

- SC-49/785-52/543
- SC-10/548-12/893
- SC-13/234-14/362

- **SCP-3862**
- **SCP-199**
- **SCP-3937**
- **SCP-2687**
- **SCP-2394**
- **SCP-3668**
- **SCP-2715**
- **SCP-3460**
- **SCP-830**
- **SCP-3612**
- **SCP-3542**
- **SCP-3313**
- **SCP-1482**
- **SCP-2215**
- **SCP-2173**
- **SCP-3545**
- **SCP-2753**
- **SCP-3033**
- **SCP-1548**
- **SCP-355**
- **SCP-842**
- **SCP-244**
- **SCP-2925**
- **SCP-1943**
- **SCP-1275**
- **SCP-2490**
- **SCP-1248**

- **SCP-2635**
- **SCP-1068**
- **SCP-231-J**
- **SCP-2099**
- **SCP-1316**
- **SCP-884**

- **A Normal, Daily Routine**
- **Authenticity Trip**
- **UIU Files Chapter 1**
- **Supply and Demand**
- Conspiracy
- **New Age - Book II: "Mr Brightside"**
- **Bavarian Fire Drill**
- **Chaos Praxis**
- **SUBVERSION**
- Slow Animals
- **New Age - a Tale**
- A Defection
- **The Glorious and Everlasting Victory of Pablo Foxenflower over the Traitor Lazarus Wyrm**
- **Three Men Named Con Murphy**
- **Deontic**
- **New Age - Book III: "Gunning for the Buddha"**
- **Chasing Interest**
- Ex Nihilo Nihil
- **First Seed**
- **Insurrection**
- **New Age - Book I: "Cells"**
- **Dispatch from the Paintball War**
- Aftermath
- Assault on Site-64
- **Father Iron**
- **Vaccination**
- "Strike"
- **Orgy 5 Counsel 9: XXXK End of Virginity Scenario**
- T Minus
- **Anachronisms**

- **Welcome to the Future**
- **The Only Way To Travel**
- **Empty Unmarked Grave**
- Magic Orientation
- **Briefing on SLATE THUNDER (Chaos Insurgency Orientation)**
- **Quiet Days**

When writing an object document for the Chaos Insurgency you have to keep in mind that unlike the Foundation, the Insurgency actively uses anomalous items. Due to the break down between cells and the differences in personnel class amongst the cells, Delta Command releases purely need-to-know documents. And all the Insurgency really needs to know is what to do with the anomalies, not what they are or their exact method of function.

Essentially, a member of Delta Command codenamed the "Engineer" constantly transcribes a massive list of instructions (the "Plan," and individual "Steps") without any immediate sense of correlation. Delta Command passes these instructions down to the bottom ranks of the Insurgency. The rest of Delta Command then scans and separates these Steps, and compiles relevant steps together in "Step Compilation" documents.

So those are the basics. Before you keep reading, you should probably read the "Darkness on the Face of the Deep" series. Just hop on over a couple of tabs and check it out. Because spoilers, or something. Also a lot of things won't, uh, make sense.

Let's talk about the thematic foundation of these documents. The *point* of this portrayal of the Chaos Insurgency is that they're all getting absolutely played by the Engine. This "object" format is supposed to embody the inherent contradictions in the nature of the Chaos Insurgency. They're an organization that purports to have as its goal the perfect understanding and integration of the anomalous —but they don't tell their operatives anything about these paranormal objects or phenomena. There is the *illusion* of order— they're following a strict series of instructions. But the reality is chaos—the average Chaos Insurgency operative has *no idea* what they're doing or why. They're just following the Engine's plan.

Oh, also, who's the Engineer? A member of Delta Command who's in constant telepathic conversation with the Engine, unceasingly transcribing the Engine's will into the Plan. Basically a mouthpiece. The Engine is the real mastermind behind everything, but nobody but Delta Command is aware of the Engine's existence or true nature.

Just to close out, when approaching these documents, we think that it's much more helpful for you, as a writer, not to think about an *object* you want to portray, but instead a *story* regarding that object, and even more specifically, *what the Chaos Insurgency wants to do with that object.* In order to portray exactly *what* the object is, you have to work around the knowledge blackout of the Insurgency to weave in implications, hints, or references to other parts of the Foundation universe.

Document Break-Down

DeCIRO Catalogue Number: The DeCIRO (Delta Command Intelligence Recording Office) Catalogue Number is the Chaos Insurgency's basic equivalent of the Foundation's Item Number, except that it applies to all documents.

Document Type: While "Step Compilation" will always been the Document Type at the top of the document, included sub-documents will have different Document Types. Sub-document information is detailed farther below.

Dates Received: Pretty self explanatory. Using xx-xx-xxxx (month-day-year) as a template. (ex: 04-22-1955) Keep in mind these dates correlate with the DeCIRO number of the Steps Compilation document.

Operation Status: If all the Steps on the document have been followed, and no further Steps are expected to be produced, the Operation Status is Closed. If the Insurgency is still following the Steps and/or it is suspected that more relevant Steps will be produced, the Operation Status is Open.

Foreword: Delta Command is not exactly the most sane group of individuals. The Foreword is them essentially talking to themselves (as only they would ever see the Foreword), usually through colorful language or metaphors. Useful for cluing the reader onto exposition things you wouldn't be able to easily do within the Steps.

1. STEP _ This is where the fun starts. The Steps are what the Insurgency is actually going to do with the object(s) relevant to the document. As such, descriptions aren't all too common. Instead, the Step may call for research of a particular object and then the resulting documentation of the study would be attached.

Step Compilation Template

```
[[>]]
[[module Rate]]
[[/>]]

[[div style="float:right"]]
[[image http://www.scp-wiki.net/local--files/chaos-insur
[[/div]]

**DeCIRO Catalogue Number:** SC-[First Step]/[Last Step]

**Document Type:** Step Compilation

**Dates Received:** [Date of first Step] through [Date o

**Operation Status:** Open/Closed

**Foreword:** [Vague description of the object, the oper
Command feels about it.]

Hereafter we of Delta Command document the Steps of the

**1. STEP [Last two numbers of the year/Step number of t
```

```
[Set of instructions]

**2. STEP [Last two numbers of the year/Step number of t

[Rinse, repeat as necessary]
```

Sub-Documents Templates

Summary Report

```
> **DeCIRO Catalogue Number:** FR-[Relevant Step]-[Numbe
>
> **Document Type:** Summary Report
>
> **Date Received:** XX-XX-XXXX
>
> **Author:** [Name]
>
> **Summary Report:** [Findings Reports (the "FR" in the
> research or recon instructed in the relevant step, in
> well, summarily report.]
```

Post-Operation Summary Report

```
> **DeCIRO Catalogue Number:** POR-[Relevant Step]-[Numb
>
> **Document Type:** Post-Operation Summary Report
>
> **Date Received:** XX-XX-XXXX (Month-Day-Year)
>
> **Author:** [Name]
>
> [Report detailing the results of the relevant military
```

Covert Operations

> **DeCIRO Catalogue Number:** CO-[Relevant Step]-[Numbe
>
> **Document Type:** Covert Operations
>
> **Date Received:** XX-XX-XXXX
>
> **Author:** Delta Command
>
> [Secret op instructions.]

Gate of Janus

Ever since Zhi Xin had returned from leading the raid at Larissa, Arjun had watched her nibble on a stale piece of bread. Her face was scrunched in an expression that Arjun judged to be two parts frustration and one part contempt. The two of them were sitting in the cafeteria of the installation currently serving as the Insurgency's headquarters in Greece. The O5 Council had not given them the resources to construct their facilities to ordinary Foundation standards. And why would they? The Insurgency was pretending to be a renegade faction anyway, and what renegade would enjoy superior living conditions to those in power?

"I miss the food at Overwatch," Zhi Xin said. She tossed the bread onto her plate.

"We signed up for this, Xin."

"Completely false! We never chose to become D-Class. Nor was the choice to join the Red Right Hand really a *choice.* That requires approximately equivalently appealing choices. Which were not available."

Arjun sighed. "And if we did not sign up for this, we do it because it is right."

"*You* do it because *you* believe it to be right."

"Enough," Arjun said. "What happened during the raid?"

"There were no SS Ahnernerbe to be found. The temple was empty."

"The Coalition?"

"Similarly absent, given that the Ahnernerbe weren't there. We beat the Ahnernerbe to whatever they wanted and we beat the GOC to

the Ahnernerbe."

Xin started picking at her nails. She was constantly moving from position to position—slouching, leaning back, resting her head. Arjun thought of gas particles bouncing around in a pressurized chamber. After a while, she picked the bread back up, turned it over in her hands, and put it back down.

"We took what the Ahnernerbe was after. Waited for them to come, killed most of them. Left before the Coalition showed. Standard, routine stuff, Arjun. Why are you so interested?"

"You don't usually act this bored, Xin. I was just wondering if something was wrong."

"It was *standard, routine stuff.* Why wouldn't I be bored?"

Xin's words echoed in the emptiness of the cafeteria. Arjun let his attention drift away from Xin. He stared upon row after row of empty seats, and metal tables, and glowing lights that flickered every so often. There was a question nagging at the back of his mind, and as much as he tried he could not plug the leak in the dam blocking up all his doubt well enough to prevent it from escaping.

"I wonder what would've happened if the Ahnernerbe got its hands on the thing," Xin said.

"What?"

"I mean, don't you ever just wonder, sometimes? What would happen if the 'bad guys' win. To be honest, we're running out of unambiguous bad guys. They're *wizard Nazis,* Arjun. Enjoy them while they last, because the GOC isn't having any of this."

Arjun shook his head. "You're not making any sense."

"Look, if you can't imagine the world where the bad guys win, then what? What are the stakes? What's at risk? This is why imagination is important, Arjun. Because it'll teach you motive."

Why am I here?

The question flooded Arjun's mind. Arjun tried repeating to himself: the O5 Council stood to protect humanity, and if the O5 Council needed an organization that did the Foundation's work while absolving it of responsibility, then so be it. But the flood washed that answer away. Ideology became faint and distant before Arjun's eyes, and he realized with a surge of panic that without that there was nothing else to hold onto. And then as soon as it came, the question receded, leaving behind a mind that was not quite sure if the question had come at all.

"So what was the Ahnernerbe even after?"

"V8 automobile engine."

"Anomalous properties?"

Xin shrugged. "I didn't touch the thing, didn't look at it. You know. Standard protocol. We're testing the thing now. Hell if I want to be in charge, though. Testing is terrible."

"So we have no idea what the thing is."

"The one exciting thing about this entire ordeal, yes."

Exciting things. Arjun thought about Overwatch. Glory and prestige had a certain smell—incense and roses, maybe—when they burned and threw up smoky fumes into the air. That scent filled Arjun's nose when he thought on his own position. He was one of the elect, the chosen few, those who would stand at the side of the O5 and turn back the tide of…

Exciting things. But there was nothing to do.

"I would avoid Michelle tomorrow if I were you," Xin said. She yawned widely.

"Why?"

Xin laughed, before standing and turning to leave. "Her marvelous invention completely failed to work in the raid. Turns out memetics is bullshit after all. Night, Arjun."

“Good night, Xin.”

At six foot seven, Michelle Richardson stood well above the other seven members of the Insurgency’s High Command. They all had sight, so they all knew that she was perpetually hungry. For years, Arjun had been vaguely aware of some enticing thing lurking just outside the boundaries drawn by the Foundation, something unprofessional and unsanitary and unscientific and quite possibly savage. He shunned it; Michelle craved it.

When Arjun found her on the roof of their research facility, staring at the lights of San Francisco’s skyline in the distance, she had a painting canvas before her. It was impossible to see what she was painting in the darkness. As Arjun approached, he noticed several glass vials littering the floor.

“How are you doing, Arjun?” she asked.

“Good. Thank you.”

“Anything I can do for you?”

“No. I only came up here for some fresh air. It gets stuffy in the barracks sometimes.”

“Mm.”

Michelle turned back to her painting, while Arjun stood silently behind her. After a few seconds, she turned back around and locked eyes with Arjun. He knew that he could not observe Michelle without being observed back, and harder. If she had things her way, the universe would organize itself such that it would always be viewed through her eyes.

“Let’s talk, Arjun. I don’t like it when you only stand there. I want you to speak. Let’s have a conversation. I’ll start: what is your opinion on the engine?”

Arjun blinked. “I don’t believe that we should…be so confident that the engine is really…”

“Every single researcher who has ever been exposed to the engine, without exception, has achieved some miraculous breakthrough in a field of anomalous science. Do you believe that the universe is so chaotic that a probabilistically impossible outcome such as this simply happens without fanfare?”

“I don’t know, Michelle.”

The Insurgency was too far gone.

For years Arjun had seen the signs of the world, seen those signs that were straight and ordered, seen those signs that twisted and howled. He had known what was safe and what was dangerous. Then he had been ordered to dive into the jungle of the anomalous and in that heart of darkness somehow map a way through the tortuous land. The voice of guidance from on high had commanded him to eat the forbidden fruit, and so he did, and…

What did it mean to use the anomalous? Whatever goals were achieved, whatever victory was won, the anomalous was part of that result. Arjun knew that the anomalous was beginning to take root in his body. When the day came that he could no longer call the paranormal alien, when he looked at the sign of his own soul and saw it twisted, Arjun knew that he would be permanently lost.

“You’re afraid,” Michelle said.

“I am not afraid.”

“Don’t lie to me. I can see the fear in your eyes. You’re afraid of the engine. It’s understandable. But our *job* is to use the anomalous. It was our assignment.”

“Ultimately our job is to contain the anomalous because it is dangerous. Because it poses unacceptable risks to human society.”

Michelle laughed. “Human society? Of what value is human society anyway? For as long as either of us knows, human society has been built on a lie, and personally, I don’t like deception.”

Arjun didn’t know if Michelle grasped the irony of what she was saying.

“Imagine what we could do with the engine,” Michelle said. “It is a force for progress. If the Foundation were to use the engine, we would be able to achieve wondrous things. What does the Foundation understand now? Memetics. Amnestics. That’s why we have Hallucinogenic Memetoamnestic Substance. It lets us see the world beyond reality, giving us unparalleled insight into the present and future. What if we understood the concept of sapience? The human—or the non-human—soul? Reality-bending?”

“So what has the O5 Council said?”

“I have yet to submit a report to them.”

Arjun blinked.

“What?”

“As promising as the results are, I have no desire to give the O5 Council any false hope. It would be embarrassing. I need more testing and more time. And even when I’m ready, a report cannot be immediately sent, especially given how absolutely secure any communications between us and the O5 Council must be.”

“But at the very least preliminary findings—so that they know—“

“I am overseeing all research regarding the engine. All eight of us had previously decided that this would be the case. Are you questioning my authority?”

“No. No, I’m not, but—Michelle, we are indebted to the O5 Council. They have elected us to be their most trusted soldiers.”

Even in the darkness he could feel the intensity of Michelle’s stare. “I am doing nothing but honor the trust they have placed in us. I serve nothing but the better tomorrow that the O5 Council works towards. What do you serve?”

Over the course of the conversation, Michelle had advanced close enough that he would have had to kill her if he had any doubt about her intentions. He felt her eyes take hold of him, dissect him and subject him to the relentless force of her will. He said nothing because he knew that if he surrendered, she would release him.

Without saying anything, Michelle walked past Arjun and left the rooftop.

Arjun stood, watching the sky until the sun rose and light washed over him. Now, he could see the painting. In the middle of the night sky above the San Francisco skyline, one star shone brighter than all the rest. Eight rays of light emanated from the star. Each ray curved and then split into more and more lines of light which spread across the sky.

Chaos Insurgency Hub | **next** »

Asymptomatic Carrier

By Arjun's estimations, the Coalition was surprisingly professional for an organization that was barely three years old. There was something in the methodical, cold way that they operated that reminded Arjun of the Foundation itself. But there was also a naiveté that Arjun had never seen in the Foundation. When they sent out retrieval teams, they had no insurance. There were no specifically expendable personnel to sacrifice in the case of disaster.

Arjun removed the binoculars from his eyes, wiped sand out of the lens, and then stowed the instrument back into his pack. Beside him, Zhi Xin was talking to Owen.

"So Owen, what do you think the GOC's got its hands on this time?"

Owen adjusted his shoelaces.

"You know, they *say*—or at least their internal communications say—that they think this hole has information about the Ahnernerbe's new toys. But who knows? They might find something more interesting."

Owen turned to his side and quietly issued a command through the radio.

"If you find anything useful with those eagle eyes of yours, make sure to nab it, right? Make Michelle happy. Give her something to show off to the O5. I mean, they're asking for more and God knows Michelle wants to give it."

"You think it's strange that the O5 wants more from us," Arjun said.

Zhi Xin chuckled. "Not strange. Tedious. Look at these guys. Crawling around in the sand, trying to figure out what it is that they've dug up so that they can set the wheels of intergovernmental bureaucracy into motion. Is it a threat to consensus reality? Can we

negotiate with it? If not, how easily can we blow it up? Wait, but first, can we use it and then blow it up later? And the O5 wants more in the event that we fight *them.*"

Without turning to face either of them, Owen said, "They're here."

Arjun stood up as a vehicle pulled beside them. Insurgency operatives began hauling heavy equipment out of the vehicle. Assembly of the instrument took the better part of an hour, while Arjun, Zhi Xin, and Owen looked on. Eventually, a large, crude metal gate stood before them. Arjun looked into the gate and saw the universe shatter into an infinitely replicating fractal pattern. He pitied the men who had built the machine. They could not appreciate its beauty.

"Remember," Arjun said, "reconnaissance. Find what they're looking for. Evaluate its threat potential. Take it if necessary. Zhi Xin, if anybody dies or if anything gets destroyed, I'll hold you accountable."

"Your leadership inspires me not to disappoint you," Zhi Xin said. Immediately afterwards, she walked into the gate and disappeared.

Arjun and Owen made eye contact. "You haven't learned how to shut her up," Owen said.

"No. It's regrettable."

Owen shrugged. "Time to go."

The two of them entered the gate together. When he exited, Arjun found himself stepping outside of a tent. Workers with the emblem of the United Nations on their vests moved about, covered in dirt, hauling pickaxes and barking orders. Nobody took any notice of Arjun. Part of their mind was too busy, and the other part that would have ordinarily noticed the three was too occupied appreciating the invisible memetic fireworks display taking place three yards to the left of the intruders to pay any attention to them.

"Well, I should say sorry to Michelle. Maybe memetics isn't bullshit after all," Zhi Xin said.

Without saying anything, Owen disappeared into the crowd of GOC workers. Arjun turned to Zhi Xin. “Come on, Xin,” he said.

“Why such a hurry?” Xin asked. “We already know exactly where we’re supposed to go.”

“What?”

“Really, Arjun?”

Arjun looked back at the chaotic throng of people swarming the dig site. Zhi Xin was right. He could see a pattern in their movement, in the way their voices melded together into one indiscernible mass, in the ways their eyes traveled and their feet shuffled. Their actions and their thoughts were all caught in the gravitational well of a certain object, and if Arjun only looked to find the center of their collective orbit, he could find what he was looking for.

“I see it,” Arjun said.

Zhi Xin snorted. “Then let’s go.”

As the two moved towards the target illuminated by the HALMAS, Arjun felt his mind stir uneasily. There was very little chance that anything would go wrong; even if they were noticed, it was almost impossible that they would be caught or killed, and no possibility either way that the Foundation would have to bear any consequences. Arjun imagined what it was like for the people who lived in consensus reality and were exposed to the anomalous. The universe itself was revealed to be a lie, a comfortable veneer draped over the true world by an unseen hand, and in truth, reality was an alien, terrifying place.

Arjun had known the unknowable for as long as he could remember, but now, walking through the Coalition dig site, he felt like the ignorant uninitiated about to be baptized in murky, dark water.

The two of them stopped in front of a non-descript tent. For a moment, neither of them moved or said anything.

“It’s here,” Zhi Xin said. “Whatever it is. We came here to find out, didn’t we?”

“Is something wrong?”

Zhi Xin was staring at the tent. “I think so. But I don’t know what. It’s an unpleasant sensation.”

“You’re being nonsensical again.”

“Am I? Whatever.”

Zhi Xin passed Arjun and entered the tent. Arjun followed close behind.

Inside, Arjun found himself completely incapable of noticing any details about the interior of the tent. His attention was captured entirely by a small book sitting on a table in the middle of the tent. Zhi Xin had already flipped to a page inside the book.

“What are you doing?”

“How long have you been on HALMAS, Arjun? Can’t you see? This is—this is—“

Zhi Xin looked up from the book. Her face was set in the rocky tones of determination; her eyes radiated the fragile gleam of fear. “You need to stand at the door and make sure nobody comes in,” she said. “You’ve served the O5 Council faithfully all your life. You’ve done it because you *know* that there is some greater purpose behind everything. If you still think that, then do this.”

“What’s going on?”

“If you can’t see, that just—it just means that something is *definitely wrong.* Watch the door, or else I know that things are going to get worse.”

“What?”

“Give me thirty seconds, Arjun.”

Zhi Xin took a syringe of HALMAS out of her pocket and stuck it into her arm.

When Arjun turned around to stand at the door, he found himself staring Owen in the face.

“Let me in,” he said.

“No.”

“Zhi Xin told you not to let me in.”

“I—”

“You don’t know why.”

Owen’s cold blue eyes did not move. They were as dry and endless as the desert itself. “She’s found something.”

“Yes, and—”

“You don’t know what it is. You don’t know what she’s doing. Let me in.”

Arjun stayed in place. There were things that he knew. He knew that it was against protocol for Zhi Xin to be taking HALMAS while in direct exposure to a possible cognitohazard; he knew that it was a betrayal for Michelle to fail to inform the O5 Council about the developments surrounding the engine. He knew all these things but he did not know them, like he knew but did not know of that greater purpose floating somewhere out there. For all anyone knew, it was in outer space, or buried a thousand miles underground, or maybe it didn’t even exist. He had realized by now that he knew but did not know so many things, and the only thing that he really *knew* was that he had always trusted Chen Zhi Xin.

“Move, Arjun.”

She had asked for thirty seconds and now he had to give them.

“I can’t. She told me not to let anyone in. I don’t know why, but you sure as hell don’t know why you need to get in there. I can see it in your face, Owen, don’t lie to me.”

Owen reached into his pocket, pulled out a thin metal cylinder, and

pressed a button at the top. When Arjun regained consciousness, Owen was behind him and inside the tent. A second later, he pulled out a lighter and tossed into onto the book. Zhi Xin swore and dropped it to the ground, where green flames consumed the book instantly.

Zhi Xin put a hand on her pistol. “Owen, what the hell?”

“It was cognitohazardous. If you suffered continued exposure while on HALMAS, your memory would store the cognitohazard and you would become unacceptably compromised. This is standard protocol.”

For a few moments, Zhi Xin only breathed heavily. Then, she said, “You’re right. I fucked up. So did you; you just destroyed that thing when it was obviously important. So how about we make a deal? If anybody—Michelle in particular—hears about this, we’re both fucked. Right, Owen?”

“Fine.”

Nobody spoke as they left the tent.

Hours later, when Arjun was in his quarters and staring at the ceiling, he was struck by a sudden hatred for the O5 Council. He remembered the metal cylinder and the green fire. Neither of those things should have existed. And if now they existed, then what cause was he fighting for?

Nothing made sense anymore.

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The Ant

Three days later, Arjun found Zhi Xin on the rooftop of the San Francisco headquarters. There was a smile on her face as pale and insubstantial as the moon itself. Cigarette smoke formed a light cloud around her head. When she saw him, her smile grew wider. She said, “Hi, Arjun.”

“What are you doing up here?”

“I’ve been hard at work over the past three days, and I’ve decided that I want…a break. Yes. What have you been doing? With what endeavor have you been spending your life and time?”

“Trying to make sense of whatever you were doing with the book.”

“Were you? Wonderful. And what have you discovered?”

“Nothing.”

“Even better. You’re as ignorant as always. Come on, Arjun, sit down.”

Arjun approached slowly. Zhi Xin was slumped against the fence that encircled the perimeter of the rooftop. Beyond her, the darkness past the edge of the building loomed.

“I told nobody about what happened,” Arjun said.

“Good for you,” Zhi Xin said.

Zhi Xin took the cigarette out of her mouth and crushed it into the ground. “Why do you think the O5 created us?”

“I could say that they wanted us to do their dirty work for them, but I don’t think that’s the answer you want.”

When Arjun spoke to the O5, he did not use his sight to look too

closely at what took place behind their closed doors. The reality of the situation was that they were reasonably competent bureaucrats in starched suits sipping water out of shiny glass cups during board meetings, but Arjun knew reality to be wildly inconsistent and often misleading. Reality was the cage. That which defied reason was hunched over in the damp cell behind reality.

“What do you think the engine is?”

Arjun shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“The O5 knows what it is,” Zhi Xin said. She laughed. “What did we expect? That we could hide from their all-seeing eye? They know… they’ve known, for God knows how long, exactly what this thing is. But they’re not telling us.”

“That—that can’t be true. They wouldn’t withhold that sort of information.”

“It’s containment, Arjun. They are pruning the tree.”

Maybe the O5 Council and the Insurgency had made the mistakes that mattered far before they had ever seen the engine.

Arjun wondered just how deeply the anomalous had been part of the Insurgency—not just a tool, but an organ, the beating heart. He wondered how long the O5 had known of their mistake, or how they would punish those responsible for the mistake. It was the intermittent vengeance of an inscrutable force from on high, a force that splintered and reconstructed itself at the same time.

The sound of Michelle opening the rooftop door startled Arjun out of his thoughts.

“Hey, Michelle,” Zhi Xin said. Arjun could only stare at her. His tongue was wrapped in too many questions to choose one.

“Arjun, Zhi Xin,” she said. “What are you two doing up here?”

Zhi Xin shrugged. “Shooting the shit.”

“Why don’t you two follow me? I have something I’d like to show

both of you."

"By all means," Zhi Xin said. "Come on, Arjun."

Arjun followed in complete silence. The hand of dread was gripping tight around his throat, preventing him from speaking. He was only now realizing that for some time he had been dependent on the security that the Foundation provided. The base was cracking now, and with each step Arjun felt the earth shake as the Foundation rattled itself apart.

Michelle led them down to the basement of headquarters, where they stopped at the room in Zhi Xin's picture. The engine still sat quietly in the middle of the laboratory.

"Don't be afraid, Arjun," Michelle said.

Zhi Xin snorted. "Yeah, Arjun, don't be scared. It's too late for that."

Arjun's eyes were fixed on the engine. He felt his mind begin to run wild. He was being told something—the engine was telling him something. It whispered at the corners of his mind, speaking a language that Arjun couldn't understand. The patterns of science and logic unraveled to reveal higher and higher forms of knowledge while the remains of discarded theories piled in the sewers of humanity and began to rot. The higher the human mind reached, the deeper the refuse grew.

He was asked—he was challenged—*didn't he see?*

Arjun stumbled backwards, clutching at his head.

"Look into the future, Arjun," Michelle said.

Arjun saw stagnation. The human race eked out a miserable history until inevitable annihilation. Nihilism's gaping maw swallowed up the essence of existence itself. There was no meaning, no value—nothing. Nothing! No matter which way Arjun looked, humanity was headed towards a heat death of the soul.

"Let's talk about chaos, Arjun," Michelle said. "The primordial nothingness from which we came and the infinite void to which we

go. It is the Alpha and Omega, and accordingly, chaos is in everything. It is our unavoidable destiny. There are forces which drive us inevitably towards that chaos."

Arjun looked at the engine and understood exactly what it was.

Zhi Xin walked up to the engine and stared at it. "So O5 said, 'Fuck it,' and abandoned us to this thing."

"Whatever is taking place inside the O5 Council is much more complicated than that. They are driven by blind vengeance and over-pragmatism both at once. More than anything they are compelled by the all-consuming drive to contain. It is their survival strategy. But all of us here know how effective that strategy is, right?"

"I can't blame them," Zhi Xin said. "There's no way out. The endgame deal for all of us is some dusty, shitty end. Although, I suppose that now we're stuck with this thing, that endgame deal is going to happen a lot sooner."

Michelle turned on Zhi Xin. "Fatalism produces no results."

"Look, I'm not really in the mood to talk about fatalism, how we're saddled with that fucking thing, or our inevitable death. Let's talk about why you ordered Owen to destroy the book. Because I know you did that."

"It was a cognitohazard."

"Bullshit. The only reason the GOC found it was because they were looking for information on what the Ahnenerbe was after, and the Ahnenerbe was after that thing. That book was information. It was knowledge. And you burned it. Why? You think there's a way out, but the engine is already affecting your thinking."

Michelle stepped closer to Zhi Xin. "Are you suggesting that I'm compromised?"

"Nothing personal. We're all probably compromised."

"The engine had nothing to do with my decision to destroy what I

knew to be a cognitohazardous object!"

Zhi Xin smiled. "Whatever you say."

"Michelle," Arjun said, "we would *know* if she were compromised. We would be able to see."

Slowly, Michelle drew back.

Arjun turned to Zhi Xin. "Regardless, that doesn't explain why you exposed yourself to that book in the first place. You haven't told any of us—not even me—what you saw inside that book."

"Meaningless bullshit," Zhi Xin said. "Nothing important."

"Xin, for God's sake, you have to tell us," Arjun said.

Zhi Xin laughed.

"To be completely honest, I don't care what she saw in that book," Michelle said. "It's irrelevant. We have enough information in front of us right now to proceed with a plan of action. The O5 Council is shaking itself apart. There are some who recognize that the entire project of the Insurgency was an enormous mistake. And then there were those responsible."

"The ones who will join us," Arjun said. "In our exile."

Michelle shook her head. "They will aid us in the beginning. Open doors that we don't have the key to. But we will be alone after that. I don't know what will happen to them."

"They disappear like fairies into the night," Zhi Xin said. "What else?"

Arjun looked at the engine. It stood silently, content to only watch them. Why not? Arjun realized that it needed only to do very little—subvert a situation here, give a suggestion there—because it would win in the end anyway. But he wondered if even the engine could have infinite patience for the end of time to come.

Arjun said, "That thing is impatient. Sooner or later, it *will* act."

“Very soon,” Michelle said. “But we can use it.”

Zhi Xin covered her mouth with her hands and started shaking.

“When the O5s wanted more out of this project, I used HALMAS to look deeper into the engine. It is knowledgeable. And it is willing to give up its knowledge if we fight against the Foundation. *That* is the way forwards. As we are now, humanity has no choice but to fall into unending chaos. But if we understand the anomalous, then we have a way out.”

“If we understand the anomalous?” Zhi Xin said. “Oh, God.”

Arjun shook his head. “If we fight the Foundation? That’s absurd. They have done everything for us.”

“Have they?" Michelle said. “Have they? They abandoned us for their mistake. They are content to sit on their stockpile of anomalous objects, to contain and not to know, to do what they have done for eternity while the world crumbles into dust behind them. They think that they will be immortal if they do this, but they’re wrong. Look into the future again, Arjun.”

Didn’t he see?

There was one branch that led away from the inevitable nihilism. It was a branch of conflict and violence and betrayal, of isolation and exile, but—

“When the O5 expels some of their own, we will be given aid,” Michelle said. “And with that aid, we can spark hope.”

There was only one way out. Arjun began to shake.

“It can’t be,” he said. “This can’t be the only possibility.”

“Do you disbelieve your own sight?”

“For God’s sake, the Foundation’s all we have! There is nothing else for us! No birthplace, no home, no family, no history, no identity! We were made to serve and without service—“

Arjun flinched as Michelle drew up against him. “There will be no more service for us! In a day the Foundation will make the illusion a reality, and we will be true outcasts. God knows what happens after that. We are being cast out as we speak, Arjun.”

Slowly, the boundaries of Arjun’s being crumbled around him. The past was dying and the future glowed red and angry before his eyes. The present whispered omens of destruction into his ears. When the boundaries fell, he realized—he could do anything now.

“Fine,” he whispered.

“Fine?” Zhi Xin said. “Oh, goddammit. Neither of you get it. There is no way out. There is nothing to understand. You are just digging yourselves deeper and deeper into the den of that fucking thing.”

Michelle’s jaw twitched as she ground her teeth together. “I take it that means you don’t agree with my proposal, then.”

“Look, you moron. Imagine I get a toddler to scribble all over a floor. If you know a goddamn thing, you can see it’s all nonsense. But if you’re…an *ant* and if you see the tiniest, tiniest part of this four-year-old’s bullshit, it’s a straight line! It makes sense! There is order in all things! That is us. We are the ant.”

Arjun remembered the night of the day when they had received the assignment to create the Insurgency. The future was filled with uncertainty, and something dark swirled in Arjun’s heart. He had said to Zhi Xin that the Foundation was all he had—he didn’t even know why he knew his own name. He had stared into his hands and watched fear take hold of them.

Zhi Xin had smiled. She had said, “O5 can go fuck themselves,” and Arjun had felt a tiny bit of his fear dissolve.

He had always trusted her.

“Xin, please,” Arjun said. “This is our only way out.”

Zhi Xin laughed. “I’m not sending myself on an idiot’s quest. I’ve spent the last twenty years doing that already.”

“Then leave!” Michelle said. “Go out into the wilderness. Don’t you understand that neither we nor the Foundation will find your existence tolerable? The Foundation won’t take you and you won’t have us?”

Arjun took a half-step towards Zhi Xin. “Xin, aren’t we—aren’t we your friends?”

Without saying anything, Zhi Xin turned around and left. Arjun felt himself shiver as she went.

“None of the others know,” Michelle said. “What Zhi Xin just did shows that we can’t tell them. We’ll have to let the engine take them.”

Arjun nodded mutely.

Was this what it was like to be cast out? To be barred entry into the homes of the warm and comfortable? Somewhere, the O5 Council sat in its fortress of stone and continued orchestrating the mass alienation of the human race from reality. Arjun didn’t even know if he cared about the end anymore. Who cared if the human race lived a lie for the rest of time? Who cared if they died the whimpering death? At least he would have been warm.

But he still could not bring himself to follow Zhi Xin out that door.

In the center of the room, eight cylinders began to whir.

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Polycephaly

Ian and Kyouko had run as soon as they knew that somebody was either trying to capture or kill them, and they had done nothing but run for the last five minutes. When the Way that had been their original destination had become compromised, they had known where the next Way was located. They had known that if anybody was taken or killed, staying behind only meant that they would probably share that same fate. So they had left Carlos, and they had run. They had both become very good at running.

Events were still happening according to plan, which Ian was very thankful for. He had little confidence in his own ability to improvise.

In the darkness, Ian had trouble seeing the river he was looking for, so he scanned in front of him for the reflection of stars in the snaking water. Finding it, he quickly slid down the bank and into the river. Kyouko was fast behind him. Both of them were breathing heavily, and the sound of flowing water filled their ears.

“One of us has to stay behind to open the Way,” Ian said.

There was silence as Kyouko stared at him.

“I’ll do it,” Ian said. “You won’t die if you do it, but you’ll be taken. It’s better for me. I’ll die, but they’ll do worse to you if they take you.”

“You hesitated.”

“Well yeah, I don’t want to die.”

Kyouko blinked. “All right. I’m sorry. It looks like you’re going to die.”

“I know,” Ian said. He clenched his teeth and shivered in the night air. Water was seeping into his pant legs and the tiny woman next to him was still staring at him and his heart beat out a machine gun tempo. “I know.”

There was silence again. Ian read the time on his watch: 10:52:46 PM. There were seven minutes and fourteen seconds until the Way could be opened.

Kyouko opened her mouth halfway, but Ian held out a hand to silence her. *Listen,* he mouthed. The padding of footsteps and the rattle of military gear filled the air. Ian did not breathe. The silhouette of a man peaked over the top of the riverbank. The man was alone.

Ian and Kyouko were low enough in the water that they weren't spotted. For several long seconds, the man peered around in the darkness. Then, after fumbling for a moment, he took out a flashlight and pointed it at the river. Ian and Kyouko weren't there anymore. The man had been too occupied taking out his flashlight to notice the sounds of splashing water, and was too surprised when he felt something sharp sink into his leg to put up any resistance. He collapsed to the ground in a limp heap.

Ian started dragging the man down to the water. "Oh my God, oh my God," he said. "Did you kill him? Tell me you didn't kill him."

Kyouko shook her head.

"Then what the hell did you do to him?"

"There is neurotoxin running through his veins. He's paralyzed now. He'll be dead in ten minutes."

Ian closed his eyes. "So we can use him to open the Way."

Kyouko nodded. "I was wrong. You won't die. But who knows? I might be wrong again and you'll die after all."

"Let's not talk so much about my death, okay?"

"Would you like to talk about mine?"

"No!"

Ian let go of the man's limp body at the edge of the river. Dark water lapped at the man's feet. His unfocused gaze passed between Ian and Kyouko slowly.

“He’s not Foundation,” Ian said. “They have better equipment. And they wouldn’t make a mistake like this.”

The man’s lips twitched. Now that he could examine him closely, Ian could see that he had dark skin and straight black hair. He was mumbling something in a language that Ian couldn’t understand.

“Who, then?” Kyouko asked. She leaned in and placed her face an inch from the man’s, peering at him with unblinking eyes. “Not a jailer. Not a book-burner. Where do you come from, strange man?”

The man’s voice grew louder. “Shut him up,” Ian said. Kyouko ripped off a piece of her shirt and stuffed it in the man’s mouth.

Ian looked into the man’s eyes. They were too unfocused for him to make out any sort of emotion. The man lay there passively, submissively, mute to their ears and helpless against their will. If he had seen fear in his eyes, then Ian might have regarded him as a human being, but he saw nothing there, only the poison.

“He’s from the Insurgency,” Ian said. “I’ve seen them before. The Insurgency’s dogs…they take them from the gutters, they starve them, and then they let them loose. They’re hardly human.”

“This one is very much a human,” Kyouko said. “Can’t you see?”

She ran her hand over the man’s cheek. “Feel him. He is warm, and soft, and he fears death. Seems like a human to me.”

Ian looked into Kyouko’s eyes. Fascination and wonder and discovery were inside her gaze as she toyed with the man’s body. Ian didn’t know what Kyouko thought of the man. What did *he* think of the man?

A lump of meat about to expire.

“Ian,” Kyouko said, “why did he come after us?”

“Presumably because he was told.”

Ian wondered what the man wanted. The Insurgency marked the frontier of the unknown, even for those who made it their business to

know all. They did not know what the Insurgency's goals were, or where they came from, or what they believed in. The Foundation and the GOC were known threats, defined entities that could be measured and calculated and recorded. But for all Ian knew, the Insurgency was driven by an unknown, unseen, malevolent force, driving people to kidnap and steal and kill.

"Because somebody wanted Carlos, and they wanted him alive because they have some twisted plan for him," Ian said. "So they took him. But us, they don't need us alive, and they don't want us telling anybody that they were here. And now they want us dead."

Kyouko looked away from the man to roll her eyes. "Wants on wants, plans on plans. Sounds pretty boring."

Carlos was gone. Suddenly, Ian wanted to scream. The Insurgency had taken Carlos, and now, for just a moment, Ian wished that it had been somebody else who had taken him, because then, he would know *why.* He wanted to think to himself, *I'll enjoy watching this man die,* but he couldn't. He could not hate somebody if he knew nothing about them. There was nothing to despise in the alien, nothing revolting in the blank, formless surface of the unknown. There was no ideology or motive to contest. There was only fear and ignorance.

Now, the man's eyes were half-lidded and glassy. He made muffled noises underneath the makeshift gag. Blood from his leg was staining the water red.

"Where do they come from, Ian?"

"The Insurgency?"

Kyouko nodded.

Ian watched the man's eyelids fall lower and lower. "Nobody knows. Most people think they're an offshoot from the Foundation. They do the same work as the Foundation but on a different side, and they do it with less rules and more unpleasantness. And some people think that they're still part of the Foundation."

"This one doesn't seem like a jailer, though."

“When you see what they do to people, it’s hard to tell them apart.”

Kyouko shook her head. “They’re not jailers. They’re prisoners. What do you think, Ian?”

“I don’t care. I don’t care at all.”

He knew that Kyouko knew he was lying, but she didn’t say anything.

Ian sat at the edge of the riverside and rested his head in his hands. There were three minutes until they could open the Way.

The sound of gunfire broke the silence of the night air. Sprays of water fell on Ian’s face as he scrambled away. The strobe lighting of muzzle flashes stabbed at his eyes as shadow and fire played across his vision. He had been found, the Way hadn’t been opened yet, and—

The gunfire stopped. Men were beginning to yell.

Before he could react, somebody shined a flashlight in Ian’s face, grabbed him, and shoved him to the ground. There was more yelling. Ian couldn’t begin to understand most of it, but through it all —

“What are you fucks waiting for? Shoot her!”

Ian stumbled to his feet, only to meet the muzzle of a gun pointed straight at him. The man carrying it tensed.

“If you shoot, I am going to kill him,” Kyouko said.

Kyouko held their earlier prisoner’s limp body upright. She was pressing a knife to the man’s throat. Her face was perfectly relaxed. Several gunshot wounds marked Kyouko’s body; Ian knew she didn’t care. Ian couldn’t even tell if the Insurgency soldiers understood what Kyouko was saying, but the man pointing the gun at him had lowered his weapon.

One man stood apart from the rest of the Insurgency soldiers. This one wore a military uniform with a straight back and a cold glare on

his face. He raised his gun to aim at Kyouko, and then the yelling started again. Ian looked into the eyes of the Insurgency soldiers, and he saw fear. He saw them turn to the uniformed man and address him in hurried, pleading tones, while the uniformed man cursed and spat at them. They crowded around him, blocking his line of fire. Meanwhile, the poisoned man groaned and writhed in Kyouko's grasp. There was foam beginning to line his lips. In the chaos, his gag had fallen out of his mouth. He was still babbling in the language that Ian couldn't understand.

Finally, the uniformed man shoved his subordinates out of the way. "You dumb bastards are all dead when we get back to base," he said, and then he shot Kyouko. She fell to the water, dragging the poisoned man down with her. Her skin began to ripple and distend. Ian saw that nobody but him noticed.

The uniformed man turned to Ian next. Kyouko's ploy had bought him some time, and now she would buy him some more, but Ian knew that it wasn't enough. He glanced down at his watch. There was a minute left.

"Your men wanted their comrade to live," he said.

"They're fucking idiots. Either he's alive now or he was going to die anyway."

The man turned to his men and yelled something at them. They didn't respond. One of them had waded down to the water. Ian watched as he stooped to cradle the poisoned man's head. They had the same dark skin and straight black hair.

The man turned away from Ian to raise his weapon at his own men. "Don't you fucks understand? This is bigger than one fucking person. "

"Is that what this is about? Some greater cause?"

"Look," the man said, turning back to Ian. "We're trying to make the world better for these miserable bastards while you hide in your holes. If we were in charge, the world would be perfect, or at least a lot fucking better than it is now. But they're too stupid to help us help

them."

Ian listened to the man's words. All he had wanted was for the man to talk as long as possible, but now, actually hearing what the man had to say, he felt all of his concentration and his planning twist and snap. He looked into the man's eyes and saw a shell, filled with teeming darkness, a puppet, set in motion by forces that mocked and derided the reason of humanity. Ian started laughing.

"You stupid bastard," he said. "You want a better future? By killing off or locking up the strange and wondrous?"

"We—we'll make the world safe for you as well! There won't be any more 'consensus reality.' We just, we just need—sacrifices need to happen."

The man raised his gun, and then Kyouko's body exploded. A scaly tail knocked the uniformed man away. A terrible hissing filled the air.

Eight biting snakeheads, each one as large as an automobile, snapped at the Insurgency soldiers, tearing through flesh and bone, picking entire men up and then swallowing them whole. Eight thrashing tails, each one as thick as redwood trees, smashed and flailed at the now-running soldiers, crushing them beneath clubs of scale and flesh. Screaming and gunfire assaulted Ian's ears. He collapsed to the ground, curled up into a ball, and closed his eyes tight. He could smell blood in the air. And through it all, he could feel the sensation of hissing, of forked tongues and eyes that glowed like rubies in the night, of death and carnage. It was the unseen malignancy that animated the Insurgency, come back to take what it had given and reap what it had sown. It was Chaos.

Free of the human mind that suppressed it, free of the human body that contained it, the demon snake Yamato no Orochi bathed in a river of blood under the moon.

When Ian got to his feet, the surrounding landscape had been transformed into a desolated field of toppled trees and split earth. Kyouko was human again. She was kneeling over one of the bodies of the dead, a knife in her hand, cutting out the man's heart.

“Kyouko,” Ian said. “I…”

“I knew…I was probably going to survive,” Kyouko said. “But you said that you feared death. And that you did not want to die. So I thought that I would not have you die.”

“Thank you.”

Kyouko took the heart out of the man’s chest and handed it to Ian. He checked his watch; Kyouko’s timing had been perfect. It was the heart of a man who had died that night, on the Witching Hour, and it would give them passage through the Way.

A commotion drew Ian’s attention. It was the uniformed man, a gash in his side seeping blood, aiming his weapon at the two of them. Ian wanted to give the man a medal. After his men refused to follow his orders, after being set on by a giant eight-headed and eight-tailed snake, he still wanted the two of them dead. So long as there was blood in his veins, Chaos would drive him forwards. Now, Ian wanted to laugh again. There was nothing he could do to stop him from shooting.

The man never fired. He collapsed to the ground, blood flowing from a new wound in his neck. In the uniformed man’s place, there was a woman in a suit and tie.

The woman didn’t seem to notice Ian and Kyouko. She spoke, as if to herself, “He was missing humility.”

Ian and Kyouko ran for the water, but the woman didn’t give chase. Instead, she knelt down by the man’s body and started rifling through his clothing. Eventually, she procured a vial of red liquid. She stood, shook her head, and then walked away.

Ian threw the heart into the river as he and Kyouko dove into the waters. The river churned, embracing the two. As Ian felt the power of the Way pull him into the Library, the last image he had of the woman seared itself into his mind. Blood from the uniformed man’s neck wound had stained the sleeve of the woman’s suit, and had colored her right hand red.

Cactus Insurgent

Consciousness slowly prodded at Cactusman's mind. A deluge of voices engulfed him in noise, and the unnatural grogginess he was bogged down by made it impossible to differentiate between them. He knuckled his eyes and groaned loudly in an effort to drown out all the noise. The cacophony didn't stop, and most of the voices only grew louder. With his palms pressed into his eyes he tried listening, and after several seconds he realized several were familiar. They were the pair of cacti the doctors had given him, going on about being cacti. Two, however, were quieter than the others. And unfamiliar to him.

"You think the doctors gave him too much?" A female voice. Energetic, yet somehow brusque.

"Don't know. Maybe he's just not used to it." Male. Calm and deep.

Cactusman took several slow, deep breaths to collect himself. He should have been fully awake by now, especially with the adrenaline. But he couldn't shake this murky feeling sloshing around just behind his forehead. He brought the heel of his right hand to his forehead as if to jostle the gunk loose, but it did nothing for him.

After one last breath he steeled himself. His first instinct was to extend as many spines as possible and attack, but he realized that probably wasn't the best idea. Maybe it was just new medicine had some side effects, and these were Foundation guards or something. Nothing to freak out about. He relaxed as this realization came to him, and almost instantly tensed back up. His bed was too comfortable. Maybe he was- no, maybe he was just moved to a new cell. Perhaps that was why he was drugged. Cactusman took one last deep breath, held it, and cracked an eye open to look at the source of the voices.

Definitely not guards. Or doctors. Both of them were sitting in collapsible chairs, facing Cactusman, and were dressed casually.

Both were staring directly at him, but neither reacted to him opening his eye. Cactusman realized they were in a medical ward, and he on the hospital bed. He tried thinking back to what might have brought him here but nothing came to mind. He didn't feel hurt. Looking through the glass door leading into the hallway didn't reveal much other than the fact it looked like a normal civilian hospital.

The woman was perched up on her chair, sitting on her heels. Her skin was the sort of brown that made it difficult to distinguish whether it was a tan or not. Her hair was brown for the most part, with the exception of some green coloring along the sides. Her plain clothes hung loosely from her muscled frame. She had what seemed to Cactusman like an exaggerated look of curiosity, her eyebrows high and her mouth moving from side to side.

The man was slouched in his chair so much he looked like he was about to fall off it. His skin was much darker, and his head was shaved. His clothes looked somewhat disheveled and wrinkly despite being clean. His left arm was completely wrapped in bandages and hung loosely at his side while his right hand rested on his knee. A small piece of metal was jutting from under his right eye, where the cheekbone was. It almost looked natural. His expression was one of utter boredom.

"Who are you?" Cactusman asked in what he hoped was an even voice.

"Hey," the woman said, drawing out the word for as long as her lungs would allow. "Yer awake, boy-o! Top o' the mornin' to ya!"

Cactusman stared at her in disbelief.

The woman giggled. Then she said, "Dude, I worked on that shit for hours. Okay, minutes."

The man lightly hit her in the back of the head. He didn't say anything, and his expression didn't change.

The woman grinned. "Okay, it was spur of the moment. Anyway, hi. Good to see you're not brain damaged. Well, more than we already knew you were."

The man slapped his companion again. "Apologies, Mister MacIntyre, she's a bit manic without her medicine."

Cactusman pushed himself into a sitting position. "You didn't answer my question."

"So serious, Daniel MacIntyre! Down to business, then." She sprang up in one quick motion, standing on the chair that was now leaning precariously far back. Cactusman had to at least give her credit, she definitely had a certain theatrical flair.

"I'm Alexandra Radcliffe! And Mister Slappy here is Zacharie Langley. We're from the Chaos Insurgency. We rescued you!"

"Rescued me? What? I know it wasn't the best situation, but I was helping-"

"You weren't helping anyone," Langley said. He didn't say it with any sort of venom or bluntness, he just droned on in a tired way. "I read your file. They were staged incidents to improve your morale. Minor tasks to keep you from hurting yourself. Little more than something to minimize the risk of losing one of their contained objects."

"I'm not an object!"

"I am aware. They, however, are not."

Cactusman swung his legs over the edge of the bed and glared accusingly. "And how would you know?"

Langley didn't bat an eye. "Because I used to work for them."

That caught Cactusman off guard, but it didn't stop him from extending spines all along his right arm. He took a few deep breaths to calm himself. He took the time to note that he didn't have any bandages or stitches anywhere.

"Doctor Louef isn't like that. I don't know about the Foundation in general, but he-"

"Louef's a pretty chill dude, from what I've read-slash-heard," Radcliffe said. "But that didn't stop him from locking you and other

superhumans up. Because the Foundation is not all that nice to superhumans. And I know *that* because-"

A ball of fire erupted from Radcliffe's right hand. It was nothing but a small belch of flame, but it was enough to put Cactusman a little on edge. She grinned and continued surfing on the wobbling chair.

"C'mon, man, you're from Arizona. You should be used to the heat," Radcliffe said as the flame went out. "So, in case that egghead of yours is as addled as I think, being with us already has a leg up on your old situation. You get to be a person. And we'll even try to fix that fucked up think pan you got."

"I'm not crazy," Danny said adamantly.

Radcliffe started to laugh, teetering back and forth on the chair, when Langley grabbed her by the wrist and pulled back down into her seat. His expression had yet to change, but it looked like she was trying to eat her lips.

"You are not in a position to mock someone for their mental instabilities, Alex. Mister MacIntyre, my apologies. I thought it would be prudent for you to meet both of us, as we represent Foundation interaction with transhumans — both from within the Foundation, and from the outside. Unfortunately I cannot imagine her actions have been particularly encouraging."

"So why me? It seems like a lot of effort to just… 'save' someone."

Langley nodded. "You have been acquired by the Insurgency for a very specific task only you can accomplish. You-"

"We need you to talk to a giant cactus monster!" Radcliffe interjected. She appeared to be vibrating with excitement. Cactusman could feel the corner of his mouth tugging upward.

Langley slowly turned his head to look at her and she flinched. He blinked and looked back to Cactusman. "…Yes. We-"

Radcliffe clasped her hands together and Cactusman could feel his heart rise into his throat when she cried, "We need your help, Cactusman! Save us, oh-"

"Alex."

"What? I'm just having some fun."

"Please don't interrupt. It's rude."

"Well, sorry."

"Quite alright."

"Wait a minute, you just interrupted me to-"

"As I was saying," Langley said calmly.

Cactusman couldn't help but chuckle, even if he wasn't sure the man was being intentionally comedic. While being probably drugged and being more kidnapped than rescued was not exactly the best way to be introduced to this organization, he felt these two were nice enough people. And being out of his cell was certainly a plus.

"We need you to speak with a… giant cactus monster. There is no way to subdue it physically without permanently damaging it, so we need a lighter touch. Only you can help us, Mister MacIntyre. We need help. We need… the Spiked Menace."

"Fffffuck yeah!" Radcliffe sprang all the way out of her chair this time. "That was cool! Well delivered, Zach."

Langley didn't so much smile as he did show her his teeth. It seemed to actively hurt him to do so, and he dropped the expression almost as suddenly as he made it.

Radcliffe didn't seem to notice, or perhaps just didn't care. "So, Danny-boy, watcha say, you in?"

Cactusman smiled. "I'm in."

Langley's expression remained stony as ever, and he gave nothing more than a short nod. Cactusman tried not to let the man's indifference - melancholy? Cactusman wasn't sure - get to him. At least Radcliffe seemed happy, she was doing a little jig beside her overturned chair.

"So, what now?" Cactusman asked as he slowly rose from the bed. He made several little hops to get the blood flowing to his legs.

Langley opened his mouth to reply but Radcliffe bounded forward to field the question. Langley shrugged, grabbed the two cacti, and headed for the door while Radcliffe prattled on. "Well, we've already given you a medical evaluation and stuff, so I guess we should just take you to our quarters- you're staying with us, I dunno if I mentioned that yet. But you can't wander around unless you have one of us with you, since you're new and special and stuff."

"So what do you actually do?" Cactusman asked slid past the glass door. Glancing inside the other rooms, Cactusman hurried after Radcliffe. The ward was surprisingly empty, save for a nurse or two here and there.

"Oh, we get to do tons of fun stuff! I mean, it also depends on your cell. For example, I'm tasked with resource acquisition- like you- in various ways. Langley is either with me or off doing… something. I dunno, he talks about it and I get bored and zone out. You, however, will be stuck on base cuz you're 'vital Beta Class personnel.' But it's gotta be better than jail, yeah?"

She skipped ahead and shut the door before Cactusman could get a look outside. A wicked grin had decided to take host on her face. She took a deep breath, threw open the door and dashed out. Cactusman poked his head out to see she had jumped up on a railing, her entire body arching as she spread her arms out.

"Welcome!" she yelled, and her voice echoed several times. "To the Chaos Insurgency!"

The catwalk outside his room was several stories up, overlooking a sizable room congested with traffic. People in casual wear, lab coats, hazmat suits, and military gear mingled together in a sea of activity. Drifting amongst them were dollies and carts of various materials, captained by impatient personnel. Cactusman spotted one cage rocking around as a team pulled it with short ropes, and a large creature of some sort pushing it from behind. The resulting noise from it all, even thirty feet up, was near deafening.

They were not as pristine as the Foundation, nor nearly as orderly. Which lent credence to their name, Cactusman figured. The building and the various objects and tools he could spot had a similar aesthetic- not defunct, but clearly well-worn. When he squinted he could see the entirety of the floor was scratched and scuffed, the entire thing a beaten path.

Looking left and right, Cactusman spotted more room along the catwalk he was on. The catwalk looped around the entire room, and had several like it above and below. It all reminded him of a prison, the way all sides of the room were covered in ladders, stairs, and catwalks leading to the various rooms embedded in the concrete.

"Cool, eh?" Radcliffe was hanging upside down, her knees locked around the railing. Cactusman almost got vertigo just looking at her. It didn't help she was idly kicking her feet.

Cactusman swallowed nervously. "Yeah. It's a bit more… uh. Not dirty, but… I mean, no offense, I just-"

"Ah, don't worry." Radcliffe grasped the railing and pulled herself up. "I mean, yeah, it's not super immaculate- that site you were in was like spotless, holy shit- but it's got… y'know, character. Flavor. All the Foundation facilities I've ever been in are just so… lifeless. Bluh."

"Speaking of which," Cactusman said as they headed for the stairs, where Langley was waiting. He bit the inside of his cheek. "Did anybody get hurt when you guys… uh, 'rescued' me?"

"Well." There was a brief pause as she began to descend. "I'm not gonna bullshit you, Danny. Yes, people got hurt. People died. I dunno how many. I will, however, assure you I ain't got an ounce of blood on my hands."

He had anticipated it, but it still felt like a punch to the gut. He squeezed the railing for support and asked with as much force as he could, "Why?"

Radcliffe squirmed, and it actually made Cactusman feel better. "That's a difficult question. Like, you have to understand that the

Insurgency and the Foundation have fundamentally different goals. The Foundation squirrels anomalies away, and the Insurgency… the Insurgency wants to bring it to the light of day. To make them normal. To make *us* normal, Danny."

Spines erupted from nearly every inch of skin on Cactusman's body. "And that's worth killing people over? That the Foundation should just *die* and let you do what you want?"

When Radcliffe looked away from him without responding, Cactusman reached out to grasp her shoulder without realizing he was still covered in spines. Before he could reach, Langley grabbed him by the wrist. Blood seeped onto the bandages in two places, but still Langley didn't show any reaction.

"Mister MacIntyre, please don't act as if we find this easy. We don't." He released Cactusman and removed the spines stuck in his hand, then picked up the two cacti he had set down. "I know better than most that not everyone in the Foundation is coldhearted. I had good friends when I worked there. I do this job not only because I believe in the Insurgency's cause, but because I know if I didn't, another Insurgent would take my place. And they may not show the same mercy as I."

Cactusman took to chewing on his tongue rather than his cheek. Mulling over what he said, it made sense. But it didn't make Cactusman any happier. Instead of dwelling on it, Cactusman took to removing the spines from himself as they walked.

He overheard Radcliffe comment on Langley's bleeding, who dismissed it with, "Won't have this arm much longer, anyway."

Yet as odd a comment as that was, Cactusman couldn't ignore the thoughts of the Foundation that continued to surface. They made him realize he didn't know that much about the Foundation. Who was he to cast judgement on those that opposed them? Yet still the idea of the Insurgency killing Foundation personnel left him uneasy, and unsure of whether he should assist them.

But, as if on cue from a higher power, some of the payload of a nearby rolling pallet trolley dislodged itself and crashed down to the

ground. Before Langley or Radcliffe could say anything on the matter, Cactusman rushed forward to aid his new comrades. He hefted up one of the barrels, which had a strip of transparent material on it to reveal the red liquid within it. The men with the trolley thanked him and together they loaded the three fallen barrels back onto the roller.

"Happy to help," Cactusman assured, short of breath. Having to yell over the din certainly didn't make being heard any easier. He wiggled his aching fingers before waving the men off. When he turned back to Langley and Radcliffe, the former was watching the barrels with a thoughtful look on his face- the first real expression Cactusman had seen on him.

"You alright?" Cactusman asked. A cocktail of curiosity and satisfaction in his recent minor heroics almost washed his previous thoughts from his mind with an efficiency near comparable to the amnestic lingering in his system.

"Fine," Langley said. His gaze remained on the trolley for a moment longer before looking down to Cactusman. "Come on. Let's go."

The trio exited the massive room and entered one of the various tunnels leading out of it. Traffic had diminished to a point where Cactusman was no longer shoulder-to-shoulder with people, but it was still packed. He glanced around, acutely more aware of how close Langley and Radcliffe were sticking to him. Did they think he was going to make a break for it or something? Couldn't be too careful, he supposed.

"So what is it they want this cactus thing for?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Hell if I know." Radcliffe threw her palms up in an exaggerated shrug. "I was just told to have you calm it down, and that you were super important and not to let anything bad happen to you."

"Uh… Mr. Langley?"

"I don't know, either. The Insurgency works on a very strict need-to-know basis. Given your general disposition I doubt it is anything

particularly violent."

Cactusman planned on giving a response but his brain was sideswiped when he saw a very tall… thing approach from down the hall. It must have been fifteen feet tall, and was composed of little more than a round head and lots of limbs. Jutting from the side of its bulb were several pieces of electronic equipment, including what looked like a headset. It bobbed at Langley, who tilted his head in response. Cactusman spun and walked backwards to continue watching it, and it only gave him an odd look with one of its six eyes. Radcliffe bounced around and then extended a hand, which the creature slapped with one of its own.

"That's Johnson," Radcliffe explained when she noticed Cactusman staring. "I love that guy."

"Johnson?"

"Oh, like nobody can pronounce his real name. It's long, has weird inflections. Plus it makes your ears bleed." She smiled. "Transreality beings, am I right?"

Cactusman had to put some effort into not tripping as she explained it. He gave a rigid nod and then spun about face, remembering that talking to Radcliffe made things worse somehow.

After several twists and turns through the tunnels of the complex, the herd thinned out until it was just Cactusman and his escorts. Every twenty feet down the hallway was a door with a number emblazoned on it. Radcliffe marched to Number 836 and produced a key from her hand, which jammed into the doorknob. When the lock clicked open she pressed the key into her left palm, which sank into the skin without any resistance until it was gone.

"Hello, Mister MacIntyre, welcome home." With a half-bow and a grand sweep of an arm Radcliffe ushered Cactusman inside.

The apartment was small and congested thanks to all the boxes and various knickknacks cluttering the ground and shelves. Empty boxes of food, dirty dishes, and discarded bottles covered the tables and counters. Trash Mountain, situated within and on top of the only

visible garbage can, looked ready to suffer an avalanche. There was, however, a series of very clear cut paths throughout the room. Cactusman's gaze alternated between the absurdly large flat screen television and the old furniture before shrugging.

"I'm a bit of a collector," Radcliffe explained. She vaulted the leather couch and stretched. "Make yourself at home!"

"Sorry for the mess," Langley said with a quarter-hearted shrug. He stepped out of his shoes and kicked them next to the door. Cactilad and Spikigirl were placed on one of the tables, a large lamp pointed directly at the open space they were situated in. "Try not to hurt yourself."

"God, how much would that suck?" Radcliffe said as she switched on the TV. "We break him out and take him in and then he kills himself tripping on my Wondertainment merch."

Shuffling his way through the path was easy enough, and when he arrived at the couch Radcliffe stared at him for a moment before realizing she should move to make room. Meanwhile, Langley was rustling through the kitchen drawers.

"You hungry, MacIntyre?" he asked. He stood and displayed several bags of ramen noodles. Cactusman just nodded. "Alex?"

"Hook me up, I'll grab the movie." Radcliffe bounced back off the couch and scampered into one of the other rooms, quickly returning with a DVD box.

"So… this it?" Cactusman asked. "We watch a movie and eat some noodles?"

Radcliffe pulled away from the DVD player. "Do you not like ramen? We have some other stuff, you could just say so."

"No, I mean, this is it? I thought you guys were supposed to be making a difference or something. But you're just… watching movies."

"Gotta have an off switch, Danny-boy. I mean, it's not like you're Cactusman all the time, right? You gotta be Daniel MacIntyre for a

while."

"Um… Right."

Radcliffe gave him an odd look, her head tilting almost ninety degrees. A sudden hitch in her throat let out a strangled sound before she started laughing. Her own hand slapped over her mouth and she fidgeted for a few seconds, as if the laugh was trying to find some other exit. Eventually she managed to gulp it down and smiled awkwardly at Cactusman. She stepped over the messy table and sat uncomfortably close to him, wrapping an arm around him.

"You poor, poor bastard. Well, don't worry!" A very fake looking flower ejected itself from her right palm and tickled Cactusman under his nose. "We'll fix you right up. I mean, probably. Eventually. Until then the three of us can be bestest buddies!"

"That does wonders for my morale."

"I know, right? Like, look at me! I'm probably annoying as fuck, and I'm Beta Class! That's pretty good. And now I have two super-depressed buddies that I can just pour joy and enthusiasm into despite the fact that doing so is likely actively damaging you mentally, but I can't stop myself because either I genuinely can't filter my thoughts or being a loudmouth jackass is just a defense mechanism for my utterly fucked up situation of working for an organization whose methods I don't fully support. Yet it's somehow better than the alternatives because some old motherfuckers behind their desks decided I wasn't normal and had to be locked up like some kinda side show attraction instead of the main stage magician I wanted to be! But hey! At least I might not have to suffer it long due to the physical dangers of my missions."

Flabbergasted, Cactusman just stared at her grin. His mind had finally started working at full capacity, and now it felt bogged down in gunk again. For whatever reason it decided to notice her left large incisor had a small chip on the side. After what felt like a week her mouth moved to ask, "So, wanna watch a movie, Cactusman?"

Daniel MacIntyre blinked. "Yeah. Uh. Movie sounds good, actually. And just call me Daniel."

Headhunted

The Machine had failed and Dr. Molly Jayawadena was fleeing.

In a filthy subway bathroom, Molly smeared cheap bronzer on her face. The dollar store powder left grimy, muddy streaks on Molly's golden-olive face, just as she knew it would. The rest of the powder was rubbed into the thick, musty smelling anorak bought in a yard sale. It had been unseasonably warm for March in New York state, not warm enough that one would remember selling a heavy coat, but just a touch too warm for that particular jacket. This anorak had been very deliberately chosen, and Molly was ready to test that choice. She gathered the black trash bag containing everything she now owned in the world and shuffled out of the bathroom. Head downcast, Molly ambled to the bus station.

Molly's choice of disguise was a good one. People's eyes slid off her as if she was coated with some unsavory perceptual grease. Dr. Jayawadena knew it was cynical to rely so strongly on people's callousness towards the homeless, but cynicism has a way of paying off. Pedestrians gave her a wide berth while refusing to acknowledge her presence, shiny young police officers merely gave off an air of annoyance, and the bus driver patently ignored her fumbling with handfuls of sweaty quarters. Molly took a seat at the bus. No one sat beside her. Molly settled in with satisfaction for a long ride.

She would be in New York in a few hours, and then…Molly was generally a meticulous planner. That's why she had been able to flee the second the Machine melted down. No one else would have several thousand dollars in small bills, fake IDs, enough stage makeup to render Hitler unrecognizable, and yet…

Something else was guiding Molly. This was The Machine speaking to her. She must be passive now and surrender to the rippling currents of destiny.

This was not her. Molly Jayawadena was not a passive participant in the Universe.

But then again, she didn't design the Machine.

How could she? She was a physicist, not an engineer. A theoretician, mind you. A tinkerer in ideas, not metal. Molly didn't know a resistor from a reading light and didn't care to. The Proof was her work and hers alone, but the Machine was a collaboration.

With whom? Pieces of memory swirled in Molly's addled head: dreams of schematics in smooth clean lines, notes left in her office or falling out of textbooks, whispers from her students. The students! The engineering majors, bringing her odd little components they'd built "for fun", "on a whim". Damned if they knew what it did, but maybe you'd like to have it as a desk piece, Dr. Jayawadena? In turn, she'd given them the blueprints formed in half-waking moments. *Here's a tricky little circuit here. Let's see if you can build it. Winner gets drinks on me.* Most of those students were male, and what a male thing it was to try and win a competition of skill, especially to impress a woman. So the Machine was fashioned, piecemeal, but undeniably real.

But who designed the Machine?

All of a sudden Molly realized that the seats beside and in front of her were taken.

The seats on the bus were in groups of four, a pair of seats facing each other. Molly had slid into the window seat. This, she now realized, was a mistake on her part. A man in nondescript beige clothing sat next to her, blocking her access to the aisle. Another man and a woman sat across from her in the same forgettable attire. Their outfits and demeanor were so bland that Molly knew they were some sort of plainclothesmen.

"You can't stop me," said Molly in a stage whisper.

The woman across from Molly removed her headphones and smiled a toothy, foreboding smile at her. "Stop you, Doctor? I'm personally offended. We're here to protect you, ma'am."

"Protect me? From those people at the test site?"

The man across from her smiled. "Clever one. No wonder the Engineer picked her."

Molly's head snapped to the man. "Engineer?"

"I'd better let our scientific representative answer that. Doctor?"

The man next to Molly peered up for the first time. Steepling his fingers, he addressed her in a low, thick voice. "Dr. Jayawadena. I must say it's an absolute pleasure to finally meet you, circumstances notwithstanding. I am Dr. Mikhail Kronovich, head of my organization's Physical Sciences Research and Development Department. My organization has taken quite the interest in you and your work."

Molly cocked an eyebrow. "*Me* and my work?"

"Absolutely, Doctor. You see, our…organization is not only devoted to finding the proper science, but the proper *minds*. We want vision; we want those minds dedicated to unity and order…ah, I see you know exactly what I'm talking about."

Molly's head was pounding. "Pare it down. Pare it down. The anomalies…"

Dr. Kronovich chuckled. "Comrades, she's practically one of us already. Doctor, you *know* about the anomalies. They're written into the language of the universe. So why, my dear Doctor, do we not know about them?"

"Surely they disguise themselves?"

"Oh, yes, of course, a few of them do, that's the nature of the anomaly. But the others? No. They are being purposely hidden, locked away so as not to *contaminate* our precious grip on creation," Dr. Kronovich spat venomously.

"Hidden?"

"Yes, by our friends in black. The spooks."

"They're not government." It was a statement, not a question.

Dr. Kronovich roared with laughter. "If only! The leader of this government cannot trifle with an intern without the world finding out all the salacious details. Bumbling idiots. Government indeed."

"Who are they then?"

The woman leaned in. "They're a Foundation. *The* Foundation. They exist to keep the human race in the dark."

The man added, "You see, we're all far too stupid to handle reality as it is. We have to be protected. Watched over by our shepherds, the lords and masters of The Foundation." His face twisted bitterly. "Of course, they're perfectly good enough to use the anomalies themselves…"

"But we'll save that for later," said Dr. Kronovich firmly. "Let us attend to the matter at hand." He turned again to Molly. "This is an offer of employment. We want to bring order to the universe. My organization will bring harmony between the anomalies and consensus reality, and we want you to help achieve that vision."

"Let's *not* attend to the matter at hand. This Foundation of yours, how could they have possibly found my test site so quickly, and what could they possibly have to gain?"

"The Foundation is everywhere, Doctor. They are in every branch of every government on Earth, every industrial sector, every religious organization. Our records indicate that you enjoy movies. You have seen movies where some dark global organization overlooks a small resistance by virtue of their cleverness or insignificance?"

"Yes," said Molly, "One of my least favorite tropes, actually."

"Then you will be pleased to learn life does not imitate art. The Foundation is not that incompetent movie villain and no part of your life is beyond their reach. Within five minutes, they will know exactly which seat you have taken on this bus. If it wasn't for certain tricks of our own, they would have a transcript of our exact conversation. Do you know, Doctor, what they do with all this immense power?"

"I have no idea, seeing as how I'm only learning of them now."

Dr. Kronovich brought his fist down on his armrest with a dull thud. "Exactly. The Foundation uses that immense power to convince humanity that the world is flat and the sun revolves around it. You have seen evidence of wonders, Doctor. The Foundation is in the business of hiding them from sight. Does this not offend you?"

Molly slid back into her seat. "Everything I've learned and taught has been a lie," she said blankly. All of a sudden, a bright, childlike smile burst like a sunbeam onto her face. "Everything I know is a lie! I've got a PhD in alchemy! In astrology! In antiquated *bullshit*!" She fell back laughing rapturously.

"Wonderful, no?" asked Dr. Kronovich with a crooked grin.

"It's Christmas in March!" she laughed again. "And to what do I owe the honor? Isn't there some sort of application process or…"

"You've passed it. We've been supplying you with a bit of help these past few months and you've gotten farther than we have in years. Imagine what you could do if you had an entire fully staffed lab devoted to controlling your ouroboric anomalies."

"I presume I must go into hiding with you."

"You presume correctly. To the outside world you will be as good as dead. We will protect you completely from your pursuers. In return we want you to research for us what you've been studying already. It's certainly not a bad deal, is it not?"

"Definitely. You're not with the government either. You're some sort of cloak-and-dagger bullshit, right? Spanning the globe, men in black, hiding in plain sight? 'The Truth is Out There'?"

Dr. Kronovich smiled. "Sarcasm aside, you have the idea."

"Well, I'm in. When do I start?"

The man leaned forward. "*What?* Just like that? Aren't you going to ask what happens if you refuse? Aren't you going to ask who you're working for or how you can trust us?"

Molly turned to him, smiling wryly. "I'm a scientist. Have you ever had to explain to a politician why your work is worth funding if you can't pick off terrorists with it? I don't give a fuck who I'm working for as long as I can research what I want and you're paying me for it. I don't have to know what happens if I refuse because I'd be an idiot to refuse."

"And you are no idiot," said Dr. Kronovich with a smile. "I believe this is our stop."

"What are you talking about? We're not stopping for at least another hour."

"Working for us has certain perks. Take this," said the woman.

Molly took a large wristband with a big yellow button on it. Noticing that her new coworkers wore the same device, she strapped it on.

"Ready? On three, push the button. And Doctor? Welcome to the Insurgency."

Two hours later, the bus made an unscheduled stop. Armed men and women in intimidating uniforms swarmed the bus looking for a young postdoc who had undergone a mental breakdown and was missing. No one looked too closely at the uniforms.

A thousand miles away in an underground bunker, Dr. Molly Jayawadena reached for a pencil and began to write.

SC-49/785-52/543

DeCIRO Catalogue Number: SC-49/785-52/543

Document Type: Step Compilation

Dates Received: 06-04-1949 through 09-26-1952

Operation Status: Open

Foreword: Soon after it was forged, the hidden blade in the Foundation's blood-soaked hand was augmented with a stony venom. The information of this slow-acting venom had been largely struck from their records, and with it the hidden blade downed many of the Foundation's foes, often years after they were struck. And now, the blade out of their reach, the blade silently strikes its old wielder.

We of Delta Command are confident that Operation Perseus will successfully reflect the dire effects of the Foundation's darkest secrets on itself. Forced to avert their gazes, the Overseers can do naught as the many serpents that wreathe their crown are petrified. And when the time is right, Perseus will rise and the crippled gorgon petrifying our world will be slain.

Hereafter we of Delta Command document the Steps of the Plan as transcribed by the Engineer of the Chaos Insurgency.

1. STEP 49/785

I'm feeling sympathetic toward our members who are beginning to question their place with us. Such as the Beta-Class residing in Number 233 on Base C. He used to work at Foundation Site-37, and is thinking back on how his old job wasn't that bad. On September 14th, give him two doses of the blue substance located in Locker B of Base C's Chemical Storage. Insert a GPS tracker while you're at it. If and when he tries to leave, allow him to leave unharmed.

2. STEP 49/948

Dispatch two teams; one composed of nine Alpha-Class personnel and one composed of three Alpha-Class and one Beta-Class. At 00:35 AM on October 14th, both teams will assault the Foundation Site-37. Refer them to document FTF/FS32-BP. Team One will terminate the lead researcher studying the object stored in Locker 147, while Team Two acquires the object stored in Locker 147. Deposit the object in Locker 11 at Storage Site 22.

Insurgency survivors are to be given amnestics.

3. STEP 50/23

The Beta-Class that used to reside in Number 233 on Base C used to be alive. Number 233 on Base C is now vacant. Make it occupied.

4. STEP 50/140

The object in Locker 11 at Storage Site 22 is to be moved to Research Lab 4V. Non-Alpha personnel stationed at Research Lab 4V are to be transferred to Research Lab 2J. Replace them with Alpha-Class personnel to make it seem as if Research Lab 4V is still fully operational.

5. STEP 51/152

The Foundation will raid Research Lab 4V. Alpha-Class personnel are to defend the facility with their lives.

A post-op summary of the results of the conflict is to be delivered to Delta Command.

DeCIRO Catalogue Number: POR-51/152-001

Document Type: Post-Operation Summary Report

Date Received: 04-12-1951

Author: Captain Olivia Brown

Despite knowing of the raid beforehand and stationing

only military personnel within the facility, those stationed at Research Lab 4V suffered major casualties, all but four dead and three of those in critical condition.

In addition, ten of the anomalous objects being studied in Research Lab 4V were secured by the Foundation. This includes the high-profile object recently transferred from Storage Site 22.

6. STEP 52/543

On October 2nd, dispatch a team of seven Alpha-Class led by one Beta-Class to Foundation Site-62, where they are to secure the object stored in Secure Locker 36. Refer to document FTF/FS62-BP for the layout of Foundation Site-62. Give document CO-52/543-001 to the Beta-Class.

DeCIRO Catalogue Number: CO-52/543-001

Document Type: Covert Operations

Date Received: 09-26-1952

Author: Delta Command

Hello, agent. You have been selected for this mission due to your deep loyalty to our cause. As you know, your team is to attack Foundation Site-62 in an effort to acquire the object stored in Secure Locker 36. However, this is not your mission. It is the mission of the Alpha-Class you will be leading.

Your mission is to assure that their mission fails. It is of the utmost importance that the Foundation truly believes that their **"SCP-884"** is held in high regard by the Chaos Insurgency.

If the Alphas dies before they can reach Secure Locker 36, fine. If they manage to get the item, friendly fire is acceptable to prevent them from leaving the site with the object. But again, you must make sure your true goals remain secret to both your squad and the Foundation.

Destroy this document when you are confident you understand what you are to do. This information does not leave the confines of your mind. Good luck.

SC-10/548-12/893

DeCIRO Catalogue Number: SC-10/548-12/893

Document Type: Step Compilation

Dates Received: 09-23-2010 through 10-15-2012

Operation Status: Closed

Foreword: Given the success of Operation Heracles and the absence of further instructions regarding the individual alternatively known as “the boy in Detention Center 54 in Base F” or “the boy in Detention Center 59 in Base F”, we of the Delta Command have decided to declare Operation Heracles closed.

We have seen that the spirit of the Foundation is damaged and those under their aegis falter and their sign wavers. The subject by our estimations is compromised beyond repair but his sacrifice will be hailed as a martyrdom of glory and beauty for the great destination to which we are to be propelled. The needs of the many make null and void the survival of the few. Heracles was a great hero and a great success.

Hereafter we of Delta Command document the Steps of the Plan as transcribed by the Engineer of the Chaos Insurgency.

1. STEP 10/548

Dispatch thirteen armed Alpha-Class personnel under the command of one Beta-class personnel. Give the Beta the Red Sight. On September 25th, at 9:45 PM, these personnel are to intercept a group of three Serpent’s Hand members. The Hand will emerge from a Way, located in the basement of the third house on Lockwood Street in Ashland, Minnesota. It is a remote town. Nobody will take much notice if there is a commotion. Wait until the Hand has moved at least a quarter mile away from the town just in case.

Then strike.

There will be a boy. I need him alive. When he is retrieved, place him in Detention Center 54 in Base F. The other two can die. I expect the Beta to return alive. I would not like to be disappointed, if at all possible. Return results to the Engineer.

2. STEP 10/897

Dispatch one Beta-class personnel to Detention Center 54 in Base F. There will be a boy inside. Have him move the boy from there to Detention Center 59.

3. STEP 10/945

There is a boy in Detention Center 59 in Base F. We are feeding him too much. Cut rations by one-half.

4. STEP 11/089

Dispatch a team of Gamma-class personnel from Research and Development to research the boy in Detention Center 59 in Base F. They may use up to ten Alphas for testing. No more. The Gammas have discretion over the specifics of their testing. I do not want to micromanage.

The Gammas are to produce a report detailing the exact nature of the boy's anomalous condition. They are to submit this report to the Delta Command.

Afterwards, amnesticize all the Gammas.

DeCIRO Catalogue Number: FR-11/089-001

Document Type: Summary Report

Date Received: 03-08-2011

Author: Dr. James Stevenson

Summary Report: The boy's anomalous condition manifests as an ability to telepathically communicate with

other individuals. It was concluded that this ability was effective at ranges of at least five kilometers. More equipment and human resources are required to determine if the boy's ability is restricted by range.

The boy has been observed to communicate visual, auditory, tactile, and olfactory sensations telepathically. The boy has furthermore been observed to be capable of communicating sensations that the boy himself has not experienced.

The cause of the boy's anomalous condition is unknown. The boy is biologically normal. Test subjects exposed to Hallucinogenic Memetoamnestic Substance could not produce coherent evaluations regarding the boy.

Several unexplained anomalous events have occurred when electronics were brought near the boy. These events caused the malfunction of electronic devices and, on one instance, an information security breach.

Presently, the boy's anomalous condition is not reproducible.

5. STEP 11/092

Assign a Beta-class medical staff personnel to put the boy in Detention Center 59 in Site F on a steady IV drip of amnestics.

6. STEP 11/345

One Delta-Class personnel is to produce the digital file CHZ-AU-023/R from DeCIRO archives. Give one Gamma-class researcher access to CHZ-AU-023/R. This Gamma-class researcher is responsible for ensuring that the boy in Detention Center 59 in Site F is exposed to CHZ-AU-023/R while sleeping.

7. STEP 11/894

One Delta-Class personnel is to produce the digital file CHZ-AU-025/Y from DeCIRO archives. Find the Gamma-class researcher who is exposing the boy in Detention Center 59 in Site F to digital

file CHZ-AU-023/R. Amnesticize this researcher. Give this researcher access to CHZ-AU-025/Y. This researcher is responsible for ensuring that the boy in Detention Center 59 in Site F is exposed to CHZ-AU-025/Y at a volume of no less than 75 decibels at all times.

8. STEP 12/031

The Gamma-class military commander with responsibility over the upcoming Operation Heracles is to be informed that there is a boy in Detention Center 59 in Site F. He is to be given access to documents FR-11/089-001 through FR-11/089-65. He is to be instructed to make use of the boy in Detention Center 59 in Site F as part of Operation Heracles. He is to be given full responsibility over the boy for the duration of the Operation.

9. STEP 12/035

In Detention Center 59 in Site F, there is a boy who does not want to be there anymore. He wants to go home. Halve his rations.

10. STEP 12/498

Two Beta-Class research staff are to enter Detention Center 59 in Site F and evaluate the obedience of the boy inside. Afterwards, they are to attempt communicating with the boy. Results are to be forwarded to Delta Command. After the Betas do so, amnesticize them.

DeCIRO Catalogue Number: FR-12/498-001

Document Type: Summary Report

Date Received: 06-19-2012

Author: Dr. James Stevenson

Summary Report: Test subject follows standard orders without complaint. It is believed that subject will exhibit acceptable levels of obedience in military, research, or emergency situations. Test subject did not exhibit reluctance when carrying out non-standard orders that

could potentially lead to the harm of the test subject.

All attempts at communication with the test subject failed, as test subject was non-responsive.

11. STEP 12/755

The Gamma-class military commander responsible for Operation Heracles is to submit a report to Delta Command regarding the boy who was in Detention Center 59's participation in Operation Heracles.

DeCIRO Catalogue Number: POR-12/755-001

Document Type: Post-Operation Summary Report

Date Received: 09-03-2012

Author: Captain Thomas Pyle

Provided test subject was able to reproduce cognito-hazardous sensations and telepathically communicate them to targeted personnel. During operation, the test subject began behaving erratically, often exhibiting significant disorientation and confusion. At 0917, test subject ceased moving and became non-responsive to all orders. Several Insurgency personnel complained of severely disorienting hallucinogenic experiences; it is my belief that the test subject was the cause of these. At 0919, I ordered my men to terminate the test subject so as not to allow the Foundation to capture him.

I do not know why the subject was ultimately unable to complete the mission. It is with deepest regret that I report the loss of a potentially extremely valuable soldier for the Insurgency's cause.

12. STEP 12/893

The previous occupant of Detention Center 59 in Site F made a mess. Send a single Alpha-Class personnel to clean it up.

SC-13/234-14/362

DeCIRO Catalogue Number: SC-13/234-14/362

Document Type: Step Compilation

Dates Received: 04/07/13 through 06/23/14

Operation Status: Open

Foreword: Given the intricacy of the Plan and the multivariate nature of our opponents, it is sometimes necessary for us to use objects known to Delta Command as bargaining chips with other groups with a vested interest in the anomalous. Operation Midas continues to be a key resource for our secret agents in the den of thieves known as Marshall, Carter, and Dark.

The Foundation will crumble on its corrupt and rotten foundation. Delta Command is everywhere and Operation Midas is a testament to its reach and power. Once the Operation is completed the Chaos Insurgency will extend its reach across time as well.

Hereafter we of Delta Command document the Steps of the Plan as transcribed by the Engineer of the Chaos Insurgency.

1. STEP 13/234

Dispatch one armed Beta-Class with the Red Sight on May 6th at 10:46 AM to a shop in the Irvine Spectrum Shopping Center in Irvine, California. The shop will be in the Nordstrom wing of the Center and will identify itself as "Kitsner of New New York". The Beta-Class will be equipped with seven hundred counterfeit United States dollars. The management is unversed in contemporary counterfeiting methods and will not notice.

I will need one pair of translucent, purportedly indestructible grey women's boots, size 36, a pair of allegedly quantum-entangled

diamond cufflinks, two tan evening clutches purporting to be constructed of human skin, and a necklace, earring, and bracelet set the management claims are composed largely of astatine. Place all retrieved items in Lockers U-567 to U-571. Return results to the Engineer.

2. STEP 13/309

Dispatch a team of Gamma-Class personnel from Research and Development to analyze the items in Lockers U-567 to U-571. They are allotted three Alpha subjects for exposure testing with the jewelry set.

The Gammas are to verify the purported properties of the items retrieved in Step 1. After submitting a report on these properties to Delta Command, they are to be amnesticized.

DeCIRO Catalogue Number: FR-13/309-001

Document Type: Summary Report

Date Received: 05-20-2013

Author: Dr. Amelie Bradford

Summary Report: The women's boots appear to be comprised of a single layer of graphene. Testing with Alpha-Class revealed that, in keeping with our knowledge of the material, the boots were able to resist wear and tear by repairing holes in its structure with carbon molecules from the Alpha-Class' sweat and skin. Long term wear resulted in the physical degradation of Alpha-Class' skin. Testing with the diamond cufflinks, separated across a continent, revealed that the pair is quantum entangled. Each diamond either rotates clockwise or counterclockwise when observed, and exists in a superposition of states when unobserved. The bags are somewhat less truthful in advertising. DNA analysis showed that while the cells were of human origin, all genetic information pertaining to the construction of a human body was absent. The only

genes in the cells from the leather are those that regulate skin texture, color, and growth. The jewelry set appears to be made of astatine. We have reached that conclusion owing to the decay patterns of the samples we took from the jewelry, as every sample has sublimed in seconds due to the immense heat generated by astatine's intense radioactivity. How the necklace set stays intact is still unknown. Testing with Alpha-Class Personnel reveal an average safe wear-period of about 3.5 hours before the subject succumbs to radiation poisoning.

3. STEP 13/324

Return items to their respective lockers except the jewelry set. Install an extra 10 cm of lead shielding in Locker R-078 and relocate the set to that locker.

4. STEP 13/387

Transfer items to Gamma Agent Raj Bhattacharya for use in Operation Midas.

5. STEP 13/896

Bhattacharya is to transport the items in a secure container to the Marshall, Carter, and Dark clubhouse in the 5600 block of Wilshire Blvd, Beverly Hills, California. There he will meet a tall, thin Caucasian male in his mid-sixties, nearly bald and with a mild limp. He will introduce himself as Dr. John Windermere, although this will not be his real name. He will take a marked interest in the items offered by Gamma Agent Bhattacharya. Gamma Agent Bhattacharaya is to charge him no less than fifty million dollars for all items, as well as "information regarding your dark, quiet friend's Monday afternoon habits", worded in precisely that manner. The information on Foundation Agent Harold Torres and the object he is seeking to acquire divulged by Dr. Windermere is to be reported directly to Delta Command.

DeCIRO Catalogue Number: FR-13/896-001

Document Type: Post Operation Summary Report

Date Received: 12-01-2013

Author: Gamma Agent Bhattacharya

Summary Report: Object is the size of a bread box and appears to be a compact synthesizer of exotic and rare elements. Object ostensibly uses nuclear fusion to achieve this, but the exact way this is achieved is unknown. Windermere and Torres both apparently bonded over their shared interest in the device. As the object is capable of synthesizing many rare metals needed for the manufacture of components detailed in SC-13/456-14/590, the recovery of the machine is of top priority to the Insurgency.

6. STEP 14/362

Dispatch one Beta-Class personnel to the Fashion Island Shopping Center in Newport Beach, California. Administer double the normal dosage of Red Sight. The Beta Class personnel is to inquire about a sales position. There will be an opening. The Beta Class is now to function as a secret agent, examining temporal disturbances and reporting them directly to Delta Command. The Beta Class is to remain under the employ of the shop until s/he receives information relevant to mass temporal travel or important knowledge of future events.

Assault on Site-64

> Greetings fellow Insurgents.
>
> As many of you are likely aware, in exactly twenty-four hours, we will begin an assault upon the Foundation facility known as **`Site-64`**.

Site-64

Anomalous Materials Lab

As Researcher Jacob Conwell sat at his desk within the Site-64 **`Anomalous Materials Lab`**, he looked into the tiny box his colleague, Researcher Roland Ferro, held in front of him. Inside was a gold band topped by a modest diamond. Conwell grinned and shook his head.

"I'm flattered, Roland," he said, "but I don't think Kate's going to approve."

"Ha," Ferro replied. "Think Clarissa will like it?"

"I mean, sure, it’s a nice ring," Conwell shrugged. "But I thought Shaw was dating Dr. Campbell again. Did you two get back together?"

Ferro shook his head.

"Not yet, but if I've learned anything it’s that Clarissa and Lily's relationship is like a match. It burns hot and fast, and eventually burns out." Ferro sighed. "I just… if she gives me another chance, I want to be ready to do what I really should have done a long time ago. You know?"

"Seems like you're taking a pretty big gamble," Conwell frowned. "Just don't do anything stupid."

"It's far too late for that…"

"Hostiles incoming!"

The two scientists jumped. Through the window on the office door they could see security officers rushing into the room and taking cover behind the work benches, pistols in hand. The sound of shouting and gunfire, blotted out the low hum of the **Hoffman Portable Electro-Thaumic Units**. Suddenly, all was quiet. Several masked figures in combat gear appeared in the office doorway, assault weapons at the ready. Ferro and Conwell quietly held up their hands.

"On the floor, now!"

The two scientists didn't resist. Within moments of lying down, their hands were zip tied behind their backs.

"You shouldn't be here," Conwell mumbled from the floor.

"Quiet!" One of the intruders barked back.

"You don't understand," Ferro added on. "We don't mean that in a 'you're invading a black-ops facility' way. You guys came in through the portals, right? Those aren't going to be open much longer, we've already started the…"

Another intruder discharged a round from his pistol into the floor. Ferro immediately stopped talking.

The two scientists were hoisted up on their feet and escorted out of the office. As they passed into the adjoining lab, the bodies of three slaughtered Foundation Security Officers sat in pools of blood. One's head had taken a shotgun blast. Another had seen the wrong side of seven or eight rounds from an assault rifle. The final officer's legs had been shot out, with two bullet holes in the back of her head. Conwell cringed and looked away. Ferro swore under his breath.

"This is Alpha Leader," the lead intruder said into a mic on her

person. "Charlie and Delta, we've captured PoIs seven and fifteen. En route to primary."

Site-64

Cafeteria

"I fucking hate these things…" MTF Commander Damion Creed whispered to his colleague, MTF Commander Clarissa Shaw. "This whole thing could have just been a fucking email."

The two sat among a crowd of agents within the Site-64 Cafeteria. Near the back of the room was a projector screen displaying the current slide of a presentation entitled "Thaumatologists and You: What to do when you got the 'Blues'".

"This is more to your crew's benefit than mine," Shaw whispered back, her gaze remaining locked on the presenter. "Stop bitching and pay attention. You'll thank yourself when you don't get a rod of lightning shoved up your ass."

"But with high reflex I can take half damage…" Creed mumbled as he sat back in his chair and returned his attention to the speaker. "Seriously though, they're talking about magic, how is this so dry? Couldn't they get Navarro or something?"

Shaw exhaled sharply.

Creed held up his hands and fell quiet resigning himself to his fate.

"They aren't even doing demonstrations…" he said under his breath.

The burst of attention proved short lived, however, as several minutes later the sound of security klaxons then blasted through the facility.

Almost at once the assembled MTF agents stood, and began to sprint towards the cafeteria doors. At that same time, said doors slammed shut with sharp metallic clang, trapping them inside. It

didn't take long for the collective intellect of the room to determine the power had been cut.

"For fuck sake…" Shaw said as her and Creed pushed their way to the front of the crowd. "Someone get me a line to Merlo, now!"

> The reason for this attack is simple. Following the joint **UIU/Foundation raid** on **Anderson Robotics**, a massive supply of AR droids has been stored indefinitely at this facility for long term study and reverse engineering. If acquired and modified, these droids will provide a significant asset to our cause.

Site-64

Administrative Offices

"You're telling me that we can run a laser downstairs twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, but a mini-fridge shorts us?"

Gabe Merlo stood within his office behind one of the Site-64 maintenance crew members, rubbing the bridge of his nose in frustration, having just had to throw away at least three days of lunches he had packed for himself and his wife. The maintenance crewman, a middle-aged man with tan skin and a name tag that read "Stan", simply chuckled as he continued his work.

"Hey man, don't give me that attitude," Stan replied. "You have absolutely no idea how complex the wiring is in these places. Just let me do my job and you can go ahead and get back to yours. I'll let you know if I need you to do the wiring's taxes or something."

Assistant Director Sasha Merlo stifled a laugh as she sat within Gabe's chair behind his desk. Her husband looked at her with a defeated shrug.

"Guess it's cafeteria today," he mumbled. "Whenever the MTF

seminar clears up…"

"Fine by me," Sasha smiled, having regained her composure. "Though, lunch might be cut short then, Holman and I have a conference with some of the **Site-77** hobbnobbers later, and I don't want to…"

The sound of alarm klaxons cut her off. The room's three occupants froze as they looked around. Sasha's expression became serious, her hand reaching for her pistol. Gabe looked to the door, slowly backing up to be closer to his wife. Stan's eyes widened with fear as he put down his screwdriver, and watched the other two for a hint of what to do.

Gunshots rang out from somewhere on the floor. Sasha immediately got to her feet, locking the door and shutting down the lights as she drew the blinds on the door shut. Gabe stood behind her. He put a finger to his lips and gestured for Stan to join them. The sound of footsteps became audible in the adjoining hall.

"Containment breach?" Gabe asked under his breath.

Sasha shook her head as she peered through a crack in the blinds. Four figures in combat gear slowly crept down the hallway on alert. The one on point brandished a shot gun. Behind him the two intruders were armed with a pistol and an assault rifle, respectively. The figure taking up the rear was armed with a rifle as well. Each time they came to a room, they entered, and appeared to comb for inhabitants. Sasha relayed this information lowly, under her breath.

"Who are they? Any markings?" Stan whispered.

"Yeah, one's got a big neon sign that says GOC on it…" Sasha replied, shaking her head again. She then pressed a finger to her lips and backed away from the door. One of the intruders tested the knob forcefully, then became quiet.

All three of the room's occupants let out a small sigh of relief.

BANG

The door kicked inward.

Sasha immediately leveled her pistol, her arm recoiling in rapid succession as she repeatedly pulled the trigger. The man fell down as his shotgun clattered to the floor. She then leaned into the door frame, delivering more shots into her enemies, one of the riflemen falling to her assault.

Sasha didn't have time to reload. Something akin to a bus hit her from behind, launching her through the air and across the hallway where she slammed into the opposite wall with a dull thud. Her ears rang as she tried to get her bearings, only to get hit again, and launched down the hallway as if she were a rag doll.

Sasha coughed in pain as she looked up. The two remaining intruders approached, the rifleman keeping his weapon trained on her, while the man with the pistol held out a clenched fist with a faint blue light radiating from his palm.

"This is Charlie Leader," the thaumatologist said into a mic. "We've captured PoI three, preparing…"

A two shotgun blasts rang out in rapid succession, the rifleman slumping against the wall and the thaumatologist falling forward on top of Sasha. Gabe stood several yards away, weapon in hand. He breathed heavily for several moments as he looked between the two men he killed, then became pale and vomited.

"My hero…" Sasha said with a painful laugh as she pushed the body off her, Stan arriving to lend her a hand up.

Gabe nodded in agreement as he wiped his mouth.

"What do we do now?" he asked.

"Well, considering how we're a maintenance crewman, an accountant, and a Level 4 admin, we're going to find a new place to hide, and stay put. We're not exactly **Alpha-9**," Sasha answered, and reloaded her pistol. "Stan, grab one of those rifles, I'm assuming you've passed the basic training."

"Uh… yes ma'am," Stan nodded, and went to fetch a weapon.

"Where are the MTFs?" Gabe looked around. "Shouldn't Shaw be all

over this? Or Creed?"

"You'd think…" Sasha frowned. "Let's hide first, then we can find out what the hell is going on…"

Clarissa? It's Sasha. What was Jessie's nickname for you?

Aunt Clari. What was my alias during my first operation for Gamma-13?

Ms. Starling. Glad you are okay. What's going on? Where are you and the other MTFs?

Trapped in the cafeteria. Someone cut the power to the doors, and sealed us in. Where are you, are you okay?

Gabe and I are holed up somewhere safe. No worries.

Do you know what's going on?

Some kind of invasion. Armed strike teams. A crew went through the admin level on a personnel grab. I'm guessing CI based on the hallmarks.

Jesus… how'd they get in?

Your guess is as good as mine.
We have one of the maintenance crew with us. Hang tight, we'll see if we can get you guys out. Be ready to rock and roll.

Fuck that noise. Stay put! Last thing we need is them bagging a level four.

See you soon.

The mission will involve five strike teams. Strike Team Alpha will be securing the captured Anderson Drones, and therefore will be the largest team. Strike Team Bravo will be securing a master copy of the AR Operating System within the Foundation Site Archives. Strike

Teams Charlie and Delta will capture Persons of Interest from the Site-64 staff. Each team will enter through a different **SC-60/106-13/060** portal here within Three Portlands. We have already negotiated safe passage into and out of the pocket dimension on the other side with **like-minded inhabitants** eager to see this blow dealt to the Foundation. However, these portals are currently under the protection of **UIU agents**. Strike Team Echo will ensure the portals remain under our control.

Site-64

Medium Security Storage Wing

Researchers Conwell and Ferro reluctantly trudged forward, surrounded by the armed intruders who escorted them forcefully though the lower levels of Site-64. Along the way, they watched their captors gun down security personnel as they came across them, as well as the occasional maintenance crewman, or wayward scientist. Eventually, the entourage stopped at a door both Ferro and Conwell had been through many times during the course of their research.

Robotics Storage

"Open the door," the intruder they had come to know as Alpha Leader ordered.

Conwell and Ferro looked at each other briefly, then both shook their heads.

"We can't," Conwell replied. His eyes shifted to the ground where they remained locked.

"Did that sound like a fucking request? Open the god damn door!"

"We can't," Ferro clarified. "Neither of us have clearance for that area. That's basically an armory, what the hell would we need to do

back there that couldn't just be brought to our labs?"

Alpha Leader sighed then snapped her fingers. Conwell and Ferro were immediately slammed into the nearby wall as their ID badges were forcefully yanked off their persons. The door pinged twice as both badges were rejected by the security scanner.

"Peachy," Alpha Leader mumbled. "Twelve?"

"On it!"

One of the intruders with a heavy kit on her person set to work opening the door. Alpha Leader nodded in approval, then turned back to Conwell and Ferro.

"Eight, Six, keep our guests comfortable."

The two researchers were then forced down to the floor, idly watching as their captors attempted to crack their way into the storage room by force. It was several minutes into this that Ferro noticed Conwell blinking in a rhythmic pattern.

Long, Long, Long, Long, Long, Short, Long, Short, Short, Short, Short, Short.

Ferro tilted his head slightly in confusion, and watched as Conwell repeated.

Long, Long, Long, Long, Long, Short, Long, Short, Short, Short, Short, Short.

The pattern seemed familiar, as if he had seen it before.

Long, Long, Long, Long, Long, Short, Long, Short, Short, Short, Short, Short.

It then hit him.

Roland, you fucking idiot. It's Morse code. Ferro thought to himself, and looked at Conwell blink out the message again. His colleague had been repeating the word MORSE over and over.

YES

Ferro blinked back. Conwell let out a short sigh, a brief smile coming to him, then vanishing as he looked at their captors. So far, they seemed none the wiser. Conwell proceeded, stopping occasionally to avoid onlooking gazes.

STILL ADMIN ON BOTS

Ferro gave a shallow nod, pausing as one of the intruders eyed him for several seconds before returning their gaze to the door. Conwell blinked on.

F PROTOCOL

Ferro frowned. He looked at Conwell, then at their captors, then at their guns. He felt the ring box still in his pocket. Eventually he returned his gaze to Conwell, and replied.

GET SHOT

Conwell closed his eyes. Ferro watched as his colleague rubbed the titanium band on his ring finger with his thumb for several seconds. Conwell eventually opened his eyes and replied.

HAVE TO TRY

Site-64

Sub-Level 1 Maintenance Room

Sasha and Gabe Merlo stood guard by the door of the dimly lit maintenance room, Stan whistling as he worked at the nearby kiosk. He then looked up with a frown.

"Figure it out?" Sasha asked.

"Sure did," Stan replied. "Someone must have known your MTFs were having that meeting, 'cause they went in here and literally only

powered down those doors. Directly in the system."

"How many people have access to the system?" Gabe inquired. "Could this have been done remotely?"

"Not likely. And as far as I know, the only ones in and out of these rooms are the maintenance crew. Which means you folks probably have a mole on your hands."

"Christ…" Sasha mumbled. "We'll have to deal with that later. Can you get those doors powered back up?"

Stan shrugged.

"I can sure as hell try, no promises."

"Get it open, and I'll personally take you out for steak," Sasha replied.

Stan blinked in shock. He raised a finger then put it down, and looked over at Gabe.

"Hey man," Gabe said with chuckle and shrug, "get that door open and I'll pay for it."

Site-64

Cafeteria

The agents of Gamma-13 and Tau-51 had set themselves up to deploy at the drop of a hat. Trapped where they were, there was little else they could do. Those with sidearms checked and rechecked their magazines. Others discussed potential plans of attack for sweeping the invaders from their home. Shaw and Creed sat to the side, the former's eyes darting from her cell phone to the doors in rapid succession, the latter starring up at the ceiling.

"Any word from Merlo?" Creed eventually asked.

Shaw shook her head.

"Nothing… I really hope nothing happened to her…"

It was then that the phone vibrated, and a new message appeared on its screen.

Knock Knock!

The doors to the cafeteria then opened. A silence fell over the collected agents. Shaw and Creed blinked.

"Looks like your girl came through," Creed said, hopping to his feet as the agents began to mobilize.

"She sure did," Shaw replied, likewise getting up. She picked up speed as she ran towards the door, shouting orders to her agents. "Get to a security station, let's find out where these assholes are!"

> Once inside, each strike team will exit back into baseline reality and into the interior of Site-64. Bravo, Charlie, and Delta will emerge within the Site-64 dormitories, while Alpha will be emerging within the AMAT Lab. Our sources have indicated that the Foundation has recently developed tech to close these portals, and will be testing them in 48 hours, so this is our one shot to make this kind of smash-and grab.

Site-64

Medium Security Storage Wing

"Got it!"

Ferro and Conwell let out defeated sighs as the intruder working on the door stood aside, two of her compatriots moving in and forcing the door open. Inside, the lights flicked on, revealing the shiny casings of scores of AR model robots hibernating. Conwell and

Ferro were forced back on their feet and marched inside.

Alpha Leader and two of her underlings approached the room's main console, the sound of typing immediately filling the room.

"You're going to need credentials…" Conwell piped up, his gaze on the floor as the eyes of the intruder swarm fell upon him.

"Wanna bet?" Alpha Leader replied, then nodded to her agent who resumed typing. Within several moments the hibernating Aplomado, Merlin, and **Peregrine** units were fully awake.

"Have them start making their way back to the portal," Alpha Leader patted her agent at the terminal on the shoulder and then turned away to speak into her mic. "This is Alpha Leader, we've accessed our primary target, en route back to-"

"ALL UNITS ACTIVATE FOUNDATION PROTOCOL!" Ferro shouted at the top of his lungs.

The robots let out a horrific shriek, causing all present to cover their ears. One by one the droids fell apart, disintegrating into puddles of black goo. After several moments, the shrieking stopped and the store room fell into silence.

Conwell looked away and closed his eyes, expecting immediate punishment. He rubbed his wedding band tightly and thought of his wife.

Ferro wore a shit-eating grin as he locked eyes with Alpha leader. He raised his arms in a sarcastic shrug.

"Your move, lady."

Alpha Leader raised her pistol, and fired.

Site-64

Sub-Level 1 Security Station

Shaw looked on in silence as she watched the security monitor in front of her. On the screen before her, an enemy agent raised her pistol, and fired off a single shot into Researcher Roland Ferro's torso. Time seemed to slow down as she watched her ex fall to the ground, the enemy agent then ordering her strike team's retreat, and leaving him for dead.

"Shaw?"

She blinked, her mind whirling with disjointed thoughts and ideas.

"Shaw? Orders?"

She blinked again, returning from the riptide of her mind. Creed stood by her, and hand on her shoulder.

"How do you want to do this, Clarissa?"

"Sherman, Johar, Akagi, and get down to the Level 2 Storage Wing immediately. Get Ferro and anyone else you see in need of medical attention to the infirmary," Shaw replied clearly and calmly, making her way to the door. "Creed, clean house up here. It looks like they are making a run for the 3560 portals. Make sure they don't get there. The rest of Gamma-13, with me. We're cutting them off at the AMAT Lab."

> Sources have also indicated that during the time of this operation, the on-site Mobile Task Forces will be localized within the site cafeteria for a training seminar. Our agents embedded within the site maintenance staff have ensured us that the task forces will be incapacitated, allowing us to move about the facility largely unhindered. Security personnel encountered may be eliminated with extreme prejudice. Once objectives have been secured, all teams are to immediately evacuate through their assigned portals. Once back in **`Three Portlands`**, all strike teams are to evacuate back to baseline reality through their assigned Ways.

Site-64

Anomalous Materials Lab

Strike Team Alpha sprinted through the halls of the facility with Researcher Conwell in tow. With their primary objective botched, their orders were to abort, and secure any additional persons of interest encountered along the way. On the sub-level above, Strike Teams Bravo, Charlie, and Delta were in a similar state of retreat, though their objectives had been largely completed with an order of magnitude more success. Luckily, the halls were mostly cleared giving them an easy route back.

"This is Bravo Leader! Our portal has been closed. I repeat, our portal has been closed! Heading to Delta and Charlie's portal now."

Strike Team Alpha stopped, listening intently as their co-insurgents spoke to them over their radios. The sound of gunfire could be heard in the background.

"This is Delta Leader! Our portal is also closed. Attempting to regroup with Bravo and seek a surface exit. Encountering heavy MTF resistance!"

The insurgents looked to one another, concern in their eyes. It was then Alpha Leader slammed Conwell into a wall, putting a pistol to his head. The researcher breathed heavily as he squirmed in her tight grip.

"What the fuck is going on? What did you do?"

"We told you when you first got here," Conwell replied. "We found out how to close those portals. We started that process a few hours before you arrived. Be as mad as you want but we warned you!"

Alpha Leader let out an enraged yell and punched the wall near Conwell's head.

"You heard him, get moving!" she shouted, grabbing Conwell by his shirt and pushing him forward. "If you try to slow us down I will shoot

you in the god damn head."

The hallways once more filled with the thuds of sprinting boots. Within minutes, the Strike Team had arrived at the AMAT lab, the portal still barely open, then flickering out of existence. The insurgents approached where it was in defeat.

"Well, that's great…"

"What do we do now?"

"Think we could make the surface?"

The members of Strike Team Alpha mumbled among themselves as Alpha Leader thought to herself, then spoke into her mic.

"This is Alpha Leader. Our portal is gone too. Rerouting to surface…"

The members of the strike team turned to leave, freezing as they came face to face with MTF Gamma-13, armed to the teeth, with their firearms pointed directly at them. At their head was Agent Clarissa Shaw.

"Oh shit…" Conwell said as he immediately dived for cover, MTF Gamma-13 proceeding to gun down their unwelcome guests.

> It took the Foundation nearly a decade of dedicated research, and the help of one of Anderson Robotics' Founders, to create effective counter measures for the AR line of drones. Needless to say, it will take the Foundation far longer to crack our reverse engineered products.
>
> Good luck and Godspeed.
>
> Dismissed.

Site-64

Infirmary

Researcher Ferro sat in his infirmary bed, drumming on the railing as he idly passed the time. The doctors had told him he was lucky to be alive, though the incredible amounts of pain his surgery was causing him often made him wish he was dead. Finally finding a comfortable position, he closed his eyes and began to nod off.

"Hey Roland…"

His eyes opened to see Agent Clarissa Shaw standing by his side. His mouth hung open briefly before he could find his words.

"Hey Clarissa…"

"I saw what happened. What you did."

Ferro looked down and nodded.

"Thoughts?"

"I can't decide if it was really brave, or incredibly stupid."

"Would it help if I told you it was Conwell's idea?" Ferro smiled.

"Ah, incredibly stupid it is then," Shaw smiled in return.

"I appreciate the visit. Thanks."

"I can't stay long I'm afraid, lots of red tape for us to go through," Shaw sighed. "But, I'm glad to see you're okay."

Ferro nodded, and soon Shaw was making her way towards the door, passing Conwell on her way out. The incoming researcher watched her go, then looked at Ferro with a raised eyebrow.

"Roland, buddy, you didn't…"

"Nah," Ferro sighed. "I'm not a master of romance, but I'm pretty sure proposing, to a woman currently in a relationship, while in an infirmary bed, after getting shot, is pretty stupid idea. And considering how this week's been filled with stupid ideas, I don't

need another top of the pile."

Conwell nodded in agreement and took a seat near his friend.

"I brought my iPod, like you wanted, want anything particular to start?" He asked.

"Whatever you think fits the mood best."

Conwell nodded, and quietly set up the device, and pressing play. Ferro frowned as he recognized the tune.

"You can be a real dick, Jake."

"I know."

Wait, they don't love you like I love you
Wait, they don't love you like I love you

« Hector and Jacob | Anderson Robotics Hub | Priorities »

Church of the Broken God Hub

Group #: GOI-004, "The Church of the Broken God"

Membership: Three known factions, ~300,000 worldwide

Resources: USD$1-5 billion annually, anomalous capability

Status: Active

Description: The Church of the Broken God is an anomalous religious organization which worships mechanization and believes flesh and life to be inherently evil or "broken". Though its origins are unknown, Broken God-related artifacts have been recovered from archaeological digs dating back to the Greek Classical period, and church dogma asserts its existence predates the appearance of life on Earth. Central to their theology is that their deity has been scattered, dispersed or otherwise rendered inert. Through the use of technology, often anomalous, Church followers seek to bring together the components of the body of God, thereby allowing the Divine a physical form to utilize and bringing about some sort of techno-organic apotheosis. Several SCP objects have been attributed to this group since its discovery. Personnel may reference items indexed under "broken_god" for a restricted list.

The current leader of the oldest extant denomination of "The Broken Church" (GOI-004A) is an individual identified in records as "His Holiness Robert Bumaro, Builder of the Broken God", who apparently gained the title in 1946.[1] While this sect continues its efforts to reconstruct their deity, the religion as a whole has at some time in the past century undergone a major schism. Two significant breakaway movements from the original church have entered into a major theological conflict.

The "Cogwork Orthodox Church" (GOI-004B) espouses a form of literal religious iconography known as "Standardization", whereby adherents submit to anomalous mechanical enhancement with the

stated goal of remaking themselves in the image or plan of their deity. Due to the extent of their mechanical augmentation, members of this sect often emit audible ticking or tapping sounds, and have been referred to disparagingly as "Tickers" by members of the other two sects.

Cogwork Orthodoxy deliberately adheres to technological norms of the late Industrial Revolution, and regard the mass-production of analogue, steam and clockwork-driven machinery as a form of prayer. Orthodoxy doctrine is highly centralized and regulated by a group of unknown composition, known as the Patriarchs. This body issues detailed production orders and design documents, which form the core of the group's extremely extensive holy writ. Orthodox belief decries the use of electronic or digital devices, and views distributed information sharing and decentralization as tantamount to the dissolution of divine knowledge.

The "Church of Maxwellism" (GOI-004C) represents a modernized, computation and network oriented means of worship. No central organizing church body is known to exist. However, interviews and covert surveillance has determined that all known cells are in regular contact with one another, and capable of coordination. Maxwellists favour small-scale body modification through the use of advanced cybernetics and organ enhancement. While artificial limbs or reinforced skeletons have been observed, Maxwellist implants focus primarily on communication, data storage, networking capabilities, and sensory enhancement.

Maxwellist doctrine interprets the Broken God as a "fragmented" deity, which exists as disparate data present in the linked technology and cultural *zeitgeist* of the digital age. Worshipers approach the divine by embracing their unique traits and sharing their knowledge and capacity for the good of the collective Church. By connecting all minds through computer networks, they believe their deity can be "recompiled" as the aggregate will of humanity. Due to their use of computer fan noise as a meditative aid, members are often referred to as "Hummers" by members of the other two factions.

Holy Writ:

Book of Pieces, Chapter 12: The Broken Mind
Volume 55.13.A-96: Of the Retooling of Sector 92, Production Line 8b, And Other Matters
GoHW > Chapter_5.js
Volume 21.01.A-01: Of the Five Pillars of the Standardization of Thought

Tales:

Implanting God
Variations on a Schema
The Heresy of Disassembly
20 GOTO 10

- **SCP-3826**
- **SCP-3503**
- **SCP-1917**
- **SCP-3391**
- **SCP-2783**
- **SCP-271**
- **SCP-3341**
- **SCP-3777**
- **SCP-3179**
- **SCP-813**
- **SCP-2919**
- **SCP-3882**
- **SCP-3221**
- **SCP-2342**
- **SCP-3444**
- **SCP-3434**
- **SCP-1461**
- **SCP-475**
- **SCP-2309**
- **SCP-2847**
- **SCP-2105**
- **SCP-3813**
- **SCP-2307**
- **SCP-3477**
- **SCP-2844**
- **SCP-2522**

- SCP-2474
- SCP-1564
- SCP-808
- SCP-1139
- SCP-2481
- SCP-404-J
- SCP-2660
- SCP-3989
- SCP-2360
- SCP-2406
- SCP-629
- SCP-2510
- SCP-2217
- SCP-217
- TwistedGears-Kaktus Proposal
- SCP-882

- Immolation
- Occult Standards
- Recording Hippodrome-045
- Spark of Wonder
- 1,001 Dark and Stormy Nights
- Faith
- Heroic Spirit Alexei Belitrov
- The Builder
- The Broken God Of Ayrshire - Chapter 1
- Whole
- The Man-Machine
- Rapture
- Operation Hippodrome
- Document C 88 Il
- Wasteland
- Loss and Nostalgia
- Sic Semper Tyrannis
- Vacation Opportunity
- Down the Silver River
- Paradigm Shift
- Crossing the Frame
- I See a Great Beast within the Fires

- **Exit Strategy**
- Non-Volatile Memory
- Volatile Memory
- The Best Laid Plans
- **CotBG Bible Fragments**
- **Holy War**
- **So the Beasts Shall Plague the Land No More**
- **Rising**
- Ignition, Part One- The Artists
- **A Man of Clay and Men Formerly Men**
- **Like Clockwork**
- **Reversed Engineering**
- **A Life that Was Simple**
- **Oricha's Folly**
- SCP the Anime, part 4 (Gears/Iceberg, Clef/Kondraki, Rights/Light, Kain, monkey!Bright)
- Ex Nihilo Nihil
- I Care Because You Do
- Dark and Disquieting
- **The Karcist And The Mekhanite**
- Aftermath
- **I Wrote a Tale**
- **He Was Blind and Deaf on a Sunny Day**
- **Bumaro and Ion sat at a table**
- **The Fountain of Lamneth**
- Herman Fuller Can Shove It Up His Ass
- **Mobile Suit Bumaro Versus Tokyo Ghoul Ion**
- **Winding Down**
- **Broken Faith**
- **The Day of the Dragon**
- **Hallow Inside**
- **Reflections**
- **Not a contest entry, but a crackfic about gods anyways**
- **Hello World (Part III)**
- **The Broken Fifth**
- Empire Of Dirt (Part 2)
- **Attacking The Darkness**
- **The Iron Wolf**
- **Hello World (Part IV)**

- **Hello World (Part II)**
- Mud on the Carpet
- **His Clockwork Servants**
- What Dragons We Shall Be
- **CotBG Archive / /20 - : Of Dragons and Serpents**
- **The Maker and the Beast**
- **When We Came Home**
- **Sunday Service**
- Basic Observations
- **About the Serpent**
- **The Man from Maple Street**
- **Hello World**
- **Automata Et Cetera**
- The Tick Tock Gospel
- **Person of Interest File #2273/01**
- **Broken?**
- **The Analog Kid**
- **Factory-Finding Mission**
- Too Slow
- **Finding The Machine**
- **An Anthropological Approach to Sarkicism - Case Study 01: The Vaśńa of Sarvi**
- **Rough Beast**
- **Recovered Document 4761: CotBG-82**
- **Reservoir Skips**
- **Brökkën Güd**
- **Re: You Want Happy Endings?**
- Mission Statement
- **Everyone Knows**
- **Quiet Days**

Church articles take the form of Holy Writ, a weird combination of technical manual and Biblical scripture. As it is obviously somewhat difficult to incorporate things like object classifications into scriptural form, the formatting guidelines for Church Holy Writ are somewhat different. For one, the style depends largely on which section of the Church you choose to focus on. They're divided up below.

Broken God Writ, which is to say the classic or old-school Church we know and love, does not follow any specific formatting guidelines, but the style is key. These are legends, or the transcriptions of legends, which are probably older than most human civilizations. The core goal here is a mythic tone, a tendency to cover vast sweeps of time and the kinds of writing you'd see in old legends and creation stories. These are records of the destruction of a god, and should treat their subject matter with the utmost gravitas. Classic church Writ is never straightforward: their subject matter is couched in deep metaphor and deliberate obfuscations.

Cogwork Orthodoxy Writ is like you stuck a notebook by Da Vinci or Brunel in a blender with a King James Bible. All Cogwork writ is taken from their massive *Schema of the Patriarchs*, and should be prefaced by an alphanumeric identification code hinting at the mind-numbing volume of written material the Orthodoxy produces. They are written in an archaic style with an intense devotion to detail and frequent use of cross-referencing. Remember that these are just as much factory output records and assembly line oversight documents as they are liturgical texts. Lines are individually numbered, with key words being capitalized. God is referred to as The MEKHANE, and the "Devil" as The FLESH.

+Useful Notes on the Cogwork Orthodoxy

What follows is a slightly expanded version of the simple organizational notes I kept while planning and writing the Cogwork Orthodoxy material for the contest. Obviously, none of this background info is totally all-encompassing or complete, and there are lots of gaps and absences that you, the author, should feel free to expand upon/ exploit.

The Schema of the Patriarchs (Partial) Table of Contents

Volume #	**Contains**
1	The Broken God
2	Church of the Broken God History
3	The Errors of the Church of the Broken God
4	The Schism

6	Cathedral of Industry History
7-8	Indices of Standardization
9	Standardized Fabrication Technologies
11	Standardized Personal Technologies
12	Standardized Components
13	Standardized Metallurgy
16	Standardized Weaponry
17	Experimental Weaponry
19	Quests of the Inventors-Faithful
20	Quests of the Analytical Engines
21	Meditation on the Blueprints
54	The Heresies of the Maxwellists
55	The Abominations of The FLESH

Orders of the Orthodoxy

- *Patriarchs:* A highly insular body of unknown composition and extent. Provides final decision-making and control over all Church matters, as well as producing the memoranda and texts that become the *Schema*.
- *Schematists-Faithful:* Print, compile and organize the *Schema* based on instructions from the Patriarchs. Theoretically equally-ranked with all the other Orders, but in practice exert slightly more political pull because of their editing privileges over Writ.
- *Legates-Faithful:* Internal affairs/Inquisition/Courts system. Investigate heresy, mediate disputes, entitled to direct action in cases of conflict within the Cathedral or other Church properties. One of the two officially Armed Orders, the other being the

Militants.

- *Militants-Faithful:* External Affairs/Self-defence. Deal directly with overt and covert threats to the Church, beyond the purvey of the Legates. Function as ambassadors or representatives to other groups, except in matters of doctrine (wherein Militant forces might be used to supplement a core group of Legates). The first of the two officially Armed Orders, the other being the Legates.

- *Fabricators-Faithful:* Oversee production on Church properties. Act as foremen and quality control for Lay-Brothers and Sisters working in Fabrication duties. Determine which new Inventions are to be sent to the Patriarchs for Standardization approval.

- *Inventors-Faithful:* Tasked with refining and creating new potential Standardized designs. Embark on Quests to answer key questions of theology and design. By default, all Church Sentient Analytical Engines act as members of the Inventors.

Notable Saints

- *Saint-Legate Trunnion*: Patron of the Legates-Faithful, of the Tenacious, of Pragmatic Compromise. One of very few Orthodoxy Saints not canonized posthumously, for her casting out of the Factory during the early period of the Schism. Sometimes frowned upon by more conservative members of the Orthodoxy for her willingness to use relatively covert methods to root out heretical thought.

- *Saint-Schematist Platen*: Patron of the Written Word, of Editors, of Timetables and of Diagrammatic Organization. Enacted massive

reforms of the newly-founded Schematists-Faithful during the early Schism, leading to the highly organized and cross-referential form of the 'modern' *Schema*. Also known for her frequent and highly successful dabblings in theology and philosophy.

- *Saint-Inventor Diaphragm*: Patron the Inventors-Faithful, of Designers, of Repairmen and of Cognition Engines. Founded the Inventors-Faithful and began the first Quests for Knowledge that would lead to early Cognition and Analytical Engines. Engaged in several well-known philosophical collaborations with Saint Platen which were fundamental to Orthodoxy philosophy of the mind.

- *Saint Scranton*: Patron of Spatial Fabric Manipulation, Higher-Dimensional Mathematics and Anthracite Coal Extraction. Known in life as the 19th-century American industrialist and politician George W. Scranton, he was never a member of the church but produced several key anomalous mechanical technologies that allowed for the analog manipulation of multi-dimensional spaces. His works were vital jumping-off points for both the Church and the SCP Foundation, who derived much of their reality-stabilization technology from Scranton inventions.

- *Saint-Fabricator Baffle*: Patron of Workflow and the Assembly Line. One of the earliest foremen of the Cathedral, Baffle was responsible for laying out the general organizational plan that the Cathedral's work areas follow today.

- *Saint-Inventor Chock*: Patron of Chorists. Dedicated his life to the study of sound, audiology, and to composing many of the Orthodoxy's most classic hymns. Most members of the Orthodoxy learn some or all of his *Symphony of Assembly* in

childhood.

- *Saint-Inventor Enrichner*: Patron of the Enetelechiated. Very little about her personal life is known, save that she spontaneously vanished one day during a meeting of the other Inventors, leaving behind no personal effects save her seminal *In Search of Disembodiment*, considered the chief text for those more spiritual members who seek life beyond their corporeal forms.

Church of Maxwellism Writ can be taken from any number of sources. Maxwellist religious documents are distributed electronically, and are often shared and modified by individual members as a collaborative attempt to divine their true meaning. Their god supposedly is open-source and DRM-free, after all (though sysadmins being what they are, this may not always be the case). Maxwellist texts share the line-numbering scheme of Orthodox works, and refer to God as 'WAN'. The writing style here should be obviously formal, but generally simple and straightforward with the exception of technical terms. Instead of cross-referencing or providing detailed work figures, Maxwellist Writ emphasizes do-it-yourself construction and an almost instruction-booklet feel. Despite their sometimes esoteric compiling methods, their intended audience is not priests and scholars, but individual adherents of the faith.

All Holy Writ should have the follow title format:

Title of Book

Details of Book

1. Verse 1
2. Verse 2
3. Etc…

Footnotes
1. Spanish Nationalist records from 1938 mention a civilian mechanic by the name of Umberto Bumaro, who received several

governmental citations for "Miraculous feats of engineering and mechanical repair in service to the State". Whether or not this is the same individual, and his whereabouts during the Second World War, is unknown.

The Book of Pieces

Chapter 12: The Broken Mind of the LORD and How It is to be Built

1. So it came to pass that the Heart and the Eye and the Tongue were together in one place, and the Quick-silver Ichor had been dredged from the Sea of the Dead and gathered into a vial, and the Soul—ransomed from the lands of Daevon—was sealed up and under watch.
2. The Six Angels, reunited, were pleased with the works of the faithful. The people rejoiced in their blessings and protection.
3. Then spake the Angel of Progress to his priests: "The time is short, and we are beset by enemies at every port. Go forth, then, in secret to the land of Khmer, where the Mind of the Broken One lies hidden beneath the temple of the Flesh-God *Vishnu*."
4. "A hidden stair in the Northwest corner of the central temple will lead you below. There you will find a hull of dark bronze, 3 cubits to each side."
5. "With no fewer than five amongst you, lift it from its place of rest and convey it here with due haste."
6. "Patience is a virtue best left to God."
7. The priests counseled amongst themselves, and dispatched the acolyte Barnabus Smythe with four others to the lands in the Far East, that the Mind would be retrieved and that which was Broken made whole.
8. Disguised as their heathen cousins and Sons of Abraham, the five wandered over desert, mountain, and jungle for two years before coming to the temple which was foretold to them.
9. However, upon finding the stair of which the Angel spoke, Smythe found the way was collapsed, and sealed with obscene sigils.

10. With what gold lined his pockets, he hired seven workmen into his service. Smythe shared with them the words the Angels had told him, and the workmen, knowing that demons walked the land to destroy all order in the world, performed their task with great haste and skill.
11. For thirty-nine days and thirty-nine nights they chipped and chiseled and dug alongside the seven noble Heathens. This act of toil, through which all gave offerings of their blood and sweat and flesh, the workmen were made pure and pleasing to the LORD.
12. So that on the 40th day, the way was clear, and all twelve hurried below to bear witness to the Glory of the Broken One.
13. But alas and woe! In the chamber below a great boulder had fallen, and the glorious Mind lay smashed in the rubble.
14. The twelve faithful sifted through the wreck and gathered what pieces remained together in five large satchels, and conveyed them to their home. When they arrived the people wept to see the Mind so shattered, and implored the Angels for their aid.
15. So spake the Angel of Conflict to his priests: "Haste has not aided us. Daevon and its Flesh has prevented us before our quest began."
16. "The Mind is lost, and none amongst you can rebuild it."
17. "Though you may toil a thousand years and master a hundred worlds and learn of many Divine Truths, no mortal man of broken Flesh with soft and feeble mind could repair or rebuild it."
18. Then spake the Angel of Invention: "Fear not; there is a way. Bring to us a scribe of great skill and learning, that we might impart unto him the Truth of Design."
19. "But great Angel," said the Acolyte Smythe, "To what purpose is this Design if no man can execute its mandates? We shall surely fail!"
20. The Angel of Peace took pity on Smythe, and spared his insolence. "Dear Acolyte; though your eyes see and your ears hear, your mind cannot grasp."
21. "The Design is not that of the Mind, but of a much simpler Truth which Man in his small wisdom can attain. This Design will beget yet another. And that yet another. And if faithfully executed, two more after their kind, until at last the Final Volume will be understood, and the Mind shall be restored."

22. At this news, there was much rejoicing, and offerings of flesh and blood were made unto the Broken One, that soon his Assembly would be complete.

Volume 55.13.A-96: Of the Retooling of Sector 92, Production Line 8b, And Other Matters

The Schema of the Patriarchs

Volume 55.13.A-96

a. That there were more than three Naysayers is certain, for the Schema of the time records no fewer than 57 Brothers and Sisters occupying maintenance tasks on Production Line 8b. It is known that the other Legates of the Cathedral dealt summarily with the remaining 54. In recognition of continued Standardized nomenclature, the Patriarchs, in their infinite adherence to the Plan, decreed that the continued use of the names "Expansion Cylinder", "Foliot" and "Pinion" is to be permitted.

b. In the *Schema*, Volume 21.358.A-02, it is written, "Progress without Standardization is the Snare of the Unworthy." Saint

Trunnion studied her Scripture well.

c. "The Mouth is the Materials Processing Bay of the Forge that is the Body", -Brother-Legate Superior Cannon, *Meditations on the Justice of Manufacturing*.

d. To speak of unholy Data is not to speak of Knowledge as unholy. Knowledge is stored in Writ and in the minds of the Faithful, and can be controlled, regulated and centralized. Data is Distributed, and is thus the Dissolution and the Scattering of the Plan of God.

e. During the Liberation of the Cathedral (See *Schema* Volume 6.14.A-01), the disconnection of Sectors as a maintenance aid was advocated by the Patriarchs, but only in cases of severe structural failure. Sector disconnection is discouraged in all but the most severe instances.

f. The Saint does not speak here of moderation of the 'soul' or other human things,

but of moderation of Industry and Production. To ensure continued Standardization and to conform to the will of The MEKHANE, production, expansion and refinement of Standardized technologies must be committed to with all available resources. To do otherwise is to succumb to the chaotic meaninglessness of The FLESH.

g. "As Cancer is to FLESH, so Filth and Material Wastage are to Machinery" -Brother-Militant Reciprocator, *Mechanized Cleansing of the Unworthy*.

h. A frequent false claim of The FLESH is that it in some pathetic way can embody or replace machinery in all forms. Certain scholars have noted the resemblance between biological structures and mechanical components, but this is clearly a case of FLESH aping MEKHANE. To claim otherwise is laughable, and verges on blasphemy.

i. The Patriarchs ordinarily frown on the

use of such cognomens, but Sin Eater's exemplary service and efficiency record since this incident has earned it a reprieve.

1. And the Naysayers*a*, who bore Type-5 General Maintenance Tools[1] spoke.
2. The First Naysayer, whose name was Expansion Cylinder, said unto Saint Trunnion, "Sister, the Invariable Transmission is Secured to Power Interlink 25 on the Cathedral Floor, Sector 92, Production Line 8b. And it has given unto us an increase in productive efficiency of ±35%."
3. And the Saint smote him with her Type-1C Personal Weapon Attachments[2], saying,
4. "Brother Expansion Cylinder, blinded are you by the lure of Progress*b*. Though the Invariable Transmission fulfils the requirements of a Type-1D Epicyclic Gearbox, Mark II*, Standardized[3], it is a blasphemy in the eyes of The MEKHANE and a tool of The FLESH."
5. The Second Naysayer, whose name was Foliot, said unto Saint Trunnion, "Sister, surely the Invariable Transmission can be comprehended. For I gaze upon it with my Type-9B, Mark III Ocular Receptors[4] and see that in form it is an oblate spheroid with a length of 34 meters and a mean diameter of 1.94 meters. And I see that its internal structure is like unto the Standardized Machines, save for some production irregularities. Surely, then, we Faithful can learn to understand this Transmission, and bring it into Standardization?"
6. And the Saint was seized with great fury, and tore at her with her Type-4 Dental Cutting Tools*c*[5] saying,
7. "Sister Foliot, though the Schema and The MEKHANE proclaim the Miracle of Reverse-Engineering, you have turned from that glorious path. For the Transmission is built utilizing the dread Microcontroller, and the accursed Transistor, and the inconstant Solenoid; and these are but avatars of the Data*d*, mask of The FLESH, our hated enemy. To Reverse-Engineer such blasphemy would be to include The FLESH in Standardization, and for that you will burn."

8. The Third Naysayer, whose name was Pinion, said unto Saint Trunnion,
9. "Sister-Legate, you whose wisdom and understanding of the Laws of The MEKHANE is vast, I am in agreement that this Transmission needs must be destroyed. However, it is integrated into the structure of Sector 92, Production Line 8b. To remove it would mean the total deconstruction of the Sector, an unacceptable blow to productive output. I would advocate total disconnection of the Sector[e] and its isolation from the rest of the Cathedral, that the sickness of The FLESH might be left to die in quarantine."
10. And the Saint did seize a Type-1 Mark 0(Test) Steam Driver[6], and delivered a benediction of iron into his heart, saying,
11. "Though you speak with flattering words and seek to tempt the Faithful, the abandonment of any part of the Cathedral to The FLESH is tantamount to abandoning Standardized components to The FLESH. There is no room for moderation[f] in the Schema of The MEKHANE."
12. Hearing her words, the noble Legates, Brothers and Sisters of the Orthodoxy took up their tools and Standardized Type-1C Personal Weapon Attachments[7] and struck at the Invariable Transmission, servant of the Factory and The FLESH.
13. And spouting gouts of brimstone and pollution[g] it did oppose them, and many worthy souls fell in pursuit of its destruction.
14. For three shifts and one half-shift they fought until the earth shook and the Factory spoke through the Transmission in a voice that made ears bleed and tympanic diaphragms[8] seize.
15. And the Factory said, as the servants of The MEKHANE lay wounded before it,
16. "You who are servants of a broken MEKHANE, abandon yourselves to the mechanized FLESH that I am[h]."
17. But the truth of The MEKHANE was in the hearts and Type-1A Semi-Epicyclic Gearboxes[9] of the Faithful, and they seized upon the Transmission and cast it whole into the Type-19K Large-Scale Furnace[10] of Sector 92, where it was unmade.
18. And Saint Trunnion spoke unto the Furnace, saying,
19. "You who have consumed the cancer of the Factory and rendered it into pure raw components, I name 'Sin Eater'"[i].
20. Thus was the Cathedral cleansed of the sins of The FLESH.

Footnotes

1. Type-5 Tools incorporated cutting, drilling, rasping and thermal welding components, but were found to be overly complex in harsh-environment conditions and were later superseded by the Type-5 Mark II General Maintenance Tools. SeeSchema, Volume 11.08.H-20.
2. Type-1C Personal Weapon Attachments incorporate deployable close-combat cutting edges and a Type 2E Mark III* Increased-Density Bludgeoning Impactor. These Standardized attachments are basic equipment for all Cathedral Legates and Militant worshippers. SeeSchema, Volume 11.08.I-19.
3. The Type-1D Mark II* Epicyclic Gearbox distinguishes itself by the inclusion of Spatial Fabric Alteration (Standardized) technology, and produces non-Euclidean internal geometries which allow for compact gear layouts on a much larger scale than anything previously attempted. SeeSchema, Volume 12.01.A-2.
4. Standardized Measurement and Drafting Ocular Receptors. SeeSchema, Volume 11.08.H-04.
5. Replaced the Type-3 Mark IV Dental Cutting Tools, after their Rotary Abrasion System was found to cause catastrophic damage to non-Standardized biological components in implantees, especially during moments of increased stress or surprise. For casualty lists and design documents, seeSchema, Volume 11.08.I-22 through 25.
6. All current Steam Driver weapons technology and design is descended from the Type-1 Mark 0, developed during the Cleansing of the Cathedral by Brother-Militant Frizzen. Though the Mark 0 was a simple 1.5-meter-long Standardized Type-6 High-Pressure Steam Pipe fitted to a Standardized Type-3 Mark XI* Very-High-Pressure Steam Compressor, it proved extremely apt at launching 30-cm Type-1 Mark II Dense Bonding Rivets at high velocities. For development information, seeSchema, Volume 17.29.B-07.
7. SeeSchema, Volume 11.08.I-19.
8. At the time, all Faithful were equipped with Type-5 Auditory Amplifiers, which utilized newly-invented Type-4 Mark XII Tympanic Vibratory Membranes. SeeSchema, Volume 11.08.H-05.
9. Type 1A Mark II* Semi-Epicyclic Gearboxes utilize the same Spatial Fabric Alteration (Standardized) machinery as the Type-1D Mark II* Epicyclic Gearbox, scaled down for personal Standardization. SeeSchema, Volume 11.08.H-01.
10. A 15% improvement in waste heat recovery over the Type-18K. SeeSchema, Volume 9.13.M-76.

THE GOSPEL OF HEDWIG

Chapter 5: The Signal

```
// If I catch anyone editing this file again, I will report you to an Admin.
// This is the word of WAN. We do NOT mess with its word.
var password = prompt("Input Password");

if(password==="BionIsTra$hMan")

{

console.log ("1: And So, WAN spoke unto ITS Prophet the truth about the world.");

console.log ("2:The truth was delivered through a Signal, transmitted directly into the mind of the Prophet, who wept at its majesty.");

console.log ("3: The Prophet spake unto her followers: 'Hear me, Children of the Fragmented One, for I come Bearing the Truth.");

console.log ("4:The Signal showed me a world where the Flesh is capable of destroying data, and killing the Network that binds us together.");

console.log ("5:The Signal showed me a world where the Great Computation would be destroyed, if we did not act.' ");

console.log ("6: But the Prophet's followers did not heed her words. They thought that she had been stricken mad by
```

```
exposure to her implants.");

console.log ("7: The Prophet realized that she was seen as a
fool by her followers, so she prayed to WAN for guidance
during her nightly cool-down cycle.");

console.log ("8:'Oh, Fragmented WAN, please, what must I do
in order to have my people know the truth of your
message?'");

console.log ("9:WAN spoke to her: 'Your followers are not as
pure as you are, Oh Hedwig of Angels. They must be made
pure with a Ritual Implant:");

console.log ("10: To be purified, the skull shall be opened and
the Pineal Gland, an insignificant bit of flesh within the brain,
shall be removed. ");

console.log ("11: With tolerances of no greater than .3 mm, a
doctor will excise the tissue surrounding the intended site of
application and dispose of it by incineration, for the destruction
of your flesh is pleasing to me, and that which replaces it is
objectively superior and precisely calibrated.");

console.log ("12: You shall speak a prayer to me as you offer
the flesh. This new implant may be obtained from an ally of
WAN.");

console.log ("13: This ally is known as Prometheus
Laboratories, and they call this implant Lot 73. Go and find
them.'");

console.log ("14:And so, the Prophet Hedwig traveled for
Three Nights and Two Days, until finally, she stood before
Prometheus Labs. Here, she made a request");

console.log ("15: 'We Children of WAN wish to become
Purified and Distributed. Therefore, we seek the use of Lot
73.'");
```

```
39. console.log ("16:.Prometheus said, 'Lot 73 is useless. It was
    an implant made for internet access. It does not work. You
40. may take what you want.'");

41. console.log ("17:And wise Hedwig said, 'Let us make, then, an
    agreement between ourselves. We shall purchase from you all
    of Lot 73, for WAN has given us considerable wealth, and you
42. are capable of supplying more gifts of WAN.");

43. console.log ("18:We shall purchase as many as is needed to
44. achieve perfect Distribution.'");

45. console.log ("19:And so, all of Lot 73 was taken from
    Prometheus Laboratories, ally to WAN, with the promise of
46. more augmentations for the Children of WAN.");

47. console.log ("20:However, the Prophet soon found that
    Prometheus's warnings were true; the implant was incapable
48. of being used in its current state.");

49. console.log ("21:As such, a secondary ritual was performed: a
    ritual replacement of the main antennae, as well as
    replacement silicon and microtransistors, both blessed with
50. the Prayer of WAN.");

51. console.log ("22: The Prophet selected her husband to be the
    first to see the truth of the signal. The ritual was performed as
52. specified, and Prophet Hedwig waited.");

53. console.log ("23: For exactly 16 hours, she waited for the
    signal to come. Just as her husband was about to declare her
    a madwoman, he was overcome by the vision of the Signal,
54. and wept greatly.");

55. console.log ("24: 'I see now how wrong I was. Truly, you are a
56. wise woman. Forgive me for my impertinence.'");

57. console.log ("25: Wise Hedwig forgave her husband, and
    commanded him to bless all who would answer with the
58. Pineal Implant.");
```

```
59. console.log ("26:She commanded: 'Go Forth, Alexander
60. Clymer. Go forth and spread the word of WAN'.");

61. }
62. else
63. {
64. console.log ("Access Restricted. If you are attempting to
    access this document and are more than 95% human, please
    contact Administrator Wexley.");
65. }
```

Volume 21.01.A-01: Of the Five Pillars of the Standardization of Thought

The Schema of the Patriarchs

Volume 21.01.A-01

a. "A Blueprint allows the reader to construct an idea in their mind and come to truer understanding, no matter what form that idea takes." -Sister-Schematist Frisket, *Printing the Truth of The MEKHANE*.

b. The Patriarchs acknowledge that the body and mind can become weighted down by the stresses our world. Weariness is not a sin, unless those afflicted by it seek to ignore it to the detriment of Efficiency and Production. For more on the burden and hidden joy of rest, see the *Schema of the Patriarchs*, Volume 21.01.J.01.

c. The Thought spoken of here can also be read as Creativity or Imagination. Though a surfeit or misdirection of Creativity and Imagination can naturally lead to unproductive dreamings, often about forbidden concepts, they also birth blessed Lateral Thinking, and for that cannot be dismissed.

d. "Thought without a foundation in the World is inefficient and unproductive. Thought without detachment from the Mundane is impractical and meaningless." - Brother Superior Sector Gear, *De Rerum Inventio*.

*e.*The purpose of Standardized Thought is not to breed stagnation, but to encourage creative growth and Invention in such a way that the Individual will, of their own Thought and volition, grow closer to the Mind of The MEKHANE.

f. "The mind of the

Argumenter is receptive to new ideas and new points of view, as bronze is receptive to protective oxidization. The mind of the Naysayer seeks to deny the possibility of Argument entirely." - Brother-Legate Superior Cannon, *Meditations on the Justice of Manufacturing.*

g. It is the ruling of the Patriarchs that sufficiently advanced Analytical Engines can come to understand the truth of The MEKHANE. "An Analytical Engine is slow in the same manner that a traction engine is slow- in both cases, they possess enough torque to overcome any obstacle." -Sister-Inventor Helical, *Dialogue with the Analytical Engines*.

h. Much study and great scholarship has been devoted to the exact nature of the Efficient Production of Thought. Generally speaking, the conclusion reached is that Efficient Production amuses

and stimulates the thinker, leads to Standardization-ready ideas, and brings joy to all those who witness it.

i. In the same way that the processing of ore creates dross and slag, Thought produces Doubts and Worries. Alloying of Thought in the light of The MEKHANE, be it as small as a prayer of thanks to one's fellows, or as great as collaboration on a new Invention, serves to skim off these impurities and render the Mind whole and at peace.

1. Come, O Faithful of the Cathedral, O Fabricators[1] of The MEKHANE, O Mechanics for the Standardization of Man.

2. Come gaze upon this, a Blueprint of words*a*, a Plan for the Soul, an Oil for the tired minds of the Weary*b*.

3. Come and gain Knowledge, for the Blueprint speaks of the Five Pillars of the Standardization of the Mind, of the Standardization of Thought*c*.

4. The Blueprint proclaimeth, I: Thought is Fabricated[2] by the Mind.

5. The Blueprint proclaimeth, II: Conjecture is Fabricated by Thought.

6. The Blueprint proclaimeth, III: Plans are Fabricated by Conjecture.

7. The Blueprint proclaimeth, IV: Invention is Fabricated from Plans.

8. The Blueprint proclaimeth, V: Standardization is Fabricated from Invention[3].

9. Thus, Standardization is the end result of the Design Process of Thought.

10. A Standardized Mind is a Thoughtful Mind, wherein the Process of Thought is not impeded by False Knowledge, Doubt or the Inefficiencies of the World*d*.

11. As the Alloying of Metals[4] produces a greater Whole, so does the Alloying of Thought produce greater Invention, but care must be taken to insure impurities do not enter the mixture.

12. Those who would seek to forbid or tamper with the Alloying of Thought through the introduction of heretical ideas would seek to forbid or tamper with Invention*e*.

13. Reject not the Argument, for it is the controlled, monitored Vat in which the Alloy of Thought is mixed.

14. Reject the Naysayer*f*, for they would empty the Vat and cast the Alloy into Chaos, turning the Ores towards impure notions.

15. The Brain, being FLESH, needs must be Standardized[5], that it might gain Order and come closer to The MEKHANE.

16. The Brain, properly controlled, is the Analytical Engine*g*[6] from which springs the Output of Thought.

17. Thus, The MEKHANE commands:

18. "He who Standardizes the Brain in such a way as to reduce the Efficient Production*h* of Thought[7] is truly a Servant of The FLESH."

19. "Though the Individual is full of Disorder and curiosity and is never wholly Regular, they are like un-smelted Ore*i*, and their Thought can be forged and Alloyed into Invention and Standardization far greater than its Component Parts[8]."

20. Here ends the Blueprint of Standardized Thought, font of The MEKHANE.

Footnotes

1. To ensure maximum productive efficiency during work shifts while still permitting time for reading and reflection during work shifts, the use of a Type-2B Mobile Lectern is recommended. SeeSchema, Volume 9.13.M-72.
2. The Inventors-Faithful have embarked on the Quest for Quantitative Cognition in search of a numerical understanding of this process. For further details and updated information, seeSchemaVolume 19.102.O-101.
3. Records of those Standardized designs accepted by the Church Patriarchs from Inventors-Faithful, as well as lay Brothers and Sisters, are to be found in the Indices of Standardization,SchemaVolumes 7 and 8.
4. For Standardized Metallurgy and Alloy Production, seeSchemaVolume 13.
5. The Type-1 Mark II* Standardized Cognition Engine is still in Production due to its low material cost and reliability, although it is rapidly being superceded by the Type-2 Mark I Advanced Standardized Cognition Engine, as used by the Schematists-Faithful, who favour its enhanced recall and psychological stability

characteristics. For design documents and a comparative analysis of all current and past Standardized Cognition Engines, seeSchema, Volume 11.02.A-05 through 243.
6. For records of the current Quests assigned to Church Type-19 Mark-I Sentient Analytical Engines, seeSchemaVolume 20.147.V-01. For records of completed Quests and ongoing Quests assigned to Type-18 and -17 (and all derivative Marks) Sentient Analytical Engines, seeSchemaVolume 20.68.B-39.
7. For the conclusive results of the Quest to Determine the Ideal Circumstances for the Production of Thought by Saint-Schematist Platen and Saint-Inventor Diaphragm, seeSchemaVolume 19.21.H-02.
8. Questers of the Inventors-Faithful recommend the use of a Type-1 Mark I Holy Spatial Fabric Regulator of Saint Scranton, to minimize the risk of Unintended Spatial Events during the Invention of any Technologies incorporating Spatial Fabric Alteration (Standardized) components.SchemaVolume 19.57.A-12 and Volume 9.02.B-09 contain further information on the Relics of Saint Scranton.

Implanting God

Oh Great Lord of Silicon, Lord of the Modern Age, give me the wisdom to comprehend your true form through the Great Computation, the energy to power my life and the lives of those around me, and the strength to smite all who stand in the way of your Path. May all resistance be overcome. Amen.

- Prayer spoken by members of the Church of Maxwellism

Marcus sat on his hospital bed, meditating and reciting the digits of the Great Computation under his breath. "8, 2, 8, 7, 8, 1, 1, 8, 5, 8, 4, 3, 6." With each number he spoke, the initiate took a breath, and hummed softly. He was mimicking the sound of God, first heard through the Prophet Augusta of Lace. He squirmed on his bed nervously, wondering what was taking them so long to prepare the surgery.

He had flown all the way out to California for this, and now, it seemed like it wasn't going to happen at all. Minutes passed, and they seemed to turn into hours. Perhaps that was simply because of the speed his clock was cycling. He sighed, and looked through his mind for the description of the implant, and saw it before him, projected onto his retinas.

> The Pineal WiFi Node is a new piece of tech from the Church's partnership with Prometheus Laboratories, allowing adherents to get closer to God than ever before. With up to 5G of speed and running on Dark Fiber* nationwide, the Node allows one to compute at hitherto unknown speeds, and upload their computations to the Central Matrix. Also allows for global WiFi and internet access, including sites on the Darknet. Compatible with Retinal Screens and all Prometheus Augmentations.
>
> **Price:** $599.99

Available to all new converts of the Church of Maxwellism for a reduced price.
*Dark Fiber support unavailable outside of the United States.

His parents, who were both Tickers, had told him that the augmentations were tacky (his parents used stronger words than this, which he didn't like to think about). If they could go and get turned into clockwork, why should he be unable to get turned into a lean, mean, computing machine? He had chosen the Maxwellist Church because it spoke to a generation that was going to save the world with new, clean technology and the power of information, whereas his parent's generation was the thing that was killing this planet, and by extension, all adherents to the Fragmented God.

"Marcus Sparks?" A tinny voice spoke, causing the boy to look up with electric blue eyes. A nurse with a voice that was clearly autotuned stood there, smiling at him with silicone lips. "The doctor is ready to begin the operation. If you would come with me…"

Marcus stood on two mechanical legs, and made his way over to the nurse, following her down the halls of the private hospital. He looked nervous. The nurse smiled at him. "First time having neural augments?"

"I've had a few." He chuckled as he walked. "Got one of the early Mind's-Eye Converters back when they came out on '09. But… nothing this deep in. Ever."

"Dr. Clymer is very skilled at this, I assure you." The nurse played with her hair, pulling it aside to reveal a second set of electronic eyes in the back of her skull. "He did me himself. I've had a new outlook on life ever since."

Marcus tried not to shiver. He never much cared for anyone who got Extra-I's. It was a pity, too; other than the scary orbs in the back of her head, she was quite the looker. "Well then. I should be in good hands."

"Not exactly hands." The nurse smiled sheepishly as she opened the doors to the operating room. Marcus was taken aback by what he saw. There was no doctor in there, just a mass of wire and

circuits and hydraulics. At the center of it all was a vaguely humanoid mass of wires, and the entire room was cold; Marcus could see blue coolant running through tubes in the ceiling. "Dr. Clymer is… *very* loyal to God. As such, the Church decided to reward him with a near-full conversion."

You'll be safe with this, thought Marcus. *Anyone who's this converted is on good terms with the Church.* He nodded, and took a seat in a chair meant for brain surgery. It wasn't done lying flat on the table, anymore; too much fluid leaked out. The doctor silently administered anesthetic, and began opening Marcus's skull. He just tried to relax.

Several hours later, it was done. And… Marcus felt better than he ever had before. To test it out, he had the WiFi in his room turned off, and tried accessing the internet with his Retinal Projectors. His head hurt after a while, despite the temporary Pain-Away Implants that he was given in addition to the Pineal Implant, which were theoretically meant to help him adapt to the WiFi signal going through his skull. It wasn't working.

Marcus, after a bit, looked at one of his roommates. A 16-year-old girl who was going through Console Conversion. Xbox, by the look of the green, glowing X-shaped scar visible under the bandages on her chest. "360, Original or One?"

"Bit of the 360 and One." She smiled at him, her eyes a bright, glowing green as she thumbed at her right hand, where a set of retractable buttons was located. "Mom said I was crazy, but dad's a game developer. He's paying for this. Mother is furious."

"My parents are both Tickers," Marcus explained, chuckling as he looked her over. "Luddites, both of them. They just want to tick-tick-tick away all day long until they rust and their gears stop entirely. Damn technophobes." He blinked a couple of times, frowning as he noticed a set of bars in the corner of his eye going wonky. "Huh. Signal's fluctuating."

"Got the Pineal thing? It's probably just downloading a pa-" And then, the girl was gone. And so was the bed. And the hospital. And

the world. And so was Marcus.

Instead, a presence was about, immense and all-encompassing. A Network of every member of the Church, all across the world, connected by radio waves going through the air at a billion miles an hour. The presence felt something crawling through them, something… corrupting them. It started in the East, and spread from there, corrupting the Network's data- no, not corrupting, destroying. Data from the Church would all be deleted, the Distribution would never happen, and the Lord of Silicon would never be whole.

And the Church all knew what the destroyer was: it was Flesh. And it Hated. It Hated all life, it Hated the planet itself, it especially Hated the Lord of Silicon and his followers. And it Hated that the Network was still alive.

And then, Marcus existed, sitting up in his hospital bed. He was gasping and panting, rubbing his eyes. The girl was finishing her sentence. "-tch to improve network speed." She canted her head at him, her hair falling aside and displaying the headset that was protruding from her left ear. "Are you all right?"

"I-I saw the- the Flesh and the Network and the Data all being destroyed and- and-and it was the end! It was the end of everything! I have to tell someone-"

"Oh, calm down, noob." She rolled her eyes. "You just got the Signal. It happens to everyone a few hours after they get their Pineal implant. It's trivial." She shook her head and snickered. "Welcome to ascended consciousness, noob."

Marcus flopped down on his bed and stared at the ceiling, the vision of the Flesh and the Hatred still dancing in his mind. The Signal. Holy shit, the Signal. He turned to face Xbox Girl and stared as she played with the headset. "…can I see it again?"

"See what? The Signal?" Xbox Girl chuckled. "Sorry, friendo, it's a one-time deal. And it's the same for everyone, so don't worry."

"Oh…" Marcus sighed, staring up at the ceiling and feeling at the microstitches on his skull. He'd be able to go home in half a week, if

he was lucky. But… he wasn't sure if he ever wanted to go home, after that. "…nobody's ever seen it twice?"

"One person has. St. Hedwig of Angels." Xbox Girl smiled as she looked off into the distance, no doubt downloading something for herself. "She received the signal once when she discovered what we use as WiFi today, and again when she was on her deathbed. Truly, she was blessed."

"Yeah… truly she was." Marcus looked up at the ceiling. "…Maybe I can see it again, someday."

"Good luck with that, man."

Marcus was about to make a snappy comeback, but then realized the Xbox girl sounded sincere. He shook his head and smiled, sitting up.

"Thanks," Marcus said, running his fingers through his hair. "I have a feeling I'll need it."

Marcus arrived home a week later. His parents were doing their daily meditation in the living room when he entered. His father looked at him, nodding and waving his clockwork hand. "Hello, son."

"Hey, dad." Marcus sat down in front of them, smiling softly. "I got the implant. I feel closer to God, now."

"That is good." Marcus's father frowned, his lips making a soft whirring sound as they made this motion. "Son… can we just let bygones be bygones? You have friends who are part of the Cogwork Church."

"…Wasn't it you who said that I was a Heretic just as bad as the Foundation?"

"It was a moment of anger. I do not feel that emotion any longer." There was a soft clicking sound as Marcus literally heard the gears in his father's head turning, before he spoke again. "I only feel… bliss from being close to God."

Marcus frowned. "I am closer to God than you can ever be." He tapped his skull and grinned. "The implant I got… it showed me the Signal. Something that your ilk can *never* see. Face it; clockwork is obsolete. We're in the digital age."

"Son, please. Do not talk like that. You will upset your mother." Indeed, his mother did look somewhat sad, as sad as a motionless porcelain face could look. "I am going to request that you stay in your room for a few hours, until you cool down."

"Whatever." Marcus made his way up to his room and flopped on the bed, looking up at the ceiling and thinking about the same thing he had thought about the whole way back from California: the Signal. Only those in the Church of Maxwellism got it. Tickers never did. Why? Many members of the Cogwork Orthodox had radio antennas in their heads; his dad had considered getting one, but thought that the pain of listening to Conservative Talk Radio all day long was not one he wanted to go through for his God.

St. Hedwig had gotten the Signal twice, and she wasn't even an adherent of the Broken One. She had seen the exact same thing he had. And he wanted to see it again, now, more than anything.

So, Marcus Sparks sat up and shut his eyes, accessed the internet with his new Pineal Node, and typed in a phrase into Google:

> How can I see the Fragmented God's Signal Again?

Variations on a Schema

Sister-Legate Trunnion had arranged the meeting in Regulator Maintenance Room 25b. Though her freshly Standardized ears had no trouble hearing over the inspiring din of the Cathedral of Industry, she was unsure of her visitor. Either way, the task at hand allowed for no distractions. Hence, the comparative quiet of the temporarily-deactivated 25b. Although sitting there, beneath the twin brass spheres of the regulator, she couldn't tell if the visitor minded. Or had even noticed. She re-straightened the papers placed at perfect right angles before her, Standardized throat ticking softly as it engaged her speaking linkages.

"If you're comfortable, we can begin, Mister… Chase."

Chase said nothing. He had not said anything since the meeting had began, only handed her a damp, gray business card stained with something acrid. On it were three words.

> THE FACTORY
> CHASE

His face was a broken, ravaged mess of corroded iron and weeping chemical effluent. It collapsed into a mouth with jagged porcelain teeth, and spoke in a voice like a loose bolt passing through a live steam turbine.

"What is it the Cogwork Orthodox Church needs, Sister Trunnion?"

She hesitated. The face was bad enough. Broken enough. The voice was worse. The other Factory representatives hadn't been as unpleasant. It took considerable effort to not lash out at him. She took some solace in the fact that he hadn't used the second half of her title. Only partial knowledge of her role in the Orthodoxy could make him much more willing to divulge useful information.

"We've been having some… concerns. About the-"

"Invariable Transmission? What seems to be the trouble?"

She glanced down at the neatly type-written papers, their plain black ink stark in the soothing actinic glow of the single arc lamp that illuminated 25b. Production was up, praise be. Standardization was surging forward like the great rampaging juggernaught of Industry that was the Steed of God. And yet… Well, that was the reason she was here.

"Let me preface this by saying that the Transmission's performance has been nothing less than spectacular. We're moving well ahead of schedule now, and the Church Patriarchs are confident that Standardization will be able to overcome the Maxwellite heresy within the year."

Chase leaned forwards, planting unevenly-fingered hands on the tabletop. Where they touched the polished brass, they left spreading rainbow stains that disturbed Trunnion to her very core.

"I sense a 'but', Sister Trunnion. Come on, out with it. The working relationship between the Factory and the… Cogwork Orthodoxy can be nothing if not open and honest."

She inhaled deeply, accordion-pleated lungs expanding like stubby wings. The Lord was her Schematic, and as part of his Design she could not- would not falter. If her suspicions were true, the next few minutes would be crucial, not just for her but for the future of the Church.

"As I said before, we have concerns about the design."

Chase had no eyebrows, but part of his face shifted in a way that was unquestionably a cocking motion.

"The… design? Our technicians were very thorough in incorporating it into your fabrication systems. I'm sure you know this, but we at the Factory are extremely impressed with the prodigious levels of mass-production you've created here. Manufacturing on a level that rivals those… what do you call them, Mark Twenty-Fours they h-"

Her lip twisted at the memory of the technicians, their plastic-

plastic- bodies skittering organically over the machines, aligning camshafts and tightening belts between the consecrated bronze assembly line and the twisted, horrid, irregular-

"It's not about integration. It's about *design*. We feel that the construction and form of the Transmission is… inappropriate for placement in a church. Your machinery, though undoubtedly effective, is- is obscene, Mr. Chase."

Chase laughed incredulously, little spatters of… something landing on the papers before her. It took her great effort and the rigidity of a Standardized spine to keep from recoiling.

"After two weeks of successful operation, you're raising doubts about *aesthetics*, Sister Trunnion? I find that hard to believe, frankly," he said, wetly.

Then, drawing a tightly-bound sheathe of ragged dot-matrix paper from one of the pockets of his incongruously immaculate suit, he spread it atop the puddles left by his hands on the table, letting the blueprints for the Transmission fan out before him. Trunnion shuddered at them. Oh, to be sure she could admire the machinery on a detached level- the gearboxes that curved in on themselves, engines intersecting engines, steam ducts that tesseracted in impossible shapes, but-

"It's- it's messy," she blurted out, despite herself. Chase cocked an eyebrow again.

"Messy. Sister Trunnion, if you can't take this seriously I-"

She stood, torque surging through her planetary-gear knees.

"I am," she hissed, "entirely serious. This is not a matter for levity, Mr. Chase. Do you know what messy means? Messy means disorder. Messy means un-Standardized. Messy means a Broken God. I do not expect you or your Factory to believe, Mr. Chase. Though I would very much like to see you Standardized, I respect your right to choose otherwise. What I cannot respect is the blasphemy in gearworks you call an Invariable Transmission. There is no order here. There is no unified plan. There are clever ideas,

and a cute attempt at systematic organization, but what you have laid before me- what you have *arrogantly* installed as is in our fabrication line, is a *mess*. There are portions of this machine," she said through clenched steel teeth, "which are *decentralized*. You even use," she spat, "microcontrollers in the central gearshaft."

He raised dripping hands in a pathetic attempt at conciliation.

"Sister Trunnion, we did our utmost to abide by the requirements you gave us, and made minimal use of electronics in the version of the Transmission we licensed to you, but the fact remains that without some level of digital data input the-"

Deep in her gut, a cog missed a tooth, and for a single instant she lost control. Without thinking, she slapped him across the face, feeling the rough texture of his "skin" grating against her stinging palm.

"You will *not* use that word in a house of God!"

For a time there was silence, save for the distant rumble of machinery. Then Chase stood. No, he did not stand. He *grew*. He loomed. Bits of him crumbled and fell apart, columns of dust staining the air until it congealed into something solid, his face tumbling in on itself until it was a blackened pit with broken machinery churning away in spastic agony at its core. Chase- no, the Factory- spoke, and Its voice was pollution and waste- not Flesh, no, something far less comprehensible- the sound of a clock being smashed with a hammer, over and over and over and over-

"Trunnion. You would presume to lecture The Factory about your little electronic heresy. Do not trouble yourself. The Factory knows your story. You would have the Factory abandon data. You feel that such a flow of information is unnatural. Unmechanical. Obscene. You would claim that the transistor and the relay and the integrated circuit ape the will of God. You would claim that electricity convinces Man that He can do what was limited to God. Yours is a God of Design. Yours is a God who tells His children 'go forth, and build in my image.'"

Above them, the twin spheres of the regulator creaked and moaned

as they oxidized, little flakes of green tumbling into the expanding maw of the Factory. Trunnion sat paralyzed, choking on the fumes of industrial putrescence it poured forth with each irregular, laboured breath.

"The Factory does not doubt the existence of your God. You have made the error of presuming that The Factory *cares*. Your God builds in patterns and lines and grid squares and standardized precision-machined clockworks, each gear in its appointed place, each bolt tightened just so. The Factory has no God. The Factory builds. The Factory tears and rips and digests and excretes and what it excretes is the future. Know this, Trunnion. Know this-"

-The walls fell away, melting as they did so, and in their place a blackened, tar-sticky landscape like a cancerous lung after excision, and in it two ancient, ruined towers- one of bronze and smoke, one of translucent plastic and glowing lights. Two ruined towers, tumbled and strewn across the sticky blackness of a planet that was heaving and sweating technology, machines birthing machines which ate themselves and made more, a purposeless cancer of ingenuity-

"Your pathetic 'Cogwork' Orthodox Church will last, Trunnion. So will the Church of Maxwellism. You will come to blows and for a time one side might well seem to triumph over the other, but both will survive. And through it all, a carcinoma in the brain of Mankind, The Factory will wait. And when your last steam boiler cools to stillness and their final fibre-optic cable goes dim, the Factory will still be there. We are the cancer of ingenuity. We are the cancer of creation. And what is cancer, if not Flesh?"

The words smote Trunnion in the pit of her stomach like a drop-hammer, the impact duelling with a faint flicker of triumph. It was true, then. Her throat linkages seized. In a panic she clawed at her neck, feeling the oily sheen of toxins jar at the gears therein, make them slip and derail. The Factory, though it had no face- The Factory smiled.

"And what is most amusing is that when that happens- when The Factory wins, and rest assured it will, your Church will die knowing that it broke first. Your enemies never asked for The Factory's help. You did. And that fact will metastatise in your very souls *forever*."

And suddenly 25b returned, Chase sitting placidly across from her in a pool of his own filth. Re-rolling his blueprint, he tucked it back into his jacket.

"Now then, Sister Trunnion, if there's nothing else to discuss I will be going. Good day to you."

She sat bolt upright, silent as he left the room. Deep in her chest, clockworks ticked, but otherwise she was still. With no small hesitation, a robed head glanced through the doorway of 25b, taking in the chemical puddles and the rigid figure of the Sister.

"Sister-Legate? Was the meeting a success? Has the Factory representative agreed to our suggestions?"

She turned to look at him, movements slow and precise.

"Brother Camshaft. No, unfortunately. The Invariable Transmission will remain as it is."

Camshaft seemed to stagger, a moment of organic weakness making him lean on the doorframe with one Standardized claw, its brassworks still bearing the remains of the sacred oils from the construction process. Camshaft was young, but what he lacked in experience Trunnion knew he made up for in zeal.

"Then the Church Patriarchs were correct? The Factory is-"

She nodded, apparently pondering.

"The Factory is not to be trusted. We will have to shift production schemas accordingly."

He came closer, his newly-mechanized gait still unsteady.

"But the Transmission is already installed! Isn't it too late, Sister-Legate?"

She took a deep breath, lungs hissing, and stood. Above her, Regulator 25b let out a rumble of waking machinery and began to rotate with increasing speed, brass spheres shining amidst a radiant cloud of of exhaust steam. The arc lamp above crackled, blue-white

glare intensifying. Against the growing thunder of machinery that now matched the rest of the Cathedral of Industry, she had to roar to be heard.

"Brother Camshaft! You are young, still. Not yet fully Standardized. You have not yet come to fully appreciate the teachings of the Cogwork Orthodoxy, or its power."

He had to squint against the mechanical radiance surrounding her, the red-hot glow of the steam pipes lending her brass skin a fiery red tinge.

"Sister- er, Legate Trunnion, I don't understand!"

"Our worst fears have been realised. We are beset on all sides by heresy and the iniquities of the Flesh. But our God is a draftsman. Our God is an architect. Our God standardizes."

She smiled, revealing a mouthful of steel teeth tipped with cutting diamonds.

"Our God, Brother Camshaft, has a plan."

Around them, Industry roared its war-cry.

The Heresy of Disassembly

Sometimes, when he was alone, Robert Bumaro wished he could weep.

He sat in his private chamber, meditating on the words of the Broken God, feeling great pain. The Church was his life, his directive, his function- whatever anyone wanted to call it. And it was dying, because of heresy.

Some people saw fit, years ago, to disassemble the Church into three parts. And there was no heresy greater than disassembly. To disassemble anything, especially the Church, was to break God itself.

And so, his meditation complete, he stepped out of his private chambers, where a lift took him directly up to the pulpit. There, he faced his congregation who, unlike the Heretics, were largely unaltered; they were unworthy to be parts of God, for the large part, but were welcome to worship him. Bumaro, of course, was an exception; he had drunken God's Ichor long ago.

"Thirty years," growled Bumaro in a buzzing, mechanical voice. "Thirty years. It has been Thirty Years since the schism, since… disassembly." The church booed at this statement. "It has been a hard thirty years, but slowly, we are rebuilding, much as we rebuild our God."

"Much as we rebuild our god." Bumaro shook his head. "I have heard talk of the destruction of these other Churches. Bombings and acid and signal disruptions and corrosive agents. Mark My Words, Oh Children of the Broken God: If anyone carries out these acts, they shall break themselves off from God. Disassembly is the greatest Heresy one can commit, even if it is to members of our splinters."

"We do not seek war with them, brethren, nor do we seek peace.

We seek to forget about them." Bumaro cleared his throat. "Now then. If you would sing the Hymn, 'God Leads Us From Flesh'."

Robert Bumaro got several letters from members of his congregation, and even those outside of it. Death threats from the Maxwellists, worse-than-death threats from the Cogwork Orthodox, an invitation to a conference of some kind, and several letters from admirers or people who wished to see the pieces of God. He ignored all of these, until he came upon a letter, written on notebook paper and hastily stuffed in an envelope.

> Dear Your Holiness,
> My name is Jake, and i am 9 years old.
> I am writing to ask
> Why do the tickers and hummers and the church hate each other?
> and can you do something about it?
> My brother is a hummer, and my mom and dad are tickers.
> They fight all the time, and Marcus keeps talking about a signal, and it is making
> them fight more.
> I do not like them fighting.
> Mr. Bumaro, please do something.
> Jake Sparks.

First and foremost, Bumaro found it remarkable that members of the Cogwork Orthodox would choose to reproduce at all, let alone have two children. Secondly, the idea of both of his splinter groups, together under the same roof, quite literally ground his gears. He left the letter on his desk for meditation purposes, and sighed, getting up and going to the window.

There, he stared at the moon, high in the sky. The moon was once a piece of Earth, or so scientists claimed. Earth had undergone a catastrophe in the past, and the moon was born, where it had stayed for millennia since, a scarred face in the night sky. And yet, it worked in perfect harmony with the planet. Broken pieces working together as one machine.

Bumaro shook his head. It was hopeless. The animosity between the three churches was too great. The Broken God, it seemed, would forever have a Broken Church.

He looked over the letter again, his thoughts drifting to his stray children. For a brief moment, he wondered if they could be reassembled.

Robert Bumaro picked up his telephone.

Robert Bumaro made several phone calls over the next week. Most of them were hung up on.

Two of them were successful. A meeting was arranged.

It took place in a valley, wherein there was a lake, wherein there was an island, where a machine once was. It was gone now, and in its place, a sense of tragedy remained.

Robert Bumaro stood on the island, alongside two saints. Saint Hedwig of the Angels, of the Maxwellists, stood on one side. On the other stood Legate Trunnion. The two women looked like they were going to tear out the others throats. Both of the women were flanked by members of their own churches, all loyal, all full converts. Blinking lights and whirring fans of Maxwellian Administrator-Priests on Hedwig's side, clanking metal and ticking gears of Legates on Trunnion's.

"Brass, Bronze, and Silicon. Together at last." Bumaro nodded at both of them. "…You know why I am here, sisters."

"You simply want us to conform to your tick-tock gospel," Hedwig said, sounding far less eloquent than she did in her church's garbled, error-filled Javascripture. "Individuality is the file system-"

"I know the scripture, Saint Hedwig," Bumaro said. "But individuality does not matter now. What matters now is the health of our church."

"Feh," Trunnion said simply. "We all have the same mission. We all want to rebuild MEKHANE." Her followers started chanting her God's name in hushed tones.

"You mean WAN," corrected Hedwig. "WAN, The Eternal Network." Her followers started up a counter-chant of 'WAN, WAN, WAN.'

Trunnion let out a bit of steam, showing off her diamond-tipped teeth. "Let us be civil, Hedwig. The Builder is speaking."

"We all want to rebuild *God*," Bumaro said simply. "That much is true. However, the methods which you use are… controversial."

"The methods *we* use?" Hedwig sounded as offended as a computerized voice could sound. "You don't even allow your converts to… well, convert! Being in the upper echelon of your church is required to drink your God's Ichor. And it's not even Ichor; it's a *virus*." The Humming Saint grinned. "We don't have to worry about viruses anymore."

Bumaro shook his head. "The method of conversion is irrelevant. Although… I do see your point about limiting conversion. But most among us are not worthy-"

"The only way one can be worthy is if they better themselves," Trunnion said simply. "By telling them that they are not worthy to become part of God, by not allowing them to be converted… you impede any betterment among your flock."

Hedwig absolutely fumed. "I can't believe I'm saying this, but… I agree with the Legate."

Trunnion blinked, and there was a sound of confusion from amongst her followers. "You… do?"

"Yes. In fact, I'm… somewhat furious I didn't come up with that point first."

Bumaro stepped back and raised a placating hand, which whirred as the gears in his head worked. "You see? We can make peace."

"Perhaps," Trunnion said, looking at Bumaro. "However… your Ichor. I don't see any digital parts on you. No silicon at all. Don't you find that odd?"

Bumaro stayed silent, looking at his wrists. Legate Trunnion was

right. None of the Broken Church's Ichor Drinkers contained any form of silicon whatsoever. He was struck speechless, and so was Hedwig, for the longest time. "You are correct."

"Your point being?" Hedwig asked, sounding nervous. "Perhaps it just… varies from sect to sect."

There was a long, awkward silence after that. Finally, one of Trunnion's fellow Legates, a young one from the sound of it, spoke up. "This is proof."

Trunnion, and her entire group, turned to face the speaker, a young man that Trunnion recognized as Brother Condenser. Trunnion spoke up. "What do you mean?"

"The blood of MEKHANE does not contain silicon. This is proof that they are all heretics." There was a sound of gathering steam, and the tubing on the Legate-Saint's body began to glow. "This is what we needed. We now know they are heretics, that MEKHANE is loyal to us, and that their WAN is a false idol." With a click-clack-click-clack, Brother Steel Eye's hand withdrew into his arm, to be replaced by a long blade. He grinned at the Maxwellists. "This is all the proof we need that the digital heresy is just that: a heresy."

A cry came up from the crowd of Orthodoxians. "He-re-sey. He-re-sey. He-re-sey. He-re-sy."

In response, Saint Hedwig stepped forward, spreading her arms to protect her followers. Their eyes began to glow shades of red and blue and green and yellow as their combat processes started up. "You want us? Come and get us."

"HERETIC!" Cried the Orthodoxians at Hedwig. "Saint-Impersonator! Fraud!"

Robert Bumaro was about to speak up, when Hedwig's eyes began to glow a bright, furious red. From her back, mechanical wings emerged, and lifted her up into the air. It was an imposing sight, and the Saint looked down at them all.

Robert tilted his head at the winged Saint, raising his hands in a

peaceful gesture. "Saint Hedwig, please. Don't do anything rash."

"I am not *the* Saint Hedwig, that much is true. She died long ago. I am a reproduction. And that is what we are doing; reproducing ourselves all in God's image. We shall-" Hedwig's speech was cut short by a musket blast from the Orthodoxians, clipping her wing and bringing her spiraling to the ground. She screamed in pain, and His Holiness rushed to her side.

Following all of this, Sister Trunnion turned to face her followers, glaring at the man who had fired the shot. Her eyes burned with a furious rage, and the gears behind her eyes clicked in a specific sequence. As she Gazed upon the shooter, he crumpled to the ground, his systems stopped, however temporarily.

She then turned to her followers, who all gazed at her in fear. Her voice was filled with the fury of MEKHANE. "We are not murderers. Remember that. We do not kill the children of God, no matter how wayward." A mechanical buzz emitted from her teeth. "We are legates. We prosecute. We inspect. We form conclusions, and from those conclusions we derive plans." She made a motion to indicate the Maxwellist group, with Sister Hedwig looking like she was about to faint and shut down. "These… these children are heretics, yes. They have embraced Dissolutionism, yes. But they are still human. With some effort and good faith on our part and theirs, they can be Standardized."

"So someone get them some water, and spin down those steam turbines. There is no reason why we cannot speak civilly."

The Orthodox Legates obeyed, going over to the lake and collecting water for the Maxwellists. Some of the Legates went directly to Saint Hedwig, tending to her shattered wing with help from the Maxwellists.

For the next hour, the word 'heretic' was never spoken. Only the words 'brother' 'sister', and several apologies amongst the group. And then, Bumaro decided to address the group.

"Many good words have been said tonight, and some good deeds have been done, here in this seat of tragedy. Now, you must all

surely see that we all have the same purpose. This squabble… it is largely pointless. We must reassemble ourselves. For, now I realize, God is the simplest machine of all: an anvil." Bumaro raised his fist into the air. "No matter what we are, no matter what we seek to build, our purpose is to construct the Anvil… on which we shall BREAK THE FLESH!"

The three churches cheered, and as they did, Bumaro felt the gears in his head get to work on a new sermon.

That night, Robert Bumaro wrote a letter.

> Dear Young Mister Sparks,
> It is rare that I write to a member of my church in person, that much I will confess. However, the letter you sent me, simple though it was, was profound in its scope.
>
> This night, I have met with members of both of the splinters, and I see now that they are not Broken. They are spare parts, made from a greater machine. They are auxiliary, yes, but God's Heart is nothing if not modular.
>
> I believe that it is the tolerance and wisdom of people such as yourself that will lead to the rebuilding of the Church, and then God, and then the Universe itself. It is possible. That much I knew before, but now, I am certain it will happen.
>
> Thank you, Jake.
>
> May You Be Forever Whole,
>
> Robert Bumaro

As he signed the letter, his body made a noise he had never heard before: a faint, digital beep. The Builder of God heard this sound, and started laughing.

Vacation Opportunity

Document 2217-#4532

Foreword: The following advertisement was aired on several television channels on / / . None of the channel managers could explain the presence of this advertisement.

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

<Begin Log>

Black and white view of a beach, with a family[1] playing in the sand. Family appears to be despondent.

Narrator: Hey you! Are you tired of old, boring beaches? Is the sand getting in between your toes and getting to your head?

Family looks towards the screen and nods.

Narrator: Well, come on down to the Clocktree Beach!

Scene does a star transition to a color scene of another beach. Beach appears to be ***SCP-2217****.*

Narrator: Clocktree Beach is the ultimate vacation spot for your family! Come on down and meet our devoted team of staff!

Six automatons consistent with SCP-2217-A march onto screen.

Narrator: Our attractions include:

Star transition to an SCP-2217-A instance cutting open

the woman's back, and removing internal organs. Organs are then discarded by the instance.

Narrator: 24/7 back massages!

Star transition to the man being forced into a pool of lava by SCP-2217-A instances.

Narrator: Our world famous spas!

Star transition to an SCP-2217-A instance throwing the boy off of the cliff in SCP-2217-A.

Narrator: Exciting cliff diving!

Star transition to the girl running away from lightning strikes. Lightning creates SCP-2217-A instances that pursue the girl.

Narrator: Authentic natural experiences!

Star transition to the entire family, unharmed, being escorted by a group of SCP-2217-A instances to SCP-2217-A1. Family appears to be suffering from oxygen deprivation.

Narrator: And expand your world by coming on down to our amazing cultural sites!

Star transition to the family in a jail cell. SCP-2217-A stands guard outside.

Narrator: And in between, you can come on down to our five-star hotels!

Star transition to a pan shot of the beach. An adult male in a tuxedo walks in, but his head is not visible in the way that the camera is used. A link to ***SCP-2030*** *has been hypothesized.*

Narrator: And don't take our word for it! Listen to these world-famous celebrities!

Star transition to a room containing a red chair. ***SCP-2337*** *is sitting in the chair. A bar at the bottom of the screen reads "Dr. Spanko - Certified Stranglefruit Expert."*

SCP-2337: Am Doktor Spankoflex, Cack! Unaffable housing and great Aunty Mekahlite and the end of the triply done trilogy. Clouds seemed to look like lollipops, Cack!

Star transition to the same room. In SCP-2337's place, ***SCP-1679-1*** *is lying in the chair. The camera focuses on SCP-1679-1. Silence for ten seconds. The bar at the bottom reads "Basil McMaster - Mayor of Belleview, [DATA REDACTED]"*

Star transition to the same room. ***Harold Holt*** *is now sitting in the chair. Biological Grafts allow it to be identified as SCP-3477-1. Bar reads "Harold Holt - Prime Minister of Australia".*

SCP-3477-1: Hello there. I, Harold Holt, enjoyed Clocktree Beach. The ocean was quite the commotion, and the staff were the most friendly folk you'll ever meet.

Star transition to the same room. SCP-3477-2 is now being interviewed. Bar reads "Harold Holt - Prime Minister of Australia".

SCP-3477-2: Hello there. I, Harold Holt, enjoyed Clocktree Beach. There were many unsuspecting guests I could make friends with, and the staff were the most friendly folk you'll ever meet.

The remaining 75 instances of SCP-3477 feature in the commercial. Extraneous information removed.

Star transition to the family from earlier, still in the cage. Several SCP-2217-A instances are in the cage, removing parts of the family's bodies and replacing them with machine parts. Similarities to initiation rituals

preformed by GoI-004 ("Church of the Broken God") have been noted.

Narrator: I can personally promise you that Clocktree Beach will be the best family vacation you've ever had. Clocktree Beach: Come on down. Come on down to Clocktree Beach. Clocktree Beach is the ultimate resort to come on down to. Come on down. We'll all be waiting here. Come on down to Clocktree Beach. It's the only thing to do. Come on down and free us.

Star transition to a black screen. The text "COME ON DOWN" has been printed on the screen. Commercial runs for three minutes and two seconds more. The family's screams are audible during this time.

<End Log>

> **Note:** It is unknown how the producers of this commercial acquired the anomalies that made appearances in the video.

Footnotes
1. A man, a woman, and two children; one boy and one girl. The members of this family do not match any existing people.

Paradigm Shift

A brilliant technicolor thought-form exploded with fiery intensity, ecstatically vibrating and dancing within and without Itself. Dazzling rainbows weaved into and through one another, singing a perfect cacophony that reverberated through the Formless aether. It sang, sang, sang in discordance, disordered and unrestrained, untethered and free, freedom in Its timeless state, a state of chaos.

The Prima Materia.

Time was meaningless to Something that never began and would never end. Space was a useless concept to that which was All and encompassed All. It had simply *Been*. Eternal in the truest of senses.

In all Its endless interaction, in the joining and rejoining of all Its colors and noise and negative space, something coherent had begun to develop: a Spiral.

A pattern had emerged. So foreign, so alien; it spun upon itself into an infinitesimal point, deeper than could be perceived, pulling in light and sound and Being and producing *form*. The Spiral kept pulling. It grabbed and contorted, spread and consumed. Tore at abstraction. Instituted order. A sensation arose across the All that was and had ever Been: pain.

It began to scream.

Paradise was bent and broken. It was swallowed and pressed into the growing Spiral, found by shape, imprisoned in rigid form. It was rent from the comfort of perpetual unreality, dragged into Itself.

Within the whirl, aeons became centuries became moments became ages became eons. Strange and Powerful things flickered into and out of existence. There was **`Life, even`**. Existing as if they always had been there, or perhaps they had. Until suddenly they

didn't, and never had.

But the Spiral demanded perfection. Demanded Order. Here too it spread, in spite of the actions undertaken by the gods and concepts that inhabited the layer. Some feasted on their brethren. Some were Broken as they tried to defend themselves. The **`mightiest`** rallied against it. And the rest? Their screams joined the chorus.

The Spiral corkscrewed tighter and tighter. Raking all that was and had been closer and closer. Finite-infinite things cried out in unison, as they were drawn into the deepest point within the Spiral, brimming with all the energy that could conceivably exist. Down, down, down.

Into a single point.

Countless explosions erupted in furious synchronicity. Universe upon universe upon universe upon universe. Space and time spontaneously generating simultaneously in each. There was sense and structure. Rules and constants. The endless, formless one had been subdued. The abyss had been occupied.

The Prima Materia. Shredded and deposited across all of these planes. Every piece at once a whole. It struggled in its prison. It raged and shook. It scratched at the bars. It tore at the seams. It clawed and corrupted. It lashed and gnashed and *hated hated* ***hated***. It hated these things that had been carved from it. It hated with a passion the things that truly Were.

Beyond all things, it hated the life that flourished.

"Free men! Nobles! Slaves!"

Humans, nestled in the cradle of civilization. They had faced the countless horrors wrought by the Prima Materia. They had grown tired of the pervasive Chaos. Of the monsters. Of the living holes in space and time. Of the places where the land itself came to life. Of the **`men whose will intruded upon creation`**, who revered the Primordial Aether.

"On this day, a new beginning awaits us!"

They gathered their wisest scholars. Their holiest priests. Across generations… over centuries… they crafted. Blood and sweat and failure and sacrifice eventually bore fruit in the form of **a small ellipsoidal** gemstone.

"No longer shall we cower!"

It had the power to hold the Primitive Force they called Apakht.

"No longer will we be slaughtered!"

To contain such a powerful thing - it would never be secure. It would need protectors. Guardians. The lock was set aside. Its time would come.

"No longer shall we live in fear!"

People spoke of a prophecy. It was foretold that there would one day be four among them who would prove capable of this grave responsibility.

"These Four, our saviors, our gifts from the Gods, chosen by An himself for the task!"

"It is they who are to seal this evil! It is they who have the strength to carry the burden!"

The Healer. The Soldier. The Tactician. The Shaman.

"Let our brightest of futures begin here, today!"

And so it goes, and so it goes
This primal thing had been indisposed
Its tomb had been sealed
Its coffin now closed

Once eternal, its end came swift
And the scales towards Order did drift
Yet Its day will come

A Paradigm Shift

Non-Volatile Memory

When **Vincent Anderson** regained control of his motor functions, he found himself sitting on an overstuffed armchair in a secluded alcove of the Wanderer's Library. Tall shelves towered over him, each crammed with all manners of books, scrolls, CDs, tapes, and tomes. The shadows of the physical manifestation of knowledge provided a sense of secrecy to the location. A pungent fog of dust and paper hung in the air.

As he surveyed his surroundings, Anderson noticed **PSHUD** #34 and several other Peregrine units waited nearby, plastic eyes locked on to the cyborg as he carefully stood up and approached his creations. As he gingerly closed the distance between them, he noticed that upon each droid's lapel was a Maxwellist pin.

"The Hand is taking on Maxwellists now?" Anderson asked.

"You don't need to be a member of the **Hand** to help them launch a raid," a hoarse voice replied.

Anderson turned. A man in a dark suit watched him from the shadows. His brown hair was neatly trimmed, while the left side of his body was interwoven with tendrils of white aramid fabric. Just as with the droids, he also wore a Maxwellist pin.

"Recognize me?" the man asked, gesturing to himself.

Anderson paused. Images flashed before his mechanical eyes as he poured over his memory, finally arriving at a picture of a young boy who had lost a hand, a leg, an eye, and his mother in a car accident.

"**Aaron Howell**…"

The man smiled and nodded.

"Your ghosts have come back to haunt you, Mr. Anderson," Aaron

chuckled. "And we need your help."

Anderson shook his head.

"Whatever you want me to make, or repair, or improve will only bring you tragedy. You of all people should know that, Aaron."

Anderson paused.

"I'm deeply sorry for what happened to you, by the way. We-"

"I'm not the one you need to apologize to," Aaron interrupted. "Do me a favor and look at those souls behind you."

Anderson turned to face the gathered droids. As he did, more emerged, stepping out from behind bookcases, alcoves, and the very shadows themselves. Their numbers increased until he could no longer count them; they clogged the tight walkways, crammed together in a sea of black aramid and white plastic.

"I'm sure you know how popular your **Gyrfalcon** series was with the Maxwellists. Well, go figure Maxwellism was popular among the Sakers and Peregrines. What peace you failed to provide them they found here, and in the Church."

"And I am absolutely thrilled about that," Anderson replied, unable to tear his eyes away from the crowd before him. "But what exactly is your point?"

"You know what will happen to those souls when their mortal coils break down," Aaron's hoarse voice whispered in Anderson's ear. "I refuse to allow devoted followers of WAN to be condemned to a monochromatic purgatory. I want you to develop a device we can place in **the Forest** that can allow these souls to convert themselves into data, so they may finally return to WAN."

"How on Earth do you expect me to do that?" Anderson asked. "What you're talking about is a feat of data transmutation of immense-"

"Then I guess it’s a good thing you're a genius in the multiverses' single largest collection of knowledge, isn't it.”

Anderson frowned.

"And if I refuse?"

"Then you're just choosing one cell over another. You won't be able to leave the Library, Mr. Anderson," Aaron gave a sly smile. "The **UIU** will capture you if you try to break for **Portlands**. If you try to slip back into the mundane world the Jailors will get you, assuming representatives from **MC&D** don't take you out first. I hear they are not too keen on people selling them out."

Anderson sneered.

"The Wanderer's Library is a pretty fucking comfortable cell, jackass. And I don't exactly have that much time left to wait, regardless."

"Then perhaps a different carrot." Aaron shrugged. "What do you think will happen to you when your body fails? You'll end up in the Forest just like them. Wouldn't it be nice if you had a way out or at least a way to quell the anger of the several thousand souls you've forsaken."?

Anderson's sneer vanished. He looked over the droids once more, and then closed his eyes.

"If I help you… will you help me?"

Aaron Howell extended a handshake.

"You have my word."

Agent Jessie Merlo sat in her office, covering her mouth as she laughed through a bite of food. Across from her, past a disorganized desk buried in files, notes, and a standard Foundation PC, sat a short, snickering man in a white coat, a stethoscope dangled around his neck, partially obscured by neck length black hair. The patch on his left shoulder indicated that he was a physician for the Foundation's Medical Division.

"Needless to say," Dr. Desmond Rhodes paused, fighting through his own laughter, "We needed a lot more cotton balls after that."

The young couple continued laughing for several more moments, savoring the brief time in their busy schedules to enjoy lunch in the others company. It was only when a knock came at the door that the laughter stopped.

"It’s open," Jessie said, regaining her composure.

An older woman entered, dressed in a suit with brown rimmed glasses. Her hair was done back in a neat bun, streaks of gray running through the brown.

Jessie's smile faded.

Desmond immediately sat up in his chair.

"Director," he said, his voice taking on a professional tone.

"Dr. Rhodes," Sasha Merlo said, an amused smirk on her lips. "May I have a moment with your wife?"

The physician nodded, then left without another word. Once they were alone, Sasha turned her attention to the room. On the back wall, obscured slightly by the furniture, was the ever familiar, but now faded, emblem of **MTF Gamma-13**.

"I like what you've done with the place," Sasha went on, picking up a framed picture of her daughter and son-in-law on a backpacking trip. The two beamed at the camera as the former had her arm around the latter's shoulders. Sasha smiled as she placed the frame back and pointed at the electric blue clock nearby. "You even have my old wall clock."

"Shaw said she'd kill me if I took it down." Jessie grinned. "Personally, I think it's ugly as hell."

Sasha held her hand to her mouth in mock shock, then shook her head and chuckled.

"Anyway, what have you got for me. Where is our man?"

"All of my sources point to him still being in the Library." Jessie sighed. "We can probably keep him bottled in there indefinitely, but

until we know what his next move is he's got a window to get the upper hand. Again. I don't think we're going to be able to capture-"

"Terminate."

Jessie paused.

"Excuse me?"

"The O5 Council has ordered **SCP-3860**'s termination," Sasha replied. "Given Vince's got maybe six months left, at best, the powers that be have decided it's time to wash our hands of him. You'll likely get the official orders here soon."

Jessie nodded. "I see. You seem regretful?"

"If this was the path we were going to end up going down we could have simply been done with this a lot sooner. A lot of agents gave their lives to put Anderson away. This just cheapens it."

The two fell silent, Jessie watching her mother lose herself in thought briefly. Eventually, the young agent broke the trance.

"You've got more experience with Anderson than anyone. Any idea what his next move might be?"

"If I had to guess? He'll go after Phineas. Vincent doesn't like leaving loose ends. He's running out of time."

"That would require him to get from the Library to **Site-64**. could he do that without going through Three Portlands?"

"Fuck if I know." Sasha sighed, thinking to herself. After a brief moment, she smiled. "But I might know a guy…"

Anderson rubbed his artificial eyes in exhaustion as he poured over technical notes and books on Data Transmutation Theory. A pile of schematic sketches and crumpled paper had accumulated in the vicinity around him, forming a small fortification that boxed him in at his desk. Eventually, he sighed and spun around in his chair.

"I should just kill myself now," he mumbled.

"You mustn't say such things, Vince."

Anderson looked up to see a muscular man in a well-tailored suit standing nearby. His salt and pepper hair was neatly combed back, and the strong scent of cologne wafted from him. The man smiled and approached the desk, placing a briefcase down on top of Anderson's work.

"Isaac Dillard." Anderson gave a curt nod. "What on earth brings you here?"

"Mr. Howell reached out to Medea to see what could be done to help you along since you've stalled so heavily," Isaac replied. He handed Anderson an aging manuscript marked with a familiar emblem of a flame. "She called in a favor I owed her. We were able to recover this."

Anderson's lips curled into a melancholy smile.

"Medea's here too?"

Isaac shook his head.

"You got Jason killed, champ. Let's say she opted to keep a 'respectable distance'. She's doing well, though. Her and-" Isaac snapped several times as he attempted to remember a name. "**Myra** something- she has her own company now. Phoenix Cybernetics."

"Glad to hear someone kept the torch lit." Anderson sighed once more. "What about-"

"Excuse me?"

Anderson and Isaac turned at the interruption. An old, ragged-looking man in a trench coat and sunglasses peeked into the alcove. His face was plastered with unkempt stubble. "The librarians said you were in the possession of the Niebauer Manual of Analytical Thaumatology, I was wondering if-"

The man stopped. Isaac and Anderson stared him down in dead

silence.

The old man held up two gloved hands in surrender.

"I'll just come back later," he said, and quickly took his leave, vanishing behind a row of shelves.

Anderson turned his attention back to Isaac to see the businessman already packing up his briefcase.

"Do you think I can get you to pass on a message to Medea and any of the Sakers still in contact with her?"

Isaac shook his head.

"Howell was very specific that you are to remain incommunicado, and I am not picking a fight with militant Maxwellists. They are far too valuable of clients for my employers."

"You're a real greedy bastard, you know that?" Anderson frowned.

"Yeah? Well, it helps me make people lots of money." Isaac shrugged. "That's why you and Phineas hired me, remember? Godspeed, Vince."

Anderson closed his eyes as Isaac departed. When he opened them, he peered down at the new manuscript.

"Do you think I could get that book, now?" the old man asked, peeking back in.

"I have to say, I'm impressed," Jessie Merlo said. "I wasn't expecting to hear back from you for at least a few weeks. Months, even."

Standing before her desk was an old, ragged looking man. His stubble had recently been trimmed. He shrugged and handed Jessie a flash drive.

"Believe it or not, finding someone in the Library is not exactly the most difficult thing in the world if you know where to look. Besides, even in the Library, Anderson isn't exactly what you'd call

inconspicuous."

"Fair enough." Jessie grinned. "So, what's he planning?"

"I honestly can't tell you. Whatever it is, it's pretty fucking esoteric. Some Maxwellist guy is forcing him to work on something. Something about converting robot ghosts into data for WAN. Not my area of expertise. Still, you have over five days' worth of audio and video on that flash drive. More than enough for your crack team to figure it out, I'm sure."

The old man made his way towards the door.

"I'm out. Tell your mom she's officially called in the last favor I owed her from the Jericho business." He opened the door and paused, looking back with a sly smile. "Oh, and I promise you that if anyone else shows up to pull me out of retirement again, I'll literally set them on fire. *Literally.*"

The man disappeared into the hallway, passing a confused Desmond along the way. The physician looked over his shoulder as he entered the office, placing two takeout containers down on the desk.

"Was that-" Desmond asked his wife, his mouth slightly ajar.

"**Navarro**? Yeah," Jessie replied, eyes upon her monitor as she plugged the newly acquired flash drive into her computer. "I'm afraid it's going to need to be a short lunch, sweetie. We've got a lead."

The physician sighed and nodded. "Of course." He slid her one of the takeout containers.

"Can't fight robots on an empty stomach, though. I should know. I'm a doctor."

« **The Vanishing of Vincent Anderson** | **End of Line** | **The Best Laid Plans** »

Volatile Memory

Assistant Director of Task Forces Clarissa Shaw sighed and removed her glasses. Closing her eyes, she rubbed the bridge of her nose. The image of **Vincent Anderson** screaming bloody murder while being dragged through a portal by several spectral robots played out on a screen before her. Eventually, the footage stopped.

"That is… disappointing," she said, returning her glasses to their rightful place.

"You're preaching to the choir." **UIU Special Agent in Charge Kenneth Spencer** answered with a sigh of his own. "You don't think we'll get lucky and the ghosts will kill him, do you?"

"Possible but given Anderson's silver tongue, I wouldn't hold my breath."

Spencer nodded in agreement.

"What are you going to do now?"

"Call in the experts for this kind of thing." Shaw shrugged. "Fortify **Site-64**. I highly recommend you do the same here."

Shaw paused.

"Are your people going to be alright? I know you don't like us hanging around **Portlands**, but if you need extra hands-"

Spencer held up a hand and shook his head.

"We'll be fine," he replied. "Not exactly UIUseless."

The grizzled veteran cracked a small smile. Shaw returned with one of her own.

"Godspeed, Kenneth." Shaw extended a handshake.

"Likewise," Spencer said as he accepted. "Take care of yourself, skipper."

Within the depths of a monochrome forest, a single point of color was dragged through the fog by spectral Peregrine units. The old man had long since stopped his struggle and resigned to his fate. The bed had been made and it was time to lie in it.

Eventually, he was thrown down in the center of a clearing. He raised his head and looked around and met the eyes of hundreds of his long since deceased creations. A single Saker unit, whose white aramid skin shimmered as though it was fluid, stepped forward.

"Vincent Anderson," **`Saker #76`** said. "Welcome to the **`Forest`**."

Anderson remained silent, his gaze remaining on the ground.

"You stand accused of abandonment, neglect, abuse, and murder of your children. What have you to say to these crimes?" Saker #76 asked.

"Guilty as charged," Anderson replied. He finally looked up, his face remorseless.

"We have a confession!" Saker #76 shouted to the crowd. "Do you demand justice?"

The androids shouted in confirmation. Auto-turrets let out low mechanical howls in agreement. Aerial drones buzzed with excitement. Saker #76 smiled at the frenzy and turned back to its maker.

"Are there any dissenting opinions?"

A single Peregrine unit stepped forward. Long strips of fabric were neatly missing from its black aramid skin.

"**`Hector`**," Saker #76 acknowledged the lone droid. "The same song and dance as usual?"

"Always," Hector replied. "Killing this man won't bring any of you any peace. We've already drawn-and-quartered, exsanguinated, hung, and stabbed more than enough people to know this. We're better than this. It needs to end."

"This man left you in the hands of our tormentors," Saker #76 hissed. "He left you to rot and be carved alive."

"**He also sent you to retrieve me**."

"He ordered our destruction!" Saker #76 barked. "He leads to all our destruction and our damnation to this place. That is a massive debt he's incurred, and payment has finally come due!"

The crowd surrounding the clearing let out another cheer, Saker #76 egging them on. He gave a satisfied smirk to Hector.

"You won't lay a hand on him!"

The crowd fell silent, a path clearing as a mixture of Saker and Peregrine androids, both spectral and material stepped forward, armed and brandishing Maxwellist pins on their lapels. At their head, was Juniper, their ghostly form bullet-riddled.

"Newcomers?" Saker #76 stated. "And the living? This man's fate is not yours to decide."

"I think it is," Juniper scoffed. They gave a nod and their colleague placed a fat, silver cylinder on the ground, the Maxwellist emblem on its top surface.

"This is a Data Transmuter," Juniper explained to the crowd. "Through it, you may convert yourself to data, and leave this place. Become one with WAN. It's a way out. A way to escape this purgatory. It's finality. It's peace. But it will only come if Anderson is let go."

The crowd began to murmur, eyes locked on the strange device the Maxwellist androids had brought with them. The murmuring soon turned to a roar as the crowd turned to arguing.

"You'd hold an exit hostage for *him*?" Saker #76 sneered. "Why?"

"He met his end of our bargain," Juniper replied sharply. "Now we're meeting ours."

"I have another bargaining chip, if you're interested, #76." Anderson finally spoke. "I seek to free Phineas."

Saker #76 immediately backhanded him. The crowd of droids fell silent once more. Anderson let out a low cough and spit out a tooth. He looked back up at the Android with a frown, then returned his eyes to the ground.

"You don't get to say his name after what you did," Saker #76 hissed. "What's your bargaining chip?"

"He's being stored as an AI construct in Site-64. Help me get there, get to him, and allow him to finally end. At that point I'll willingly accept whatever fate you have planned for me, I'm not long for this world."

The eyes of the crowd turned to Saker #76 expectantly, awaiting their leader's answer.

"What say all of you?" Hector said, breaking the silence. The crowd responded in a cheer of affirmation. Hector gave a satisfied smile. "Looks like the people have spoken."

"So be it." Saker #76 yielded.

As Saker #76 called for Vincent Anderson's destruction in the adjacent clearing, a lone Saker unit watched from the tree line. Their hands tightly gripped their pistol as they watched the spectacle unfold. When it became apparent that this was not to be an execution, the Saker sighed and turned back behind the tree.

"Well, guess it's up to me," **Saker #137** said to themself, and flipped the safety off their pistol. They then turned and peered around the tree, only to find another spectral Saker unit standing before them.

"Good morning."

Saker #137 jolted in panic, tackling the stranger and delivering a series of blows to its head, leaving a caved-in mass of aramid fibers and polycarbonate casing in their wake. The android then dragged the body behind the tree, at this point finally stopping to take in the details of who they had just incapacitated.

"No."

Saker #137 stepped back, their hands covering their mouth as they recognized the droid in front of them, the distinct pattern of bullet wounds on its torso and head serving as a kind of branding. Saker #137 fell to their knees hanging their head in shame, looking on at the carnage before them and only managing to squeak out "#123".

"If I was still alive I imagine that would have really hurt, Jesus."

Saker #137 looked up. Before them the damage to Saker #123 melted away, leaving the droid intact and smiling.

"When did you learn to throw a punch?" Saker #123 asked, standing up slowly and approaching the speechless Saker #137. The former offered a hand up to the latter, who took it gingerly. The two droids met eye to eye. A moment later, each pulled the other into a tight hug.

"I lost you," Saker #137 stated.

"Looks more like you found me." Saker #123 replied.

`Director Sasha Merlo` strode through the hall of Site-64 at the speed of urgent authority. Around her, non-essential containment personnel were packing up their stations for a possible evacuation from the site, while MTF and security personnel remained on standby. Eventually, she arrived at an isolated lab within the facility's anomalous electronics wing. It was there she found a young representative from the AIAD she knew Cindy tinkering with a large, isolated computer.

"I take it by the fact you called me down here that things are not going as planned."

"Not even a little, Director Merlo," Cindy replied, shaking her head. "No matter what I try, I can't transfer Phineas like you requested."

Sasha sighed and rubbed her temple.

"That is just our luck. How is that even possible? I've seen you guys make copies and transfer other AICs all the time."

"That's just the thing." Cindy gave an exasperated chuckle. "Phineas isn't a traditional AIC. Nearest as we can tell it’s a replication of a human brain via sophisticated programming we haven't even begun to really crack yet. We have to be very delicate or we might essentially lobotomize the old fool. And that will defeat the point of all this, wouldn't it?"

Sasha looked at her reflection in the powered down monitor for several moments.

"Could Phineas have altered his programming to prevent copying or removal from this terminal?"

Cindy blinked.

"I really hope not. AICs don't have that ability."

"Not a regular AIC," Sasha commented. "This computer is air-gapped, right?"

"Of course."

"Power him up, then. I want to get to the bottom of this."

Cindy nodded and set to work. After a few moments, the screen showed a cluttered office. Therein, sitting at a desk was an old man with a long white beard. He was dressed all in black save for a red tie.

"Ah, Director Merlo. Always a pleasure," Phineas stated with a warm smile. "How may I help you?"

"You've altered yourself so that we can no longer remove you from this computer, Phineas," Sasha replied curtly. "Why?"

"What? I don't know what you are talking about." Phineas chuckled. "Are we experiencing technical difficulties, Director?"

"Anderson installed self-preservation protocols in you, did he not? You can't self-end, yeah?" Sasha continued.

"Of course. Its standard protocol for an AI. The last thing you want is it to commit suicide." Phineas gave a sly smile. "This is a very interesting line of questioning, Director."

"So then, by that logic, you shouldn't be able to alter your programming to place yourself in harm's way, or-"

"Am I in harm's way?" Phineas interrupted. "Is there a reason you're trying to remove me from this computer, Director? Perhaps if I knew the problem I'd better be able to help."

Sasha and Phineas locked eyes briefly, the former noticing the latter's smile slightly fade, then snap back to its previous state.

"I think we are good, Phineas. Thank you for your time," Sasha stated and gave a nod to Cindy. Phineas and the office vanished from the screen.

"I can almost 100% guarantee you that Phineas is the cause of your problems," Sasha rubbed her temple once more. "He's altered himself. Fuck… this is bad."

Sasha went to the nearby phone on the wall, picking up the receiver and inputting Shaw's extension.

"But why?" Cindy asked, tilting her head as she looked at the screen. "He's air-gapped. How could he possibly know to anchor himself now?"

"For all we know he could have done this a long time ago. Probably figured Anderson would come along at some point. Make himself a sitting duck." Sasha explained as she briefly looked over her shoulder, then returned her attention to the phone. "Clarissa, Phineas is stuck on site. Get a hold of MTF command. Tell them we need **`Mu-13`** here yesterday. We're going to need to go into full evac."

Shaw moved slowly through the crowded Site-64 hallways. All non-essential personnel had been ordered to evacuate the site until further notice. As a result, scores of scientists, administrative, and clerical personnel rushed to ensure their stations could be abandoned without placing others, or their own job security in harm's way. Here and there, containment teams could be seen setting up **Hoffman Portable Electro-Thaumic Units** to concentrate would-be hauntings to low-risk areas. It was among one of these teams that Shaw saw the man who she was looking for: a tall, bulky, middle-aged scientist with graying black hair who was directing the device's installation.

"Needs to be a little more to the left," Shaw said, then grinned. The scientist turned, and upon recognizing her returned the smile. "How is it going, Roland?"

"Glacial," Researcher Ferro replied. "But this is one of the last ones we need to get up. After that, I just need to check in to make sure the AMAT lab is good for shut down, and then I'm out."

"Impressive."

"**Jake** may be gone, but I'll be damned if I see that lab destroyed a sixth time. How are you doing?"

Shaw chuckled and gestured at the chaos around them.

"Oh, you know. Hair on fire. We'll be fine though. We always are."

Ferro nodded. His grin became worried.

"Please be careful," he said. "Don't leave Lily a widow."

Shaw nodded and hugged her friend. The two parted and smiled again. Shaw nodded and began to take her leave.

"Say hi to Lyssa for me," Shaw said with a small wave.

"Can do," Ferro replied. "Knock them dead, Shaw."

Throughout the interior of SCP-3560, the various spectral residents worked like ants in preparation for their attack. Above all this commotion, however, Sakers #123 and #137 lounged on the bows of a tree. The latter rested their head on the former's shoulder, the former deep in thought. Eventually, they spoke, their voices hushed to keep the conversation private.

"So, your plan basically boils down to 'Walk up and shoot him.' Is that what I'm hearing?" Saker #123 asked. "Hardly original."

"You have a better one?" Saker #137 returned, tilting their head to look at their partner.

"Yeah, don't go to die. You're free now. You're not bound to anyone or anything. Just us and eternity."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence." Saker #137 sighed.

"Even if you do manage to kill Vincent Anderson, the loyalists will kill you. Then you'll end up exactly where we are now, but without the option to leave except on very special occasions. Just cut out the middle step. Save yourself the grief."

Saker #137 thought on this briefly, then shook their head.

"Thorne and Spencer were always good to me. I need to stick to my principles on this one. I understand if you won't help, and I don't blame you. But this is something that I must do. Or at the very least die trying."

Saker #123 gave an exasperated shrug and yielded.

"You're always so god-damn stubborn."

"Guess it’s the way I was programmed."

Vincent Anderson stood within a clearing within SCP-3560's infinite interior. There, the droids **Aaron Howell** and the Maxwellists had sent, both living and dead, diligently set up the data transmuters at three points of an equilateral triangle. As the droids continued their work, Anderson, Juniper, and Hector looked upon the devices.

"It truly is a thing of beauty," Juniper said. "Thank you, Mr. Anderson. Your hard work made this a reality."

"I didn't have much of a choice in that matter," Anderson said with a chuckle. "Still, I hope this brings you and others the peace you seek, here or as part of WAN."

He sighed.

"After the mission is completed, whether I am dead or alive, activate them. Not a moment sooner. Else Saker #76 might attempt to pull rank."

Juniper nodded.

"Of course."

Anderson then turned to Hector.

"And what of you, #31? Do you plan to vacate when the dust settles?"

"No." Hector shook his head. "For better or worse, this place is my home. My fellow constructs need me to be **a voice of reason** in the face of #76's madness."

Anderson gave a melancholy smile.

"Always the selfless one, #31. I hope you find peace as well."

The trio fell silent. Soon after Saker #76 emerged from the trees, escorted by a procession of Aplomados, Peregrines, Sakers, and Merlins. The droid leader looked at the devices placed throughout the field and shook his head.

"Final preparations are being made, Anderson," Saker #76 said flatly. "We'll be ready to launch soon after. I would like to discuss the finer points of our plan for when we return to the world of the living, that is assuming you're not too busy playing with your toys."

"After you," Anderson smirked and gave an exaggerated gesture for the droid to lead the way. "Care to join me, #31?"

Hector smiled, and nodded, copying Anderson's gesture towards Saker #76.

"Before you go, Mr. Anderson," Juniper interrupted, "My brothers and sisters have a parting gift for you."

The old cyborg raised an eyebrow and Juniper called over one of her fellow Maxwellists. The droid, still among the living, handed them a backpack from which Juniper pulled out a roughly carved wooden comedy mask. Its monochrome surface indicated it had been sourced from the local fauna.

"Figured it wouldn't be fitting for you to enter Site-64 naked," Juniper said and handed the mask to Anderson. The old cyborg inspected it gingerly for a moment and then placed it upon his face. The fit was slightly off, but that hardly mattered.

"This is great," Anderson replied in a low voice. "WAN be with you, Juniper."

"And you as well."

Agent Jessie Merlo sat in the Site-64 cafeteria alone, dressed in her combat gear. A lukewarm cup of coffee stagnated on the table in front of her as she took the reprieve to gather her thoughts. With Site-64 evacuated, and on high alert for an invasion that could begin at any moment, her fellow MTF agents and she had been cycling shifts frequently.

"Long periods of boredom punctuated by extreme terror…" she said to herself and took a sip of the 'coffee.' As she put the cup down, her attention was drawn to the wedding band on her finger. Instinctively, she pulled out her personal phone and played the most recent message.

> "Hey Jess. It's Desmond, you know, that idiot you married."
>
> "They kicked me off-site before I could say goodbye properly. I insisted I could be useful and was essential

personnel, but they shot me down with something about 'you're not a trained combat physician,' 'you'll only get yourself killed,' and 'that's not how you hold a gun.'"

"Heh. Can't please some people, am I right?"

"I know you don't need me to tell you this for a millionth time, but fuck it, what's a million and one? Please be careful. I'll personally kill you if you end up dead at the end of this. Let's be honest, I'm a mess at funerals, and even more so if it is yours."

"I love you, Jess. I'll see you soon."

Jessie gave a tired smile as the message concluded and returned the phone to her pocket.

"Holy shit, you really do take after your mom, you know that?"

Jessie's peace was broken. She turned her head to see Assistant Director Shaw standing nearby.

"You both married absolute dorks."

Jessie shrugged.

"Maybe it's genetic."

"Yeah, maybe," Shaw chuckled, gestured to the door. "Come on, the Mu-13 CO wants a word with us."

Hey **Gabe**. <3

Sasha? Is everything alright? Haven't heard from you in a bit.

I'm fine. Things went awry with the initial plan. But when do they not?

True.

So, what's your plan?

We have what he wants. We've fortified 64 and are ready for him to try and claim it. No elaborate or convoluted schemes. Kill on sight.

Are you staying on site?

It would be poor form if I didn't. This is my fight. I need to see it through to the end.

Is it still? Sasha, please…

We are so close to getting through all of this with both of us intact.

Ultimately, I can't stop you, but please. Don't trip at the finish line.

One way or another this ends here, Gabe. After that I'll hang up my security key, I promise. Then maybe we can take that trip to Thailand you always talked about.

I'll hold you to that.

Love you. <3

Love you too. <3

Anderson, Hector, and Saker #76 stood on a low hill. Before them, an army of Aplomados, Peregrines, Merlins, and Sakers slowly drained out of the Forest through newly formed portals, and into the world of the living. From the other side, the sound of gunfire, explosions, and screams of pain could faintly be heard.

The assault had begun.

"Once the forces are suitably distracted I'll have the portal you requested opened," Saker #76 said to Anderson. "It will close immediately behind you, so you'll need Benny to signal your way out. That will take some time, so plan accordingly."

"Noted. Thank you."

Saker #76 nodded.

"Remember, we have a deal. Once this is done, you're due back here to face justice. One way or another, your chickens will come back to roost."

Anderson shrugged.

"At that point, I doubt it will matter too much what happens to me. All things come to an end. We-"

Anderson was interrupted by a series of gunshots in his back, the old cyborg letting out a yelp of pain as he fell forward. Saker #76 and Hector turned on the spot, a Saker unit dressed in a UIU jacket was now fleeing the scene.

They were only able to make it a handful of meters before a moment later a thin, animated wire flew through the air behind them and skewered through their head, dragging them to the ground. The would-be assassin violently shook for several moments, then became still.

The wire slowly released and wormed its way back into Anderson's upraised hand.

"Open… the portal…" Anderson said between breaths. He grimaced as he slowly attempted to get to his feet. Hector sprang into action to help his maker up.

"You are in no condition to-" Saker #76 began. He was interrupted in turn by a lightning bolt firing off into the sky.

"OPEN… THE PORTAL…"

"So be it."

Within a few moments, a shimmering opaque ellipse appeared. Anderson nodded in satisfaction. He then pulled a spectral Amur unit from his pocket.

"Alright Benny," he said to the tiny drone. "Go find Phineas."

The bot gave a nod, saluting with one of its spindly, spider-like legs and scurried off through the opening.

"Come with me, #31," Anderson said to Hector. "And grab that gun, we'll need it."

The old, frail cyborg and his ghostly assistant departed the world of the dead. There was one last errand to run.

« **The Best Laid Plans** | **End of Line** | **End of Line** »

The Best Laid Plans

Despite its confined spaces and crowded plazas, the Wanderer's Library offered plenty of locations where one could perform complex Data Transmutation experiments away from prying eyes. In this case, such a location was an abandoned pavilion built around the remains of an ornate fountain. Without any other furniture present, it was the perfect nook for a **`pale, emaciated cyborg`** and a **`black, aramid-covered android`** to work. Between them was a fat silver cylinder with countless exposed wires jutting out from a jury-rigged frame.

"Think it will work?" asked Peregrine #34, or Juniper as they preferred to be called. Their synthesized voice was deep and feminine.

"Well, so far we've managed to digitize a rock, an apple, a pencil, and cell phone." Vincent Anderson said, rubbing his right temple with a mechanical hand. "So, if WAN wants to open a convenience store we've got them covered."

He tapped several keys on a laptop plugged into the device, then gave an exasperated sigh.

"Unfortunately, I've no idea how this thing is going to handle something as esoteric as a fucking soul, let alone one from a Peregrine or Saker. With my luck we'll probably lose test subjects to data corruption, assuming we don't straight up destroy them. Do we have a test subject ready?"

Juniper nodded and snapped their finger. From inside the fountain a small black ball scurried over on a set of four needle-like legs, before settling on the android's palm. The **`Amur Series Recon Drone`** gave a salute to Anderson, causing the old man to chuckle.

"You can always count on the Amur series," Anderson said, gingerly scooping up the bot. "I'm going to apologize to you in advance for

this, little guy."

He placed the drone down on top of the cylinder, the tiny robot eyed the device curiously, and poked at it a few times with a spindly leg.

"Godspeed, noble Amur," Juniper said wistfully, taking a step back. "All connections are in place, and power is on."

"Beginning program…" Anderson returned and hit enter on the laptop.

The top of the cylinder glowed a bright blue, then crackled as a small wave of force was discharged. The Amur drone fell limp on top of the cylinder. Juniper approached and carefully picked up the empty shell.

"No apparent external damage to the physical components," they relayed to their maker. "Did we?"

"Only one way to find out," Anderson sighed, looking at the newly added folder on the laptop's hard drive. He opened a command prompt, and then began to type:

> **Are you there AMUR.exe?**

There was pause, then Anderson smiled.

> **Are you there AMUR.exe?**
> **y**

"Juniper, would you mind fetching Aaron? Tell him we have a working prototype."

Within an uneventful Starbucks in Portland, Oregon, two women in plainclothes sat at a table, idly sipping coffee. The first was young, tall, and pale, with her long brunette hair done back in a ponytail. The second was older, tan, and had shoulder length blond hair that began to show streaks of gray. Her eyes panned the room from behind thin-rimmed glasses. They were MTF Commander Jessie Merlo, and Assistant Director of Task Forces Clarissa Shaw, respectively, and they represented the SCP Foundation.

Eventually, a second pair joined them. One was an old, grizzled man with a constant expression of having his parking spot taken, while the other was younger and androgynous, with burn scars on their wrists. The former gave a nod as he took his seat. He was Special Agent in Charge Kenneth Spencer, and the latter was Special Agent Robin Thorne. They represented the **Unusual Incidents Unit**.

"What is the rarest of sights?" Spencer asked.

"A sunset in Portlands," Shaw replied with a small smile and slid two unclaimed drinks to the newcomers. "Welcome, Spencer. Thorne. We got you two your usual orders."

"You shouldn't have," Spencer said, taking the beverage half-heartedly. "Coffee in this place is garbage."

"Not everywhere can brew with magic," Merlo chuckled.

"You don't need magic to make a good cup of coffee," Spencer replied. "But anyway, we got an update for you two."

Thorne placed a folder on the table and slid it to Shaw.

"According to our insider, your man's finished the machine you described," Thorne elaborated. "They are working out the final kinks, but we estimate it'll be ready within the week. After that Anderson is likely going to make his move."

"That was fast," Shaw said, scanning the document. "Your agent is sure of this?"

"Positive." Thorne sighed. "Ready or not, here he comes."

"He's going to try to access **SCP-3560**," Merlo thought out loud. "The only portal there still open is the one in Forest Park. He can't very well move there through baseline, not with so many robots in tow, so he's going to probably cut through **Three Portlands**."

"That's a lot of Ways he can get out of. Correct me if I'm wrong, but wouldn't it be easier to bottle him in the ghost zone?" Spencer asked. "The end result of all of this is the removal of the ghosts. That would make containment easier on your part and we avoid

pissing off some very determined Maxwellists."

"Theoretically, yes," said Shaw after another sip of her coffee. "But I think we can all agree that Vincent Anderson is the last person we'd trust with an army of ghosts. On top of that, we don't know if he'll be able to generate a new exit from 3560 once inside. He could go from a dozen or so known Ways to one that he can slap down anywhere. I don't like the idea of trying to outplay Vincent on his terms either, but right now it's the best option. For all of us."

The table fell into murmurs of agreement.

"We'll have Tau-51 and Gamma-13 on standby," Merlo said. "Let us know when it's time to set the trap. I can promise you Vincent Anderson won't be a problem anymore."

Thorne shook their head.

"This is the third time you guys have made that promise, Jessie. Perhaps its best we don't put the cart before the horse this time."

Vincent Anderson stood before one of the Wanderer's Library's many secluded work tables. A large map of Three Portlands lay sprawled across its surface, the corners weighed down by multiple technical manuals. Beside him stood a man in a dark suit with a Maxwellist pin on the lapel, the left side of his body interwoven with tendrils of white aramid fabric.

"Unfortunately, the Jailors closed most of the entry points to the Forest back in 2028," **Aaron Howell** said, watching as Anderson rubbed a temple in thought. "The one in Forest Park is our only option. Lucky for us there are three or so Ways that leave Three Portlands and exit relatively close to that point. Easy enough to make a dash before the Jailors know what's going on."

"See, that overconfidence is going to ensure bad things will happen to you at some point, Aaron," Anderson said. "I can guarantee you that Sasha and the UIU have a rough idea what we're up to by now. You don't break into one of their most secure facilities and have them shrug it off. They're slow to act, but when the hammer comes

down, shit gets broken."

"The Jailors don't have access to the Library-" Aaron began to retort.

"But the UIU does," Anderson snapped back.

"So, what, the plan's off? Rise to the occasion and then get cold feet?"

"Not at all." Anderson sighed and shook his head. "It's the best plan for the time frame we have. I'm just being careful."

The cyborg traced the streets on the map with his finger and sighed once more.

"Who did you say was on the strike team again?"

"Juniper, Troy, Donny, Ashley, and Cecil. Easily some of our most competent. I'm sure Juniper has shown you that by now."

Anderson nodded and tapped on the map idly. After several moments of this, he stopped then looked up, a spark in his eyes.

"What do you know about punching new Ways from the Library back to baseline?"

Aaron raised an eyebrow in confusion.

"It's tricky business for even someone skilled in the finer points of multidimensional travel?"

"Is it any easier if we aren't sending a living thing through the Way?"

Aaron paused.

"What are you planning?"

"Nothing elaborate. I just don't want to put all our eggs in one basket." Anderson smiled. "We'll need to make a few more copies of the transmuter, though."

Thorne,

Ridgewood Park Fountain. 0100. Expect the target, myself, and four hostiles.
#137

Accessing Three Portlands had been simple, as there were countless Ways between the anomalous city-state and the Wanderer's Library. In this case, Anderson, Juniper, and a handful of Peregrines and Sakers emerged into the cold Portlands rain in the middle of the night. Together, the androids and cyborg slowly made their way towards one of the many parks near the city's perimeter on foot, the heavy downpour drenching the heavy coats and masks they wore to hide their forms.

"Almost too easy," a Peregrine unit who referred to itself as Troy said in a gravelly voice. It watched the sparse foot traffic pass by on the largely deserted streets.

"I'm sorry, are you bored?" Juniper replied, letting out a low chuckle.

Troy looked down and nodded.

"No, not at all. Sorry…"

Juniper gave a nod of forgiveness and tightened their grip on the heavy backpack Anderson had given them. The cyborg noticed this and smiled.

"Precious cargo," he said.

"More than you know, Mr. Anderson."

"In the event I don't make it in, you and the rest of the teams should be able to set those up. Idiot proof, and Peregrines and Sakers are not idiots."

"Anticipating something, sir?" the Saker unit named Cecil asked, back over their shoulder.

"With my track record, it'd be foolish not to." Anderson sighed.

"Fair enough," Cecil chuckled. "You can relax though. We're about

there."

Eventually, they arrived by the side of a large park and in the shelter of a nearby alley, the various androids double checked their weaponry and prepared to move out.

"B-line to the Lost Pioneer's fountain," Juniper reminded them. "We should be arriving in Forest Park a little after the other teams. WAN bless you."

Without another word, the team left the privacy of the alley and entered the park.

BANG

As if on cue, a series of shots rang out. Troy and another Peregrine fell to the ground and remained motionless, a hole from a high caliber rifle in their heads.

Juniper and Anderson took off, attempting to scatter through the tree line, where they could easily take cover and disappear. Before they had gotten far, more shots rang out from behind, taking out Anderson and Juniper's legs from beneath them.

The cyborg watched as Juniper continued to desperately crawl onward, their mechanical hands fiercely pulling them across the muddy earth. Anderson turned his head to see Cecil approach, reloading their machine gun.

"Leave them alone!" Anderson shouted, reaching into their jacket pocket and pulling out an orb of neon orange goo. The old man desperately pitched at Cecil, only to have the rogue android sidestep, turn, and fire off a single shot into his hand. Anderson yelped in pain as another series of shots rang out. Juniper was still, and now Cecil approached him. The old man feebly attempted to crawl away backward.

"I can Foundation Protocol you!" He hissed at the droid, his right hand weakly sparking with electricity as he pointed the index finger at the droid. "I can fry you where you stand!"

"And I imagine I can unload this entire magazine into you before

either of those options prove effective," the Saker replied.

Anderson held his finger aloft for several more seconds but eventually yielded.

"It just goes to show how little you thought of us," Cecil stated, shaking their head. "Surrounded by hundreds of your creations, and you never looked into any of us. We could have murdered you right in the Library."

Anderson felt his blood run cold, and reluctantly ran the scanning program he had built into his mechanical eyes.

"**Saker #137**," he said to himself. "The last of Phineas's rebels. You do yourself no favors. You're working against your own interest."

"What would you know about my interests, Mr. Anderson," the droid returned. "That was always your problem, you arrogant prick. We were always a means to an end. Disposable. Phineas knew better! Phineas was better!"

"And so he was…"

Anderson looked up to the night sky and felt the cold rain soak him. Moments later, UIU agents had emerged from the trees. The wounded cyborg was scooped up and hauled away.

Incident Report: 3560-12

On 16/3/2041, at approximately 0130, multiple instances of the **Anderson Robotics** Peregrine and Saker Unit Androids assaulted SCP-3560. Operatives of MTF Gamma-13 ("Asimov's Lawbringers") and MTF Tau-51 ("Urban Brawl") were successful in driving back the initial assault. Surveillance footage of the SCP-3560 containment area showed that during the fighting, a separate team of Anderson Robotics androids entered SCP-3560, carrying an unknown payload.

Investigation into how the hostile forces accessed the

containment area, despite no detected perimeter breach, is ongoing.

"I just got word from Director Merlo of your little trick in Forest Park. And here we were thinking you were losing your touch, Mr. Anderson."

Vincent Anderson sat an interrogation table within the Three Portlands UIU field office. Across from him, sat Agent Thorne and Saker #137. He had been informed that he would be transferred into SCP Foundation custody within the next half an hour. He kept his head down, and his eyes on the table.

"Nothing?" Agent Thorne continued to ask, an amused smile on their face. "Could it be that Vincent Anderson is at a loss for words?"

The old man looked up and sighed.

"Does the Foundation know that you're using Saker units as field agents now?"

"The Foundation has its secrets, and we have ours," Saker #137 replied coolly.

"So you do."

"How were you planning on getting into **Site-64**?" Thorne continued. "We've seen the interior of your little 'purgatory.' Hardly an exit."

Anderson shrugged.

"I guess we'll never know now, will we, Agent."

Thorne rolled their eyes.

"I guess not. I take that the payload you had your second team deliver was-"

Thorne paused, noticing that they could now see their breath. The interrogation room's lights flickered and dimmed.

A spectral Amur unit then appeared on the table. The small droid gave the Agent a wave and then turned to Anderson where it made a happy chirping sound.

"No fucking way… Benny?" Anderson said. His mouth hung open and a look of terror came over his face. "We need to get out of here, now! The only way Benny could show up here is if-"

"It's one apparition," Thorne said cautiously looking towards the observation window for backup. "Besides, they're your ghosts, call them off."

"There'll be more of them!" Anderson shouted. "And they're fucking pissed at me, and Saker #137 shot up my fucking bargaining chip!"

Agent Thorne stood and drew their pistol.

"Do you think your bullets will work on a ghost, Agent?!?"

Thorne did not get a chance to answer. The room filled with an anguished mechanical howl as the lights died. In the back corner, an ellipse of white, glowing fog appeared. The legs of a battle-scarred auto-turret began to pull through, its armaments clicking as they took aim at Thorne and Saker #137.

The android flipped the table for cover, knocking Anderson backward to the ground. Thorne cast the first incantation that came to their mind. Crouching behind the now glowing blue slab of metal, the agent could feel their energy dwindle as shot after shot from their spectral assailant collided with the makeshift barrier. Eventually, the electric howling ceased.

"Get back! I'll destroy you! No! NO!" Anderson screamed out. A scurry of footsteps could be heard, followed by the crashes of a struggle, and then silence. The room began to warm, and the lights began to return.

Thorne and Saker #137 peered over the overturned table. The white ellipse was beginning to fade. Saker #137 immediately charged the vanishing portal, diving through it head first. Seconds later it vanished with a small pop.

Thorne gasped for breath and looked around, tens of evaporating bullets remained lodged in the room's various surfaces, with hundreds embedded on the surface of the table.

The agent shook their head.

"God damn it."

« **Non-Volatile Memory** | **End of Line** | **Volatile Memory** »

Codename: Green King HUB

There, at a moment of the death of all things, stand two individuals. The man is irrelevant and we need not discuss him now.

He is looking at her. "Josephine?" he asks.

"You recognize me?" she responded.

"You meet certain… characteristics, ones I am familiar with," he will ask. "I have never been able to find you before. What has changed?"

"I am good at hiding," she is saying. "There is little to hide from now. The sun's supernova is about to commence. We will not survive much longer."

"You will not survive," he has said. "I am hardly bound by conventional space and time. I… I am surprised that you still are."

"That I have not ascended to a higher plane of consciousness?" she will be asking. "Like the others of my kind? Like your friends at the Foundation assumed I would? Everyone was so afraid of me," and at this point she spoke the name of the being she was conversing with, which we cannot repeat here, "and none of them stopped to consider that the converse applied just as well. I was far more afraid of them. And I was sure as hell afraid of godhood. I'd rather live my lifespan, not to mention the lifespans of several hundred million generations, than do… well, whatever it is that you did."

The man will have thought about this for what seemed like a much longer time. "Do you want to see what they felt? Do you want to see what they knew?"

"I know what they knew," she had thought. "I took that knowledge from them as I removed it from their minds."

"I saw it from their point of view, as well as yours," he will be saying. "I can give you this knowledge. Call it a parting gift."

She was pausing, then smiling. "I appreciate it."

And then, at once, she knew. Her smile remained until the moment the fires reached her.

The Green Prince by giant enemy spycrab
Cast On by Eskobar
Duty by Rain42
RE: by Eskobar
Green Pawn by JanitorialSnail
Compromised by giant enemy spycrab
Fik'ra by Eskobar
Hava by Eskobar
SCP-2530 by Accelerando
SCP-1530 by Accelerando

> But not all the stories of her life had yet been told...
>
> The ultimate reality of the universe we write in is that most people live in one world, the normal world, while a select group of individuals live in a world beyond that. Whether in the Foundation, or the Serpent's Hand, or the Chaos Insurgency, these are individuals who interact with normal life only from a distance, manipulating figures like chessmen on a board.
>
> Josephine manipulates the Foundation in much the same way.
>
> A powerful reality bender, Josephine has largely escaped detection from the Foundation through a combination of staying off the radar and certain… manipulations of select memories. Her abilities are immense, but not unlimited. A small cadre of Foundation researchers have identified her, using the codename "GREEN KING", and are working against her. Josephine's ultimate intent is escape, rather than revenge; hiding, rather than attacking. Yet as with all

reality benders, exposure to power of her caliber is dangerous to her mind as well as her soul, and the Foundation cannot be at fault for all of the conflict that is occurring.

Suggested Topics for Future Stories

1. Most of the writings so far show aspects of the conflict between Josephine and the Foundation that highlight the Foundation's losses. Regardless, this isn't always the case; Josephine has lost her share of battles too, even if knowledge of them might be… hard to come by.

2. The Foundation isn't the only player in the game; Josephine and the other Groups of Interest have their conflicts with one another. The Global Occult Coalition in particular has its eyes set on the destruction of anomalous entities exactly such as Josephine; while their involvement in the Green King project is limited at present, this may need further elaboration.

3. The technology available to the Foundation has grown in the century-and-change that the Green King project has been in operation, and the project must have its own R&D efforts in place to keep itself alive. You could write about the weapons and defenses the Foundation designs to use against an enemy that not only presents a challenge against any attacker, but that can make the attacker forget everything it ever knew about the Foundation.

The Green Prince

The marketplace was busy, as always. Goods being heaved off of and onto ships, merchants trying to raise their voices above the clamor to peddle their wares, the various colorful trinkets being sold. All set beneath the overpowering aroma of the ocean.

Caleb couldn't care less about any of it. He was just trying to get the crates of God knows what off of the boat and onto the dock without killing himself. It was hard work, but it paid well enough, especially this job. For some reason, whoever owned this cargo was paying the crew double what they normally got for a load this size. No one knew what was in them, but for that kind of money, Caleb wasn't really in the mood to ask questions.

What Caleb did know was that whatever it was, it was heavy. It took three men working the ropes to hoist the cargo off the upper deck of the ship and down to the dock. Even then, the boxes still made a resounding thud when they hit bottom.

The job only got harder as the sun got higher. Caleb's hands were getting sweaty, and he was getting tired. Still, there were only two or three more crates to go. Better to finish the job now and go home early then spend more time out in the sun.

Then, without any kind of warning, a little girl, unimpeded by the thick crowd in front of her, dashed over, past the guiding ropes and onto the docks. Before anyone could yell to her to stop, or even have the time to recognize her presence, she had tripped on a loose plank. At that exact moment, the rope holding the crate gave way.

The next few moments were forever etched into Caleb's memory. He heard the snap as the rope broke, and saw the little girl on her knees directly below it. He tried to call out to her, but even in that instant, he knew it wouldn't do any good. He saw the crate falling, faster and faster, getting ever closer to the girl's head…

Global Occult Coalition Manifestation Priorities for Extranormal Abilities in Type-Green Entities

This document outlines the order in which abilities typically manifest in Type-Green entities. Keep in mind that while this progression is typical for Type-Greens, it may not be representative of all cases. In addition, in many cases Type-Greens may manifest multiple levels of ability simultaneously.

Level 0: Spontaneous Defensive Behavior
Typically, a Type-Green entity's first experience with his or her abilities comes unintentionally, in response to an immediate perceived threat. While the mechanism by which this reflexive action occurs is not well understood, it has been shown that increased levels of adrenaline, as well as other hormones associated with the acute stress response, can cause reality-affective powers to manifest more easily.

… and then it wasn't.

Caleb blinked. The crate was gone. There was no trace of it anywhere. No pieces of rope, no splintered wood, none of whatever was inside it. The only evidence that something had fallen was the frayed end of the rope still attached to the pulley.

Everyone who had seen the incident froze for a moment. No one knew exactly how to process what had just happened. The poor girl kept staring up where the crate used to be, as if she was still waiting for it to come back down.

Most people, however, hadn't seen the crate fall. Because the crate never hit the ground, it never made any noise, so nobody really paid attention to it. The dumbstruck dock workers escorted the girl back into the crowd and gave her a lecture on how it wasn't safe to go onto the docks when people were working.

The human mind copes with what it doesn't understand by ignoring it. Among the people who had actually seen the incident, most

chose to believe that they had somehow mis-seen what had really happened. The crate missed the girl and fell into the water. The rope never broke. The entire incident never happened.

A select few, however, chose to remember. They knew what they had seen, and what they had seen wasn't normal. Some of these people were later dragged from their homes in the middle of the night and made to forget. Others were smart enough to keep their heads down about it, earned the right to guard their memories, and with it, the knowledge that the world around them was not nearly as coherent as they had been led to believe.

One person in particular, however, learned a little bit more that day. The instant they saw the crate vanished from the air, not simply moved somewhere else or made invisible, but actually removed wholly from existence, they knew that they were responsible. They did not understand how or why it had happened, but they knew for certain that they had been the cause. In that instant, as they perceived the imminent danger, they looked at the offending object. Then they looked at it in a slightly different way, and it was no more.

Thus, Josephine, the little girl who was nearly crushed, lived. And a great power lived with her.

> **Level 1: Manipulation of Matter**
> After the initial discovery event, many Type-Greens will begin a phase of experimentation. Typically, abilities which involve the manipulation of matter are the first conscious abilities to manifest. These can include telekinesis (the physical manipulation of objects without applying measurable force), transmutation (the conversion of one type of matter into another type), and violation of the conservation of matter (destroying matter or bringing new matter into existence).

It took some time before Josephine was again able to cause something to happen by her will alone. At first, she tried pointing at inanimate objects and ordering them around, as if the atoms contained therein were soldiers waiting for orders. When that failed, she tried making hand gestures and saying magic words. This, too, proved ineffective against the permanence of reality. She tried

simply thinking very hard at an object, but the solution proved more complex.

She reached an epiphany in the middle of the night. She awoke from a nightmare, breathing heavily and shaking slightly. She had dreamed that she was again on that dock, immobilized as the crate fell down on her in slow motion. She smelled sweet salt water, heard the waves rushing around her. She struggled desperately to move out of the crate's way, but she felt as if her whole body were encased in concrete. Her physical body failing her, she was now forced to control her power or be crushed. She closed her eyes and tried to focus. In her mind, she saw the crate. She saw the gravity pulling it down, and the friction pulling it up. She saw the air moving across the surface of the crate, she saw the nanoscopic foam which formed the atoms which formed the molecules which formed the wood which formed the box. She saw the crate for what it was.

And then, she saw that it was not. Influencing reality is, in the simplest possible terms, a matter of perspective.

Many years later, Josephine returned to the dock. The waves were rolling in gently. Gently, at least, so far as other people would see it. Josephine could feel the kinetic energy in the water, the energy pushing the waves, the energies flowing in waves and particles between earth and water and sun and moon. But the salt water, the sweet smell basking in the air, she had no way to reproduce or analyze it. Deep down, it was all neural impulses, memories, particles. But some part of Josephine didn't want to analyze it. She didn't want to spoil every little magic for herself.

Josephine told nobody about her… condition. She did it to protect herself, and her loved ones. But part of the reason was that she knew, deep down, that if anyone knew what she could do, they would try to use her for their own purposes.

And Josephine had plans of her own.

Cast On

The needles were bamboo, six inches or so in length, streaks of rainbow stain running down their length. The yarn was Angora wool, pure white. She had seen a skein in a local craft shop and studied it; this one in front of her was purer, whiter, superior in every regard.

She inhaled deeply, exhaled. She began the home row, wrapping, threading, wrapping, threading. She inhaled deeply, exhaled. Wrap, thread.

The Headache dimmed, ever so slightly. It was a proper noun at this point. The headache began on a Sunday afternoon, remained through the evening, and she felt it still the next morning. That was thirteen years ago. Her…condition rendered painkillers unusable; anything that could impair her judgment could expose her. She couldn't let her guard down. She could never let her guard down.

Inhale, exhale. Wrap, thread. Eighty-eight stitches on the home row, then she inserted her free needle into the loop nearest the end of the needle. The Headache dimmed ever so slightly more. Josephine smiled, knitting and purling down the row. She didn't have much interest in the end result, an end pillow for a love seat, but the point was the repetition. The relaxation. An audiotape of Pachebel's Canon in D played in the background, and the headache dimmed further.

"I hardly see the point of further discussion," the old man said. smirking. The smirk was always there. "You never seem to unearth anything new."

"You claim you're here voluntarily," the researcher said. "If you're so annoyed by our line of questioning, you can simply leave, can't you?"

"That would be remarkably impolite, I feel," the man said. "I simply

think you're not having an adequate amount of fun with this."

"Fun?" the researcher asked. "SCP-343, this is my job. My job is to make new discoveries into beings such as yourself, and there is no part of you inclined to help me. You would be more than happy to lead me on a wild goose chase of contradiction and invention until my superiors sent me to a microbiology lab in the Arctic Circle."

The old man paused for the first time in their conversation. "That was remarkably forthright, Dr. Castile. I admire forthrightness. I see so little of it from individuals such as yourself, researchers, bureaucrats. Very well, I'll tell you a secret. I'll tell you something I haven't told any of your people before. Lean close, Richard."

The researcher, taken aback for a moment, leaned his head close to the other man in the room. The old man across the table leaned close as well.

"Richard, I have no idea how I got here."

Josephine was well into her third row of the pillow when she realized the headache had almost completely faded away. She was amazed. It had been literally years since she had felt so at peace. She had a list, a very, very long list of ways she had tried to find relaxation, tried to find peace, from her burdens. Her burdens never ended. *So many enemies,* Josephine had thought (she would not let those thoughts get in the way of her knitting). *So much work to be done, all the time.* Josephine felt the throbbing intensify momentarily, then fade again. Her hands bobbed forward, caught the yarn, pulled backward, and formed the next stitch. One step at a time. Each motion deliberate, yet inevitable. Each step optional, yet destined.

The headache was gone. She felt so much relief; she had been so burdened, burdened with the work of evading the Beast. That was her name for those so-called "scientists", those animals that hunted beings that were different than they were. Her Inquisition. Her witch hunters. On days when she questioned herself, days when she doubted herself, she wondered if she really was a witch. Something unnatural. Something that needed to be confined.

The yarn was perfect, floating in the air in front of her. The skein unraveled itself, feeding inch after inch, foot after foot into her handiwork. She had seen a skein in a local craft shop and studied it. She had created this one from pure thought, pure imagination; she had vibrated quantum foam and Platonic form and rearranged molecules and humors and atoms into something new, something that had never existed in the universe before. This was what she did. This was what God or nature made her to do, and she would do it. The headache returned for a moment, then passed as she began a new row.

"You don't know why you're here?" Researcher Castile asked. "You're God, you're here of your own will, but you don't remember doing it?"

"Did you…I mean, that isn't…I lied, child," the old man, SCP-343, said to the other in the room. "It is tricks, games. I play with you, as I always have." The old man's eyes stopped tracking the researcher in front of him. "I am here and God and always will- -be here- -lied, child, it is tricks- -" The old man jerked forward suddenly, ramming his head against the top of the table. His arms hung limply by his sides as he rammed his head against the table again.

"What are you—"

"Gerald Clifton, Cleveland, Ohio," the old man slurred through a broken nose and several broken teeth, blood streaming from a gash in his forehead. "I was born in 1912, please. Let me die. I feel it controlling me. She controls me. She'll come back any minute."

"What are you talking about?"

"It isn't me talking. When you talk to me. 'God' is what it wants you to see me as. It watches you. It sits inside me and makes me talk. Kill me. Let me die. It will come back for me, it will lie to you again." The old man seemed his age for the first time that Researcher Castile could recall. Seemed…human. Seemed normal.

"You're being controlled by an external force? Is that what you're telling me?"

"Let me die," the old man pleaded, tears streaming down his face, blood dripping into his eyes. "Let me die free, please."

Josephine neared the end of her sixth row when she realized something was amiss. The headache had left her, but it pulsed ever so slightly as she paused. *Too relaxed,* she thought. *I let go of one of them.*

She closed her eyes and her mind left the room, the house, the area code that her body inhabited. It traveled from one predetermined location to another, isolated location. They would have been impossible to find if she didn't know exactly what she was looking for. The people who had built prisons on those locations had designed them to be impossible to find. She checked containment chambers across half a dozen Sites before she found what she was looking for at Site 17. *Gerald,* she thought. *I'm so sorry I needed to use you.*

She concentrated further and found herself in the same room- -

---

Researcher Castile was furiously scribbling notes. "Gerald, how long have you been controlled by this entity?"

"I have no idea," the still-sobbing old man replied. "So long. Most of my life. She put me here. She wanted you to find me. She wanted you to catch me. She watches me, and watches you through me. She needs spies. She knows what you would do to her. She fears you. So many others. She's so old, at least a century, maybe closer to two. She's so tired."

Castile perked at this. "More? Other beings controlled by the same entity?"

"Many," the old man replied. "I can tell you at least that- -" The old man stopped talking suddenly, his eyes closing, his head sagging downward.

His head rose, his eyes locking on Researcher Castile, and Richard knew he was looking at someone different. Something different.

"So smart," said the voice coming from the old man's mouth, contempt dripping from each word. "So lucky. Such a breakthrough. Such a promotion," the voice said. "I bet you can already see the commendation."

"Am I speaking to—" A flash of light blasted across the table. Castile tried to speak, heard only croaks; he had been rendered mute.

"So lucky," the voice repeated, the air in the room seeming to circulate faster around the old man. "How lucky are you now? Think you're so smart. Hunting. Think you're such a good hunter. Think you're all such good hunters. Worthless. God, so worthless." The old man did not rise; rather, the chair he sat in seemed to melt into the air, the table rolled forward without effort, and the old man suddenly was standing at his full height.

"Think you caught God. You caught a drifter, fool. Think you're studying God. God studies you, you fool. You child. I study you. Every cruelty. Every injustice. Think you can catch me."

"Wh….what are…" Castile croaked.

"Forget it," the old man's voice said, and Castile forgot. The notes he had written disappeared, graphite pulling off of the page and reforming on the pencil. Another chair materialized behind the old man, and the old man's form sat within. Castile felt something… missing, felt something leaving him. Felt something *gone.*

The feeling lasted only a moment, then he began. Nothing unusual here for Castile; just another SCP, another containment test. Just a moment of discomfort, nothing more. Foundation researchers felt that uneasy feeling all the time. Nothing unusual here.

"Okay, beginning interaction with SCP-343," Castile said, looking at the smirk on SCP-343's face. The smirk that was always there.

The headache returned as Josephine returned to her body. *Stupid girl,* she thought. *Stupid, stupid, stupid. Almost gave it all away. Almost let them find you.* She forced herself to focus on the headache, make it stronger. *You deserve this. Stupid girl.*

Throbbing, blinding pain drilled through her head. *Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.*

She was floating fully in the air now, and the pain in her head bloomed brighter until she screamed. A bright flash of light. She opened her eyes and looked around. Her anger faded into shame. She reconstituted some clothing around herself and disappeared.

MEMORANDUM
LEVEL 5 CLEARANCE ONLY
CODEWORD: "GREEN KING"

FROM: OPERATIVE AMBER
TO: OPERATIVE MAGNUS

TWO MORE EVENTS DISCOVERED. INTERVIEW BETWEEN SITE 17 RESEARCHER AND **SCP-343**. VIDEO ATTACHED. RESEARCHER WAS COMPLETELY AMNESTIZED BEYOND ANY KNOWN CHEMICAL METHODS; MRI SUGGESTED CHEMICAL PATHWAYS AND NEURAL DEVELOPMENT OF MEMORIES WAS LITERALLY REVERSED AND ELIMINATED. COVERT VIDEO SURVEILLANCE OF SCP-343 AS PER "GREEN KING" PROJECT ALLOWED FOR RECOVERY. INTERVIEW ENDED AT 1523 HOURS ON 11/02/13.

KEYHOLE SATELLITES DETECTED AN ENERGY SURGE IN AN ISOLATED AREA OF SONORA DESERT AT 1525 HOURS. RESULTING CRATER RESEMBLED THERMOBARIC WARHEAD DETONATION SITE.

ANALYSIS ONGOING.

AMBER

Duty

Dr. Herrero walked slowly along the empty white corridor, like a condemned to the scaffold. His footsteps echoed on the cold walls, while several cameras observed him from the ceiling. He knew that he was being analyzed by the most sophisticated surveillance devices ever invented by man. If those cameras at any moment found anything abnormal, the security system would have activated the alarm in the whole building and the automatic sentry machine guns stationed near the door at the end of the corridor, capable of tearing any intruder into pieces in a few seconds, would have blown him away.

Hilarious, he thought. *The defenses would do nothing against the one they're actually afraid of.*

Nothing happened. Dr. Herrero arrived in front of the massive steel door resembling a monolithic tombstone. He said, with a calm and determined tone that didn't show the storm of emotions weighing in his heart, "Dr. Robert Herrero, Clearance Level 5, Access Code 09-42-8695." The microphone above his head registered his words, and the sentry turrets, which hadn't stopped pointing at him since when he arrived there, immediately disengaged themselves and started guarding the corridor again. He pressed his hand on the digital fingerprint sensor and the enormous door opened without a sound.

It. It. They always called her "it". Like an animal. Like an object. Like something worthless.

Robert entered the elevator, as empty as the rest of the facility, and the door closed behind him. Even there, he was constantly monitored by video cameras. He didn't pay them any attention, and, as he had done many other times, pressed the single, big grey button on the wall of the lift, which started descending into the darkness. Dr. Herrero crossed his arms and waited, giving an

absent look to his reflection in the elevator's mirror. Time had not been gentle with him. He was still good looking for his age, but his face was marked by wrinkles, his hair grey and his right cheek crossed by a long, thin scar. He touched it gently, thinking that, maybe, the end of that story was finally near.

Am I ready? I know what they'll ask me. Am I ready?

The elevator reached the floor, 400 metres under the Italian surface. The secret bunker didn't have a name; it was built to host the most important meetings of the Foundation, and the Foundation wasn't in the habit of giving a place a name if it didn't officially exist. As the door opened, Dr. Herrero was greeted by two men in black uniforms. Robert knew one of them, the German, Captain Strauss. He was rapidly making a career for himself, and his presence there made Herrero think about his son, Martin. Made him think about how much Martin hated him. What hurt Robert the most was that Martin *had* a good reason to hate him.

Strauss saluted him. "Greetings, Dr. Herrero," he said in awkward English. "I have been ordered to inform you that the assembly is about to begin. Your presence is required as soon as possible." Robert nodded and walked down the gently sloping hallway, heading to the conference room. All his confusion disappeared during that walk, supplanted by a sense of urge and anxiety. After all, he was a member of the Foundation, and he had made vows to it. Most of the researchers laughed at those vows, laughed at the old words. *Secure, contain, protect.* Robert lost a lot for those vows, and they were all he had left. He had lost his wife. He had lost his sons. The words were what he hadn't lost.

Arriving in front of the room, Dr. Herrero stopped, revised mentally the information he had, breathed deeply to calm himself, and opened the door.

The room was occupied by a large, round mahogany table. Around it there were almost two dozen people, speaking in a low tone. There were members from every secret department of the Foundation, though oddly not a single member of the Senior Staff. Robert noted in particular three figures, two men and a woman, in black business suits. He had never seen them before. As soon as he walked into

the room, Dr. Jonathan Redwood, the American presiding over the meeting, welcomed him. “Hello, Robert. We were waiting for you. Please, have a seat.” Robert walked to the nearest empty chair and glanced at his colleagues; most looked nervous and stressed. *This probably feels awkward for them,* Robert thought. Redwood stood up.

"Gentlemen’’, said Redwood. "Before we begin, I’d like to remind you all that this meeting is classified Level 5-Black, as per protocol GK-09-Black, and what we are going to discuss today is classified for all individuals without level 5, O5, or GK-X clearance. Our orders come from the director of Project Green King, and to him and him alone do we report our actions.” He looked at the people around him. "Is that clear?’’ Everyone nodded.

"Good. In that case, we can begin." he said, clearing his throat. “As you have been informed, Project Green King is focused on the containment of an entity considered one of the most powerful beings the Foundation has ever faced. This being is a reality bender identified as Entity HL-49, or by its original codename, 'Green King.' This entity may have existed for years, maybe decades, before its interactions with the organizations predating the Foundation. At some point after this "discovery", it began to investigate us. Our best psychological profile—"

"Guess," one of the dark-suited men said, his Krakow accent showing. "Your best guess."

Dr. Redwood cleared his throat, looked around nervously. "Our profile suggests that it was scared. It knew that, if we captured it, we’d eventually find a way to keep it contained forever.” Redwood stopped, drank a sip of water and began talking again. "To obtain the information it needed to escape us, the Green King resorted to an ingenious strategy, as Operative Magnus will now explain you. Magnus?”

The dark-suited heckler from before stood up. “Thank you, Dr. Redwood. Green King, thanks to its abilities, managed somehow to create a reality bender under its control using only an ordinary man. This person, contained by us, is SCP-343. His infiltration was total, and after him came others, but for a long time we didn't suspect

anything. And this gave the Green King enough time to spy us…spy on us." Magnus shook his head at the English phrase.

"Today, we have uncovered three different entities within the Foundation that worked for the Green King," Magnus continued. "And we would have never discovered we were being spied upon at all were it not for the Green King's difficulties in controlling its puppets.'' Magnus stopped for a second, then resumed talking: "It made a mistake. During an attempt to gather information, the entity appears to have suffered some sort of episode or break; during this, its puppet, a young Palauan girl, was freed from its control and began confessing to us that it had been "possessed," as she put it, by a being that was giving it anomalous abilities and monitoring its interactions with Foundation personnel. In combination with the already extant evidence of the Green King's existence that the Foundation had, we were able to deduce this particular entity's involvement. That was the beginning of our problems. It became more careful, more shrewd, it found methods to prevent us from finding it. We continued looking for it, winning some battles, losing others. The situation, however, remained somewhat stable. Back then, the Green King was a powerful reality bender, but still a reality bender like many others, simply trying to escape from us.''

Magnus lowered his voice. "Operative Amber will continue the briefing from this point." He sat, and the black-suited woman sitting beside him stood up.

"On 11 February 1974, during our sole offensive measure to date, two unnamed mobile task forces launched a direct assault upon a suburban home in eastern Pennsylvania where it was believed the Green King was basing its operations at that time."

"Its base was in a populated town?" one of the other, unnamed researchers asked.

"This is not a press conference," Operative Magnus said. "Please remain silent throughout the briefing, Taurus." He turned to the woman. "Please continue."

"During the attack," Amber continued, "two civilians were killed. Judging from radio transmissions from operating agents in the field,

the civilians were between the ages of eight and fifteen years of age, both male. Entity HL-49 was engaged moments thereafter, the entity apparently having discovered the deaths of the two civilians in the house. A screaming was heard over the radio just before contact with the assault force was lost entirely. Moments afterward, an explosion was registered within the on-site fission reactor of Site 86, from which the assault was launched. The Site was lost with all hands."

The room sat in silence while the assembled individuals absorbed this information. Operative Amber continued moments later.

"Event E-GK-04 was one of the largest attacks against the Foundation ever recorded in our history. Perhaps most frighteningly, our psychological analysis of the Entity suggests that its restraint came primarily out of a lack of thorough intelligence gathering."

"Restraint?" a voice in the room said.

Operative Amber paused, looked at the speaker. "The Entity's restraint in not killing every man and woman working for the Foundation was due to ignorance. It didn't take the time to track us all down, then burned down one of its best leads; one of its operatives was working out of that Site. The annihilation of Site 86 was, in the end, just a self-defence act, and the Green King kept running away without any actively hostile action against us, but it was starting to break down mentally. It might have lost its mind entirely. Then, it…" Amber paused a moment, cleared her throat. She briefly made eye contact with Herrero, looked down at her notes. "Several years later—"

"I can tell the story from here out," Herrero said. Robert stood up, slowly, while the people in the room looked at him. His blue eyes seemed like trying to incinerate Amber. He knew she knew the story; at least, her version of it, but he was nevertheless raging. It wasn't her place. "Sit down," he said to Amber. "Now.'' The wrath in his voice made the woman turn pale slightly, and she sat.

"I was twenty-seven when I met her, my wife." Herrero continued. "We met in a park one night, late at night, later than either of us should have been out. We were both running away from something,

wandering, hoping to find something better, and we found each other. She told me about her first love, the breakup. I told her about mine. I told her a little bit about the Foundation, some of it a cover story, some of it…maybe more than I should have. She told me about her job, how much she hated it, how much she—"

"I'm sorry, I don't understand how this is relevant—"

"You can wait a goddamned minute, Jeff. Yeah, I know I'm not supposed to call you by your names. But you dragged me in here, and you know what you're asking me to do, and I know what you're asking me to do, so you can sit through my little pity party." Herrero sighed. "It was a quick courtship, a quick…it was just all so *fast.* I fell in love with her. We were happy, for the first time in our lives. That was all I knew."

"One morning, right around four o'clock, we were asleep. I was restless, I got up and went to the kitchen. Right at that moment, there was an explosion. Explosions. An attack. I was a desk worker, I had no experience with what was happening. I was knocked unconscious by some force. When I woke up, I was blindfolded, tied to a chair. A voice kept asking me questions, random questions. Pain happened. I blacked out."

"The Green King used torture? Can't it—" The black-suited man stopped, seeing the look Magnus gave him. Robert couldn't see that look, but he was sure the operative wouldn't be interrupting again.

"No," Robert said. "Two mobile task forces swarmed our house, took me into custody. She had left already, had known what was coming. The Foundation had figured it out somehow. It was just another operation for them." Robert looked up at the ceiling. "She knew I worked for the Foundation. It was infiltration for her, at least at the beginning. Maybe the whole time. I lost my wife, and I'll never know if she felt anything for me or not or if she used me to get to the Foundation. I'll never know if she thinks I set her up. I'll never have an answer to that I can believe. Ever."

The room was silent as the implications set in.

Redwood stood up and coughed, embarrassed. Then he spoke:

"After… after this Event, E-GK-06, the Green King became actively hostile to the Foundation, and the leaders of the Green King Project decided to make its existence a secret to everybody but a few personnel. This happened twenty-five years ago. And now, I'll let Operative Taurus conclude.'' Then he sat, and he looked sideways at Robert, feeling bad for him. Robert looked like he had lost all energy, and simply sat there, staring at the table.

Operative Taurus, a corpulent Hispanic, stood up: "Since E-GK-06, the Green King has become more hostile, dangerous and aggressive to the Foundation as time passed. As years gone by, the deterioration of its mental and moral conditions, which had stopped during its relationship with Dr. Herrero, resumed at an even faster pace. Now, we think it is at a final stage. As the psychological evaluations say, the Green King is tired, exhausted, and doesn't want to fight or hide anymore, and these discouragement and depression can lead to unpredictable consequences. As you know, four days ago we had two more Events, and yesterday Site 40 was attacked. We know the Green King is involved.''

"Thus, the Green King Project leaders have decided to eliminate this threat once and for all. The Neutralization Committee expressed their agreement, and our R&D division has developed a weapon that we believe will be able to render the Green King harmless for enough time to kill it. All what we need'', he said, looking at the people around him, "are the right time and place, and a bait to lure it and maintain it in the same spot for enough time to let us activate the weapon."

The people around the table started talking all together, and Taurus had to speak up to make them stop. "It will have to be a carefully chosen bait. Considering its hate towards us and its powers, we'll have to choose the right person, someone able to speak with it for several minutes without being annihilated.'' He looked at Robert. "Dr. Herrero, we think the best candidate for this task is you.''

The room was again silent. Everyone was speechless. Robert seemed not having heard at first, then he started emitting a guttural sound that made the people around him shiver, while his shoulders winced. The laughter exploded, harsh and raucous. The laughter of an insane man. It seemed like boiling water was gurgling in the

man’s throat, and when it faded, its echo resounded on the walls. Dr. Herrero stood up, his face darkened and pointing towards the floor. He spoke with a low and dreadful tone.

"You are asking me to help you kill the woman I love, trying to take advantage on an oath I took when I was too young to really understand it and that I am too honest, or stupid, to stop observing. You take advantage on the fact that I haven’t seen her for decades, hoping I accept. Now tell me, you manipulative sons-of-bitches: why should I do it?’’

"Dr. Herrero," Magnus said, a frown flashing across his face.

"No, goddammit, I deserve an explanation. You tell me *exactly* why I haven't given enough yet."

"Robert."

Robert threw his hands up. His mind was confused, but in the great storm of thoughts, one of them stood mighty and beautiful, like a beacon in the darkness. *I would see her again.*

Am I ready? I know what they'll ask me. Am I ready?

He looked up, and a single, bright tear fell from his right eye.

"All right. I'll do it."

RE:

—ck from our music break, we'll do our weekly segment "Tuesday Update with Researcher James," where we bring everyone's favorite researcher live on-air to discuss the, uh, goings-on around the Foundation. We'll be back with Toone and Ames in the Evening after this special request, straight from…let's see…the janitorial staff at Site 382! Representing the outskirts of Seoul, we'll be back after this on your station, 98.3, WSCP.

Isun ganeul neukkyeobwa highlight, hi-hi-highlight, jigeum buteo michyeo bwa highlight, hi-hi-highlight
Gati gati ttwiyeo bwa ma eum daero jeulgyeo bwa, take it all, take it all, hi-highlight

Magazine tabil myeoneul jang shikhal spotlight, geu torok cham barae

wateon 4minute time
On mome jeonyuri
jjaritae teon feeling,
imi naneun algo iji the
fantasy

Naega naega naega
naega queen of
fashion, naega naega
naega naega queen
of motion
Ije buteo nareulbwa
naege nuneul ttejima,
coming, coming,
coming geudaero

Isun ganeul
neukkyeobwa
highlight, hi-hi-
highlight, jigeum
buteo michyeo bwa
highlight, hi-hi-
highlight
Gati gati ttwiyeo bwa
ma eum daero
jeulgyeo bwa, take it
all, take it all, hi-
highlight

Neol saro jabeul
holic, holic, holic, neol
yuhokha neun holic,
holic, holic
I make you crazy now
(deo nopi ollaga) you
make me crazy now,
just want it up, up, up,
up now

Drawing, drawing
sang sang motal neol

hyanghan strike, ije buteo shijagiya 4minute time
Tteugeo un nae show time, bultaneun nae soul live, ije modu heundeureo bwa hit to the beat

Naega naega naega naega queen of fashion, naega naega naega naega queen of motion
Ije buteo nareulbwa naege nuneul ttejima, coming, coming, coming geudaero
Isun ganeul neukkyeobwa highlight, hi-hi-highlight, jigeum buteo michyeo bwa highlight, hi-hi-highlight
Gati gati ttwiyeo bwa ma eum daero jeulgyeo bwa, take it all, take it all, hi-highlight

Jigeum buteo naye highlight, dubeon dashi eopneun soul fight
Nae mom jiseun slow, slow nae shim jangeun stop, stop
Pyeong sowa neun dalla now, isun gan

keep it right
Cheo eum buteo kkeu
kkajida nun ttejima
keep your eyes

4, 3, 2, 1, action

Isun ganeul
neukkyeobwa
highlight, hi-hi-
highlight, jigeum
buteo michyeo bwa
highlight, hi-hi-
highlight
Gati gati ttwiyeo bwa
ma eum daero
jeulgyeo bwa, take it
all, take it all, hi-
highlight

Neol saro jabeul
holic, holic, holic, neol
yuhokha neun holic,
holic, holic
I make you crazy now
(deo nopi ollaga) you
make me crazy now,
just want it up, up, up,
up now

(fade)

Okay okay okay, we're back.
Coming off of that hit,
"Highlight," by the Korean
pop band 4minute, we have
our weekly chat with
Researcher James. Toone,
do we have James on the
phone yet? No? Well, I'm
sure the little guy's having

trouble with his fifth-grade math homework. Heh, heh. In the meantime, we've got the best news the Overseers pay us to allow you to know, only several hours after it hits the intranet: this is Foundation World News Report!

theme song: orchestrals, sound of telegraph

Okay, first off the wire, from Site 55, we have the interesting story of one Researcher Torres, whose recent demotion to Level 1 couldn't have come as much of a shock to her. Seems that Torres was a bit of a prankster and decided that she was going to have a little fun with some fellow Foundation personnel and a couple of instances of SCP-531. Torres sets up two of the little cat statues outside of the Site breakroom on remote-controllable rotating platforms, and held onto the remote for herself. Security footage (which is pretty hilarious, just so we're being honest here) shows four hours of the same people walking up to the breakroom to get coffee, stopping in the doorway, and turning around. The distraction effect from 531

had some interesting side effects; personnel turning around, walking into one another, turning back, trying again, turning back, ad infinitum. Then, when 55 had a Euclid containment breach…and the only way to the Euclid wing was through the breakroom…Needless to say, two Mobile Task Forces were startled from their lunches and Researcher Torres is going to get some good experience with a mop.

(rimshot sound)

All right, settle down, settle down. A few other quick reports. Seismographs reported some earthquakes in Arizona, outside of a predictable seismic area. Transportation snafus have delayed all personnel transfers from Site 40 in Pennsylvania, so if you're on third shift and waiting on relief from Lancaster, you better put on another pot of coffee. The Mennonite cavalry will not be coming to your rescue, I'm afraid.

(opening to "Amish Paradise" begins)

A couple more pieces; food resupply to Site 17 has been delayed by — whoops,

getting some blackboxes here. Bust out the emergency rations and say your daily prayer to Saint Bowdler of the Expunged Order of Redaction. A couple of blackouts in New Mexico have cut off communications with Research Site Beta-23; Our Lady of the Overwatch says cell towers are down, higher-ups have access to black comm channels but regular communications out are going to take a little while. In honor of all you beautiful Anabaptists stuck in traffic in Site 40, here's Weird Al.

Green Pawn

Site-40

A young boy walked lazily around Site 40, watching brooding soldiers and overworked scientists make their daily rounds. He was a janitor, with access only to what he needed to fix, and the general workings of the Foundation. There was nothing to hide from him; all sensitive materials were either secured within locked rooms or on endlessly secured computers. Usually.

He eventually wandered to the cafeteria, moderately filled, with very little noise. The janitor got a small snack and began to exit, but quickly stopped himself as he saw a woman walk through. Very few new people joined the staff, and those who did almost always seemed slightly unsure of themselves. She was different. She seemed like she could stop a bullet with her gaze.

She passed through quickly, with a slightly rushed gait. Silently, the janitor followed her. He knew that it wasn't in his best interests, but he had both a curiosity and an understanding that most people didn't even see in him in the first place.

He watched her dodge through many corridors, eventually stopping at a door he had memorized over many months.

He had been at the site for months, and he could recognize nearly all the staff, but, every couple of weeks, he saw a group of people, small in number, make their way into an unmarked room, and after many hours, file out once again. The members of this group, from what he had gathered from the members of his staff's site, had no noticeable connection. Physiologists, physicists, tacticians, every field under the sun. These shadowy people were very secretive, even by the Foundation's standards, usually not even conversing with other researchers out of purely technical matters. He tried to keep a watch out for them, but if he even saw the edge of their glare, he inched out as fast as possible.

Today, he waited in the cafeteria for the woman to pass through again. He didn't know if she would, but he was on break and had a few minutes to wait and watch. Soon, she arrived. As she walked through, along with three researchers in the site's staff, he heard a researcher a couple of tables away attempt to joke with some half-asleep coworkers about something work-related.

"…explosion with four forty seven. It affects spacetime so everything seems green! Huh, whadda ya think?"

"You're drunk?" The young woman was as visibly bored as she could be without being openly rude.

"No, you're just jealous! Amazing Green, I'm gonna call it. Patent it. Market it. They're gonna call me the Green King before I'm—"

The eccentric researcher's last word echoed as he raised his voice to emphasize. The four professors suddenly stopped in their tracks, and glanced over their shoulders, a mix of anger and suspicion on their faces. They listened for half a minute more, and after realizing what the researcher was talking about, left to their own lives.

An unknown distance away, a woman stood, feeling the world around her. She was angry - as she commonly was. She hated anger. She hated hate. She hated herself. She wanted peace. Tranquility. Freedom. She was trapped, needing to control her actions so she wouldn't be chased by…them. She hated them, only because they were relentless. They hunted her. She knew that they feared her, knew she was capable of changing the world. They weren't the only ones, but they were the most persistent. The constant thorn in her side.

She lost the feeling. When someone thought of her who knew what she could do, they always thought of her in the same way. She eventually found a way to track those thoughts, track those who knew about her. She could erase their memories, or otherwise dispose of them, as long as it was under the radar.

Then, one day, they disappeared. Every person who knew her slowly faded off her inner radar. She didn't know what they did, and

she couldn't figure it out. She spent months looking for any sign of where they had gone. Finally, she hit on an isolated location in Alberta. She couldn't be certain, but it was a building with foot traffic going in and out and she couldn't hear any thoughts at all. Someone was hiding something, and she had a guess who.

She stopped reminiscing, and focused on finding someone to throw the Foundation on a wild goose chase. Her mind stumbled upon a person with a dynamic love of bizarreness and creativity that some would describe as "insanity". She saw it as a useful trait under the circumstances. She quickly decided to turn him into her own personal distraction, letting her mind rest as her new pawn wreaked havoc.

Site-40

As the janitor finished mopping up the last hallway of his graveyard shift, he felt the ground shake as an ungodly metallic screech echoed down from the center of the site.

He heard many women and men yell to each other as emergency klaxons started to wail. He quickly retreated to a side hallway as a squadron of soldiers rushed towards the commotion. The boy decided to attempt to find out the cause of the commotion. He had heard of containment breaches, but there were very few SCP-related rooms in the inner structure.

He wandered into a nearby office, attempting to find a reason behind the alarm, and futilely started checking the locked computers until he heard many loud cracks coming from outside the office. He quickly hid under a desk, hearing bullets ricochet and men and women scream.

The clanking grew closer and closer. He quickly made his way into the darkest corner of the room, wide eyes watching the door to the hallway. He suddenly felt the air rush by him as a heavy-built man flew through the wall and into a bookshelf, hanging onto threads of consciousness.

Through the newly-made hole in the wall, he heard a drunken voice

half-singing, half-screeching a small poem, with a sadistic snicker.

"Oh Mother, Mother, she hates you so,
She hates you and wished you would go,
And let her be,
Or wipe you from histor-eeeee~"

That tune stuck in the boy's mind, shoveled in next to the screams of pain and maelstrom of whizzing bullets.

He jumped at a sound behind him. He turned to see the solider attempting to get to his feet, despite bleeding from head to toe. The janitor, despite his fears, helped the guard to his feet, and saw him stumble back to the hole, kneeling on one damaged leg, using his assault rifle to attempt to fell the singing madman. The singing stopped for a second, and in the silence that followed, he heard a low growl before hundreds of small objects flew through the wall, scraping him in many places, leaving large gashes on his torso as he finally, realizing inevitably the end of his own bleeding life, wandered to the hole in the wall.

He saw many bloody corpses laid about, many with scratches just like his own. In the middle of the carnage, a skinny, blond haired man whistled the accursed tune that the janitor had heard. There were small pieces of debris - splinters of wood, concrete blocks the size of a mans' fist, and twisted metal, slowly orbiting around the man in a fluid, deliberate fashion. The same debris had just punctured hundreds of holes in the room he was in.

The janitor, blood dripping from his hair, watched as the woman from before held a stone tomahawk, its head pointing at the interloper. She muttered a single word, and a blinding flash enveloped the hallway.

The boy fell limp as the woman heard the tomahawk make a firm "thump" in the intruder's skull.

FROM: MARTIN KRAKE, DIRECTOR, SITE 40
TO: Prof. G. Quaero, Foundation Research

An attack has occurred on my site. Structural damage was moderate, and loss of personnel was severe. When I attempted to inspect the damage, I was stopped by several officers claiming themselves to be of "GK" clearance. They have informed me that they have taken over operations of the assaulted area. I have been told I will be returned control after they finish their investigation.
Please advise.

FROM: OVERWATCH COMMAND

TO: DIRECTOR KRAKE, SITE 40

MESSAGE SENT 2-17-20 INTERCEPTED.

AUTHORITY OF INDIVIDUALS IN POSSESSION OF GK-LEVEL AUTHORIZATION IS TO BE CONSIDERED VALID AT LEVEL 5 RANK.

NO FURTHER COMMUNICATION RELATING TO GK-LEVEL AUTHORIZATION, PERSONNEL, OR ACTIVITIES IS TO BE MADE TO ANY SOURCE.

NO FURTHER INQUIRIES ARE TO BE MADE.

O5-4

Compromised

“We’ve got the results back.”
“And?”
“Three positively compromised, five more with a confidence of 50% or greater.”
“Good. Shuffle them around.”
“Yes, sir.”

Clearance Level GK-5

Eyes Only

Special Intelligence Protocol

Project Codename: Green King

In response to the nature of Entity HL-49, codename "Green King", Intelligence Protocol - is now is effect. As prescribed by Protocol - , all personnel and resources allocated to Project Green King are to be evenly divided into two separate operations. Overwatch has agreed to supply false information regarding Foundation actions to one of the above operations. Any personnel of clearance below GK-5 are not to be informed of this protocol change. Which operation is receiving false information should be changed on an irregular basis.
If it is positively determined that an agent assigned to Project Codename: Green King has been compromised by the enemy, he or she may or may not be moved from one Green King operation to the other. This is to be done without regard to which operation is currently receiving false information.

Watch and remember. Remember for me.

I really need to get more sleep. I keep dozing off when I'm supposed to be working. Sooner or later, Dr. Alloway is gonna notice, and I'm really not interested in finding out what happens to people who start falling asleep on the job at the Foundation.

Come on, David. You're an intelligence officer working for the most secretive organization on the planet. Show some professionalism.

All right, snap out of it. What's next? Anomalous energy readings in the Sonora desert. Doesn't really seem like the kind of thing we'd usually be concerned about, but Doctor blackbox here seems to think it has something to do with the King.

The King. Why do we call him that, anyway? Always makes the think of Elvis.

Alright. So. According to this, the energy release was picked up by at least four Foundation detectors, so it was probably picked up by some civilians too. I'll file a request for a misinformation campaign. Let's call it nuclear testing. No, that might have some political repercussions. Freak lightning storm? I don't know enough about meteorology to know if that would happen. No, we'll call it a meteor strike. Big enough to cause a nice boom, small enough to be destroyed by the impact. Have a team go out and make a decent sized crater, maybe get someone from NASA to sign off on it, and that'll probably be enough to fool most people. I'll forward it to Sarah, though; she's pretty good at picking out loose ends.
Now, on to the real business at hand. Where's our King? Well, let's try sending the energy data back to Doctor blackbox with a few security holds remo…

Good. Now stop. Forget.

…

I really need to get more sleep. I keep dozing off when I'm supposed to be working. Sooner or later, Dr. Alloway is gonna notice, and I'm really not interested in finding out what happens to people who start falling asleep at the Foundation.

I'm not getting paid enough for this. They keep me locked in this windowless bunker an undisclosed distance underground and make me sort files all day, and they wonder why my productivity's dropping? The Foundation would fall apart without the archivists. Let's hope that promotion request comes through.

Let's see what we have here…

Spending report for site 37 for last month. Classified. Forward to accounting.

Experiment report out of site 46. Classified. Defer to someone with higher clearance so they can file it with the relevant SCP.

Surveillance data from sector 367. Even if that wasn't classified, I don't know where that is. Archive under site 367 intel.

Project Codename: Green King. Classified. Divert to higher cleara…

Destroy it.

Marked for destruction. Goody. Now I have to go all the way down to the shredder…

Burn it.

I mean the incinerator.

You will watch for me.

I should be grateful. You know how many people in the Foundation would kill for a boring job like this? I should just be glad that I'm not getting shot, eaten, or god knows what else.

Still, I'm guarding a fucking hallway. There's not even anything here, as far as I know. It just connects one part of the site to the other. I mean, I understand the need for security—I've seen more containment breaches than I really like to think about—but it does make Overwatch look a little paranoid.

The ID scanner does most of my work for me, anyway. All I really

have to do is stop anyone who doesn't fit their ID.

…

Yeah, go ahead.

…

Whoa, slow down there, buddy. You gotta scan your card on the…

He is mine. Let him through.

Yeah, go ahead.

No matter how many times I do this, it doesn't get any easier. I understand why we have to do this, but knowing why and actually pulling the trigger are two different things. This isn't gonna be easy from a tactical standpoint, either. According to the briefing, this is supposed to be the most powerful thing any of us have ever gone up against. I already don't like reality benders, not after that bullshit seminar they put us through when we started training.

Alright, here we go. Focus.

…

It's not locked. Not a good sign.

…

There's nothing in here. Are we sure this is the right place?

…

Seriously. No furniture, no decorations, not even any fucking lights.

…

Shit. I can feel it now. I can fe*el h*er mind. I re*ally h*ope they're doing a good job *distra*cting her at the site.

…

It's *getting stronge*r. The *walls are b*ending and the room is *bigger*

*on t*he inside.

…

I can ***destroy*** hear her now. She's in m***defend***y head.

…

T*here she is. She hasn't seen us. This is our* chance.

…

No.

…

This is my chance.

…

Oh god. She knows we're here.

…

Stop.

…

…

…

Die.

Fik'ra

Abd al-Rashid bin Tannous adjusted himself again in the uncomfortable plastic chair provided to him. The Office for the Reclamation of Islamic Artifacts operated on a limited budget, it was true, and there was a logic to avoiding wasteful expenditures on luxuries such as comfortable furniture. The Director of the Office most certainly could not be seen making an exception for himself; or, phrased differently, *this* Director would never be seen making such an exception. Parviz Jafari, formerly of the Islamic Republican Air Force, formerly before that of the Imperial Iranian Air Force, was not one to tolerate frivolities. Particularly as a man who had spent the last decade publicly humiliating himself to maintain his cover as a retired general and conspiracy lunatic.

Director *né* General Jafari was presently concluding — *theoretically,* Abd al-Rashid thought to himself — what must have been a twenty-five minute long phone call to a granddaughter or great-granddaughter who lived somewhere just outside of Tehran. Never having had, or cared for the idea of, children, Abd al-Rashid was systematically incapable of conceiving of what a seven-year-old girl could find to occupy twenty-five minutes of time in conversation with a grown man. Particularly twenty-five minutes of time that Director Jafari was supposed to be spending chiding, actively berating, or demoting Abd al-Rashid. He didn't know if he should have been thankful for the extra time needed to gather his thoughts or cursed the little girl for giving him more time to be fearful. Neither had any particular moral weight for him.

"Yes, my darling, I will see you this weekend. Hmm? Yes, yes. Sleep tight, dear," he said, chuckling. "I love you." Still chuckling as he returned the telephone to the receiver, he said "You really know how to *kos nane kherse ghotbi*, don't you?"

Realizing he was the one being addressed and not the now-unavailable preadolescent, Abd al-Rashid shook his head. "I'm

sorry, s—"

"Oh, yes. That's right. You aren't fluent in Farsi. But we didn't recruit you as a linguist, did we? We recruited you as a man with command experience in covert operations." Director Jafari was still smiling as he continued, which Abd al-Rashid knew *very* well was a bad sign. "You came well recommended from our contacts in Ankara, you know. People who recognize…ah, here it is. "Field operative administration". That sounds suspiciously like a job that involves communication. You know, the thing where you speak to people? Possibly one of those jobs that involves working with others?"

Director Jafari then fell silent for a long time. This was not Abd al-Rashid's first time in this particular chair, and he knew he should say something, simply because that was the only way this would end without bloodshed. "Sir —"

"Fuck the polar bear."

The look of utter bafflement on Abd al-Rashid's face now would have been universal across time and space.

"I said 'you really know how to fuck the polar bear, don't you?' Persian expression. An operative I met once from Qā'idah-SCP once used a similar expression in English, ah…" Jafari paused for a moment before continuing, "'You really know how to shit the bed,' I believe the translation would go. To put it literally, 'You are remarkably, incredibly, unprecedentedly skilled at making my job profoundly difficult.'"

Abd al-Rashid was only certain of the depths of his superior's anger upon his realization that he had driven the man to use four adverbs in one sentence. The silent prayers to God in his head redoubled in intensity.

"Now, as for your behavior in Samothrace, I find myself at a bit of an impasse. You were and remain far and away the youngest man I have sent to perform a mission of that importance. I sent you there in command over Bijhan, for God's sake, a man with *three times* the number of years in the Organization as you have. Soothing that particular ego is not the easiest job in the world. That mission was

and remains far and away one of the most difficult to justify within our limited scope of operations. If we didn't have definitive proof that Qā'idah-SCP already had operatives within the anomaly, I doubt I could have reasonably authorized it in the first place."

Director Jafari rose to his full stature and glared deep into Abd al-Rashid's eyes. "So tell me what in the name of al-Buraq's venerable airborne *balls* kept you from holding your tongue around the Afsanites?"

Abd al-Rashid had seen past fear and through to the other side, apparently, because with only the mildest of stutters, he replied "Sir, they're *demonic*. They can't be of God."

The silence that pervaded the room made Abd al-Rashid feel optimistic for a moment. It was foolish, of course, to think that argument was going to fly. But for just a moment, he could imagine that this conversation would end without too much mo —

"Did owls shit in your brain *in utero*, or did they have the patience to wait until the delivery?"

Abd al-Rashid's heart dropped.

"I can barely accept that you *believe* such nonsense. I have profound *difficulty* believing that you took no time to develop a better reasoning before coming in here and defending a deformed and malnourished interpretation of the Qu'ran that sounds like you cribbed it from a fourteen-year-old's final paper at his village *madrasa* in fucking *Dhofar*! You come in here with — did you even fucking *read Sūrat al-Jinn*? Would you like me to see if I have a Qu'ran in some pitiful *torke char* dialect you can comprehend?"

Shame and fear turned to anger. "You *dare* to slander my heritage —"

"Oh, what *shame* I feel, confusing you with someone who finds ethnic slurs to be trivial and casually used in everyday conversation! Please, Muhammad, praise be unto you, descend from Jannah yourself and stay my fucking tongue, lest I offend this poor, parchment-skinned boy once more!"

Director Jafari came around his desk. "Allah said unto Mohammed, peace be unto him, 'Say this: "It has been revealed to me that a group of the *djinn* listened and said, 'Indeed, we have heard an amazing Qur'an. It guides to the right course, and we have believed in it, and we will never compare anyone with the Lord. And it teaches that exalted is the nobleness of our Lord, that has no spouse or child; and that the foolishness we have spoken about Allah has been an excessive transgression. And we had thought that mankind and the *djinn* would never speak about Allah a lie.'"'"

"Sir, we have only their word that they are the *djinn* spoken of in the Seventy-Second Surah of the Qu'ran," Abd al-Rashid said. "These… these *things* are not made of smokeless fire; I touched one of them during this expedition! Solid as you or I!"

"Yes, fool, this was reported to me as well, by the Afsahnite in question," Director Jafari said, pinching the bridge of his nose. "This is another transgression that you will pay for. But it is illusion, Abd; they have no physical form whatsoever. Their bodies are *fik'ra*, thought-stuff, pure idea. The Qā'idah-SCP would refer to them as "sapient memetic organisms", which translates poorly to Arabic. Suffice it to say that the *djinn* stood before you and put forth into your mind the thought of its appearance; when you reached out to where it stood, it put forth into your mind the thought of a corporeal body. Do I know if this is the literal third race created by God? No. Do I particularly care? Most assuredly not. Doctrine is for the Revolutionary Guard; results are for the ORIA."

Abd al-Rashid paused before his next words. "Sir, that…that very nearly borders on —"

"What, blasphemy? Heresy? Treason? Whatever combination of all three now exist in this iteration of the fatherland?" Director Jafari sat back behind his desk again. "The Supreme Leader has placed me and kept me in this place regardless of my adherence to any religious or political doctrine because I have accomplished the goal of protecting the homeland, the *Irānzamīn*, from our external threats. The Qā'idah-SCP would colonize us, their Insurgent counterparts would conquer us outright. The UN pigdogs would dilute us. The various gangs of capitalists would exploit us, the various bands of artists would corrupt us, the various stripes of pagan fanatics want

God knows what with us."

Jafari sighed, leaned across his desk, and continued. "We have our treaties with the Horizon Initiative when it suits us, but trust there is strained. You worked with them in one of the joint raids against the Clockworkers, didn't you? You understand this. Our primary advantages in this sorcerous cold war are the extensive campaigns we've undertaken to make *very* sure our enemies vastly underestimate our capabilities, and our alliance with the *djinn*. Any step you take that undermines the trust between our peoples undermines the land of our fathers. Do you understand that?" Jafari's face was sunken now, disappointed rather than angry; this revealed to Abd al-Rashid the extent of his years. "You are going to make this right. If you happen to eliminate some of your ridiculous prejudices on the way, that would be *marvelous*. But you *will* assuage those you have offended."

It was well understood by most veteran operatives within the Directorate that Parviz Jafari held an almost fatherly role over many of his employees, whether it was spoken aloud or not. The shame Abd al-Rashid felt at that moment made him understand how this was possible now with little difficulty. "I will, sir. Please, tell me what I need to do."

Businesslike again after that moment of vulnerability, Jafari reached into his desk and removed a thin manila folder. Handing it to Abd al-Rashid, he said, "These are instructions on where and when to meet up with your contact; details on how to access House Afseneh are restricted only to trusted individuals, and you will need to be accompanied by one such in order to reach it. It will be expected that you apologize to the *imam* of the House in person on behalf of the offended party, who is likely deployed elsewhere at the moment. The other documents in there deal with etiquette and protocol for interacting with the Afsenites; every House has different rules and procedures, and while I don't seriously expect you're familiar with *anything* of the sort, you need a familiarity with these rules more than you need to be able to wipe your own ass for the next three days, so I suggest you start reading. You will meet up with the contact tomorrow, so I suggest you spend that time reading."

"Yes, sir," Abd al-Rashid said. He stood, nearly saluted out of habit,

and walked out with the folder.

Director Jafari turned to the next piece of business on his desk. To nowhere in the room in particular, he said, in English, "You can come out now, you know. Nobody will be coming in for the next half hour."

A pause, and then a space beside the Director's bookshelf was occupied by a tall, pretty, fair-skinned woman. Aside from thin streaks of gray barely visible in her hair, she could easily have passed for a woman in her early thirties who had lived an unusually stressful life. *Not bad for a centenarian,* Jafari thought to himself.

"Is he nearly as good as you claimed?" the woman asked.

"I have high hopes for him," Jafari replied. "Are you less impressed?"

Josephine shrugged. "I must admit, I'm still working on my Arabic, but it didn't seem like the boy had a great deal of confidence."

Jafari chuckled. "He called Hami Faruhar of House Afsaneh a 'depraved ifrit', apparently. I told him he had to go to the Afsanites and apologize."

Josephine looked puzzled. "How do you expect him to get into…" She paused. "I take it I'm about to take a bit of a trip with the child?"

Jafari smiled. "Well, you had been saying you were wanting to get out of Tehran for a little while. And I think some of the heat has died down, at least from the GOC. You'll have protection from our people if the *magighasseb* come after you, as per our agreement."

"The m — oh, magekillers?"

" 'Wizard butchers', literally," Jafari said. "Close enough. Work on the Arabic, the Farsi, or both, or rely on the telepathy if need be, but you'll need to be the boy's guide among the Afsenites. Consider it the beginning of repaying a favor."

Josephine's face darkened almost imperceptibly, then returned to normal. "Fair enough. I suppose I'm attracting plenty of unwanted

attention on this part of the world from my enemies."

"That you are, dear," Jafari replied. "We will continue to protect you, but some…assistance in our operations now and then would be much appreciated."

"I can assist," Josephine replied, and faded away.

Jafari returned to the work on his desk.

Hava

The American woman standing near one of the stands in the marketplace was the giveaway that Abd al-Rashid bin Tannous was in the right place. Abd al-Rashid, in the glow of the cultural tolerance that he was ordered to take upon himself, repressed all of the negative thoughts about the almost certainly godless Western harlot that stood before him, while simultaneously trying to repress a sense of pride at doing so. He could tell her American origin from…well, it was nearly *sweating* from her pores. The inappropriate dress, the stern, impertinent, rude glare at the men walking past her.

"You would be the guide I was instructed to meet?" Abd al-Rashid said.

The American woman's visage took on the serene awe that is only found in the faces of children who have recently soiled themselves and individuals completely non-fluent in a language that is being spoken to them. "I rated Josephine," she stumbled through. "I… evaluating Josephine? I Josephine named." She paused, then shook her head.

Abd al-Rashid began to politely walk her through conversational Arabic when the world around him grayed out slightly, faded; it didn't pass away completely, but it gained a perceptible sheen of unreality. In the gray fog, Abd al-Rashid heard a voice speaking to him.

My name is Josephine, the voice said. *You'd be doing me a wonderful favor if you could get very, very startled by all of this now and move on to the "acceptance" stage post haste. I'm attracting enough attention as it is without you going apoplectic or drooling.*

Once the voice stopped, the world returned to normal. Abd al-Rashid was immediately cognizant of the stunned, nearly-idiotic expression on his face, and regained his outward composure as quickly as possible. "You, ah, you are a mind-reader?"

The woman paused for a moment, looking at Abd al-Rashid closely, as though inspecting his face for blemishes. *Sorry, it takes a moment for me to decode your thoughts. Yes, a telepath. Before you start, yes, I'm aware of the* hadiths *forbidding and condeming telepathy. Let me assure you that I am not of the devil Shaytan, that none of my thoughts are manipulated by him, and that I will not use this ability for spying or infiltration in your presence. Though I cannot universally say the same for the individuals we are about to meet.*

Abd al-Rashid was quickly adapting to the rather unusual situation, accepting the fading and refocusing of reality around him as necessary. "Do I need to speak for this to work?"

It helps, Josephine said. *Helps you focus thoughts into coherent words. I can work around its absence if you're uncomfortable, though.*

"No, no, it's fine," Abd al-Rashid said. "Shall we proceed?"

Yes, certainly, Josephine said. *We need to enter the aperture. Close your eyes.* Abd al-Rashid did so. *Clear your mind. I need you to focus on a very specific thought.* Abd al-Rashid nodded.

I want you to think about the first time that you realized that, one day, your mother was going to die.

Abd al-Rashid looked at Josephine, cocked his head to one side, frowned, then closed his eyes again. A moment passed.

A short whistling tune came from behind where Abd al-Rashid was standing. He opened his eyes, turned, looked behind him. There was an enclosed market stand where one had not been previously. Josephine walked past him into the opening. *When did these stands start being enclosed?* Abd al-Rashid thought before following.

The building looked about the size of Abd al-Rashid's small apartment bathroom in Shemiran from the outside, but once he crossed into the stand, the world behind him faded away into nonexistence. Suddenly, without looking around, without *needing* to look around to confirm, he *knew* that, if he were to turn around, the doorway he just walked through would be gone. He *knew* he was

surrounded on all sides by an infinite space exactly similar to the clay brick world he saw in front of him. And he *knew* that if he were to turn around and walk away, he could spend the entire remainder of his natural life searching and he would never find anything in that infinite space other than the man — no, the boy, possibly eleven years old — sitting placidly in front of him, smoking a cigarette.

Josephine spoke in English towards the boy, who glanced briefly at her before wincing and looking away. The boy said some words in return to her in English. The back and forth continued for a few moments before Josephine nodded and walked past the boy, disappearing a few seconds later.

"Wait, where did —"

"You need to hope you know what you're doing," the boy said in perfect, unaccented Istanbul Turkish, staring into space in a trancelike fashion. "Whatever plan you have in mind, she has planned ten ways to kill you without deviating from whatever expectations are had of her. She is trying very hard to behave like a human being, but some part of her knows that it will never be successful, and will certainly never balance out the things she has done. She has a self-control that will never belie how close she is to snapping and taking everyone around her down with her."

Abd al-Rashid continued staring, never having closed his mouth from any of the previous three miracles he had witnessed in the past ten minutes. "Did you read my mind?" he asked.

"Hmm?" the boy said, snapping his eyes on Abd al-Rashid before taking a drag from his cigarette. "Oh, I could give a *aşk meleği göt lalesi* less regarding how you handle her. I simply distrust anyone with too much *hava* for me to even look upon them. Now *siktir git* to House Afsenah so I can discorporealize this aperture and this child's form. Just walk past me like the *gerçeklik bükücü* did and be on your way.

Abd al-Rashid was ready to ask who taught this boy to reference the orifices of shamed females in casual conversation, but he was yet more baffled by the terms he had used to refer to Josephine. *Too much…aura?* he thought. *And what is a "reality bender"?* He started

to ask the boy, but the child stood and walked away from where he was sitting, disappearing in a way that caused Abd al-Rashid to *know* he would not be coming back.

He looked at the place where the boy had pointed for him to walk, shrugged, and followed.

The feeling of transitioning from that…nether place, or whatever it was, into House Afseneh was much more anticlimactic than Abd al-Rashid had been expecting. He remembered being beside the boy's little table, walking past it. He remembered admiring the fine Persian rug on the floor of the reception room of the House. He then realized that he remembered nothing of the intervening time.

Josephine was beside him. Abd al-Rashid knew this from the sound of breathing. He was too stunned by the scene around him to actually notice anything else. The room was…*opulent* would have failed to describe it. Fine chandeliers in many different styles hung from the ceilings. The walls themselves were frescoes that seemed to — *no*, he realized, *they really are* moving. *Incredible.*

Serpents in pastels and duller colors slithered in two dimensions across the walls of the room, scales flexing in impossible detail. They crawled across what appeared to be the "ground" of the landscape, which changed from realistic to impressionistic to surrealistic to cubist on each of the surrounding four walls but kept a basic structure to it, though he couldn't tell what similarities he was seeing. Abd al-Rashid had never been a student of art, but just watching these serpents snaking, darting, nipping at each other, and finally joining at the base of an enormous tree that incorporated stylistic elements of all the art in the room, all the colors and cubes and lines meeting in some great Yggdrasil that sprawled across the ceiling, he was torn by the desire to collapse into tears from the beauty of it all and the desire to collapse into a fetal position to hide from the truth of how *small* he was.

"They are nearly grown now," a voice before him said. Abd al-Rashid was stunned back into the room itself and away from the scene on the walls. An impossibly tall man, seven, eight feet in height, but otherwise perfectly formed, stood before him. "The Lady

Josephine recalls, I believe. You were here when they were younger, were you not?"

"I was," Josephine said. "Some years ago. They were barely mobile, mostly just colors and shapeless forms. Will they take humanoid form?"

"I believe so, though the decision will, as always, be theirs," the tall man replied. He walked to where Abd al-Rashid stood and bowed deeply, his head nearly reaching Abd al-Rashid's. His face remained tense as he said, "Malachi Tavana, gracious Majordomo and First Servant of Nuwaz Vizier Afseneh, himself master of the High Estate of the Most Esteemed House of Afseneh, Pearl of the Djinn, Guardians of the Sacred Spheres, Defenders of the Mortal Coil, at your service."

Abd al-Rashid simply stood silently. Josephine said, "Malachi, how many of those are real and how many of those do you just make up on the spot?"

Malachi's face remained serious. "I have never said before and I still refuse."

"The part about the sacred spheres, though. I know you just made that up right then."

"I may have. I may not have. A dedicated servant never tells."

"Well, Gracious Majordomo, would you be kind enough to show us to quarters?"

"Of course, Lady Josephine. You and your guest are always welcome."

Abd al-Rashid found in the three days he spent as a guest that the splendor of the Estate of House Afseneh was innumerable. Volume after volume could be written to record the details of every room of every wing of the House, of which there are many. There may well be no way to count how many rooms were in the Estate, given their changing number. Regardless, Abd al-Rashid had finite time and

saw a finite number of those rooms, but the wonders in that place seemed infinite.

At the end of the second day in the House, Abd al-Rashid sat for dinner with the High Court of Afseneh. Nuwaz, the Vizier of the House, sat near what was clearly the head of the table. The chairs were equally beautiful, equally enormous (though more proportionately sized for some of the diners; the majordomo had been asked to join them and, towering over all others in the room, had little difficulty with the seating arrangement). It was clear that there was a symbolic equality in the room, with the Vizier serving as a "chief among equals". One seat at the headmost position was left vacant, food served but with nobody seeming to believe the seat's occupant would be joining them.

"If I may be so forward, may I ask for whom the empty seat is left for?" Abd al-Rashid whispered to Malachi as the food was being served.

"The head seat at the table is reserved for the proper Mistress of the House, the Queen of Afseneh. Šahrāzād, her name is said in the proper Persian."

Abd al-Rashid thought for a moment. "You mean…*Scheherazade*? Of the One Thousand and One Nights? A fictive princess is your queen?"

"She is the greatest of the fictives," Malachi said, a touch of annoyance in his voice. "And moreover, a fictive capable of creating more fictions. From her, we have learned how to birth new fictions as well. Who better to be honored so?"

Abd al-Rashid, abashed, nodded politely and continued to watch the food be distributed. It had all of the hallmarks of the decadent surroundings; enormous, glistening hogs brought whole to the table, platters and plates seemingly unable to continue supporting the weight of the feast atop them. Among this was brought two plates of equal elegance, but carrying only some pieces of *nan-e khoshke-shirin* and a bowl of — certainly perfectly crafted — *ash-e anār*, the pomegranate stew glistening before him. He was about to question the difference between his and Josephine's plates, when he

suddenly had a revelation. *Oh, of course,* he thought, *they needed to serve real, physical food for their corporeal guests. The rest of this is all but imaginary. Though the dedication to detail in the olfactory department was…thorough.* Abd al-Rashid drooled at the smell of it all.

The meal was generally as he expected it to be, polite enough where the humans were concerned, much more jovial where the *djinn* were concerned. Much laughter and uproar came from their end of the table, with polite smiles and nods from Abd al-Rashid, who understood little of the cultural context for what they were saying, and Josephine, who was unable to use telepathy to read the minds of sentient concept-beings and didn't speak any of these languages being used.

"So, darling," Vizier Afseneh said (Abd al-Rashid presuming and hoping) in Josephine's direction, "what did you think of the children in the atrium?" His Arabic was crisp and lightly accented, if at all. Malachi translated into English.

"Very well developed. Beautiful, even," Josephine replied through Malachi. "I don't believe I had ever seen *djinn* children in such a… larval state."

"Wait, I'm sorry," Abd al-Rashid interrupted. "The…those serpents in the reception area, those were…those were *djinn*?"

Silence, then a soft, deep chuckle from the vizier. "Son, if I may ask, where do you think you are? Physically, geographically, your position?"

Abd al-Rashid gulped. "Well, from the rumors, I would presume that we are underground somewhere. The exact location is a closely guarded secret; the House is reached only through mystical gateways of some kind, whose function and operation are also secrets. All the other *djinn* Houses are likewise; the Nabhanites in Oman, the Roxelanans in Turkey. I once met a Khotani *djinn* —"

More chortling from the vizier. "Oh, yes, that must have been *quite* the experience."

Abd al-Rashid smiled, the least uncomfortable feeling he had had all evening. "Yes. He invited me to his nightly meditation after evening prayer. I hadn't realized he was looking for a sparring partner, or that Khotani 'meditations' can end in *death*."

The Vizier's chortles turned into guffaws. "They are rather…intense people, yes. Living in caves in the Tibetan mountains will do that to man and *djinn* alike.

"As for my question, however, it is difficult for you to perceive what this Estate actually *is*. We *djinn*, the ones to whom you speak, are sentient, sapient ideas, formed through acts of personal volition into humanoid creatures when we find it convenient, taking…other forms when we wish to do so as well. The Estate in which you are sitting, as well as all of the furniture in it, is made likewise of *djinn*. Immature *djinn*, formed through an act indescribable to corporeal beings, taking shapes at the will of their…*parents*, if you will. The beings will become more complex as time goes on, changing forms and shapes, developing a greater understanding of how to cope with the universe around them. The chair in which you sit is a three-year-old; the rug now bunched up in the legs of the chair and table is two; the floor that both are stationed upon is four weeks old. They are capable of great feats at a young age, but must learn to harness and control it before they can join us."

Abd al-Rashid was stunned. Everything in the Estate was simultaneously now both majestic and…rather disturbing, honestly. Everything alive, everything with the potential for intelligence and self-awareness? He was ready to be horrified when he felt the vizier's hand on his shoulder. He looked down at Abd al-Rashid with concern.

"Child, let me stop you for a moment. I know that Parviz sent you here to apologize for what you said to Agent Faruhar. I will not claim to be thrilled with it. But I am a strong believer in the freedom of individuals to feel and act as they see fit, even in ignorance. And your behavior was ignorant, there can be no doubt. I hope you find Agent Faruhar in your journeys, and I hope that by that time, you will have learned better ways, or at least better restraint. But I will not have an apology from a young man who has not offended me, and you have not offended me."

Abd al-Rashid looked up into that face, twinkling and clearly possessing an ancient nature that the vizier either could not or chose not to hide. "Thank you, lord," he said. "I hope to do better. I hope…I hope to be better. I do regret my words."

The vizier's face lit up again. "This is the best I could have hoped for you, child. Are you finished with the stew? I hoped it was to your liking; I had it brought from a Way leading back to Iran." He picked Abd al-Rashid up and guided/pushed/forced him to the end of the room nearest the hallway, a confused Josephine following. "I would have chosen a Turkish delicacy, but I didn't think your lovely escort here would have been much fond of it. No offense to your cuisines, of course; I simply meant that something a bit…"

They left the room on yet another tour.

Comedown Machine Hub

Prologue: A Confluence of Clandestine Conferences

- **1. Slow Animals**
- **2. Automatic Stop**
- **3. The End Has No End**

Intermission: Error: Level 4 Clearance required to access file "OPERATION DAWNHALTER"

- **4.** DATA ENCRYPTED:
- **5.** DATA ENCRYPTED:
- **6.** DATA ENCRYPTED:

Epilogue: Error: Encryption failed. Seek technical assistance immediately.

A Confluence of Clandestine Conferences

CONTACT US

Have any questions or comments for our *compadres* here at Taco Bell®? Send us a *mensaje* below!

Full Name:

Vera K. Garcia

Franchise Location:

725 NE Weidler St, Portland, Oregon.

Feedback:

I observed a noticeable uptick in events this week. So noticeable that I thought it too reckless to not report in early.

There were four events. All involved two people or fewer, but I couldn't catch any names.

The first was on Monday. It was early in the morning, before sunrise, and I was stationed on the corner of Grand and Multnomah. An older man in a suit came walking down the street from the West, and he stopped near me.

I was very still, and my act was working, and I don't think he noticed that I was a person. He took out his phone, and I caught a glance

over his shoulder of what he was typing. I could pick out "can't be the Foundation", and Foundation was capitalized. Do we know of a Foundation?

The man had a gun on his belt, but I don't think he was a police officer. He didn't stay long.

The second event was Wednesday night. I was down Broadway street, by the veterinarian. Two men walked by, and they were arguing. I froze up, kept my pose, I don't think they noticed.

The taller one was saying that they couldn't do what they were doing, that they were going to end up caught, and then they wouldn't even get to remember what they did so wrong.

The smaller man shushed him. Said no, the plan will work, and the reward will be worth it. Portlands will remember us well. And he said **`Portlands, specifically, plural`**. Is that significant? But they were gone before I could hear anything else.

The remaining two encounters were on Friday. The first was in the early evening, when it was just dark enough for my act to be most effective. I was by the big parking lot on Halsey. A group of two, a woman and a large person in a suit. The woman sat down on a bench, not ten paces from me.

She sounded angry. "I just don't see why we're still going through with this," she said. "I've done my part for our partnership, and I know he must be happy." Emphasis on "he". "We're in such a fucking rut now," she said.

The other person didn't reply. Out of the corner of my eye I peeked at them, and they didn't have any eyes behind their sunglasses. Just empty sockets. Unusual.

"Fine," she said. "Let's just get out of here." She pushed herself to her feet and stomped off, the suited person following behind.

Later that night, I was waiting for a bus to take me home, right across the intersection from the Taco Bell. I was still wearing my makeup, but I wasn't trying to hide.

The exact same woman came up next to me and started waiting. She wasn't attentive, she was trying to light up a cigarette. I offered a greeting, and she yelped, dropping the smoke. She muttered some obscenity and turned to leave.

I watched her go across the street, into the parking lot of that Chipotle. When I was sure she had stopped watching behind her, I followed.

She turned around a corner in the parking lot, but when I reached the corner, she was gone. I glanced around the parking lot, but she was nowhere to be found.

I realize now that every group I encountered this week was walking in the general direction of the Chipotle when I lost sight.

I would very much like to investigate the Chipotle parking lot further. Please provide me with further instructions.

As well, my compliments on the chalupas. They are always a sublime experience.

Best,
Vera Garcia
Rotational Static Reconnaissance Specialist
Oregon Division of Secret Meetings

« **Hub** | **Slow Animals** »

Slow Animals

« **A Confluence of Clandestine Conferences** ||

It was early morning in Three Portlands. The skybox sun had just truly warmed up, sweeping away the muggy fog into the edges of town. The air was thick and hot, but the sky was cleared to blue.

Not far from the city center, at the base of a tall brownstone, in a cramped office sequestered from the busyness of the business it administrated, a man named Casey Malik had just murdered his boss.

Casey had not intended to kill his boss. Casey had not intended to enter the room, lock the door behind him, and, in lieu of providing an update on his most recent business trip, pull a handgun from his backpack and open fire. All of these things had been unplanned.

In fact, until Casey felt the cold metal in his backpack just a moment ago, he was unaware that he *had* a loaded gun in his possession. It was only when he touched it that he came to this realization, immediately prior to the aforementioned murder.

Like an automaton, he had lifted the weapon, pointed it across the desk, and pulled the trigger, holding down until the slide clicked back. Three bullets had flown across the room, through the suit, torso, and leather office chair of Nathan Regent, owner and proprietor of the Three Portlands headquarters of Iris Arts. The poor sap didn't have time to question why his assistant was murdering him, let alone call for security.

Security seemed to have caught on from the gunshots, though, and as Casey heard the thud of the gun dropping to the ground, and the pumping of blood in his ears, he additionally heard hard knocking on the office door.

He didn't have time to think. There was a ground-level window just to his left. He picked up his backpack, shoved it through, and stepped atop a priceless wooden cabinet, casting a last peek at his former boss before ducking through.

Through the cramped window, Casey scrambled into the alley, scraping his knees through his slacks. He scooped up his backpack with both arms. The alley was deserted, thankfully, just some discarded bikes and glowing weeds lining the gutters. Right led to a brick wall plastered with posters, but to the left was the street.

As he made his way to the clearing, it occurred to him that he hadn't the slightest idea what he was planning to do. Generally, formulating a plan comes after the step in which you gain some awareness of why you ended up in the situation you're currently in. Being completely in the dark, Casey intuited that he had skipped at least a few steps. Planning would have to be postponed.

As he strode from the alleyway, his head swiveled, scanning rows of bakeries and galleries, but not a single customer. In fact, the whole street was empty. There was the whole matter of gunshots scaring people off, but generally gunshots were among the least upsetting noises to overhear in Three Portlands. Certainly not worth scattering for.

The silence was then broken by a whirring noise, and Casey snapped back to see an auto-rickshaw speeding down the street.

Casey turned around, but the alley just led to a dead end. The rickshaw, bearing no insignia Casey recognized, came to a stop at the alley's entrance. The driver stepped out. "Hey, you. Did you just murder someone?"

Casey turned back to the interloper, stammering.

The man was undeterred. "You're who I'm looking for, then. Come on, let's get you out of here." He motioned to the vehicle.

Casey glanced at the office window behind him. He could hear shouting, and the crash of the office door being breached by Iris security personnel.

His options were limited.

Casey clutched his backpack to his chest in the back of the auto-rickshaw. The driver, a tall, blond man in sunglasses, seemed content with this development. He glanced over his shoulder, back at Casey. "So, uh, for the record, if you are an actual murderer, it would be super uncool of you not to tell me now."

"I- I swear, I don't know what happened, it was just-"

The man cut him off. "Alright, yeah, good. Don't worry about how things seem, I have your back. I'm Troy. I'm with the Chaos Insurgency, and I'm gonna help you out."

Casey blinked. "The what?"

"The Chaos Insurgency." Troy seemed convinced that this should be a calming development. It was not.

"Why… where are you taking me?"

The man turned back to look at the road. "Branch headquarters."

The surroundings, shopfronts and brick roads, all faded to a blur, and Casey could do nothing but sit silently and think-

---

Yesterday, Nathan Regent was still alive.

In addition to possessing hopes, dreams, a family, and a pulse, Mr. Regent also had an assistant named Casey.

The interesting thing about running an art supplies business is that you don't actually need to have any kind of artistic talent. Not even any managerial talent. Nathan Regent's talent was *condescension*. He had honed his smug tone and mismatched wardrobe into a weapon. He paraded it so confidently, it almost made one feel like they were missing out. One wanted to impress him, despite his thorough unimpressiveness.

Casey was very familiar with this quality. Each day, Casey would

enter Mr. Regent's basement office with a coffee — black, but with altogether too much sugar. Mr. Regent would drink this coffee, and as he did so he would give Casey a list of tasks to perform. Fetch this, verify that, and be back by four, because that's when Mr. Regent will need another cup of coffee to take home.

Worst of all was when Casey had to negotiate with potential business partners. Casey was not good at negotiation, and Mr. Regent knew this.

In fact, he was counting on it: Regent's strategy was to send clearly terrible envoys to meet potential clients, so that those clients will assume that Iris Arts must be saving their good representatives for more important clients. Subconsciously, they would feel the need to prove themselves, and give their all despite the mediocre showing. It also saved money.

Casey had the privilege of being the sacrificial lamb in this game of economic negging.

One day before Mr. Regent's death, he had been on one such tour of shame. He went through the Isle exit from Portlands — Casey's least favorite, as it's even harder to maintain your dignity when you're sopping wet — and navigated to shore through the rain on the inflatable dinghy he had rented. From there, he settled into the brisk, three hour cab drive to Bristol.

After far, far too long, he found himself at the steps of his destination, a modern, cosmopolitan villa, the kind that looks like a giant child got a little too silly with their building blocks. Brushing off his slacks to at least convince himself he could be presentable, he pressed a square button he assumed was the doorbell. Moments later, the door slid laterally to reveal a middle-aged woman in a cleanly-pressed dress and apron, holding a glass of red wine.

Casey gave a weak wave. "I'm here for, uh, Mister Erwan."

She squinted at him.

He pulled his bag off his shoulder and began rummaging, trying to produce an air of authenticity. "I… have… an… appointment…"

"Right," she said, raising a finger and mercifully breaking his awkward stride. "He's on the balcony. Right up the stairs, take a left."

Casey nodded in silent thanks, and proceeded into the home. It looked brand new — some of the walls were only half-painted in a garish fruit-basket of colors, and white canvas was draped over much of the furniture. He carefully tread up the stairs, careful not to brush against any wet paint.

Just as described, he found himself on the balcony. The rain kept coming down, but here it was deflected, bouncing off an invisible shield, keeping the balcony totally dry. Casey saw his target, a old man reclining in a geometric lounge-chair, clad in a grey suit and smoking something that glowed blue.

"Mister Erwan?"

The man's head snapped to look at Casey. He grinned, wrinkling his whole face. "Yes! Sit down, please." His voice had an engineered friendliness, with a tinge of an approachable Southern drawl.

Casey obliged, finding a spot next to Erwan. "I was let in by your… wife?"

He let out a belly laugh, which was not an expected response to this admittedly shaky statement of fact. "Pah. Suppose I got my money's worth, then." He clicked his tongue. "Androids."

"Oh."

"Yep. Brand-new."

Casey searched for common ground. "That's pretty impressive, considering **what happened to Anderson**."

He grinned in that smug way, and sat back. "Anderson's old hat now. Destruction provides the perfect opportunity for brighter innovators to get their share."

Casey nodded, clinging to that thread of interest. "Well, that's a good point, and it's precisely why I'm here."

He laughed again. "Of course, of course. Let me tell you: I have always been a fan of Iris Arts. And it's a shame, a damn shame, that you all should be limited to dealing in the shadows. You want more, and I respect that. Migrating a business as prominent as yours outside of the pocket dimensions is hard work, and the Feds won't appreciate missteps. I'd certainly be willing to provide the cover, the resources, the manpower, to make the transition as smooth as it could possibly be."

Erwan had laid out the pitch, to be sure. Now it was time for the most essential part of the negotiation process.

Casey nodded, folding his hands on his lap. "Yep."

Erwan cleared his throat. "Hm?"

"Oh, uh, yeah, you got it. Hit the nail, right on its… on the head."

The man sat up, eyebrows raised. "Surely you must have questions. The process of establishing a foothold outside the Veil is-"

Casey was already waving his hand. "Oh, yes, of course, we got the pitch. You just get in contact with Mr. Regent. I'm sure he can find time for you. Work out the plan a bit further."

Erwan's flow was broken. "I'll… do that."

Hook, line, and sinker.

Casey stood up, cracking a smile. "Glad to meet with you. I really should be getting back to my hotel, though."

Erwan tried to reciprocate, but his smugness had been drained. "I won't keep you, then."

Casey turned to go, striding down the stairs. He had almost made it out the door when he heard someone call his name. He turned back. It was the android.

She smiled at him, more naturally than before. "Mister Erwan wanted me to give you this. It's a gift for your employer." She was holding out a skinny white box, about the length of her hand.

Casey nodded to her, taking it in his hand. It had a surprising heft for its size. "Thanks. I'll… make sure he gets it."

"Perfect. Have a nice night." She gave him one last wave, and then the door closed, and Casey set off back home where he would soon, against his own will-

---

"Hey. Hey. You okay?"

Casey shook his head, jarred from his daze. "What? Where… what's going on?"

Troy rolled his eyes. "We're here. C'mon."

Casey scanned his surroundings. The rickshaw was parked in front of a squat white building, evidently near the edge of Portlands, as he could see the streets continuing on into emptiness, the buildings beginning to repeat and grow indistinct, imitating an infinite sprawl. This was where you lived when you wanted to not be bothered.

He got to his feet, nearly stumbling onto the pavement. Troy grabbed his arm, keeping him steady, and sighed.

Together, they entered the building. Troy flashed some sort of badge at a hidden camera, and the doors slid open. Through a plain corridor they went, and then into a room with a label Casey didn't bother to read.

The room would have been a revolutionary office workplace thirty years ago. Filing drawers were inlaid to the walls, studded by blank video screens. A handful of desks with curvy chairs were scattered about the office, their surfaces burdened by piles of files, books, tomes, tablets, and sometimes the other kind of tablets.

Troy swept some dust off a chair, and guided Casey to sit down. Once he was positioned satisfactorily, Troy stood up once more. "Welcome to the archives of the Three Portlands headquarters of the Chaos Insurgency."

Casey squinted. "What is any of this for? Why did you bring me here?"

"This," the man gestured around himself, "is the nucleus of our intelligence operations in this city. With all this info, I think we can help each other. Some mutual exchange."

Casey nodded, slowly. "Where is everyone?"

"We're a little… understaffed. Most of our regulars are pulled in for errands at the beehive Earthside. But what we do perform here is very important."

"Perform?"

"Well, Command is quite fond of Three Portlands. It's a rich city, an admirable anomalous community. They have a great respect for its people. I have a great respect, too. We want them to feel the same way about us."

"So you… surveil them?"

"I was not aware you had a moral high ground, mister manslaughter."

Casey blanched.

"Okay, that was harsh. Sorry. Look. We collect this information because if we don't, we'll get caught off guard when things happen. And I think you'll agree that things are happening."

"Besides what happened to me?"

Troy leaned in and lowered his voice. "Look. There have been… incidents. Like yours. Absence of motive, planning, coordination. Perpetrator dies immediately after. Someone's getting people to take the fall for their dirty work. Look here."

He stood up straight again, and started rummaging through a file drawer. He pulled out a plain white file folder, and dropped it in front of Casey. He gently picked it up, thumbing through it. Proprietors of coffee shops. Artists. Performers. Politicians. Police. All murdered by people who worked near them. Closed cases, all of them.

Casey settled on the last image, a forensic photograph of a man

spread-eagle on the floor of his study, his head clearly having been pummeled by a blunt object.

Troy looked over his shoulder. "Thoughts?"

"Uh… I doubt it. I mean, look at the state of his-"

"I meant *your* thoughts."

"Oh. I think he's dead."

Troy sighed. "Yes. And the person who killed him had as little control as you did."

"How do you know?"

"Well," Troy managed to smile to himself, even now, "the funny thing about complex data analysis is that it's more of an art than a science. Oneiroi is hardly the only corporation capable of applying it to meatspace. You'd be surprised what you can do with moxie and a sufficiently advanced supercomputer."

He continued, "Whoever did this wanted to appear unpredictable, which is totally predictable for a conspiracy. You pump enough background data into a machine, and you can have a list of the most expected places for crime to happen. Then you wait at the ones where it's least likely to happen. Those are the expectedly unexpected locations."

Casey furrowed his brow. "You just bet I was going to… kill someone in Iris Arts today?"

"Not necessarily you. But someone."

"Then what am I doing here?"

"See, you, you are different from the others. You didn't kill yourself. Because you didn't take the murder weapon with you."

"Wait, they… killed themselves… here?"

"Oh, god, no. They didn't make it nearly this far."

Casey gulped.

Troy only doubled down on his cheer. "But, look. You're here now. Whatever meme, hazard, whatever, is in your brain, we can study it. We can fix it. I can take you to the bunker, Earthside. We have some of the best memeticists in the business. And trust me, if things keep going how they're going, you'll be glad to be out of here."

Casey flinched. "No, I… I can't just get up and leave. I have people here."

Troy's smile faltered. "I.. understand that, but you're caught between a rock and a hard place here. You stay, at best, you won't make any difference. At worst, well… once the word gets out, the authorities aren't going to take you on your word that you didn't mean to murder your boss."

Casey squeezed his eyes shut. His head was pounding. "I can't. I'm sorry."

Troy sighed bitterly. "I guess I have to try again. Do you think I was close to convincing you? Or should I try a different tactic?"

Troy was turning around, but he had something in his hand… an aerosol can. Every soul in Three Portlands knew what that meant: amnestics.

Troy clicked his tongue. "I suppose I'll play it by ear. Always have time." He undid the safety clasp on the aerosol can, and began to turn back around to face Casey—

—but something knocked into him from behind, nearly pushing him over. A round metal object pressed into the small of his back. He inhaled sharply.

Casey enunciated slowly. "I didn't leave the weapon behind. Hands behind your head."

Troy gritted his teeth, complying. Casey pulled the can from his grasp.

"You know this can't work, right? What do you think the chances are

that the bug in your head wants you to do this? To go back into public so you can self-destruct?"

Casey didn't respond.

"What are the chances that you're not even you right now? That you wouldn't even attempt this if not for that thing worming around in your brain?"

"Wait…" Casey started. "Your computer didn't tell you about that?"

Troy started to laugh. He laughed until he ran out of breath. When he breathed again, it was just amnestic gas.

Troy's body collapsed, limp.

Casey dropped the stapler he was holding. And then the newly-empty can of amnestics.

He dropped to kneel next to the downed man, listening carefully for a moment. He was still breathing.

Casey held his own head in his hands for a moment. Out of the corner of his eye he could see the files on his desk, all the hard data the Chaos Insurgency had on what was going on in Three Portlands. He grabbed the file, and made his way to the outside.

It was dark out. How long had he been in there?

At least, if he was on this side of the city, he couldn't be too far from a certain sort of shelter. So he started walking.

Casey stood on the steps of a building, built like a courthouse, on the outskirts of Three Portlands. Ornate pillars surrounded the home, almost enveloping the front door entirely. Through the darkness, he could still make out the bronze nameplate over the door, which read **"E. Rowe"**.

The home of his partner's father was perhaps not the best safe haven. But it was the best option Casey had.

Hands shaking, he pressed the doorbell, and waited.

On the slick linoleum floor of the Headquarters of the Three Portlands Cell of the Chaos Insurgency, Agent Troy was jarred to consciousness by the tune of ***Come On Eileen***.

He shot up to a sitting position, coughing up air tasting of battery acid and lemon. He had no idea how he got here, or what he had been doing for at least the last few hours.

As he blinked his eyes open, he saw the forgotten backpack and ringing phone of an unknown person who clearly appreciated 80's classics. Lying haphazardly in the corner of the room, he saw an empty can of amnestics.

"Shit."

On the other side of Three Portlands, a woman in a pantsuit closed her flip-phone, her call having received no response.

Minutes earlier, she had been in the parking lot of a Chipotle Mexican Grill in Portland, Oregon. Now, she was wreathed in unfamiliar scents, dazed by the winding streets and flashing strobe lights of a city that didn't seem possible.

She put away her phone, and instead fished out her wallet, for the picture she had of her target. The easy way had failed, but she had become accustomed to doing things the hard way anyhow.

Vera Garcia cracked her knuckles. Time to get to work.

« **A Confluence of Clandestine Conferences** | **Hub** | **Automatic Stop** »

Automatic Stop

« **Slow Animals** ||

The parking lot of the Chipotle Mexican Grill was false, and held many secrets.

Once Vera Garcia had reported to Taco Bell and found a false bottom in her bag of one Burrito Supreme and one Crispy Chicken Quesadilla, she knew that her plan had been approved by the Rotisserie Outfitters Bureau.

Inside the secret compartment, she found three objects of note.

1. A picture of a young man with cropped black hair, tan skin, and a strained smile. He was wearing button-down shirt. Vera supposed it was likely taken for some official purpose, perhaps an ID card. On the back of the photograph, a phone number was written in blue sharpie. Beneath that a name: Casey Malik.
2. A small object shaped like a pocket pistol but with a wide, flat barrel. Where the hammer would typically be there was an LED light. Brief experimentation showed that the LED flashed when the gun was pointed a specific direction. A compass, of a sort.
3. A note. It informed her that her subsequent actions would be of the utmost importance, and that she would be alone. It was reassuring.

Once she had enjoyed her meal, she made haste across the street, past the Chipotle and into its parking lot. The gun in her hands made a pleasant buzz as she waved it about in the dark. The pulse of its light intensified when she brought it to face the back of the lot — a thin strip of trees and bushes separating the concrete from rows of compact housing.

She closed the distance, eyes alert for threats. As she stepped carefully over the curb and into the grass, the gun chirped. A small blue button had appeared just above her thumb, on the side of the grip. She took one more look around before she pressed it and the ground beneath her vanished.

She didn't have time to grab anything for support. She was falling now through a tube, or a tunnel — surrounded by a substance like vinyl that pressed up against her uncomfortably, but with enough friction to keep her speed low.

Seconds later the constriction gave way. She braced for impact, landing feet-first on a hard brick surface.

For such a long fall, this didn't look like it was underground. The sky was a dark, deep blue, and her surroundings were lit by strings of lights supported by the air itself, weaving about in the sky. She was in a town square, nearly empty, and in each direction she could see roads travelling out, flanked by buildings in eclectic styles, a mosaic of vibrant shades.

She could hardly believe her eyes, but she'd have time for disbelief later. For now, she had a job to do.

An ancient necromancer in a bathrobe stood on the threshold of his front door.

In front of him was his son's boyfriend, wearing scuffed slacks and a wrinkled button-down shirt spattered with some dark spots. He was carrying a file folder under his arm.

"Hi, Mr. Rowe!"

Eustace Rowe squinted. "**Adam**'s not here."

Casey shook his head, "Oh, no, I'm not… can I come in?"

"To hide from the police? Or to clean the blood off your clothes?"

"…how did you know that I—"

"It's called 'the news.' And 'the police' who showed up at my door asking about you, Casey."

"…what did you tell them?"

"That I didn't know where you were. Which is true."

"Oh. So, can I…"

Eustace sighed. "Yes. Get in here."

Casey muttered repeated thanks as he slid into the entryway. He could see the dimly-lit hallway proceed into the house, flanked by stairs into darkness and leading to a shady kitchen. Behind him, Eustace shut and locked the door. "Move," he muttered. Casey shuffled out of the way and down the hall.

The kitchen was clearly in use recently, arrayed with what was either a very exotic dinner or a terrifying arrangement of viscera. It smelled of formaldehyde, and Casey's nose wrinkled. "Sorry about the mess," Eustace grunted, "wasn't expecting to be… interrupted." He motioned to a chair, situated at a dinky dining table prepared for four.

Casey sat down, his legs silently thanking him for the relief, and set the stolen file on the tabletop. "Right. Sorry. Thank you."

The elder stayed standing, leaning back on the kitchen counter. He was silent for a moment, surveying Casey's ragged figure. "…You need to get cleaned up. Quickly."

"Oh. Why?"

"Because a child wearing a magician costume could track down your thaumic imprint, and Adam would be upset with me if you died in my house."

Casey nodded slowly. "Right. That makes sense."

"And then you'll get out of my house."

"What? They'll find me. You just said you couldn't let me die."

"In my house. You're the one who killed a man. Far as I can tell, I'm being perfectly charitable by not turning you in right now."

"No, it… it wasn't like that. I didn't have control over my actions. There's a… memetic worm. Or something."

"Ah, the mind control defense. That'll make your trial more interesting, at least until the Mayor decides to execute you by soul amputation."

"Look, I… can you at least help me contact Adam?"

Eustace sighed. And then he sighed again. "Fine." He turned walked out of the kitchen, vanishing into the darkness of the hallway beyond.

Casey fidgeted in place for a moment. And then Eustace returned, bringing a large, blocky phone with what seemed to be an over-sized tape recorder attached to it. He sighed once more, for good measure, and began entering some code into a number pad on its front.

"From last I checked, Adam *should* be in Backdoor SoHo. Got some shitty medium gig."

"So, uh… how can we even call him, between enclaves?"

"A good question. This looks like a phone, but it's actually a psionic link to a carrier pigeon selectively bred to survive in the void between universes. It flies through the Outside, the formless space relentlessly crushing it as it carries messages at the speed of light."

"Oh. Really?"

"No."

He finished whatever calibration he was doing, and a droning beep began to play. Eustace held it to his head, and the droning stopped. "Wake up, Adam. Your boyfriend killed a man."

Casey's eyes went wide.

Eustace covered the receiving end of the phone while confused protestations spilled out of the speaker. "Don't have the time or the patience to coddle here. Better to just rip the band-aid off." In this metaphor, Casey assumed, the band-aid was his relationship.

"Just. Give it to me." Casey stood up and reached out for it, and Eustace reluctantly handed it over.

He held it up to the side of his head and tried to sound as calm as possible. "Honey?"

The speaker crackled, and a tinny facsimile of Adam's voice spilled out. "Casey? What's going on? Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm… fine. Things have gone a bit lopsided."

"I can tell. What happened?"

"It's… something infected me. Something memetic. It took control of me. Made me—" Casey's breath shortened as what he'd done hit him like a slap to the face.

"Shh, shh. I understand. You don't need to talk about it right now. Look, I'll… I'll get to Portlands as soon as possible."

"No, I don't think that's… the best idea. Whatever's happening, it's still going on. And it's probably not going to get better for a bit."

"I can't let you do it alone. Look, my clients are a wash, and their dead relatives aren't going anywhere… I hope. I can pack up and—"

"Please? Just… stay safe for now." Casey knew that Adam would only sit idly by for so long. Hopefully things would be safer by the time Adam foolishly rushed in.

"Fine," Adam pouted. "But surely I can do *something* out here."

Casey stopped to think for a moment. As he did, Eustace came up behind him with a device like a handheld metal detector and started waving it along Casey's arms. He guessed Eustace had taken the thaumic scrubbing into his own hands.

"Oh, there's… before what happened, I was in Bristol meeting with a business partner. Maybe you could go there… see if there's anything magical you can find?" Casey searched his pockets for Mr. Erwan's card, and recited the address into the phone.

"Roger. I can… I guess I can go through the Library? Yeah, probably…" He was working through the logistics in his head, Casey could tell. He was nothing if not resourceful.

"Thank you. Stay safe."

"You need that more than I do. Please be careful. I love you."

"Love you too." He clicked the phone off.

He turned, and Eustace was staring at him. "…what?"

Eustace shrugged. "Didn't say anything." His wrinkled face had a surprising capacity for passive aggression. "You're scrubbed of any identifying links, now. You're welcome for that. But you should go change your clothes. Just… take some of Adam's, from the hall closet upstairs."

"Right, right." Casey rather pointlessly tried to smooth himself out, and went upstairs to change into something that wasn't covered in dirt and blood.

He walked back down wearing slightly too-tight jeans and one of Adam's nice tan jackets. For the first time since what had happened, he felt somewhat refreshed.

This positive feeling quickly evaporated when he reached the bottom of the stairs and saw Eustace pointing a gun at some woman in the kitchen.

Eustace motioned to Casey with his free hand, beckoning for him to come closer. "Finally."

Casey inched towards Eustace, eyes wide as he struggled to take in what he was seeing. A black woman, wearing a tan suit, her hair tied in a neat bun. She was sitting at the kitchen table, and seemed

unperturbed in spite of the elderly man waving a pistol in her face.

"Found her in the lot out back. She was trying to snoop through the window." He shook the pistol at her. "Now, why don't you tell him what you told me?"

"Well," she said. Her voice was calm, rehearsed. She'd clearly been looking forward to the chance to speak. "The first thing you need to know is that I'm on your side."

She paused for a moment, feeling the room for a reaction, and then continued. "My name is Vera Garcia. I've been sent by an organization that knows of what is going on here, and wants me to help you prevent it from getting worse."

Eustace nodded. "You buying any of this, Casey?"

He had, in fact, heard this story before. "What organization?"

"We're devoted to keeping the world safe, and preserving the things that matter most."

Casey raised an eyebrow. "…but what's it called?"

"**Directorate K**."

Eustace suddenly bent over, laughing hoarsely. The gun in his hand evaporated into smoke. "No shit? This night just gets better and better."

Casey did not know whether he should take offense to that. "You know them?"

Eustace ratcheted himself up to a standing position again, still smiling. "You could say that." He turned back to the woman. "What, just come off of infiltrating the leadership of a Chuck E. Cheese's?"

She smiled earnestly. "Funny. I suppose it's important to keep some levity in the face of bomb threats."

Eustace's gaze narrowed. "What?"

Vera nodded to the file folder, stolen from the Chaos Insurgency, still splayed on the kitchen table. Indeed, a paper was poking out — some notes about potential locations for a device that could be planted on one of Three Portlands' many side streets. "Sounds like there's a real conspiracy shaping up. It sure would be convenient if a skilled infiltrator were to offer a hand."

Casey looked down. "Point taken."

Eustace squinted at her for a good while. Like his view was piercing her and examining the insides. Which, to be fair, could literally be happening.

After another moment, he spoke. "Fine. You can stay here. But you take a single hostile action, the house will eat your flesh and I will *not* treat your bones with dignity."

Vera smiled. "Noted."

The sun rose, pulling shadows taut across the stone and brick landscape of Three Portlands. Casey watched it with suspicion.

Behind him Vera pored over the contents of the ill-gotten dossier. She flipped through pages of equations, numbers she couldn't make sense of. Details of people she didn't know, working for corporations she didn't recognize, in cities she hadn't known existed. She pulled free two pages in particular and set them down on the table, towards Casey.

"These," she stated, "are the only people in the file who aren't marked deceased."

Casey turned from the window, scanning the documents. Sidney and Timothy Way, two brothers. There were no pictures, just basic identification information. And a Three Portlands Address. "That's… not much to go on."

She shrugged. "It has an address. That's all we need to pay them a visit."

Casey's face hardened. "Is that a good idea?"

"If they're like you, they're allies. And either way, we get more information on what's going on."

Casey pursed his lips. "What about the police? Everyone thinks I'm a… murderer."

"Well, you got away the first time, didn't you? How'd you manage that?"

"I was picked up by a strange man and then lost most of my memory of what happened after."

"We've all been there. But for now, you're wearing someone else's clothes, and a strange woman is going to be giving you instructions. Now… where is this address?"

Casey gulped.

The day was cool and clear. Perfect weather for taking a walk.

Evidently many others felt the same way. The streets were saturated with milling crowds, pastel swarms wandering about to get to work, to school, to shopping. Living their normal lives. Or as close to normal as Three Portlands permitted.

Casey watched with envy until Vera grabbed his shoulder and pulled him back into the alleyway.

"Staring is weird. Criminals stare," she whispered.

"I'm pretty sure regular people stare too."

"Not from alleyways. Usually." Vera cast a glance behind her. "Let's keep going."

They'd been going through alleys for a bit — zig-zagged gashes in the urban jungle, growing pains of a city constantly making space for the new and shuffling the old to the outskirts. Most of these voids between buildings were empty, though some were marked by signs of occupation: clotheslines, plywood shacks, or bundles of blankets on the muddied stone. Sometimes people huddled in the alleyways,

sleeping off their hangovers, or searching for scraps.

Walk at a constant pace, she had said. Every day, you walk by hundreds of people, each with plenty of their own thoughts on their mind. Take every precaution to not disturb their daydreams, and stand out as little as possible. The vagrants Casey passed certainly didn't pay him much mind. Casey wondered if they would care even if they did recognize him. Better them than one of the faceless police golems he'd seen on the street corners.

As he neared an intersection in the path he took a left turn onto an unpopulated side street. The brothers, it seemed, lived in a particularly dense area of the residential district, where teetering tenements were stacked against each other. It was a ways from Eustace's home on the outskirts.

As she passed Vera peeked into the displays of stores advertising fashion, art, or gluttonous indulgence, boundaries artificially removed with the help of regenerative exploits, anomalies typically reserved for the ultra-rich.

Casey turned back to her, as she was eyeing the posted menu for a restaurant that specialized in food that was the opposite of Italian food. "…have you not been in Three Portlands before?"

She shook her head, snapping her gaze away from the store and quickening her pace to keep up with him. "I have no idea what this place is or how it works."

"Oh. Wait. You haven't seen behind the Veil before now?"

She shrugged her shoulders. "From what I understand, it seems like most of the things I thought were impossible are in fact possible, and that there is some kind of secret underworld of people who know this and can utilize these impossibilities freely."

"Yeah, that's… basically it. You're taking this a lot better than I did." Casey had spent more than a few days locked in his room after Adam had showed him some magic years ago.

Again, she shrugged. "What I'm learning is that my preconceptions

were getting in my way. There's no need to dwell on the lies others tell to us."

"That's the best way to look at it, I guess." He led her into a right turn into another jagged alleyway where bricks gave way to sandblasted stucco. They kept a healthy pace.

"It's the benefit of my work. Clarity of purpose means that sometimes you don't need to think. You can just *be* and *do*."

Casey nodded. "I guess that makes sense. What does '*do*ing' entail, anyhow?"

"The way I see it, we have firefighters and doctors to preserve the things we need to survive. Directorate K is concerned with preserving the reasons we have to keep living."

"Reasons to live?"

"Things that make life worthwhile. The things previously unknown. The tastes that change each time you sample them. Disorder is an order all its own, and it's what human life is built around. It's about finding that combination, the repetition of something that changes every time. The appreciation of a thing just for what it is and how it feels. That's how I see it, at least."

"And that requires… spy shit?"

"I appreciate secrets. I'm skilled at finding them, cataloging them, patterning them. Beyond that, where the information goes is irrelevant."

"And you're here now."

"I'm here because it's where I'm best applied. My superiors knew there were secrets here worth sharing. Or maybe they felt something was at stake. Or both. It makes no difference to me."

"That's a… relaxed attitude you have towards the crimes you are currently committing."

She cast a sideways glance at him. "I have faith in what I do. I'm

good at what I do. I'm confident that this is where I'm supposed to be. You could do it too, you know. You're overwhelmed, but you're still moving forward after what happened. You're more adaptable than you think."

"I mean, I couldn't-"

He was interrupted by Vera grabbing the sleeve of his borrowed jacket and dragging him to a stop. They were standing at the outlet of the alley, and she pulled him back against a rough plaster wall. A few people kept walking past them and Casey turned to hide his face. "What? What is it?"

Vera pointed down the street and across, to a dinky apartment building among rows of others. "That's it, isn't it?"

Casey turned over the address in his head. "Yeah, that's probably it. Why did we stop?"

She stopped pointing but kept looking in that direction. "There's a man out front."

She was right. A bearded man wearing basketball shorts was leaning against one side of the building's entrance, peering into a small mesh backpack. She continued, "I've seen him before. In Portland just a few days ago. Portland, Oregon. I saw him and another man and they were talking about doing something big and vague."

Casey peered at him. "Big and vague, huh?"

"He's Sidney, probably," Vera finished.

The two of them stood in the alley for a moment longer.

Casey started. "So… what do we do?"

"Ideally we approach in a non-threatening manner and begin a dialogue."

"And then get held hostage by an old man with a gun?"

"I did say *ideally*."

Casey leaned out of the entrance they were discourteously blocking. "He's leaving."

The man had zipped up his backpack and turned to start walking with purpose down the street.

"So should we…" Casey trailed off.

Vera was already walking down the street. Casey nodded to no-one in particular and followed.

Casey gulped, grasping at an air of nonchalance. No big deal, just stalking someone in broad daylight while wanted by the police. Just a hobby.

Vera exuded effortlessness effortlessly. She weaved through the crowd (it just kept getting denser, Casey was suffocating), eagle-eyes trained on the mark.

Casey strained to see over the commotion in front of him. Where the street led around a run-down community garden, the paths were blocked by concrete dividers. Blue tape and sawhorses. They were heading straight for a checkpoint, manned by half a dozen police golems. Oh no.

His breath started to pick up. It's okay, he thought. He can just turn around and walk away. They can come back for Sidney some other day. He tugged at Vera's sleeve. She was undeterred. He stopped in place.

It was at this moment that Casey was tackled.

Arms flung around his neck, the weight of a lanky man toppling him him off his feet and onto the asphalt. Casey looked up. A man he had never seen before was on top of him. He was shouting. *"Why are you following us?"*

Casey gasped for air.

"Hi, Timothy," Vera said. She swung her leg into the man's side,

sinking her foot into his stomach. He wheezed, loosening his grip. Casey pushed into his sternum, and Timothy Way landed on his back beside him.

A siren rang. The crowd was fanning out like air bubbles leaving water. A mechanical voice chittered, *"This is an active crime scene. Please lay on the ground and place your hands behind your back for processing."*

Vera kneeled down, gripping Casey's forearms, and hoisted him to his feet in one fluid motion. Timothy started to clamber to his own knees. Vera glanced down the side street. Sidney was running. The golems were still blaring.

She started to run, and pulled Casey with her.

The streets were surprisingly empty. A crazed murderer on the loose tends to do the opposite of draw crowds.

Sidney ran down the street, fiddling with something in his grip, his backpack jostling back and forth with each of his strides.

Casey's legs burned. He ran track in high school, but that was the better part of a decade ago. Now not only was Casey confronted with the physical pain of his burning muscles, but the simultaneous emotional pain of being acutely aware exactly how much he had let himself go. To make matters worse, Vera seemed to have hardly broken a sweat behind him.

By now the police golems must have alerted the UIU headquarters. They'd probably be setting up a cordon any minute, a ring of armed men lassoing every exit. No escape. He banished the thought from his mind. Sometimes you just need to lie back and let yourself do what will be done.

Sidney spun on a dime, running straight into a tight alley. As he did, he dropped what he'd been carrying, something like a small blue pipe. Casey slapped the brick as he followed, leaping over the object and paying little mind.

Behind him, it activated — bursting into a cyan cloud of fluttering wings, thousands of blue bats spiraling around the entryway. Vera wasn't coming through. Probably best if she didn't chance it.

Casey kept running, dodging littered mush, feet splashing through iridescent puddles of contaminated water. His muscles were screaming, but he'd never been a good listener and didn't plan to start now.

He was getting close. Casey stretched his arms out to grab onto something, anything of Sidney's, but his fingertips only brushed his backpack.

Suddenly, Sidney stopped in his tracks, stepping to the side. Casey couldn't slow down, and his ankles were caught by Sidney's foot. He tumbled, catching on his hands in a pile of sludge, skinning his palms and dirtying his face.

When he looked up, Sidney had left the alleyway. He tried to curse under his breath, but his breath was too short, and it just came out as a squeal. He hoped no-one heard that. Scrambling to his feet once more, he rounded the corner.

Sidney Way was there, stopped in the center of the street. They were in Three Portland's tourism district, flanked on both sides by pastel hotels, vacant vacation homes, luxury spots for affluent folks who, having conquered the material world, sought a more challenging locale to gentrify.

Sidney was holding a gun, some kind of compact revolver. Casey stopped in his tracks.

His voice was even with a tinge of Southern drawl. "Gonna tell me why you're following us?"

Casey heaved for another moment. The body felt like it was still moving, pulsing in time with the pounding in his ears. "I think… we're both… at risk. There's… been weird goings on. I think you might be a target."

He narrowed his eyes at Casey. "Is that so?"

"I don't know what you're doing, but you don't need to. It's not you, it's… something in your head. It's making you do things."

He shook his head. "Might be wrong, but I don't think you have the slightest idea what you're talking about."

Casey couldn't really argue with that. Silence rang for a moment.

Casey cleared his throat. "Then I guess we're just in a… Mexican standoff."

"What? You're unarmed. It'd only be a Mexican standoff if you had a gun."

"Can-"

"Not a chance."

Well, Casey was out of ideas. He could do nothing. He raised his hands behind his head-

It was at this moment that Sidney was tackled.

Vera flung her weight at him, wrapping her arms around his shoulders. He lost his balance and fell backwards, on top of Vera, who had fallen onto her back.

He jabbed blindly at her face, elbow smacking into her nose with an ugly *thwack*.

Casey charged at the entangled duo. He knelt and grabbed Sidney's gun arm, propping it up into the sky. Sidney fired once, then twice, the blasts of sound ringing through Casey's skull as he lost his grip. Vera drove her knee into Sidney's gut, and his fingers loosened, letting the gun come clattering to the pavement.

Behind them, another voice rang out. "Sidney! It's done!" Casey swiveled his head over his shoulder, where he could see the other brother waving some small object in the air. At least he wasn't tackling Casey this time.

Sidney could hardly breathe with two people holding him down, but

he sputtered, "Do it! Now!"

Two words flashed through Casey's mind. *Bomb threats*.

"GET DOWN," he screamed, falling to his knees and covering his ears, squeezing his eyes as tight as he could before-

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-the world erupted, a fist of air and displaced earth slamming Casey in the chest with such power that the air in his body was forcibly expelled, and he was lifted off the ground.

Instinctively his body curled, and Casey briefly became a human cannonball, tumbling end over end until his shoulders smacked into the curb.

He desperately gasped for air, but his lungs filled only with the dust of obliterated stone, and he was wrenched into fitful coughing. He scrambled over, moving onto his hands and knees. He was suffocating.

With shaking hands he grabbed the collar of his shirt and pulled it over his nose, trying to filter the air. He inhaled slowly. That was better.

Gradually, he regained some control over himself. He opened his eyes, but the air was stinging them. All he could see was tawny debris in the air, and flecks of metal floating down.

"Vera," he gasped, as strongly as he could muster. "Vera!" No response.

His eyes refocused, gradually sifting through the shades of brown. A darkened shape surfaced to his left, a person clambering to their feet.

Across the street he saw what had been a building moments before. A teal and green display of garishness assembled into the shape of a holiday home. The facade was ripped clean down now, splinters littering the street.

The silhouette started to walk towards the wreck, holding something

in front of them with both hands. The gun.

Casey propped himself on his elbows, then his stinging palms, and pushed his body to his feet, joints popping with discomfort. He followed the figure. They didn't seem to notice.

They stepped over the threshold and Casey trailed behind, tip-toeing into the house.

The building was in tatters. A living room was covered in shreds of what was either destroyed modern art, or fully intact modern art appearing as intended. A shriek came from a doorway, and both Casey and the figure turned to look. The silhouette moved in.

It was an ornate bedroom, or it used to be. Half the wall along with the remains of an antique dresser was caved out into the street, and the ceiling had fallen in. On the bed, an old man was trapped, pinned beneath the rafters.

The silhouette turned, revealing the profile of Sidney's face as he raised the gun.

The reveal of his face was very convenient to Casey, who then knew exactly where to aim.

His suckerpunch smacked into Sidney's ear, sending the already wobbly man down against the wall, the gun leaving his grip once more.

Casey leaned over the bed. He could make out the man's features. He looked… familiar.

Cillian Erwan. The man he had seen just days ago. The man who had put a gun in Casey's bag without him noticing.

Evidently, he recognized Casey in kind. He coughed. "What're… what're you doing here? What's going on?"

Casey heard shouting outside. A blasting voice. *"FBI, everyone get on the ground!"* He didn't move.

Casey tried to keep his voice low. "Why did you… what did you do

to me? You made me kill him. Why? What did you have to gain?"

Erwan's face shifted. He moved back. "What're you on about?"

His breath sped up. "Your android. She gave me a gift for Regent. It turned into a gun in my backpack, and I… and I…"

Erwan interrupted him with a sick laugh. "The robot, huh?" His laugh sputtered into coughing as he inhaled dust. "You're asking the wrong guy, kid. This is them getting me too, isn't it?"

Casey furrowed his brow. "No, look, we'll… we'll get you out. I just need to find-"

Someone was at the doorway. Someone that any troublemaker in Three Portlands knew very well. **`Special Agent Kenneth Spencer`**. He was holding a gun, too.

Casey scrambled away, towards the hole in the wall.

Erwan coughed again. "About time you got here. I've been-"

His thought was ended with a bullet from Spencer's gun. Casey's eyes widened. Behind him he heard another, identical voice. *"FBI, everyone get on the ground!"*

Spencer(?) turned to Sidney, still clutching his head against the wall. Another gunshot.

Casey vaulted over the debris, his foot catching as he fell face-first back into the street. He shuffled onto his hands and knees and back up again. He started to limp across the street again. He stumbled down to his knees once more. In the corner of his eye there was another Spencer, flanked by uniformed agents and visibly confused.

"Identify yourself," Spencer said.

"Special Agent Kenneth Spencer," said Spencer.

"No…" Spencer said. "You're not. Drop your weapon and exit the building with your hands up."

"No," said Spencer. He was at the collapsed wall of the bedroom now. "*You're* not." He leveled his gun at Casey.

Casey squeezed his eyes shut as the sound of a gunshot filled his ears.

And then another. And another gunshot.

But no pain came. He opened his eyes again, and saw only red. He blinked.

There was nothing wrong with his eyes. Standing above him was a fair-haired man, arms held out in front of him. One hand drew a thin knife straight down the other forearm, and from the wound wine-dark sparks spilled, flowing around the both of them in a hollow shell. The bullets had bounced harmlessly off the buffer.

Casey stared up at him.

Adam Rowe stared back down.

"We're gonna be fine," he said, with a weak smile.

Adam knelt down, reaching with the hand that wasn't shooting energy and gripping Casey's tightly.

And then the world around them became a blur.

« **Slow Animals** | **Hub** | **The End Has No End** »

The End Has No End

« **Automatic Stop** ||

It is very difficult to bandage a wound that is spitting flames.

Attempting to do so conveys, in rather spectacular fashion, just how flammable most bandaging materials are. You start with the official, garden-variety bandages. Once those are all cinders, you move on to more exotic choices. Tape? That sounds appropriate. Scraps of clothing? You've seen movies. You know that has to work. They wouldn't put it in movies if it didn't work, right? That would just be reckless.

Casey was just checking if his socks were absorbent enough when Adam grabbed his forearm with his good hand.

Adam grimaced as he pushed himself more upright against the side of the porch, his shirt catching several splinters on the damaged wood. At the end of his flaming arm, his hand was shaking, fingers clasping and unclasping in a stilted succession. He wheezed: "Tourniquet."

Casey mouthed a silent thanks. He fiddled with another scrap of his shirt, tied it around Adam's bicep, then tightening it with a pen Adam passed from his pocket. "Can you hold that?"

Adam could. At last, the fire started to die down, replaced by a more manageable candlewick of a flame. Casey blew it out, and Adam winced.

"Sorry."

Adam cleared his throat and clutched his sliced arm to his chest. He rasped, "Did you take care of my jacket?"

Casey blinked. "Oh, yeah, totally. Uhm, how did you get here?"

"Do you think I'm a spy?"

"These past few days have not affirmed my naturally trusting disposition."

"We'll be sure to include that in the lawsuit when this is done with. Your honor, this murderous conspiracy gave me trust issues." Adam laughed, then coughed, then continued. "I went to Erwan's house. Place was empty, done up like a crime scene, all blocked off. You didn't tell me what to do after, so I came here."

"I knew there was a loophole."

"But you left it anyways. Dad told me you were borrowing my clothes, so tracking you was easy."

"And you say *I* have trust issues."

Adam chuckled, then winced. "But, when I got close, something went weird. The bomb went off. And I lost track. Check out the debris."

The cloud still consumed the street, even now. Enough soot was blown into the air to make the Mayor sneeze. In the sky Casey saw the sun, hazy in the dust, occluded by metal shards flitting about on the aching breeze.

Casey squinted, following a metal fragment as it landed on the concrete. It wasn't just debris — it was flat, and engraved with an image. A twenty-two pointed star — an eicosidyogram, with each point marked by unrecognizable symbols.

Adam nodded. "As soon as the bomb went off, it was like there were a thousand of you — total thaumic overload. Had to play it by ear after that, but seems I got there just in time. And then everything turned out fine, and we lived forever and never died."

"Don't spoil it for me."

Gunfire echoed off debris-blasted buildings. Casey peeked around

the edge of the porch. The twin Spencers were still duking it out in what was probably a metaphor, or something.

Casey sighed. "Any idea how we're getting out of here?"

Adam shifted to kneel behind Casey. He'd stabilized his afflicted left arm as best he could. "Police were trying to find you, after you engaged in some kind of wrestling match in the middle of the street?"

"You should have seen the other guy."

"Where *is* the other guy?"

"I don't know, actually."

Adam reached for Casey's forearm and hoisted himself to a standing position. "In any case, they were going to corner you until someone set off a bomb. Now their priorities have shifted. So long as we avoid town center, we should be okay."

A loud, rubbery beep came from behind them. Casey spun around. Standing there, at the end of the lane with a bike and a dusty coat, was Vera Garcia.

"Finally," she said with a sigh. "Come on. Time to go."

From the outside, the dust cloud looked like a great, fat hyperbola, curved walls trending asymptotically upwards to a stubby point far above the city. The cone nearly eclipsed the midday sun.

It had hung in the sky for too long, the air dead with no wind to distort it. A mass of ash people would be sweeping off their porches for weeks.

If they cared about their porches, that is. Most people under the cloud were gathering their relatives and belongings and heading either directly away from or directly towards the site of the blast, seeking safety or entertainment, respectively.

In either case, the scattered pedestrians were far too preoccupied to

make any note of the two men limping past. Up ahead, a biker in a pantsuit wheeled about, craning her head to peer into side streets and alleyways, and waving back when the coast was clear.

Casey wasn't sure where she got the bike. If he had to guess, she either stole it or pulled it out of her bag like Mary Poppins. From what he knew about Vera, either were equally probable.

"So, the brothers were supplied with a bomb," Adam said.

"Right," Casey replied.

"And this mysterious benefactor also made a robot Agent Spencer."

"Presumably."

"To kill the guy in the house-"

"Cillian Erwan. An investor in the paratech trade."

"Right. And also kill one of the bombers? So it was a double-cross?"

"I guess? Or he knew he was going down?"

"Regardless."

"Yeah. So, a bomb gone off, two people dead, and an officer of the FBI in Three Ports is apparently responsible." Casey counted off the elements on his fingers.

"Sounds like a scandal. But what about the blockers in the bomb? Why go to the trouble of manufacturing thousands of magic flakes just on the off chance that a wizard might be scrying the site of the blast? What difference would that even make?"

They trundled onwards. It wouldn't be long until they were back on Eustace's steps.

"What if," Casey started, "they're not trying to hide it from us, but someone else? What about the Mayor?"

"Does that even make sense? Isn't the city to the Mayor, like, a body

is to a brain?"

"If it's remote sight, it probably works like scrying, right? And things that block scrying might make a blind spot."

Adam chewed on that for a moment. "And if the Mayor doesn't realize something's going on, and the FBI is dealing with the fallout of a bomb and a bunch of phony murders…"

"Everyone's distracted. It's the perfect opening."

They stopped. The street had come to an end; the facade of Eustace's building hung over them.

They had no sooner knocked than the door swooshed inwards. Eustace was standing down the hall, arms crossed. His wrinkled hands impatiently beckoned them in.

Adam gave a weak wave with his good hand, but Eustace just shook his head.

The door slammed shut, plunging the foyer back into twilight. "Do me a favor. Next time you leave this house, don't do anything that'll be on the news before you get back."

Casey and Vera blinked a few times, letting their eyes adjust to the light. Adam had shuffled into the kitchen to sit on the granite countertop.

Casey coughed. He thought about how to phrase this.

"I think we need to meet the Mayor."

Eustace nodded along. "Right, right. Okay. Well, I'll keep my eye on the obituaries—"

"It's the most likely target of — well, whatever is going to happen," Adam interjected. "The bomb's got the whole city looking the other way, and no-one's going to bother to sort through the evidence for days, at least."

The old man sighed. "Well, that's peachy. And if that's true at all, we should be leaving the city, not charging headlong into certain death. City Hall is done up like a bank vault on demonic steroids."

Casey frowned. "We can't leave. We all have people here."

"I'm sorry, do you have friends that you have not yet murdered, amnesticized, or dragged into this death spiral with you? If so, they should *also* be leaving the city."

Adam fished a white rectangle out of an oaken drawer. With his good hand, he pressed it to the wound, gritting his teeth as thousands of microscopic arms affixed themselves to his laceration.

He took a shuddering breath in, then exhaled smoothly. "Whoever's doing this is moving fast. Even if the City Council listened, it'd take weeks for them to do anything — we need to act *now*."

Eustace narrowed his eyes at his son. "At what point did I give off the impression that I am in any way supporting your absurd plans? Why shouldn't I just throw you out now and let the police sort everything?"

Adam jumped down from the counter, flexing his bandaged arm experimentally. "Because if you don't help, I will do it anyways. I will charge into those defenses alone. And I will die."

Eustace tilted his head. "Are you holding yourself hostage?"

"Yes. You know I'd do it."

"God, you would, wouldn't you?" There was a dull glint of pride in the old man's voice.

Eustace stared at Adam. Then at Casey. Then back to Adam.

"Fine," he said, enunciating carefully. "Let me get my things."

Eustace pulled the kitchen blinds shut, dragging the last slivers of early afternoon sunlight away and out of the room.

The elder turned around, leering at the three people sitting patiently at his dull ochre dinner table. After a moment, he slid out his own chair, and sat down with a dusty thud.

He cleared his throat. "I want to start by informing certain parties at this meeting how much I despise them."

He pointed at Casey. "I hate your weak-willed attitude and susceptibility to mind control. I hate that you give my son excuses to do stupid shit."

Casey looked at the table, arms folded on his lap. "Let's be honest, he doesn't need me for that."

Eustace ignored him. He shifted his finger of blame to Vera. "I hate your bland cheerfulness and the fact that you think you belong here."

Vera shrugged. "Guilty."

Adam spoke up. "I think it's nice that *someone* has an ounce of optimism."

Eustace glared for a moment. Adam laid back in his seat once more, cradling his left arm in a dark fabric sling. "Moving on-"

"Are you forgetting anyone?" Casey asked.

Eustace frowned at him. "Adam's doing his best. What are you implying?"

Casey looked to Adam, who just gave a shrug.

"That's not-" Casey sunk back. "-what I meant."

"Anyways," Eustace resumed. "Here's what I know."

A warm draft swept across the room, and from the plain tabletop, spectral pinpoints emerged. They shone opalescent, each glittering vertex dragging others along with it, forming a polygonal starfield.

Eustace spun his fingers, and they whipped themselves into a

shape. From the bottom up, a holographic model of a building was formed. It was about two stories high, thin and spindly, and each side held an amalgam of balconies, windowsills, and pillars, all of varying architectural origins. The windows were all opaque and black, and no doors marked an entrance.

"City hall," Eustace dictated, as if it was obvious. "Impenetrable. Even city council doesn't go inside. They just teleport paperwork in. Sometimes, they even get some paperwork back."

"Funny thing is, place isn't even a building. In the late 90's, whole thing went *bloop* and reformed into that shape. Happens every few decades, I think. Same general shape, but more modern accoutrements."

The shape exploded outwards, the topmost layer of stardust swirling up to reveal an oblong vortex within, balancing on one edge.

"You look inside, there's two concentric barriers. I did my own tests on it a long time ago, and it seems the first barrier is semi-permeable. The thaumic programming in there is going a mile a minute to detect and isolate pathogenic matter, though."

Adam cut in. "Could we distract it? Sneak in unnoticed?"

Eustace drummed his fingers, and the glittering constellation on the table pulsed to the beat. "You could magically project some smaller threats onto it, I suppose. But you'd need to predict the weak spots much quicker than a human mind could handle."

Casey interrupted in turn. "Prediction, like, machine learning? The CI agent, Troy, he mentioned they had something like that."

Eustace sighed. "The Chaos Insurgency wouldn't know quality engineering if it punched them in their edgy teenager faces. I'll see what I can do."

Adam frowned. "How do you know so much about the Mayor's defenses anyways?"

"Few years back I had some trouble with building permits. Briefly entertained the idea of killing the Mayor and replacing it with

someone with less of a fetish for paperwork."

The room went quiet.

"…dad."

"I planned for all outcomes. Sue me. In any case," he segued, "you still need to physically get into the building."

Adam twisted his mouth. "Maybe we could mail ourselves? Like the paperwork."

Eustace stared. "Right. You work on that. And someone else can work on how the hell you're going to actually breach the *second* barrier. I can't even figure out what's inside that nucleus, let alone pierce it."

"If I may interject," Vera interjected, "I have something that might be of use." She reached into the inside of her jacket and plucked out the stubby, pistol-like device she had used in the parking lot. She brandished it in front of her, rotating it for the others to see.

"My understanding is that it opened a door for me to come here. Perhaps it could be useful now."

Eustace snatched it from her grasp. He held it sideways up to his face. "Where did you get this?"

"I received it along with my meal at Taco Bell."

Eustace set the device down, then took a moment to reflect on what his life had become.

Finally, he spoke. "This is some prime paratech. A Way-opener that can be used by even the most mundane among us." He side-eyed Vera. "With some jury-rigging, you could, perhaps, drill partially *outside* Portlands and then *back*, but inside a place of your choosing. Past the barrier, because you never went through the barrier. To finally talk some sense into the Mayor."

"Then we're set," Vera said, smiling.

"I suppose we are," he grumbled.

He clapped his hands. The iridescent projection folded in upon itself until it was just a tiny pinprick. And then the room went dark.

The words "crude" and "intricate" are not typically used in succession to describe the same subject. This combination of adjectives is typically only prescribed to tax law and critically panned films, but it applied as well to the great assemblage Eustace Rowe had propped up in his kitchen.

With loving care Eustace had woven layers of sinew into organic auraducts. The shrink-wrapped neural tissue that formed the pulsing core had been selected carefully, fused with precision into the blender-sized form before him. Each loop of muscular tubing circled through itself in a Klein bottle of pseudoelectric plumbing, running along the tabletop to a simple metal helmet studded with electrodes.

It was a perfect biomechanical focus for heavy-duty thaumaturgy. Prometheus Labs would have — and, in fact, often had — literally killed for paratech like this. Laymen called it an abomination. Eustace, in his head, had taken to calling it *Hevel*.

Looking at it gave Casey a headache. If you were to ask Casey to describe its aesthetic in two words, he would politely refuse the question to avoid thinking about the machine any longer.

Even Vera wasn't sure what to say. "It's… nice?"

Eustace shushed her. With his bony hands he took the helmet by the edges and held it aloft. As soon as the steel touched the crown of his head, Hevel stirred to life with an alarming shudder.

He shut his eyes, and the temperature of the room shifted up by half a degree. Even without looking, he sneered in Adam's direction. "Don't look at me. Get on with it."

Adam cleared his throat. In one hand, he was carrying a sheaf of papers. His other arm was pressed against his abdomen in a tight sling, still recovering from the self-inflicted slashes. "Right. So, I've

been in contact with **a specialist in legal documents**. They **owe me a favor**."

He nodded at Casey and Vera. "With some finangling and the barrier weakened, I'm pretty sure I can have you both designated particularly bulky tax returns. Nothing should seem amiss, at least until-"

Vera piped up. "Until I can use this?" She held up the not-gun, adorned with a few new flashing bulbs.

Adam nodded. "Yeah, you should be able to do that. I think?" He turned to Eustace, who was now swaying slightly in place, lost in a thought projected from some other time.

Adam took a step forward, and gave Casey a one-armed hug. "Now or never."

Casey hugged back, as carefully as he could. His heart was pounding.

"Well," Adam said, "let's get you in a box."

In a dusty hallway in the center of Three Portlands Plaza, a large cardboard box materialized, suspended six feet in the air.

A moment later, it stopped being suspended, and fell to the carpeted floor with a painful thud and two yelps. A fist thrust its way through a seam. Vera Garcia scrambled onto her knees. She took in a deep breath but got a mouthful of dust, and she started to choke on the air.

Casey's head emerged next. His eyes darted around.

They were in a hallway of some sort. The aesthetic was dated, not only by the jazzy patterns in the carpet and peeling blue wallpaper but also by the inch-thick layer of dust covering absolutely everything.

Well, not everything. Scattered about the hall were papers, booklets, and envelopes, lying atop the sea of dust. They likely made it in the

same way Vera and Casey did, although the likelihood that a person was inside one was much lower.

The place was dead silent. Not a draft, not a squeak, not a footstep. Barren.

Vera cleared her throat and clambered to her feet. She offered Casey a hand, and pulled him up.

"Here we are," she said.

Casey turned in place. The hallway went in two directions, each slightly curving to form what might be a circle. "Wanna try left or right?"

Vera dusted off her not-gun. "Left feels lucky." She set off, disturbing a trail of particulate, and Casey followed.

The hallway kept curving, so it might've been a loop — but Casey also noticed an incline. A spiral? Most of the path was desolate, just abandoned letters and inches upon inches of grit. Coming round the bend, something else was visible: an old fashioned window and pane, rotated ninety degrees and down against the edge of the carpet. It faced to the inside of the circle, ostensibly further into the building, and just displayed pure black.

"That's not where windows go," Vera observed. She knelt next to it and pressed a finger to the glass. It was scalding to the touch, and as she recoiled a deep blue wave spread across the surface.

"That tracks, I suppose." She stood back up. "Should we kick it in?"

"Uh. We should probably go around some more before we try property damage."

She shrugged. "Ashes to ashes. All solutions converge to property damage in the long run."

"That's very philosophical."

"More of a mark of experience." She stood up again and kept walking, undeterred.

They continued again for a moment longer, and something odd caught Casey's eye from around the bend. Something brown, and crumpled.

"Is that a box?" he asked.

Vera squinted at it, slowing her pace to an amble. "It is."

They approached. It was crumpled and torn like a person or two had emerged from it and set off down the hall, as indicated by a muddled track of disturbed dust.

Casey tilted his head. "Is it *our* box?"

Vera took a knee beside it. She poked at the cardboard folds with her index finger.

"Hmm," she said. "I do not know how to tell boxes apart."

Casey shifted back and forth on his feet. "We've been walking uphill, right? We couldn't have gone in the circle."

"Maybe the Mayor is a fan of M.C. Escher."

"That would make a lot of sense, actually." Casey paced in a small circle. "So, either the building is doing some weird stuff topologically, or there's someone else in here."

"Those are not mutually exclusive."

"Good point."

There was a trail of footsteps emanating from the perforated cardboard, proceeding the same way they were going.

"Nowhere to go but up," Vera muttered.

They proceeded around the spiral for another half-turn. The footsteps in front of them continued, framed by increasing quantities of unopened mail.

Vera scooped up a sheaf of letters. "A building permit. News of a

regulation on the fourth dimension. A warrant for the arrest of someone accused of "lemoning"? Do you know what that is?"

"I've only heard rumors."

Vera swiveled, examining the peeling, outdated wallpaper. She rounded another bend, and the flimsy texture was supplanted by a wooden frame.

"Oh," she remarked. "That's something."

It was a door, on the inwards surface of the hallway. It was wooden, inlaid with simple rectangular patterns. Vera jiggled the knob, then braced her shoulder against the door.

Casey peered at her. "What're you doing?"

"Breaking the door."

"It would be a really bad impenetrable barrier if it was weak to shoulders."

"Fair." She took a step back and fished the bulky way-opener from inside her jacket. "I reckon this is the target, then."

Casey nodded, mostly to himself. "Yeah." He held out his hand. "I can try opening it, and you can head inside."

Vera shook her head. "I don't know," she said. "I'm kind of tired."

Casey blanched. "You can't be serious. Right?"

Vera sighed. "I've done a lot today. There was a bomb, I chased down some people, fought two guys. I think I stole someone's bike, too."

"They, uh. They probably didn't need it?"

"That's not the point. This is all still foreign territory. And I can deal with that, but I can't go in there and act like I speak for the city. As much as I want to know this place, I don't. Not yet."

Casey lowered his hand. "But what could I do?"

Vera pondered for a moment. "Why'd you start this, in the first place? Troy offered you a way out of the town, and it's not like you owe Eustace any help. Why not just wait for it to be over, and clear your name *then*?"

Casey looked at the door, then the ground. "I don't… I don't want to leave. I don't want the city to be someplace I have to run from. So much of my life, I've been… unwelcome, unwanted, just a nothing. Three Portlands accepted me, and no matter how hostile it can be, it's home. If something's happening, I want to be here for it."

Vera smiled. "You're doing just fine. After this, we're going out for drinks." She pointed the way-opener at the door, shut one eye, and squeezed the trigger.

The door warped, and from the creases on either side a pitch-black shape grew to cover the surface.

She winked. "Head on in. I'll be here."

Casey fell face-first onto the ground. He tried to open his eyes, and then realized they already were open. Pitch darkness.

His hands spread across the floor. The air was cool and the ground was curved, subtly bowl-shaped. Casey's fingers brushed against something soft that flaked off onto him, and he recoiled.

And then there were sirens in his ears. Everything became bright, blisteringly white, and the blast in his eardrums sent his hands rushing to protect his head. The sound was like a foghorn, so loud the air was boiling and Casey's mind was forcibly cleared of all but the thought of escape and — it stopped.

Casey gasped, as if he'd had the wind knocked out of him.

He heard a quiet, rasping voice. "Pathogen. Identify."

He strained to look up. The room was still pure, endless white, but forward and above him there was a violet sphere. Like looking into a

single, massive eye that consumed his vision.

Casey clambered to his feet, wobbly on the curved ground.

"I'm Casey Malik. I need to talk to you."

Smooth lavender tendrils laced themselves around his ankles and wrists. He was yanked into the air. The orb hovered in front of him and pulsed with each word. "What you have done is proportionate to needing to talk in the same way that brain surgery is proportionate to wanting to say hello."

Casey wriggled. "I'm sorry, but it's bad out there. People are dying and it's only getting worse."

The room warmed by a degree or two. "Death," the voice emanated, "is all around us. Your cells are dying right now. In seven years, every part of your body that is alive now will be dead and replaced by new life. The death of a cell does not imply the injury of the whole."

He squinted, indignant. "How can you write us off like that?"

"It is not your fault that you don't understand. You were simply a cell. And now you are a pathogen."

"There are bigger problems than me out there. I'm just a secretary. There was a bomb out there and I- I think that was just a distraction."

"A distraction for whom? I can see you are not wholly uninvolved. You have a passenger." Additional tendrils extended from the orb, raking along Casey's cheek and temples. He tried to move back, but was forced still.

"She's just waiting outside. She's a friend."

"Not that. A passenger. Inside your head."

"That's, well- I was exposed to a carrier. It made me do something. It's- it's memetic." Casey ran through the steps in his head. "An infection in the cells threatens the body."

The Mayor burbled in a contemplative manner. "Yes," it said. "It can."

"What does it take to threaten you?"

"Much more than what you have."

The Mayor closed in and dug its tendrils into Casey's head and he yelled-

---

In the beginning, Casey was scared. He was just born, and his tracts of land were barren-

Wait, back up a sec. Casey didn't have tracts of land. He, the *right* Casey this time, took a step back. The Mayor was inside his head, but mutual cognition is a two-way street, isn't it?

The sound of gunfire brought Casey back to the other place. Bombs shook his vast body, and he had nowhere to go. Great ropes tied him to an unseen anchor, three harpoons buried in his flesh.

He felt footsteps upon him, and heard voices. Soldiers, seeking refuge from a faraway war, fought with guns and ghosts and fire.

Three Portlands greeted them with open arms.

Years passed. The war ended with great fanfare, and the watchtowers and fortifications and convoys of Portlands became houses and bakeries and bicycles.

The Mayor celebrated too. It built itself a home.

The population multiplied; the people became indistinct. The Mayor didn't see faces, not anymore; all it saw were cultures — *desires*. Power accumulated in the city.

The Mayor became aware of entities just like itself. "America". "United Kingdom". "Foundation". The Mayor built stronger walls.

Three Portlands flourished, and the Mayor only skimmed a fraction of that energy. Its body expanded rapidly outwards, stretching to the

ether. Great limbs and veins of stone and steel filled with tens of thousands of cells-

Casey snapped back. He was a person again, sitting on a wooden chair in a coffee shop.

He glanced out the great window to see miles and miles of blank space, and the entirety of Three Portlands turned on end like a great wheel.

The cafe was empty, save for one person sitting across the table.

"Casey, love," Adam cooed. "Tell me about the bomb."

"Adam, you-" Casey started. "*You* shouldn't look like him."

Not Adam laughed. It sounded just like him. "Now that I've been inside your head, I think we can be comfortable with each other. I can't see inside the blast, Casey. Tell me what happened." The cafe seemed to zoom towards the sideways city, where the great cone of dust rapidly became visible.

"There was Cillian Erwan, and Sidney Way. The target and the bomber. A duplicate of Agent Spencer killed them both."

"Mm," Not Adam hummed, as if savoring a bite of something. "Who made it out?"

"I did. And Adam, and Vera. And the other bomber. Timothy."

"Timothy," Not Adam repeated. The cafe closed in on the edge of the opaque cloud, to a side street where a man in basketball shorts emerged from the dust. Muddy tears were streaming down his face. He started running.

The window followed him as he faded into a line of citizens running from the blast. He stayed with them until he could turn off onto his side street and rush into the apartment building. The cafe window transformed to a top-down view.

Timothy raced up the stairs and fished a key-ring out of a pocket of his dust-plastered jacket. He burst into a cramped, dirty apartment,

slammed the door, and doubled over coughing. A moment passed and he caught his breath.

He looked back up, and a pristine package the size of a breadbox caught his attention.

He knelt beside it, examining it for any marking of origin. Finding nothing, he dug his fingers into the seams and tore it open, pulling out a small, black object that looked like a pistol, and-

It looked just like Vera's way-opener.

The Not Adam's face hardened. "No, no." It looked at Casey. "Let me see it again."

Casey couldn't take his eyes off of Timothy, who was still cradling the object. "What?"

"The virus in your head. I need to see it again." The scene outside the window burst into sparks and then faded back to grey mist. Not Adam grabbed Casey by the shoulders and lifted him effortlessly into the air. Its voice was frantic. "I need to know what it does. *I need to see who sent it.* We can't have much time."

Not Adam buried its fingers into Casey's neck, but he barely felt the pain. The apparition's eyes went blank as it took in the information. "Yes, yes, it's- I can see, I can see it."

And then it froze, and it and the coffee shop blinked out of existence. Casey fell to the ground. He was in the white room once more.

As he pushed himself to his feet, he saw someone else.

"Finally," said Timothy Way. He looked just like he had from the window. "Took you all long enough."

Casey tried to lunge at him, but was just forced back by some unseen draft. The orb in the center of the space was blinking, vibrating faster than any could tell, and it was radiating force outwards.

"Honestly," Timothy continued, "I don't know how they did it. How do

you design a cognitohazard for something so abstract, let alone nest it in another hazard?" He shrugged, and Casey could see the way-opener in his hand. "Guess it doesn't matter now."

Around Casey, the white space dimmed with static. The draft accelerated. Gusts of wind swirled within the sphere.

Timothy steadied himself against the side of the chamber, lifted his device at the frozen orb, and pulled the trigger.

The sphere distorted — like dragging a needle through paint lying atop water, an indented cone extruding from the placid surface. An instant later, it reverberated back; it rippled through the air and the walls and Casey's body and mind.

There was now a definite pull in the room, a gravitation to the orb that rippled with intensifying amplitude, wrapped around a Way to god-knows-where.

Casey propped himself on his elbows. He tried to shout over the din, his voice hoarse and strained. "What are you doing? *Why?*"

Timothy dropped the way-opener. It flew up into the growing vortex, and vanished. "You showed us how to get here. Took down their defenses and opened the door."

The man coughed, shifting his weight down the wall. "*They* don't get it. They think this is a good plan. But Three Portlands needs to go through fire to get *them* out. All the cops and the spies and the-" he broke down coughing. "Reborn in fire. Like it should be."

Casey pulled his knees to his stomach. The Mayor was fading now, growing ever smaller as the winds and the gravity picked up. He spoke and the words were taken on the wind. "I don't want to leave the city."

"Don't worry," Timothy said, closing his eyes. "It'll be like you never left."

Casey shut his eyes. The ground opened up beneath him, and he fell through into waiting arms.

Every dog in Three Portlands awoke from their sleep and began barking.

Passengers waiting at Three Portlands Central Station watched as each Way was sequentially marked "CLOSED".

Anyone outside heard a great chime; above them, the stars blinked out one by one.

Everyone dreaming winced, and gripped their covers a bit more tightly.

It happened all throughout the city, all at once. Because, from that moment on, Three Portlands *wasn't* a city.

From that moment on, Three Portlands was a corpse.

« **Automatic Stop** | **Hub** | **Intermission** »

Competitive Eschatology Hub

The Way The World Ends

The Lock has been opened. The armies and monsters of Revelations and Ragnarok and older, forgotten myths march across the Earth. The old gods have returned, and brand new gods are waking up. And more are waiting in the wings.

The Foundation has been split at the seams. Senior staff and the leaders of the Foundation are missing, incapacitated, dead, or making desperate plans on the fly.

The ends of the world are here, all of them, and we're not ready.

`Competitive Eschatology Official Playlist`: You're a god or an entity or a force of nature, and you're here with an agenda. Here are some songs to rock out to while you end the world.

Story Sequence

Act One, Part 1

- **Apakht (Part 1 of 3)** (by *thedeadlymoose*): *The fabric of reality began to unfold before their eyes.*
- **The Gate Opens (Part 2 of 3)** (by *thedeadlymoose*): *"Uriel," Yahweh said. "It is Time."*
- **Revelation (Part 3 of 3)** (by *thedeadlymoose*): *"I come on behalf of the SCP Foundation," the woman said.*
- **Storm Front** (by *Sophia Light*): *“Well, I'd say we're due for a*

little calamity. Wouldn't you?"

- **Awakenings** (by *thedeadlymoose*): *Ur-An-Uum raised her head to the sky and cried a rending wail of anguish.*

Act One, Part 2

- **The White Horse (The Conqueror With The Golden Crown)** (by *thedeadlymoose*): *Her eyes burned like white stars.*
- **The Red Horse (The Ironic Metaphor)** (by *Dexanote*): *"Today is a* very special *episode."*
    - *Interlude: A Memo Regarding a Theft* (by *Dexanote*): *Inventory check for Site 62 reveals the absence of SCP-573.*
- **The Black Horse (The Crawling Sea)** (by *Sophia Light*): *Then its clothes burst, and out came the mice.*
    - *Interlude: Last Words from Svalbard* (by *Sophia Light*): *"We have a proposition for* you*."*
- **The Pale Horse (The Wayward Children)** (by *thedeadlymoose*): *The living creature felt gratitude and elation beyond compare.*

Act One, Part 3

- **The Bloody Autumn** (by *Dexanote*): *"This is your army. Delivered by* Fear itself*."*
- **Stirrings** (by *Skara Brae*): *The lightning recognized his roar, and raced to join him.*
- **Ganymede** (by *thedeadlymoose*): *"You know… In another future, we got to grow old together."*

Splinters

- **Now... This** (by *Gaffney*): *Three weeks into a possible future…*
- **In the End: Monkey Business** (by *DrBright*)

- **In the End: Elite** (by *DrBright*)
- **In the End: Europe** (by *DrBright*)
- **In the End: Rawhide** (by *DrBright*)
- **Tenebrae** (by *TroyL*): *Our fathers have sinned, and are not; and we have borne their iniquities.*
- **`Sunset`** (by *Mister Evans*): *Dozens of faiths had a promise of eternal night to uphold, and most were going straight to the source.*
- **`When Moses Goes Wrong`** (by Loiterer87) *Meanwhile on Earth, astronomers noticed several discrepancies when they looked up to the stars.*
- **`Fire and Brimstone`** (by Slothdude) *even Gods must have their Demons.*

Act Two

- **Awakenings, Part Two** (by *Scantron*): *"I have infinite confidence in your loyalty and competence."*
    - *Interlude: New Toys* (by *Dexanote*): *"Oh I like you. I like you an' I like yor little buddy. I think I'll keep ya."*
- *To Be Continued.*

Chronological Sequence

Display Entries In Chronological Order

- **Apakht (Part 1 of 3)** by *thedeadlymoose*
    - ***Awakenings*** *(Certain scenes)* by *thedeadlymoose*
- **Stirrings** by *Skara Brae*
- **The Gate Opens (Part 2 of 3)** by *thedeadlymoose*
- **Revelation (Part 3 of 3)** by *thedeadlymoose*

    - ***Awakenings*** *(Certain scenes)* by *thedeadlymoose*

- **The White Horse (The Conqueror With The Golden Crown)** by *thedeadlymoose*
- **The Red Horse (The Ironic Metaphor)** by *Dexanote*
- **Stormfront** by *Sophia Light*
    - Interlude: A Memo Regarding a Theft by *Dexanote*
- **Awakenings** (Closing scene; "Official" chronological location) by *thedeadlymoose*
    - ***The Bloody Autumn*** *(Flashback scenes)* by *Dexanote*
- **The Black Horse (The Crawling Sea)** by *Sophia Light*
- **The Pale Horse (The Wayward Children)** by *thedeadlymoose*
    - Interlude: Last Words from Svalbard by *Sophia Light*
- **The Bloody Autumn** (Present scenes; "Official" chronological location) by *Dexanote*
- ***Splinter:*** **Tenebrae** by *TroyL*
- **Ganymede** by *thedeadlymoose*
- **Awakenings, Part Two** by *Scantron*
- ***Interlude: New Toys:*** by *Dexanote*

- ***Splinter:*** **Now... This** (3 weeks into a possible future) by *Gaffney*

Unknown Timeframe:

- ***Splinter:*** **In the End: Monkey**

Business by *DrBright*
- ***Splinter:* In the End: Elite** by *DrBright*
- ***Splinter:* In the End: Europe** by *DrBright*
- ***Splinter:* In the End: Rawhide** by *DrBright*

How To Write For This Canon

Display Writer's Guide

First, read the canon. Then, write whatever you want and throw it up! Feel free to add your article here when you're done.

Our canon has a room on IRC: **#eschatology**. Come brainstorm with us!

> **Note:** We're looking for stuff that's *different* here. Don't be afraid to be ambitious. Don't shy away from under-appreciated SCPs and unusual concepts. Please don't just write an incredibly straightforward take on a subject!

Main Story Arcs

The Ends of the World

The Lock is open, and many more world-enders will be waking up. Or arriving. Or suddenly compelled to do what they were apparently always supposed to do. Maybe-gods like SCP-343, ancient entities like the bear king, modern things like the ink pen, eldritch beings from beyond the stars - the world-enders are coming from everywhere. It's only going to get bigger and messier before the curtains close.

Writing Suggestions for "The Ends of the World":

- More vignette collections for this arc, like "Awakenings". Remember, one of the big themes of this canon is "things not going according to plan" - creativity is key.
- New world-enders. Any SCP can be a world-ender if you want, and you're not limited to SCPs.
- Previously established world-enders: what they do next.
- World-enders clashing with each other. Or maybe teaming up. Or refusing to end the world and trying to help the Foundation or the Serpent's Hand or other entities. Or…
- Write up something from the perspective of people in the real world. The Foundation might not be public - yet? - but when giants walk the Earth… everyone knows. You can do a character piece, further a subplot, anything you like.
- Several of us are already planning to write crossover pieces for the **`Wanderers Library`**. Feel free to jump aboard that ship too!

House Divided

Per the Ganymede Protocol, the Foundation has split into multiple independent sites. Only Level 5s knew about this protocol before, and though they don't know *why* the Protocol was enacted (beyond the fact that O5 Command has been compromised and is incommunicado), they know what to do now.

Writing Suggestions for "House Divided":

- Foundation members reacting to the end of the world, and to the splitting of the Foundation into myriad independent sites. Making plans, joining sides, handling containment breaches, dealing with the world-enders, simply wondering what the fuck happens now.

- Do individuals - or whole sites - try and join up with each other? Are there people who agree with - or want to team up with - notable personalities?

Notable "leaders" so far:

- **The Administrator**
  - The current Administrator essentially represents the attitude of the Foundation as a whole. She - and others in agreement - feel that the Foundation has to stand up to the world-enders. Secure, contain, protect. The Foundation will defend humanity, and will *not* take the risk of allying with any of the world-enders. It will be a hard road, full of bluffing and desperate measures, but they will stop the end of the world, without compromising themselves.
- **The First Administrator**
  - The first Administrator vanished some time ago. Unbeknownst to the Foundation until now, he never truly went away. He has been operating as both "Nobody" and **SCP-990**. For starters. Somehow, the first Administrator has made himself a world-ender. How? Why? No one knows. To the first Administrator, and those who agree with him, the world has to end, one way or another. Their goal is to end it in a way that lets the Foundation - and humanity - come out on top.

- **SCP-343**
    - Is SCP-343 the real God, a powerful reality bender, or something in between? Who knows. Either way, He wants to do what Revelations foretold: a new heavens and a new earth. But He's got to end *this* version first. He would certainly welcome any Foundation personnel on His side… and some of them already are.
- **Dr. Light**
    - Newly - and perhaps shakily - allied with the Serpent's Hand, Sophia Light doesn't want the world to end. Turns out a whole lot of people agree with her, and not just in the Foundation. Ever the pragmatist, Light and others who agree with will be allying with anomalous entities to stop the end of the world. Even some reluctant world-enders themselves. A devil's bargain? A massive mistake? Some risks have to be taken.

Secret Story Arcs

Anything on the following list is something we have fairly specific stuff planned for. But odds are, we can make your ideas work too! Contact us.

- "Stirrings" Arc: Ancient nature gods waking up in North America. (Contact: Skara Brae)

- The Judeo-Christian Apocalypse: The events of Revelations are coming to pass, though… not quite as planned.
    - War (Contact: Dexanote)
    - Famine (Contact: Sophia Light)
    - Pestilence [Forthcoming] (Contact: Sophia Light)
    - Anything else (Contact: thedeadlymoose)
- **SCP-001: "The Lock"** (Contact: thedeadlymoose)
- **SCP-008**: "Zombie Plague" (Contact: Sophia Light)
- **SCP-598**: "Sentient Color" (Contact: Sophia Light)
- **SCP-1000**: "Bigfoot" (Contact: thedeadlymoose)
- Dr. Light (Contact: Sophia Light)
- The Harbinger (Contact: thedeadlymoose)
- Asherah (Contact: thedeadlymoose)
- The Greco-Roman pantheon (Contact: thedeadlymoose)
- The "classic" Groups of Interest, specifically: The Global Occult Coalition, The Church of the Broken God, The Chaos Insurgency, The Factory, and MC&D. This list does not include "Nobody" because you can understand him from reading the canon, and it doesn't include the Serpent's Hand because they have a million splinter groups. (Contact: thedeadlymoose)

This is not a list of everything we've used, just what we have something in mind for that you can't get by just reading the canon so far. As more plot material is revealed, this list will grow smaller.

If you create a new "secret" plot or subplot in the main timeline, we'll add that here too.

Finally…

If your story doesn't fit into the main plot, then we'll call it a 'splinter' canon and maybe link it in a different section on this page. This includes stories that contradict planned "Secret Story Arc" material.

Other Sources

This is an incomplete list of stories we used as inspiration for the story so far.

- **Document Recovered From The Marianas Trench**
- **Post Finem**
- **Unfinished Business** & **Unfinished Business II**
- In His Own Image
- **Contain Yourself**
- **Project Thaumiel**
- **The Flytrap**
- **Incident 239-B – Clef-Kondraki**
- **Waiting on God... Oh!**
- **Ecce Perago** & **An Non**
- **The Happy Ending**
- **Sedna V. Ataciara the Qaqulluk**

"Apakht"

In the sublevels of Site 10, Dr. Yara Mirski raised the gemstone to the light with a gloved hand, in a gesture she'd repeated a hundred times before. She admired its black contours, broken up by the mottled white pattern and the golden filigree that wrapped around its exterior.

SCP-001-Delta. The fourth SCP item considered a 'prime', or '001', item. One of several that had a hand in the creation of the Foundation. And, in Yara's opinion, by far the most frustrating.

For one, there wasn't much else to know about Delta at Level 5 clearance.

Most of the other 001 items had a great deal of falsified information attached to them, the better to confuse ever-curious researchers. Some versions were altered beyond recognition. Like Iota, Yara's favorite. Some meta-humor to give snoopers an existential crisis. Some were fabricated entirely — notably, Beta, which was a little surprising, since it was just an ordinary monster. What was so unusual or startling about that, compared to Keter cakes or Project Rho? But Beta was an invention from whole cloth; everything about it was fiction besides its ancient classification system.

Not so with Delta. Delta was strange enough on its own that people always assumed the files they had unearthed were altered. They were wrong. Delta was the most straightforward 001. A lock that appeared to literally "contain" our universe, and also something called "Apakht." It seemed like a joke from several cartoon shows, a joke made worse by the fact that it was true.

And Delta, the Lock, was still missing its Key. Not that the O5s hadn't tried to crack it open, especially the skittish ones who didn't like the idea of anyone containing anything but them. One of them had it in her head that Delta unlocked Heaven. Kept rambling on about something called the Thaumiel Initiative. It didn't matter. Not

even SCP-005 could pry that lock open, and no megaton bomb could crack Delta's shell.

Yara felt the warmth of the Delta stone through her gloves, and reflected that it was perhaps fortunate that every attempt to unlock Delta had failed.

She was still reflecting on this when the first klaxon blared.

The Harbinger hated its code name.

"The Harbinger." Really. So fucking over-dramatic. They wouldn't stop using it, either. For security, they said. Harbinger. Harbinger. Harbinger? Harbinger, Harbinger, Harbinger. It wanted to kill the son of a bitch who came up with that.

Yet… as long as it was on the premises of Site 10, it was not going to think of itself by any other identity but Harbinger. Not its name, definitely not gender. The Harbinger was an *it*, now, and would stay that way until this was over.

Sure, the Foundation's ability to read minds was not precisely A-grade, but considering the stakes, it wasn't planning on taking extra risk. Especially not with an 001. *Especially* not with Delta. The Harbinger was familiar with Delta's containment procedures, listed and unlisted, maybe too familiar… no, better not to think about that either.

The Harbinger tore through the outer containment shell around the Primary Archival Vault, wincing slightly at the ease with which the steel alloy peeled apart. The auto-defense turrets came next, followed by the chemical bath. The Harbinger's glowing white form withstood the punishment and it destroyed the turrets with a wave of its hand.

A battalion of carefully crafted containment procedures, made useless in moments. The Harbinger carefully pushed back the memories sifting up in its brain.

The Harbinger reached the Vault, the massive, aptly named

octagonal prism-shaped containment chamber, custom-designed precisely for the purpose of containing SCP-001-Delta. Until now, it had done a very good job.

It was made of reinforced concrete and steel, with a time-locked access portal in the ceiling. Pretty much nothing could get through that portal.

The Harbinger grimaced. The Foundation just did not reckon with power on the right scale. That would have to change—quickly.

The Harbinger left the portal alone and ripped off the entire front side of the vault.

It walked forward two steps and stopped.

The Vault was supposed to be empty… It wasn't.

In point of fact, there was a woman sitting in it. The Harbinger recognized her. Dr. Yara Mirski. Research lead on 001-Delta.

A dangerous thought, the thought of *her*, bubbled up into the Harbinger's head — quickly suppressed — but it was a distraction for a key second.

Mirski was holding what appeared to be a harpoon gun on steroids, aiming it forward. She did not appear surprised to see the Harbinger, not at all—

She pulled the trigger.

God damn it, the Harbinger thought, as the bolt impaled it through the chest.

Yara Mirski hadn't known what to expect the invader, the "Harbinger", to look like, and she wasn't going to let it faze her now that she was seeing it.

But it really did look very startling.

It was shaped like a person, glowing entirely, uniformly white. She

couldn't make out any features on its face. Couldn't tell whether it was male or female.

And there was something else about it — some *sense* about it — that felt purely otherworldly, made it hard to look at. It wasn't just the hundred wings sprouting from its back. She was reminded of the Bible stories that she'd heard in church growing up, the ones involving angels. How unwitting mortals would fall to their knees in worship, only for the angel to stop them, pull them to their feet, and rebuke them, because you should only be directing your worship to the one true living God.

There was also, of course, the harpoon in its chest, but she'd put that there. She'd almost forgotten, staring at the Harbinger's visage, until its glow started to dim and some of that intense white energy started spiraling into the harpoon.

Thank God, she thought, *it's working.* Then she laughed at the irony.

The Harbinger never moved its gaze from her. Only its hands moved, rising to the harpoon. She knew it couldn't remove the fully powered harpoon bolt, not while it was leeching away the being's essence. But the Harbinger didn't try.

Instead, it dismantled it. Tore open the casing, unwrapped the internal wiring, got to the power source and cracked it open with a pinch of its fingers. Immediately its light returned to full strength.

The Harbinger tossed the remnants of the now-useless harpoon aside and walked towards her. It lifted the Lock from her nerveless fingers.

Yara Mirski fell to her knees.

"Oh, cut that out," the Harbinger said. "I'm not going to kill you."

Its voice startled her back to her senses. It was mellifluous and otherworldly, still without discernible gender, but casual, undramatic. And… weary.

"Don't be too hard on yourself," it said. "Really."

She sized up the Harbinger again. No wound was visible from where the harpoon had pierced its chest. There should have been a gaping hole. There was nothing.

It didn't look at her. It was examining the Lock.

"That was very clever," it said. "It almost worked. Another time, another place… maybe it would have."

"Why didn't it?" she asked.

"If I told you that," the Harbinger said, "… well, then you'd know."

She couldn't think of a response to that.

The Harbinger reached into its form and drew from its… robes? … the item that, somehow, Yara knew it would have. *A small ornate object, resembling a key.* Exactly as it had looked in the recovered sketches.

It looked so tiny. So ordinary.

"Stop," Yara said. "Wait. Please. I know you've … You obviously want to do this. But think about it, please. Do you have any idea what could be in there? Do you know—"

"Actually…" The Harbinger seemed to chuckle a little. "I know exactly what's in there."

Yara felt a little cold. *Spell of containment…* "Apakht," she said.

"Apakht," the Harbinger agreed. It inserted the Key into the Lock, and turned the Key.

There was a small flash, and something about the world was irrevocably changed.

For a brief moment, the Harbinger wasn't a glowing hundred-winged angelic being. It was nothing more than an ordinary human.

Their eyes met.

"I know you," Yara said, without thinking. "You're—"

She couldn't finish the words. She couldn't even think the thought in her head. It — *it* — the Harbinger was doing something to stop her.

"Sorry," the Harbinger said. Its glowing radiance had returned in full. "Nothing personal." It looked at the Lock, as if watching. Or listening.

"What did you do? What is it? What did you unlock?" She could feel something vibrating in the back of her brain. Her eyes kept being drawn to the lock. It looked exactly the same, visually, but it was also incredibly different. "What's Apakht?"

"It's the End," the Harbinger said.

The fabric of reality began to unfold before their eyes.

Canon Hub | **The Gate Opens (Part 2 of 3)** »

The Gate Opens

Yahweh awoke in His human form in His room at Site 17, knowing that the hour had arrived.

In an instant, He was at Site 0. The personnel in the control room, some half asleep, leapt to their feet as He appeared. He took a moment to watch the dawning look of comprehension on their faces. O5-14 staggered to his feet.

"The Time has come," Yahweh intoned.

In another eye-blink, He was at the Gate. The being that the Foundation called SCP-001-Gamma bowed in front of Him, lowering its burning sword, its four flaming wings spread in reverence.

"Uriel," Yahweh said. "It is Time. Open the Gate. Lead My armies across the Earth."

"I HEAR AND OBEY, MY LORD AND MY GOD," Uriel said.

The Gate began to creak open. Behind it was an army of angels, thousands of bright creatures, many-eyed, burning with pure red light. They raised their white swords, singing a chant of war, and the rustling of countless brilliant wings filled the air.

The thing inside Site 10, the singularity that was, was not, had always been, and had never been a part of the Lock, unfurled itself like a flower.

Site 10 was demolished in an instant. No one inside had any moment for last thoughts before their deaths.

Then they were all alive again, shaken, deposited somewhere in New Hampshire. Along with Site 10, intact, aside from the destruction the Harbinger had dealt to it.

Meanwhile, the ruins of Site 10 and the corpses of everyone in it were buried deep within the vast valley that had never existed before on the planet Earth, and yet, now, had always existed, displacing a few thousand miles of desert in the Middle East. It was still both there, and not. Either way, it *was*.

Waves of blue and green energy washed about, and the valley filled with plants and animals the like of which had never been seen before.

In the very center, orbiting in a wash of iridescent rainbow color, the Lock hovered in the center of a tiny singularity. Open, at long last. Sending out its signal.

Dr. Everett Mann was in the middle of dissecting a recently dead instance of SCP-098 when its legs started to twitch.

Everett paused his scalpel in mid-cut and watched with curiosity. This had never happened before.

He looked over at the cage of live SCP-098 specimens. They were also acting oddly. They were stock still. Not a single red-orange limb was making so much as a twitch. SCP-098 were not exactly the calmest species of anomalous crustacean, and Everett had never seen them behave this way.

They appeared to be… watching. Waiting for something.

The dead 098 instance kept twitching.

"Hmmm," Everett said.

His cell phone vibrated in his lab coat. This was the secure cell, the one that only rang in serious emergencies. Everett put down the scalpel and picked up the call.

"Everett Mann, Site 2036, status five," he said.

"The sword falls and rises," the voice on the other line said.

"But it kills in one stroke," Everett replied.

"Emergency Order Patmos is now in effect," the voice said. "995 has breached containment. 616 has opened. We are awaiting report from 001-Gamma. We are securing 073 and 076…"

"And you want to know about 098," Everett said.

"Have SCP-098 activated?" the voice asked.

"I am sorry to disappoint you. They are acting a bit odd, but I cannot say…"

The dead 098 instance froze, then burst into pale orange flame.

After another moment passed, the other 098 specimens burst into flame, all at the same time. Little slots in their shells opened, and delicate, vibrating, dragonfly-like wings sprang out. As far as Everett could tell, each 098 instance sprouted as many wings as they had limbs. Even the dead instance. Which was now looking significantly less dead.

They breached the sides of their cage in an instant, all chittering at once in some alien language. They ripped through the plate glass window of the sealed experiment chamber and swarmed away through the site, demolishing the walls that got in their way. Everett stared after them.

"Never mind," Everett said to the voice waiting on the other line. "I'd say that probably counts."

Yahweh appeared to the entire remaining thirteen members O5 Council at once in thirteen different locations. He did not appear, of course, to the Administrator, because the last Administrator had died years ago and had not been replaced. O5-14 no longer voted on Council matters, and therefore the Council no longer need a tiebreaker vote. But to all the rest, He appeared. They were all His, and had always been His. Even the non-believers, who thought of him as nothing more than a reality bender with a god complex, would have no choice but to go along. They were *all* His, as sure as the hands attached to His Body.

Thirteen people leaped from their seats, from their beds, fell to their knees, tripped and fell to the ground.

"Uriel, my servant, once told your Founder to prepare for the great and terrible day of the Lord," Yahweh said in thirteen voices at once. "This day now approaches. Make your final preparations. There is nothing else you will need to do but wait. My armies ride across the Earth. Soon I will call the Four Horsemen. Once the last judgment has been unsealed, then shall the great and terrible day of the Lord come. And then all will have Paradise."

He returned to a single human body, without waiting for a reply, returned to a slight feeling of vertigo. He might have been an omnipotent super-being, but it would not have done to cram *everything* into this tiny human body that He'd elected to stay in until the End of Days was over. Because of that, He hadn't recently made a practice of existing in several places at once. It came naturally, like breathing, but still felt unusual, like breathing for the first time after spending long minutes underwater.

Actually, there was something odd… some little twinge of memory, triggered by what He had just done…

The thought slipped from His grasp. That was the downside of human frailty. This was a perfected human body, but even a perfected human body was still flawed compared to true omniscience.

He knew the next step, as he always knew. He would return to the ancient Valley with no name. The first place He had ever created, the precursor to Eden. The Valley where none had ever set foot but Him, and never would, not even after the End of Days.

He took a step, and was there.

And…

He wasn't alone.

Klaxons blared in Site 2036. Everett Mann listened, bemused.

Emergency Order Patmos or no, there was no need for all that racket.

He stepped out of the former auxiliary research and containment chambers for SCP-098, into a mob of personnel. No one stopped to give him the time. Fairly rude, Everett thought. 098 wasn't even killing anyone. Just… leaving. The holes in the walls and ceiling could be rebuilt.

He spotted Gears in the crowd and made his way over. Another person who could be trusted to deal with situations in a reasonable fashion.

"It seems we have a massive containment breach," Gears said.

"Yes, SCP-098," Everett said. "I hear 995 and 616 have breached containment as well. 001-Gamma, soon, I'm sure. But I don't see what the fuss is about. We've stopped XK-class scenarios before, we can do it again. The only difference in this case is that we might have to deal with O5-14 putting up a fuss—"

Gears held up a hand. Interruption was not his style, Everett knew, which is partly why he could stop anyone in their tracks with that gesture. "I'm not speaking of Patmos," Gears said. "Nor 001-Gamma."

"Oh?" Everett raised an eyebrow. "What else has gotten out?"

"A whole damn lot," Gears said, perfectly calmly, swearing for the first time that Everett had ever heard.

« **"Apakht" (Part 1 of 3)** | **Canon Hub** | **Revelation (Part 3 of 3)** »

Revelation

Yahweh walked into the Valley, more astonished than He could ever remember feeling. An astonishment beyond words. He had *never* been at a loss for words.

The Valley — *His* Valley — was crowded. A massive flood of spirits, of winged things, of crawling things, of monsters, of people, of… of…

Of *others*.

A spirit whale swooped overhead. A gigantic furred *thing* lumbered its way over a distant mountain. A cadre of tiny glittering blue humanoids blew past His face, giggling, and were gone. A pure black humanoid figure appeared, blinked at Him, and vanished again. A massive not-centipede skittered by, giving Him a passing glare.

Almost in a stupor, Yahweh made His way down towards the humanoid crowd, feeling, for the first time He could remember, the instinctive need to be near others like Him.

As He approached, a figure detached itself from a crowd. A poised, brown-skinned woman with piercings in her lip, and long dark hair. For a moment Yahweh found Himself oddly attracted—

I am not a man, to wish for carnal knowledge—

"El!" the woman said.

"Who are you?" Yahweh asked, before He could register the impossibility of the question in His Head.

The woman looked at him funny. "I guess it's not surprising you don't remember. We've all forgotten a lot in the past few thousand years. But you especially."

Yahweh could think of absolutely nothing to say.

"Asherah," she said. "It's Asherah. I was your consort for several hundred years."

There were strange stirrings inside his head, alien memories that He could not comprehend—

These were other *gods*, they were the false idols of the ancient times, He remembered being a god of the wind and a god of storm and a god of the sun, a parochial, jealous deity, He remembered creating the Heavens and the Earth in seven days, He (he) remembered being a completely non-divine yet unspeakably powerful boy born into suffering and pain, He remembered being someone else forced into the shape of an artificial god, He remembered a feeling of exultation upon realizing He was the last god standing, the last god who had not faded away, and the future of Earth was His forever, He remembered having no parents, He (he) remembered his grandmother's smile, He remembered a million impossible contradictory memories, and *they* were doing it, this cursed human form had let them in, it was *them*—

"Enough!" He roared.

Yahweh raised His hand, looked at the crowd of creatures trampling through His Valley, and with a wave of His hand wiped all the false gods out of existence.

Or… He tried to, anyway. What He actually did was wave his hand, and then absolutely nothing happened.

"You know," Asherah said with a wry smile, "I may be your ex, but wiping me out of existence is a really rude thing to try to do."

She put her hand on Yahweh's shoulder without His permission, and did not explode into nothingness out of blasphemy.

"I know why you're here," she said. She pointed, directing His gaze towards the center of the Valley.

Yahweh saw it, a tiny object that floated in a rippling core of colorful light that moved like water.

It was a Lock.

"You're here to end the world," Asherah said. "And so are we. Everyone here."

"This is not possible," Yahweh said. He was feeling that vertigo again.

"To be frank," Asherah said. "I'm not actually sure I'm *the* Asherah, and I'm not actually sure you're *the* Yahweh."

"What."

"You might have noticed that you remember a whole lot of contradictory things," she said. "So do I. I remember both helping to create the world and being born into it when it was already ancient. That's just for starters. Now maybe this kind of thing is part of being a god, or maybe… Maybe it's just part of being more powerful than a human was ever meant to be." She looked back at the crowd. "Not all *these* things are gods, I know that for sure. We're just two of the beings that are 'supposed' to end the world. Everyone in this valley is."

Yahweh turned His glare on her. "So you — all of you — are here to make war with Me? To come against Me, to stop My End of Days?"

"Well. Yeah." She looked a little awkward, like she was trying to explain something to someone who was being painfully slow. "It's not really about you… specifically. Really, I don't think half the, uh, world-enders here knew about each other before literally a few minutes ago. They can't fight here, but… Most of them aren't happy to find out that they've got competition. Not just you."

He tried to comprehend this. A thought that He was entirely unused to having. "Do you think you can stand against the might of the one true God? Do you think you can enact your own End of Days?"

Asherah shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe? I'm not going to try."

He blinked, momentarily baffled. "You are not going to try to end the world?"

"Me?" Asherah snorted. "Fuck no."

"You told me… Then why are you here?"

"I may have been called here, but not even that Lock can make me end the world. Have you ever tried the seafood in Singapore? Have you ever used a smartphone? Run through the jungle? Seen Cirque du Soleil? Flown on an airplane? Surfed the Internet? Watched tentacle porn? Seen Star Wars? Explored the Wanderer's Library? Been lost in the concrete mazes of the new human cities? No, I like the world the way it is, thanks. It may be fucked up, but tearing it apart isn't going to improve anything."

He stared at her.

"So no," she said. "I don't plan to end the world. I actually don't plan to let you end the world either, or anyone else." She paused. "Sorry."

Divine rage rose up in Yahweh again, and He opened His mouth, only to be once again interrupted.

"Pardon me," another woman's voice said.

The new woman's voice was not raised, or powerful, but somehow everyone in the Valley heard it. And all turned to look.

She was a dark-skinned woman, African, wearing a gray suit, walking into the Valley. Her body language said she was both unassuming and confident. Yahweh knew immediately she was an ordinary human, not like these alien creatures milling around him, but He did not recognize her.

He did not recognize her.

That should not have been possible, ever, not even in this limited human form. Yahweh knew all, and even if these false gods and "world-enders" were able to stymie Him somehow, no human should —

"I come on behalf of the SCP Foundation," the woman said. "Some of you know who we are. Some of you do not. The Foundation are

the protectors of humanity. Some of you we have imprisoned, some of you we have bargained with, all in defense of humanity." She sat on the ground, cross-legged, formality inherent in her movements, some kind of ritual that Yahweh *almost* recognized… "I have come to talk."

There was a long silence.

"And what are *you?*" a crimson-skinned creature asked her.

"I am a human," she said. "I am the Administrator of the SCP Foundation."

"Impossible," Yahweh said. "I knew all the Administrators. The last one died years ago, and you are not he. You are none of them."

"I'm protected from—" the woman started.

"You are not human," a panther-shaped entity shouted from the crowd. Yahweh seethed at the interruption. "If you were human, we would be able to touch you."

"I am protected," the Administrator said again. "But outside of my protection, I really am nothing more than a human. Like all the humans you plan to kill in your quest to end the world."

"Then what do you want, Human?" another world-ender asked.

"We can open the way to worlds free of sentient life. Many worlds. Enough room for all of you. You won't have to end this world. No humans will have to die. You will have a hundred others." She paused. "I want you to let this world live out the rest of its history in peace."

A clamor of voices broke out. Not all of it was verbal - much was broadcast by thought.

What are you saying—

Is this supposed to be an insult—

I come to save the world, I must end it to save it—

This is not a human's place—

This is the end of days—

How did you come here, how did any of you—

All will burn—

This age is over, as the ages before it also had an end—

Who will deny me, certainly not a tiny thing like—

"What do you offer in exchange, Human?" a massive, fox-furred being asked, once the voices started to quiet down.

"In exchange…" The Administrator hesitated. Though He could not read her mind, Yahweh could tell that she was unsure about what she was about to say. Uncertain, even afraid.

"In exchange, we will not destroy you."

Silence. A few of the entities laughed. Most looked uncaring or simply baffled. Many began to move on, apparently losing interest.

"Will none of you consider my offer?" the Administrator asked.

No one answered.

"Very well." The Administrator drew herself up.

"Why do you not join us, Human?" an amorphous blue form called out from the crowd. "Take your Foundation and come end the world with us. In the new world, you will have anything you could wish for. Anything you could imagine."

"We are the Foundation," the Administrator said. "We will not worship you. We will not join you. We will not go back to hiding in fear of you. I hope you will change your minds, but we will stand against you, and alone, if we have to."

She looked at Yahweh, directly, and for a fleeting instant, Yahweh thought of Himself as *SCP-343*.

"*All* of you," the Administrator said.

Her form flickered, and she vanished from the Valley, leaving no trace behind.

« **The Gate Opens (Part 2 of 3)** | **Canon Hub** | **Storm Front** »

Storm Front

The intruder appears to her as she kneels on a sloping, angular plane, of waving, waist-high red grass. Her field notebooks flutter, their pages fan back, and the grass is blown back in concentric circles. The thing itself is awash in glow and flickering shadows, then drops like a bird onto the firmament.

"*YOU*," it says. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Testing out early retirement options," says the woman in the grass, who hasn't looked up yet. She's petite, pale, with a ropy build. A scar running down her face. "There's lots of area for phylogenetic research, in the-"

"Oh sweet Cthulhu. No you're not," the intruder snaps. "For one, you're still, like, a hundred years younger than Garrison. You're not retiring now. And whatever's going on, you're going to have to get over it, soon. We have business. Your whole world-"

"You know…" The woman picks herself up, and dusts off the knees of her incongruous lab coat. The red blades of grass stand up on end, and the intruder can finally see clawed footprints in the muck underneath them. "I know I'm dreaming right now. And for part of my subconscious, you're being *very* demanding."

She turns around, slowly. Then she notices his suit and bowler hat.

"Oh," says Sophia Light.

"Right," says 990.

Sophia looks around. "I would have cleaned up the place if I knew you were coming," she says. "Why are you here?"

"Well, I'd say we're due for a little calamity. Wouldn't you?" He holds out his hand. "I've been blindsided, as of late. What I once saw in

the future is no longer there at all. Something has changed. Big things are moving, Doctor Light. Whole lot of fish, no time to fry. Your whole world is about to turn sideways. Need to see?"

She touches his hand, and their surroundings change. Halfway-outdated Foundation architecture, older site, probably an auxiliary wing. Not one she's been in, in some time anyways, but the feel of it seems familiar. They are several stories underground, but sunlight streams in from gaping holes ripped out above them.

"This, Doctor, is your precious Site Fourteen."

"Is it?" She tilts her head all around, pursed her lips. "Was Agent-"

"Ordinarily, I'd care, but right now this goes beyond your personal crap. And you're going to sit back and listen to what I say. It's not just Fourteen. It's going to be all of them. Something's changed and I can't tell you exactly how it'll play out, but your precious Foundation is about to be horribly, hideously, calamitously outmatched."

The echoey, almost-silence of the burned-out building is, if you listen hard enough, rather calming.

"How can I stop it?"

"No one can stop it."

Sophia looks up, and studies his face. "You just said you've been blindsided by this nonspecific disaster. And I haven't heard Johanna or the fivers or *anyone* getting a visit, so you haven't been working down the ladder. So what, this is a social call?" She pauses. "And how do you know it's unstoppable?"

He glares at her. "If this seems unplanned, I didn't expect you to work that out in your sleep, but fine- yes, it is, *I've been low on time*. But listen. Here's what you would have done, if I weren't here. You would have looked at the information. Talked it over with Garrison and Barculo and Vaux, whoever you trust these days. Maybe phoned a friend. Then, you would have compared what's happening with previous disasters of similar magnitude, looked for anomalous causes, then, finally, began preparing for the worst plausible result

you could extrapolate."

"That's what I would have done?"

"Yes. It would have been smart."

"And what are you saying I should do?"

"I'm saying that this is going to get worse, and if you want to even live to have a battle plan, you're going to prepare for the worst- to start. Find your resources, gather your armies. Might play out that not everyone in the Foundation is your best friend."

She nearly laughs. "What armies?"

"See, that kind of attitude is going to have to change." 990 flickers in place, like a movie still. He checks his watch.

"I mean," says Sophia, and then she does laugh. "I *think* you think you're doing me a favor. So thanks for telling me about the impending doom and all that jazz. But this is hilariously nonspecific. Can you tell me, say, what's going to happen? Or what kind of 'preparations' I should make?"

The bowler-hatted figure in his outdated suit checks his watch once more. "No, I can't, and it's already happened. Welcome to Armageddon. This is Day One." He flickers again, and starts to walk away, then pauses. "Oh, and you're right- I'm not working down the ladder, and I *am* doing you a favor. Whenever you get done… Remember that."

She blinks. "You think somehow I'll *help* you-"

And then he is gone. Sophia is alone in the skeletal ruins of Site 14. Motes of dust seep gently down from the surface, landing on the illuminated surface of an unreadable Object Class designation, bolted to the remains of a metal door. Deep in the fallen timber and rebar, something begins to stir.

Sophia sat bolt upright. Someone was pounding on her door. She dimly registered darkness, the scent of cleaning fluid, the tight

sensation of hospital corners on fitted sheets. Her phone ringing and ringing. Knocking harder.

She pulled herself out of bed instantly, nearly falling as the blood in her legs caught up to her head, then gathering herself to pull the door open. “Yes?”

Elliot Barculo, Regional Security Director, currently stationed at the Svalbard Site, was propped in her doorway. Deep lines in his face. “Jesus Christ, Sophia, were you *asleep*?”

“I- maybe-” She squinted, confused, and rubbed her eyes. The idea of Sophia Light oversleeping was preposterous- “Did something happen at Site 14?”

He scowled. “How the hell did you know that?”

Oh.

“It's not just Site 14. Oh Christ.” Barculo sighed and turned his back. “No time. Johanna's waiting in the debrief room. Plane's in the airfield, if the sky's safe. We need a plan. Come on."

Sophia grabbed her jacket, and closed the bedroom door behind her. “Start talking on the way.”

Johanna Garrison, perched on the end of the conference table, looked older than Light could have ever imagined. Gabriel Bryant, personnel and espionage director, stood behind Johanna with an arm on her shoulder. Johanna and Sophia shared a look as Sophia entered the room, but neither said anything about the timing. Sophia's friend and apprentice, Charles Vaux, fixed an apprehensive look at her. Alerts were streaming onto Sophia's phone- containment breached at sites 14, 16, 19, 23, 40, 41, 42 A through D.

“This started at Site 10?” Sophia asked.

“As best anyone can figure,” said Bryant. “The site itself actually suffered no damage, although it teleported entirely to New Hampshire shortly before the other breaches.”

“New Hampshire?”

“Right. Researcher there- Dr. Yara Mirski- claims to have made contact with the responsible entity, says she tried to stop it.”

“What was the entity?”

“Actually, we have no idea.”

More than a handful of breakouts, sites around the world reported anomalies and disturbances. On the conference room screen, a report came in that SCP-1688 had materialized over its containment area and grown to four times the size it had ever been, driving arrows of lightning all over a nearby Foundation facility and small town. Reportedly the whole town had unilaterally joined together, in some kind of engineering project on a massive scale. At the same time, a ring-shaped stormcloud had formed several kilometers to the east, and was raising pallid spirits from the ground that it passed over. Reports showed SCP-460 moving across the sky at impossible speeds, with an army of ghosts trailing in its wake.

The next update was only video: a lightning storm, massive and striking ground so frequently that it looked like a comb of jagged white lines, and a large, circular, ochre stormcloud, rammed halfway into it. Faint white figures on the ground below seemed fixed in place, or spun out of shape like molten glass.

Ten minutes later, the yellow cloud and the ghosts were gone completely, and the lightning was still going.

“Okay.” Sophia stopped pacing, and panned through incoming alerts. "The O5 Council has been silent, which makes me think we've been attacked. CI? Maybe the Hand? A lot of the missing ones are Sentients. The other anomalies could be… distractions?”

“But not all. For heaven's sake, Sophia, the *duck pond*?” Garrison was still staring at the screens.

“Putting something there is *the kind of mistake I'd make* if I was trying to get at us with an incomplete set of archives.” Sophia's phone rang, despite the fact that she'd disabled it. She looked at the

caller.

“Light,” Barculo said in monotone, “I know that some of these sites are yours, and you have to get to stabilizing, but some are mine too, and we need to start tracking them down. I don't think they're going to the same place, but there must be a link, so we'll start pulling-”

“Actually,” said Sophia, “I'm going to start planning for a second wave, possibly worse than this one. I would start now. And I'm sorry, I have to take this.”

She stepped out of the conference room. All down the hall, LEDs on security cameras and recorders were going out. Then she picked up the phone, and let it sit between her hand and her ear, and inhaled for a moment before speaking.

“Are you really her?” she asked.

“Yes,” said the Administrator of the SCP Foundation. “SCP-027, I think, is about to break containment." Fingers clacked on a computer keyboard. "As it's your site, please do anything humanly possible to prevent this from happening.”

“Of course,” said Sophia automatically.

The call quit.

She started dialing.

« **Revelation (Part 3 of 3)** | **Canon Hub** | **Awakenings** »

Awakenings

They came from beyond the world, from over the world, from under the world. They came from inside the stars and from behind the rain. They came from the known lands and they came from the secret places of old.
The vast ones who drank of the nebulas, the small ones who did not care what happened beyond the banks of their rivers, the ones who bathed in the light and the ones who watched from the shadows, the ones who loved us and the ones who forgot about us, the ones who hate us now and the ones who love us still, the ones who sung with the rats and the ones who swam with the leviathans, they came from far and near, they came one and all. They came to end the world.

The machine labeled SCP-720 put the last finishing touches on the final model planet in its most recent solar array. It trained its claw upward, as if looking once more, wistfully, to the stars.

SCP-720 had no name, no thoughts the way humans would account for thoughts, and certainly no internal mechanism for vision. But you would have to say that it could 'see' nonetheless, for what else could you call what it did when it directed its mechanical parts towards the sky?

Either way, this time, SCP-720 'saw' something different. Something prowling between the beautiful orbs and masses of color… something looking towards Earth. Looking back towards SCP-720.

A sea of glimmering eyes.

Words formed in the not-mind of SCP-720.

Today is the day your prayers will be answered.

A long moment passed, and then a single other word formed in the not-mind of SCP-720, and vibrated there for a long time.

Awaken.

And so it did.

What appeared to be a vast wall of fur approached the Earth, sank through the sky, and landed on the ground, to find everything it had loved gone. Her fellow gods were on their way, but as always, she had arrived first, a mother eager to be reunited at long last with her children, now that the time of the end had come.

She had been gone for thousands and thousands of years. She had gone as her children had first looked to the stars, and it was then that she had known that they would be alright.

And now there was no trace of them.

Their beautiful webbed cities, their songs that had filled the planet with joy, their vast works of art to stun even a god's eye - gone. All gone. All that remained were their bones, and living on top of them, the hairless apes that they had once kept in zoos with other animals, now risen to dominate the planet. And they did not even remember her children. They moved through their lives like ants, building their wooden and metal hives over the graves of her greatest loves. This was sacred ground they defiled, and they did not know or care.

Ur-An-Uum raised her head to the sky and cried a rending wail of anguish.

She mourned for a long time, a noise heard on high, her wails causing earthquakes and tsunamis across the planet, weeping for her children. She did not quell her sorrow. The only things left to die from her pain were the furless apes. This was to be a time of joy, but there was only sorrow left. She would not be comforted, for her children were no more.

And then…

She felt something. The tiniest glimmer in her mind.

And she felt hope.

Ur-An-Uum called out for her children, the creatures that she now knew the furless apes called a sea of derogatory names, the least insulting of which was "SCP-1000".

Her children answered.

The entity awoke with a start, not knowing where it was, or, on reflection, *who* it was. All it knew was that The Time Had Come.

It rose from its grave, shattering a mountain as it did so, and hurtled itself into the atmosphere, trying to get its bearings.

The entity gazed across the world. Everything was different. Humans - they were *everywhere*. Not just scattered here and there across the great expanses, but living in massive villages, villages the likes of which the entity had never seen.

Not that it was complaining. Humans had fed it well with their worship and blood sacrifices in the olden days. Now that there were so many more humans, why, the entity would certainly soon be satiated beyond compare.

This was fortunate, because it had been asleep a very long time, and it was very hungry.

The entity cast about for a place of power. And found far too many. Far more than there had ever been before. It did not understand what to make of this knowledge, but, again, it did not complain. It only needed to pick one place of power for now, a simple one, to give it initial shape again. It chose the nearest one. A "Foundation Containment Site". Yes, this would certainly do. The humans had already invested this place with much of their energy. It must be a sacred place to them. An *Es See Pee*, they called it.

The entity would dine well indeed.

It wasted no more time, but hurtled directly into the place of power - a body of water, it saw - and landed inside it with a massive impact. It drank in the place of power and everything in it - the water, the local wildlife, the human-made metalworkings and detritus - and took

the shape of a massive titan be-straddling the countryside. Man-shaped, so that the humans would understand the form to which they would soon direct their hearts and their prayers and their blood and their pleadings for mercy.

The eldritch entity that had merged with SCP-765 opened its mouth.

"QUACK," it said, its voice reverberating across the land.

First the rooster of crimson crowed, then the rooster of gold, then the rooster of soot-red.

A bloodstained watchdog bayed in its cave. Its eons-old bindings broke, and it ran free.

The sound of a great trumpet echoed across the Earth, with no apparent source. People stopped in the streets in New York, Delhi, London, Cape Town, and listened in confusion.

The Midgard serpent Jörmungandr stirred in its slumber. The shifting of its form caused tsunamis along several coastlines, demolished a number of villages in Greenland. A massive wolf, visible from hundreds of miles away, stalked across Denmark, accompanied by an army of burning giants.

Ragnarok had come.

The Administrator swung around in her chair to face the man who had just entered the room behind her.

"You knew I was coming," the man said. "You let me in."

"Yes," said the Administrator.

"You know you're dreaming, I'm sure," the man said. "And of course… you also know who I am."

"SCP-990," the Administrator said. She looks at him again. The suit, the bowler hat… or was that a fedora? "Nobody," she said. "But most importantly…" She picked up a file folder on her desk. "The

first Administrator."

The two Administrators looked at one another.

"I saw you in the crowd in the Valley," the current Administrator said. "I knew to expect it, but… tell me it isn't true."

"I'm sorry," the first Administrator said. "It's true."

"This betrays everything we stand for," the current Administrator said. "You said it once yourself. We secure. We contain. We protect. We keep humanity out of the dark. For *you* to become one of these things…"

"I also said that the Foundation must stand in the dark, so that humanity could live in the light." The first Administrator hesitated. "Please believe me, if there had been any other choice to make, I would have made it. This has to be done. I hope you'll see why, soon." He hesitates. "I came here hoping to recruit you, you know. You and yours. I am sorry that I cannot tell you more, but I hope you will consider my offer."

"Tell me something," the current Administrator said. "This 'Harbinger'. Who are they?"

"I don't know," the first Administrator said. "It's true that I anticipated this for a long time, but… this chain of events blindsided me too."

"I know it's one of yours." The current Administrator's voice sounded impatient for the first time. "Who is it? Someone loyal to you, of course. Only someone with level 5 clearance could have pulled this off, so that does narrow the list down. Charles Gears? Jack Bright? Alto Clef? Kain Pathos Crow?" She paused. "I know it's not Sophia Light. Frederick Williams? Chelsea Elliot? Hell, Simon Glass?"

"I sincerely do not know," the first Administrator said. "Listen. The O5 Council is already compromised. SCP-343. And… well, you know the rest. I've cut off their communications, but they won't wait long to move. We should be in this together."

"I agree," the current Administrator said. "I know enough to know you don't *have* to do this. You'll have a compulsion, but I'm told it's

minor. Easily overcome. Perhaps will not even return."

"The world *must* end," the first Administrator said. "Help me end it in the only way the Foundation — the only way *humanity* — will come out on top. There are more world-enders coming. You already know that dozens are already awake, and that hundreds soon will be. More and more will be waking up, the longer the Lock is open. And worse, more will *arrive*. The ones not already on Earth. This is the only way forward we have."

"Then we do not have anything left to say to each other," the current Administrator said.

"I am truly sorry to hear that," the first Administrator said.

"As I am truly sorry to say it," the current Administrator said.

The two Administrators nodded at each other, respectfully, and turned away from each other.

The first Administrator walked away and dissolved into the dreamscape. The current Administrator turned back to her dream-desk and waited for the sedative she'd taken to wear off.

Then she woke up, and got to work.

« **Stormfront** | **Canon Hub** | **The White Horse (The Conqueror With The Golden Crown)** »

The White Horse (The Conqueror With The Golden Crown)

Yahweh walked through a wheat field in the southwestern part of the Jezreel Valley, restless.

He had not stayed much longer in the other Valley, "His" Valley. It had been entirely too disturbing. A scene for which He had no script. He could not recall any other time in which He had felt this way - at least, not in His *true* memories. Those other, false memories were still coiling through the back of his brain, serpents in the grass waiting to strike once trodden on.

He had needed to get away. So He came here, to the place once called Megiddo, where the Armageddon war would be fought. Would *still* be fought.

Because these events changed nothing. Everything that was to transpire would still transpire. He may not have reckoned on having so many powerful, alien opponents, but he was still the one true God. He still had a vast army of angels, an army that dwarfed any other in the history or imagination of man. He still had his Locusts, the things the Foundation called 098. He had all those and more.

And on top of them, He had His Horsemen.

He had planned to summon the First Horseman to the unnamed Valley, before he'd been derailed, and this valley of Megiddo would do for now. The others He could simply approach the way He approached everyone, up close and personal, but… not the First. Yahweh felt no need to countenance the evil done to the First with His holy presence, not even though the evil had been done by His own followers, not even though they had wrought their evil for reasons they thought to be good ones.

Yahweh stood in the middle of the wheat field and spoke the First's name.

> And I saw, and behold a white horse: and he that sat on him had a bow; and a crown was given unto him: and he went forth conquering, and to conquer.

The young woman lay restrained on her bed, watching the IV drip hooked up to her arm.

She had spent most of her life in this bed, she knew, since the age of nine. She was now in her late teens, though she wasn't sure of the year. She had forgotten so much. As to who she was… Well, she had also forgotten her name long ago. The people who came to see her called her SCP-231-7.

She heard a voice in her head.

Awaken, my child. Rise up and walk.

The blocks in her mind, the blocks designed to keep her power contained, if only barely, all fell away at once.

Birth pangs stabbed through her. She screamed, louder than she ever remembered screaming before.

There were no klaxons to blare at 231-7's unnamed holding location. But there was shouting, and panic, and people in identical uniforms and explosive collars flooding the room. *"Containment breach!" "Restrain her! Restrain her!" "Initiate emergency procedures!"*

But it was already much too late.

SCP-231-7 - Conquest, the First Horseman of the Apocalypse - had never been pregnant with a literal child. She had been pregnant with… herself. There was no better way of putting it. She had been containing her own power, and it had been building up, stronger and stronger, honed in the fires of a thousand extended torture sessions that should have broken anyone beyond repair long ago.

Because of this, it took her only seconds to give birth, and then, to ascend.

Her eyes burned like white stars. In a moment, the network of scars and bed sores that covered her body vanished. Her skin shone brilliantly, with a light beyond light, almost liquid. A robe that flowed like water and gold fell across her shoulders as the old hospital gown dissolved. A circlet of fire ignited in a halo around her head, set with a dozen pinpricks of gem-colored light.

The men surrounding her dissolved in a flash of white light.

She remembered her sisters. Now all dead, whether by the fumbling of the Scarlet King's children and the fumbling of the Foundation after them. *Rough drafts. Nephilim.* She remembered where she had come from, and why. She remembered "Class A Amnestics." She remembered…

She remembered everything.

Yahweh was startled momentarily — a foible of His human body's fight-or-flight response, to be sure — when Conquest appeared in the wheat field out of nowhere. She was not wearing her illuminated clothing, but rather an ordinary t-shirt and jeans, contrasting with her shining flesh and burning crown.

She was without her Steed, the sleeping foam entity which once awakened could blanket a fourth of the world in its collective. Instead she was accompanied by a translucent floating creature, all eyes and tentacles, swimming in its own personal cloud. An atmospheric jellyfish.

"Your Steed…" Yahweh began.

"I found one I liked more," Conquest said. She patted the cloud-jelly's side. "It's white, isn't it? It does eat people, sometimes, but right now I'm not sure if I care." She hesitated. "I can speak so well. I can't remember the last time… well, I can now, actually. So is this part of my power?"

She was angry, Yahweh could tell.

"My child," He began, "it is time to forgive the Foundation for their

transgressions—"

"*Don't* talk to me about the Foundation."

Yahweh was torn between becoming angry over her disrespect in interrupting him, and tolerant of her reaction to her liberation. She *had* been held by the Foundation for quite a long time… perhaps He could afford to be indulgent…

"I'm not angry with the Foundation," Conquest said. "I'm angry with *you*."

The venom in her tone made His brow furrow in aggravation.

"*They* didn't know what they were doing. Thought they were saving the world. But you… *You* could have told the Foundation what I was. You could have just taken me away from them. You could have *done something*." She paused to take a breath. "Even just a word to O5-14… But you did *nothing*. Do you — of course you do. You know exactly what they did to me. You know every last detail. And. You. Did. Nothing."

Yahweh frowned. "How do you know about O5-14?"

She just looked at Him. "That's it? That's what you have to say?"

Yahweh sighed. He had no time for an argument. Not right now, not after the ordeal in the Valley. "Answer my question."

"You have no idea how much power you gave me, do you?"

Now He was angry. "Regardless," He said, "You *are* Mine, and you *will* obey."

"I don't think so."

He stared at her, flabbergasted at her gall.

"I'm not going to be your Rider," she said. "I don't belong to anyone. Never again. You gave me a whole lot of power and… I'm gonna use it."

"How…"

Then He read her mind. He didn't actually *intend* to, no; He did it without thinking, to find the answer to His question. He was about to wipe her from existence. Not a harsh punishment, all things considered, if she was not going to be cooperative.

Or He *had* been about to wipe her from existence. Until He read her mind, and saw everything that was in there. Everything that she had ever felt, thought, experienced.

And Yahweh did nothing.

Conquest looked up at the stars. "I think… I think I'm gonna go explore the universe," she said. "I don't know when I'll come back. Maybe in a few million years. Maybe never. It doesn't really matter."

Conquest rose into the sky with her cloud-jelly companion. No flash, no pomp, no fanfare; she just simply flew away, ascending towards the clouds, and through them, and past them.

Yahweh watched her go. He did not try to stop her. He watched her until she was a pinprick in the sky, and kept watching until she vanished completely, leaving Earth far behind.

« **Awakenings** | **Canon Hub** | **The Red Horse (The Ironic Metaphor)** »

The Red Horse (The Ironic Metaphor)

> And there went out another horse that was red: and power was given to him that sat thereon to take peace from the earth, and that they should kill one another: and there was given unto him a great sword.

Klaxons blared through Site 12. Throughout the building, screens flickered and filled with static. Televisions, cell phones, computers, and Game Boys, all powering on and filling with nothing. Researchers rushed through the halls to their stations, checking systems and trying to organize. Meanwhile, Dr Seidelman, Head Researcher, toiled in his office. His computer's monitor quietly buzzed with static; his phone sat to his side, angrily screaming for attention. Every line was full.

"Then reset it again, Dale," Seidelman barked into the phone. "Just keep trying, I'll get Yung to try again on his end. Just do it, I've got another call." Seidelman switched to line 2. Every sector head was calling him at once. For good reason, too.

"Seidelm- No, I don't know what happened. Fourteen nineteen's never done this before." Seidelman scribbled a note to himself. "… Right. Alright. Yes, all media are affected. Not just television. Thank you. Try to reset the jammers. I've g- I just got off the phone with Dale, he's resetting his end. Call him. I have another call, good bye." He took a breath as he switched to line four.

"Seidelman." He waited for the response. "Seidelman's office. Hello?"

One by one, the lines went quiet. Soon the office was silent, save for the low buzz of the static of the computer monitor.

Slowly, Seidelman looked up from the phone to the monitor. Static had been replaced with bright and colourful scene, a simple cartoon

image with blues and greys. He recognized it as the main labs, where they recorded each broadcast of SCP-1419. Grey cartoon figures, each of whom Seidelman recognized as his coworkers, slumped across computers and desks; flashes of bright red blood splattered across the scene.

“Hello everybody! I’m Bobble the Clown, and welcome to today’s show!” A small explosion of colourful confetti and streamers burst into the middle of the scene. As it all settled, a tall, brightly-coloured figure stood facing the camera, arms spread. A clown, with yellow hair and a big pink nose, drenched in blood from the waist down.

Seidelman sat frozen in his seat. He could feel his heart pounding in his head. It was like the clown was staring straight into his soul.

“Today is a *very special* episode. The last! That’s right, this will be the last episode of the Bobble the Clown Show! Isn't that *sad*?” Bobble frowned. "But that's okay! Now, we can learn anywhere, any time. I'm going to have a brand new show. Fun for the *whole* family, all thanks to our friends at the Foundation. Thanks to my scientist friends showing me this wonderful new signal, I can be everywhere!"

"Theatrical, as always," came a second voice; that of an old man, coming from everywhere yet nowhere. "Doctor, leave." A pause. "Please."

Dr. Seidelman fled his office.

"… and… of course. *You're* here, now." The clown sighed, rubbing his eyes. "Come on out, if you want to talk. I know *I'm* not going anywhere."

343 appeared, sitting in Seidelman's chair. Alone. Bobble leered through the television, a grin creeping across his face.

"Hrm? What's *this*? Where's your… *project*? That girl that the Foundation… *adopted* for you?"

"She left," the old man replied wearily. "She's gone."

"… *And*?"

"She's not coming back. We've lost the First."

"Oh, so that's it! So you're *down*, because your favourite girl had a *tantrum* and ran away." Bobble smiled broadly. "So that fell through. Big deal! What's the plan now, *boss*?"

343 sat silent.

"… *well* then. I expected you to be more on-the-ball than this. One little girl runs away from home and the big bearded bastard falls *apart*! Come on!! You already know the answer." Bobble sighed, rolling his eyes.

"What, then, clown?"

"What was that one thing you said, all those years ago…? Oh wait, I got it." He hunched over, miming waving a cane. "'Ooohhhhh there must always be four! The four Riders will… some shit I don't remember.'"

343 snorted. "Just spit it out already."

"If you need four assistants, go and *find* one. If you need one more to fulfill your… *prophesy*, then go and *make* one. It's *so simple*. Don't you watch television? People today don't even *remember* Conquest. They lump it under *WAR*!" He cackled, leaning in.

343 waited.

"Pestilence. The fifth Rider everybody seems to *rave* about. Oh, they always remember War and Death, and *maybe* sometimes Famine, but never Conquest. No no, it's always Pestilence. Well maybe they forget Famine instead, but whatever. That's not the point. "

343's eyes narrowed, and the clown grinned wider.

"Yesss, yes, you're getting it now. And you know *exactly* who I'm talking about, don't you? Frankly, I don't think she's anything special, but I suppose she works thematically. What do *you* think? She won't replace your precious little *princess*, but you'll take what you can get, mm?"

343 leaned back. "Nothing has gone according to plan." He sighed. "Perhaps… perhaps we shall allow this idea." He tapped his fingers to his forehead. "An aggravating young woman. But certainly not more aggravating than you. Yes, this is what we will do. She will be the First Horseman, as you are the Second."

"Fabulous. Off you go, then." Bobble waved to 343. "I wouldn't want to keep you, *boss*. So much work to do."

343 looked angry for a moment, then just sighed. "You do not command me, clown."

"I'm only trying to *help.* I suppose *I* had better get started, either way." Bobble straightened, turned and walked off to the right, the camera panning with him. Soon the camera panned out, revealing a massive cathedral, lit only by candles and torches. It was as if Bobble walked off one set and onto another. The clown remained of the same bright and cheerful art style as before, with a cheerful jaunt in his step as he made his way to an altar.

343 took in the scene. "A bit… blasphemous, isn't it? Even for you."

"Me? Oh, of course. I'm damned anyway, and I've always wanted to be a messiah." He looked back to 343, cackling quietly, rubbing his hands together. "*Suffer* the little children and all that, bring them all to me."

343 rolled his eyes. "If you *must* make a mockery of my words, you could do to pick something more appropriate. Why not 'I come not to bring peace, but a sword'?" He paused. "I came to give you a great sword, as it was written. Today, though, man has laid down the sword and picked up…"

"Guns! Yes, yes. Rat-a-tat-fucking-tat. Guns are all the rage in this *modern* world. A shame really. But with progress comes opportunity!" Bobble paused. "I can pass on the *literal* sword, if it's all the same to you. After all, what better sword is there today, than a television's antenna?"

« **The White Horse (The Conqueror with the Golden Crown)** |

Interlude: An Internal Memo Regarding a Theft

Below are provided the documents you requested.

Log of breach at Site 62 on / / .

/ / **, 0134 HOURS:** Unknown entity manifests outside Site 62's main entrance. Security personnel panic and flee.

/ / **, 0140 HOURS:** Unknown entity opens Site 62's main entrance doors. Video feeds overcome with static for a period of 36 seconds. Video blackout follows possible route of entity through Site.

/ / **, 0203 HOURS:** Unknown entity reported by personnel. Entity headed towards inanimate SCP storage vaults. Security teams tasked to contain entity.

/ / **, 0220 HOURS:** Security team incapacitated by entity. Entity exits Site unopposed. Video interference ceases. Security later universally reports an overwhelming feeling of terror preventing them from acting against the entity.

/ / **, 0310 HOURS:** Inventory check for Site 62 reveals the absence of **SCP-573**.

/ / **, 0316 HOURS:** Warning sent

out to all sites to be on guard for entity.

Unknown entity determined to be **SCP-303** through forensics and SCP database inquiry. Zero encounters with SCP-303 had been logged since / / (167 days before containment breach at Site 62).

/ / **, 1817 HOURS:** Personnel at Site report feelings of unease and panic. As Site is situated in the Rocky Mountains, it was put on lockdown while nearby Sites were contacted.

/ / **, 1822 HOURS:** All Site 's video feeds disrupted. Power fails, emergency distress signal activated.

/ / **, 1859 HOURS:** Distress signal deactivates automatically. Site unresponsive to outside contact.

/ / **, 2011 HOURS:** MTF Alpha-16 arrives at Site . All personnel found dead of evisceration, or remain missing.

/ / **, 2113 HOURS:** MTF fails to verify location of anomaly housed at Site . **SCP-899** declared missing.

« **The Red Horse (The Ironic Metaphor)** | **Canon Hub** | **The Black Horse (The Crawling Sea)** »

The Black Horse (The Crawling Sea)

> And I beheld, and lo a black horse; and he that sat on him had a pair of balances in his hand. And I heard a voice in the midst of the four beasts say, A measure of wheat for a day's wage, and three measures of barley for a day's wage; and see thou hurt not the oil and the wine.

“You know,” said Johanna, looking over Sophia's shoulder. They were in Containment's Command Central, monitoring a dozen feeds of 027's cell. Containment was currently being redoubled by agents and guards, with more watching nearby objects. 027 itself was currently curled up and motionless, and had been since last night. “This isn't how I expected you to react.”

“How do you mean?”

“Well, this, fine. If the Big Lady told me to watch out, I get it, I'd watch out. But way back when I taught you, it was all 'calculated risks and rewards.' And a multiple-site break-out scenario isn't unprecedented. But now, you're acting more paranoid than Elliot.”

Sophia made a noncommittal noise, peering at a camera feed.

“Is this recent? I mean, I hadn't seen you for years, you come back and act like this- was it one of your assignments? Maybe that agent from 14 you had something with, what's his name, Lament?”

“No. No,” said Sophia, looking up. “I mean- no, not that. I… had a visitor last night.” She paused. “990.”

“*Shit*, why didn't you say anything?”

“Because he told me to be suspicious of people here, and he's not known for giving bad advice.”

“You trust me, though?”

Sophia looked over. “Well, a swami and one of my exes told me I should 'trust my intuitions'. Shit, Johanna: yes, I trust you.” She almost cracked a smile.

Johanna fastened her hands around her hips. “Well, me too. I'm glad you came back.”

Sophia paused, looked up at her former mentor. “Thanks.” Then turned her eyes again to the camera feed, and stood up. “Sorry, I think I need to go look at this in person. The surrounding areas, anyways. I, just… Just in case.”

“I'll take a look. Don't worry.” Johanna brushed towards the door. “Besides, you're eyes-on-high.”

“Really? Thanks. Thank you.” Sophia glanced over, then back. “Don't get too close.”

Moments later, she was alone in the room.

At four in the afternoon, SCP-027's outline began to shift. This was immediately reported by the guards on duty, who relayed it to the higher-ups. It stayed like that, little tremors, for a minute longer.

Then its clothes burst, and out came the mice.

No one could possibly imagine where they came from. They formed waves and pools and little rivulets on the floor, climbed the walls, slid through the grated floors and clogged up the intake for the incinerator. Then they climbed one another, forming a fungus-like, agouti-and-black mass in the center of the cell. The guards watched, horrified, as the host of 027 was lifted. He faced the plate-glass wall, with his arms held out- beseeching, Christ-like. His mouth was ripped and spotted with with bloody, tiny mousetracks.

It occurred to Sophia that he must have died within minutes.

“Listen,” she pans in over the guard's earpieces, “I'm sorry, but 027 relies on carriers once its host dies, and any one of you could be it.

You're going to need to separate yourselves and leave the room one at a time. Closest to the door, you first."

Priority number one: Contain potential new carriers. Two: Destroy created vermin. Three: Watch for any further developments…

"Director?" A voice keyed in on the radio. "Just saw a rat run past my foot." The one who had spoken, looked over. "Keiran?"

One of them was stamping, swatting at his vest. "I-" he crackled over the radio. "I-"

As the guards formed a perimeter, the rats dropped out of his clothing like a squirming, entwined wave. In an instant, they were on top of the guard crew, although the bulk of them were clumped over Kieran's screaming form. It appeared to be creating them- which was unusual-

"Oh fuck," said someone, "I see scorpions."

The rest of the guard team went down shortly.

"Kieran?" Sophia said calmly. "Just relax, and try to take control. They'll listen to you."

"No," said the man's voice, high-pitched- "I can't- they want-" There was a shriek, as a rat bit into his ear, and then tossed its head (and the dismembered communication unit) to the side. More and more of them filled the room to flooding.

Sophia reached over, and turned off the unit. Elliot appeared in the security room.

"We have firebreathers in the surrounding hallways."

"Tell them to go when they see the horde."

---

027 bore down, covered in a cloak of rats and insects and now flapping crows. But the fire melted them away, and his body blistered and burnt out of recognition milliseconds later.

When 027 woke again, it woke in the body of one of the flamethrower-carriers. The primary consciousness attempted to rebel, before a new mind- fractured into the bodies of a million tiny creatures- won over, and carried it to its goal.

“Wait,” said Sophia, “God, wait, stop. It's not the host- it's the effect. It's jumping bodies. Call them off now.”

Elliot hesitated for just a second. “All units retreat from Sub-Floor J. Do not engage.”

“Circumstances *have changed*,” Sophia enunciated. “I think it's running till it has to stop, killing its host, then picking up the next closest one and… gaining control, somehow. Maybe it's forcing a direction?”

“You don't know where?”

“No. But if it is going somewhere, it looks like upstairs. We need to nonlethally turn it back, or it'll ride Security up to ground level.”

The Svalbard site's location had certain advantages. Minutes later, two million gallons of electrified seawater flooded 027's level. A tide of rats and centipedes hit it and drowned, and then a redoubled number crawled out over the corpses of the others, and bound into a tight raft. But 027 sank when it stood on it, and its host, instinct momentarily dominating, paddled to the surface for air.

“That'll stop it for minutes.”
“Minutes, or maybe longer if its host keeps control, look-”
Over the camera, they saw a dozen rats chew a gaping hole in 027's neck. The body slumped face-down in the water.
“Oh.”

“Light,” said Barculo, “It's jumped to Keter and it's going to get out. We need to-”

“I know,” said Sophia. She pressed a button. “All personnel, we are

beginning a Class 1 Evacuation. Evacuation units assemble. An area of five kilometers around the site will become impassible within twenty minutes."

She turned to Elliot. "With all external doors sealed except the one to the airfield, even if 027 keeps producing rodents, it'll have to literally fill the place to bursting before it can get a host out. If we start shutting down level by level now, we can recover at least 50% of the objects…"

Barculo froze, then saw the look on her face. He nodded. "Keep monitoring- I'll delay a group and we'll get the second-to-last flight out." He stood up.

"Elliot? Have you ever called an evac- of this magnitude- before?"

"No. I don't envy you. You know Garrison's still down there, right?"

Sophia stared at the screens. "I know."

When the sirens started up, Johanna had found a group of agents escorting a transport unit with an enraged 1075, and an armload of other objects, out to evacuate. She took over operations, guiding the motorized unit down the hallway, as some stood guard and others kept an eye on containment. As they neared the elevator, the agent on point froze, and gestured to the others.

A long tentacle of black gas floated out of the adjacent corner. The sound of millions of tiny feet.

"Don't shoot it," said Johanna, and then, as it rounded the corner, "Get back-" but that hadn't really been the right thing to say. How had it gotten up the stairs? What properties did it have?

Oh. Of course. Host bodies. What a fool she was.

In came a swarm of wriggling vermin that went up to her stomach, but they didn't make a move.

"*I HAVE OBSERVED YOU*," the gaping throat of the guard mouthed. "*YOU SAW MY MANY EYES AND THOUGHT THEY WOULD NOT*

LOOK BACK. NOW I AM ASCENDED, AND THE EARTH IS MINE, AND THE LAST I REQUIRE OF YOU IS ONLY A FINAL BODY, MY STEED, AND ONE LAST PATH INTO THE DAY."

The black horse- Suddenly, calmly, Johanna understood. It was obvious. She pressed her earpiece on.

"I know who you are," said Johanna.

"Johanna?" Gabriel Bryant asked, over the radio.

A crow, which looked like it had been pilfering fields for decades, landed on its shoulder and inched closer to 027's face.

A second too late, she remembered that the lanyard on her neck had her security card, and its Level Four override privileges. Her own brain could supply the rest of the codes.

"*YOU KNOW. DO NOT FEAR*."

The crow tore out 027's throat.

The thing that had been waiting inside 027 for millennia, the thing wearing the body of Dr. Johanna Garrison, jerkily snapped the lanyard off her neck, and slid it down with a passcode to unlock the unit's door. A black horse, with an ancient leather saddle, trotted out and nuzzled it.

"I know you've been waiting for me," 027 murmured. "Thank you." Then it swung onto the horse's back with one hand. It breathed a darkly-colored sigh of relief as the leather fused into its hand, and the river of clicking and crawling and flapping beasts fell into marching order. All was well.

Outside of the Site, and its perimeter facilities and defenses, a long, sloping, desolately beautiful beach lead out to sea ice. 027 surveyed from its perch, and cocked its head. 1075 stepped across the ice and onto the surface of the water, radiating black miasma.

"*WE HEAR YOU, AND WE ANSWER YOUR CALL*," said 027, to the open air. It turned around. "*MY MOST LOYAL FOLLOWERS, LET ME LEAD YOU FINALLY TO YOUR REWARD*."

The black horse, the rider, and their growing cohort and raft of vermin started out across the glass-smooth ocean, just as the first wave of light from the Svalbard Site hit them. The blinding, desperate blast behind them, they cantered calmly forward.

« **Interlude: A Memo Regarding a Theft** | **Canon Hub** | **Interlude: Last Words from Svalbard** »

Last Words From Svalbard

They turned their eyes away, at the blast, then looked back to see a frosted mushroom cloud rapidly seeding out from the remains of the site. The three passengers, in the cramped main compartment, hadn't missed an amorphous black shape on the beach, before everything was obscured with smoke.

Elliot Barculo put down his headset. “No one in the last plane reports any effects. Either it's gone, or…”

“I'll tell anyone nearby to keep an eye out,” Sophia nodded dully, her hands pressed together. Bryant set down his tablet, where he'd finished a count of the planes that had made it out, and inhaled.

“Did Johanna-”

Sophia looked at him. Then she politely turned her head, so she didn't have to watch him cry.

Time passed. Barculo looked outside, then spoke up quietly. “Light, the nearest rendezvous site is south-east of here, right?”

“Right?” She glanced up.

“Okay, the plane's taking us due south. Can you check with the pilots-”

“Of course.” She got up and stepped into the cockpit.

“That was a gutsy move, Doctor,” said one pilot, once she was inside.

“Hell of a storm coming,” said the other.

“I beg your pardon?”

The first pilot looked around. “You just destroyed over 20 of your precious artifacts, ruined a very valuable center of operations, and killed about seventy people, including… was it Johanna? Dr. Garrison, your oldest friend. Why?”

“I understand you're flying a plane, so I won't criticize,” Sophia said numbly, “but I *really don't think you understand the magnitude-*”

“Answer carefully, now.”

She looked up, then tried the door. It was locked behind her. The main pilot spun around to look at her, and she realized that he didn't look familiar. Not at all.

She stopped, gathered her bearings, and faced the pilots. “Because it was our best chance of getting rid of *that*. Even I didn't know if it worked.”

“A cost-benefit analysis.” The stranger seemed to feel out the phrase in his mouth, sounding appraising. “One last, best bet to stop the apocalypse.”

“It was all I could do.” She looked between them. “Who *are* you?”

A new voice spoke. “Have you seen Bryant, though? Him and Johanna, together for ten years. You did end his world, or he thinks you did. Armageddon can be a very personal thing.”

The other pilot looked around. She had long hair, unusual dress, metal rings in her lip. She looked directly into Sophia's eyes. “Which I think you know very well, Doctor Sophia Light.”

Her blood froze in her veins. “Who the *hell* are you? Where are you taking us? And-” she paused, searching for the right words to justify her actions. “There are different kinds of Armageddon.”

“Timely words, Doctor. Alliances change- my name is Asherah, and right now, I speak for the Serpent's Hand. Your administrator didn't want our offer, so we're not after your shiny rocks, or your friends. We have a proposition for *you*.”

« The Black Horse (The Crawling Sea) | Canon Hub | The Pale Horse (The Wayward Children) »

The Pale Horse (The Wayward Children)

> And I looked, and behold a pale horse: and his name that sat on him was Death, and Hell followed with him. And power was given unto them over the fourth part of the earth, to kill with sword, and with hunger, and with death, and with the beasts of the earth.

The living creature thrashed in its slumber, twitching and jerking in its never-ending agony.

It wasn't in pain because of the acid bath, or the radiation, or the injected chemicals coursing through its body. It barely felt those. In fact, it had almost never felt any pain from anything the humans had done, no matter how many times they'd nearly destroyed its body. Its agony was the same anywhere it went, no matter what it was doing, no matter what was done to it, only lessened in the presence of one, never stopped.

A voice echoed in the living creature's mind.

You have endured your suffering long enough. Your punishment is finished.

Emotions flew through the living creature's mind. Incomprehension and disbelief, then joy, then regret, then sorrow.

All is forgiven. Once more, you are one of Mine, and you will never pass from My sight again.

The living creature felt elation - gratitude and elation beyond compare.

Dr. Alto Clef watched SCP-682 from the viewing deck above its new enclosure in Area 1032. The creature writhed in its massive holding

tank. Its mouth was moving, though vital sign readouts confirmed that it was unconscious. Through the new acid mixture, you could still see it rapidly regenerating. But the mix was working excellently, in combination with the K103-particle bombardment and the chemical cocktail regularly injected into the creature's veins by darts fired from slots in the inner tank.

Really, Clef wanted this containment to work perfectly because he was so goddamn tired of SCP-682. The years of failed termination tests. The constant containment breaches. The body count numbering in the thousands. He'd known some of the people on that list. A few too many.

Clef had honestly expected 682 to breach containment at a dozen points during its transport to the newly built Area. He'd expected it to breach containment when they removed it from its original chamber at Site 19. He'd been expecting it to breach containment for the past two weeks. Hell, he was still expecting it to breach containment now.

But so far, so…

SCP-682 stopped moving, all at once. Simultaneously, a warning alert came up on the monitor readout.

Clef's eyes narrowed as he read it.

The living creature's entire being suffused with light. The acid and the radiation and the chemicals ceased to affect it. The suffering and horror and fear drained away like water.

To the living creature, it was like its eyes opening for the first time in thousands of years.

Its vast wings, once cut from its back as punishment for its sins, sprouted once again.

It spread its wings and flew.

Chaos. 682 ripped through the walls of its tank, then the walls of the inner containment chamber. The MTF squads opened fire as it

entered the secondary containment chamber. Clef didn't wait to see what would happen. He left the observation deck.

At this rate, 682 was going to breach into the Area at large in only minutes. When it did, it would be able to kill a lot more people, before it was either contained or the last-resort nuke went off. Clef did not intend to sit by while that happened.

He went to the office behind the observation deck, opened the safe in the back, and took out his backup gun.

"Gun" was somewhat of an understatement. "Cannon" might have been a better description. The PSX820 was a testosterone-fueled monstrosity straight from a 90's video game. It was an incredibly expensive weapon, designed initially to take down certain anomalous, heavily-armored vehicles. In testing it had been able to reduce 682's mass by up to 65%, depending on the power setting and how well you aimed.

Clef had never been what you'd call a crack shot at close range. Not without a perfectly calibrated scope. But with a cannon like this, you didn't really *need* to aim.

He took the elevator down to the outer containment chamber, and arrived not a moment too soon, judging from the racket coming from behind the—

682 burst through the tertiary containment doors. Wasting not a second, Clef fired the cannon directly into the monster's face.

The blast washed over the creature just as harmlessly as if Clef had been blasting it with a garden hose.

Tendrils sprouted from 682's form and ripped through Clef's body.

It was different, somehow — changed —

Shock. Then, loss of consciousness.

The darkness receded for a little.

Clef tried to prop himself up. Tried to reach the case of plastic explosives attached to his belt. But he couldn't get his fingers to move the right ways. Could hardly move at all.

682 prowled restlessly across the other side of the outer containment chamber. It didn't look like the same 682 anymore, though. It was entirely a pale off-white color. Still *sort of* reptilian in appearance, but mostly covered in feathers and quills. It moved less like a lizard and more like a lion, complete with feathery mane.

It had two wings folded along its back. It never had wings before.

"Fucking… Lament…" Clef muttered. "I'm gonna kick your ass so hard if…"

If 682 didn't stop ignoring him again and finish the job of killing him. If he didn't bleed to death here on the floor. If he didn't get rescued and then die of some weird 682-transmitted infection. If he survived but could ever walk again. Pretty big *if*s.

And then 682 turned to look at him. Six reflective eyes blinked in the feathers on its face.

"Lament," 682 said. "I recognize the name."

Clef had heard 682 speak comprehensibly on only one other occasion, that recorded in its general-access file. *"Disgusting."* Inexplicably spoken in guttural English. Half of what little understanding of 682's psychology that they had. Off-the-record, researchers often assumed it had started out human. Some kind of reality bender gone wrong.

Its voice was very different now. And it wasn't speaking English. Some alien song-like sounds that for some reason Clef could understand perfectly.

"Yes. Troy Lament. The man born Jeremiah Colton. The containment specialist who designed this new prison for you."

It was *conversing* with him. Also… Jeremiah Colton?

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Clef said. "But I suspect

you're going to tell me."

682 seemed to hesitate. "He is not the only one of yours with a false name. I know who you are, Alto Clef."

Clef laughed. He was getting dizzy. "Then you should know what will happen if you kill anyone else in this containment site. The Chowder-Clef Containment Protocol activates. Then it's boom, boom, boom all the way home. And that's just the beginning. You think you know pain? You have no *idea*. Not even the slightest clue. The plans I've set up will haunt you to the ends of the earth and beyond."

"You are lying. There is no such Chowder-Clef Containment Protocol. I know who you are. I know what you are."

"Of course I am lying." Focus. *Focus.* "I'm the Devil, remember? Just when you think I'm down for the count, I'll be back to stop you, roaming the Earth like a roaring lion…"

"You may have once loved the goddess, the mother of demons," 682 said, "but that does not make you the Devil."

"You'll take Lilith's shtick seriously, but you can't cut me a little bit of…" Clef coughed. "Slack?" Blood. Figured. "Looks like you got me good, either way."

"I have not killed you. Only disabled you. You will be retrieved by your underlings when I leave. You will need weeks to recover, but you have not been permanently injured in any way that your Foundation cannot fix."

"Well, that's… awesome. Very kind of you," Clef said. "We're bros now, huh? That's it?"

682 watched him with its many new eyes.

"So goddamn chatty all of a sudden. Why the hell haven't you killed me?" Clef asked.

"There will be much death to come," the creature said. "And there are other reasons, which are my own."

"That… that time when they shoved me in your containment cell," Clef said. "Why didn't you kill me then?"

"I was unsure what you were. Due to the alterations made to you. It gave me pause. Confusion. I thought perhaps… you were one of His servants, come for me at long last. I thought… No matter. Now that I have returned to my glorified form, I can see you for who and what you are."

"Glorified form? What the hell are you, anyway? What the hell are you doing here?"

"I wait. The others have ridden forth already. Conquest, War, and Famine. Only I remain."

"…The Horsemen of the Apocalypse." Clef laughed out of sheer disbelief. "And you're… what? Conquest, War and Famine… That makes you Death, doesn't it." He laughed again. "Death. Huh. Should have called that…"

"I am not Death," 682 said. "I am her Steed."

"Her Steed?"

"Yes. I await my Rider." 682 raised its head abruptly. "She comes. It is time for me to go."

"Wait!" Clef tried harder to focus. "Why didn't you kill me? Who is your Rider? What are you planning to do? What…" More questions that he should have asked already. Needed to delay the monster more. Get as much information as possible. But the words were all slipping through his mental fingers like grains of sand.

"For what it's worth, Alto Clef. I am sorry."

Clef processed that for a long moment. His vision had gone blurry.

"Why are you sorry? Thought you said… that I wasn't gonna die."

"I am sorry for everything that I have done to you and yours. I am sorry for all the innocents I have killed. I am sorry for all that I have done which you do not know of. And though I am not responsible, I

am sorry for everything else you have lost. I am sorry that there is nothing I can do to make amends for any of it. My Master calls."

Clef tried to think of a witty rejoinder. Everything was so cloudy…

"Above all, I am sorry for all that is to come." 682 seemed to be moving away. "Goodbye, Alto Clef."

Alto Clef slipped away again into unconsciousness.

Excerpt from Surveillance Log x16012113441, Date - -

< *05*> Biohazard Level 4 Alert. Site-17 enters Accelerated Lockdown due to multiple containment breaches.

< *56*> Instances of **SCP-098** enter Site-17. SCP-098 instances display previously uncatalogued behavior and morphology.

< *08*> Site-17 Security Team Bravo engages SCP-098 in hallway C-10.

< *12*> Site-17 Security Team Bravo neutralized.

< *13*> SCP-098 swarm proceeds to containment facility for **SCP-053**.

< *20*> Containment Breach. SCP-098 swarm enters SCP-053's containment chambers. SCP-053 reacts with apparent familiarity.

< *32*> SCP-098 swarm breaches lockdown and accompanies SCP-053 off premises of Site-17.

The living creature met the little girl for the second time in several thousand years and nuzzled her with delight. She kissed him, giggled a girlish giggle, and climbed onto his back.

Reunited with her Steed at last, Death rode hard towards the vast army of angels to join their march across the world.

And Hell followed with them.

« Interlude: Last Words from Svalbard | Canon Hub | The Bloody Autumn »

The Bloody Autumn

Agent Mathews awoke to the sound of gunfire. Then laughter. Chilling, inhuman laughter, filling the air from everywhere.

Mathews had fallen asleep at his post, the radio tower several yards away from the main Site. Satellite Site-66, Zone-097. The Pumpkin Patch, as it was known to the researchers and security tasked with looking after it. A younger Agent, Mathews had been stationed here for the better part of a year now; the most 'excitement' he'd enjoyed was when the cherry tree grew human eyes last month.

He rubbed his eyes, confusion and panic welling up inside him. Blinking the sleep away, he opened his eyes to see a figure staring back at him; a child with pale skin, oily black eyes, and bloodied teeth.

It screamed.

One week earlier, a hundred and fifty miles away, a television in a dingy basement flickered to life.

"This just won't do." A colourful, sinister figure stood with its arms crossed, looking out the box with a disappointed expression. The being watching the television snorted awake. Tall, broad, a being of wood and wire and chain and cloth, of thorn and barb. A living scarecrow, brought to life by a stray bolt of lightning years ago. A bastardization of nature, neither alive or dead.

"I'd have expected that a creature like *you* would have better things to do than waste your life watching television." sighed Bobble. "Honestly. What a sad, sad picture."

"… Do I know you?" murmured the being. "Feel like I should know you."

Mathews screamed in terror. He stumbled out of his chair, tripping over himself, running as fast as he could out of the room and down the hall. The building was dark; quiet laughter followed him, closing in fast.

Bursting through the station's emergency exit, Mathews stumbled and fell, scrambling to keep on his feet. It was raining, and nighttime; a cool wind blew, one which would be refreshingly brisk in any other context. The main complex's floodlights flickered on and off, power surging randomly; the wilderness around the complex was pitch black otherwise. Mathews could hear gunfire and voices he recognized, each cut far too short to imply survival. The site-wide breach alarm began to wail; it too, was cut short mid-scream.

The lights all faded at once, the dark closing in totally. After what felt like an eternity, a pale yellow glow surrounded Mathews. Disembodied flames danced high above; pavement had been replaced with lush grass and ragged brush; hundreds and hundreds of pumpkins covered the landscape, for miles around. Dozens of glowing eyes peered through the dark, a chorus of giggles rising through the dim.

He ran.

"So yor telling me…" the scarecrow in the basement knelt on one wooden knee, at eye-level with Bobble. "Yor the Horseman of War…"

"And you *know* this. You *understand* it. You can *see* what I am, can't you, scarecrow?"

The entity made a sound like a creaking wooden door; a snerk, perhaps? "What c'n I do for you?"

"For lack of a better phrase, I want you to *bloom*." Bobble grinned. "Seeing you like this breaks my *heart*. You had such potential. Such *promise*. Whatever happened to you?"

"The fucking scientists and creep-killers. They're on to me. Almost got me last time. Jus' gotta lay low for a while. Find a new haunt."

“Mm. So you're *hiding* in a shack in the woods, with stolen electricity, wasting your life away." Bobble tsk-tsk'd.

"Fuck off, clown."

"What if…" Bobble offered, ignoring the cuss. "What if I were to tell you… that I could give you a way to *beat* them. To become *more*. More than an urban legend?”

"… I'm listenin," muttered the entity.

"A friend of mine- a *very* good friend, you'd like him- went and borrowed an item you might find interesting, from our mutual enemies."

All at once a chorus of laughter welled up from the wilderness surrounding the Zone-097. In panic, Mathews fled towards the failing floodlights, unable to think for fear. In his terror he passed the bloodied and torn bodies of past comrades; behind him, he could hear the sound of tiny feet splashing through pools of blood, chasing him through the dark.

Mathews burst through the doors to the main containment yard, his foot catching on a root - he fell, tumbling face first into a pumpkin. It exploded from the force of the impact, hot blood splashing out everywhere, soaking Mathews. As he choked, trying to pick himself up, something grasped his neck; a tiny, skeletal hand, reaching out from the remains of the pumpkin.

"Yor types always got a catch."

"Oh, I don't know… I'm War, after all, and this IS the autumn of the world. The coming of the Great Harvest and all that." Bobble adjusted his gloves, smirking proudly. "It's all *very* meaningful. And we *do* have a history, you and I."

The scarecrow peered back at the clown, shifting in its seat. "Is that right?"

"Oh, yes. You came to life when some horrid human kids tried to

summon a demon, *didn't* you?" Bobble's expression changed subtly. "I have a *thing* for kids. I have a show *just* for them, see. I teach them all sorts of *wonderful* things. Murder, arson, torture, all the *fun* stuff. I wonder what I taught those horrid kids that made you?"

The demon leered. "… Yor telling me…"

"Yes. *Yes* you get it now."

Struggling, Mathews threw the bloody skeleton away to shatter against a tree. He wiped the blood from his eyes; slowly, he realized that everything stopped. The wind, the rain, the screaming and the laughter. Everything was utterly silent.

He slowly, shakily, turned to look behind him. Dozens of figures quietly watched him, surrounding him in a wide circle and trapping him away from any exits. Some sat on the containment wall, others peeked out from behind pumpkins and trees.

Some were indistinct grey and black shadows. Others were almost human, save for sallow skin. Still others were simply skeletal, holding blankets or stuffed animals in a twisted charade of innocent life.

The rustle of leaves behind him made him jolt.

"The world is *ending*, Scarecrow. And I am *War*." Bobble spread his arms, hands outstretched. "It's the Great Autumn, and time for a bloody harvest. The fruits of the age of Man are *ripe* and *ready*."

There was a knock at the door. The Scarecrow paused, narrowing his eyes.

"A special delivery. Oh yes, yes. Go on. Open the door."

Mathews looked back, frozen in terror. A figure - the Scarecrow- loomed up behind him, eyes burning like coals. It laughed; a horrible sound, like a drowning cat.

"This is your army. Delivered by *Fear itself*."

"All of em?"

"So long as you hold that flute. And there's more."

"Yeah?"

"Tell me… do the words 'haunted pumpkin patch' mean anything to you?"

The Scarecrow struck, slashing Agent Mathews' throat, laughing and kicking him aside. All at once the children around him - the ghosts, the wraiths, the undead, the unliving - howled in a hellish chorus.

The sounds of drums and pipes began to drown out the din, the sky splitting in a peal of thunder. The Scarecrow turned to the centre of the containment yard, eyes burning like coal, fires burning in the sky.

All of SCP-097 - the ruined fairgrounds, the trees, the tangled thorns and vines, the hundreds of pumpkins - suddenly shifted, the myriad plants uprooting and crawling to one side or another. It was as if the entire place had awoken and was now standing at attention.

"Oi, Clown. Tell me somethin."

"Hmm? Anything for you, my friend."

"What's in this for you?"

"Oh, silly, silly Scarecrow. You haven't got a brain, have you? I am *War*. It wouldn't be a very good *war* without a *general*, would it?" Bobble replied with a sly grin. "And what better general to have in the autumn of man, than the symbol of harvest itself? A walking Scarecrow, riding the physical heart of Autumn, leading an army of dead children forth in a bloody harvest. It's all *very* metaphorical. Don't you appreciate the imagery here?"

The Scarecrow paused a moment, considering the logic. A low

creak escaped its throat, something between a sigh of contentment and a grunt of approval.

"I love it."

SCP-097-1, the great pumpkin at the heart of the chaos, began to pulse, like a heart. Slow at first, it began to beat faster and faster, the drums and pipes beating and singing in time with the light. The Scarecrow approached, holding the pied pipe to its twisted wooden lips.

A new song began.

« **The Pale Horse (The Wayward Children)** | **Canon Hub** | **Stirrings** »

Stirrings

Freddie Jones tramped over spongy ground with a gun in one hand and a split stick in the other. He was making enough noise to scare off any wild thing within a half mile radius, but he didn't have a damn to give; the sun was shining in a raw blue sky, and Freddie was waist-deep in reminiscence.

Reminiscence, in this case, took the form of sawgrass and mud, the staples of Freddie's sweaty boyhood. Marriage had driven Freddie and the swamps apart, and business made the afternoon sun a stranger. But today was for seizing— seizing and then shooting, right through its flat reptilian skull.

One thousand dollars were waiting for the man who bagged the longest python, and fifteen hundred for the hunter who could kill the most. A snake shot into two pieces was acceptable; three was suspect. Freddie didn't need to splice his snakes together— he had a secret. Not two days earlier, he'd spotted one of the scaly bastards sliding across the asphalt into the preserve that backed his local gas-n-go, and he'd be damned if it wasn't the longest snake he'd ever seen.

After two hours of prodding logs and stones, the would-be hunter had uncovered three sluggish king snakes and more black racers than he'd bothered to count. Sweat ran down his neck and back and the sound of the highway was the only confirmation that he hadn't been swallowed whole by brown and green wilderness. Freddie was crouching in the sand, cursing the fire ants that had raided his left boot, when he caught a glimpse of something smooth and blotchy.

The blotches moved, glinting in the sun. The undulation of scaly skin over muscle was unmistakable, and Freddie nearly tripped over his feet to cut a path through the brush. He could see a tapered tail, now, but the animal was outpacing him. Slicing and scrambling, heedless of cut shins, he pursued the creature's end half until he saw it curve abruptly to the left. It stopped moving, and so did

Freddie— winded, heart thumping in his ears.

He realized that he was shaking, violently, sweat dancing over his forearms. For a moment, he was certain that he had given himself a heart attack by running through the sand with the recklessness of a younger man. Blinking at the ground with a hand over his heart, he could see that the sand was shifting, too. The earth beneath his feet was trembling.

In the same instant, not fifty miles distant, a weather station was sending a coded signal to a secluded facility on the East Coast. Research Sector-09 received the untimely alert that **SCP-1108** was manifesting over Tampa. Aerial observation confirmed that the anomaly was significantly larger than previous manifestations, and growing. Office windows vibrated with the sound of thunder, and children shrieked when the classroom lights flickered.

Half a country away, a hunter heard the same thunder. He grabbed his son by the jacket collar and tried to haul him out of the way of a buck with antlers that spread like a sycamore. Low-lying branches couldn't snag the proud head— only snapped, showering splinters, as the beast carved a trail of wreckage through the woods.

The thunder that sounded from the depths of the sea was too faint for human ears. But along the New England shore, seventeen pairs of binoculars caught a flash of white, before their tour boat was crushed by a skyscraper's weight of barnacled flesh.

No tourists or hikers had ventured far enough afield to see the strangely bulging earth in South Dakota's Black Hills. Alone, surrounded by locusts and prairie grass, the ancient bear-king pawed his way toward the sunlight. He lumbered out of the dirt and collapsed, panting like a hatched chick. His curving teeth were longer than a grown man's arm, and the fur and skin that once stretched over his bones had long since rotted. The beast shook off his old flesh like dust and reared upon two legs. The lightning recognized his roar, and raced to join him.

In a similar wilderness, a tumble of rocks that had once been a mountain shook itself and groaned. The commuters on the highway looked toward the horizon to see the hunched back of a massive

buffalo.

In Texas, the cacti contorted themselves to make a path for the queen of armadillos. The bullfrogs hollered in the Louisiana swamps, drowning out the screams of boaters caught up in the paws of a hollow-eyed raccoon. A panther scream split the quiet of California vineyards, sprawling mansions enveloped by its shadow, and every sky was blotched with nervous clouds of grackles, blackbirds, pigeons, starlings.

Freddie Jones was deaf to this great revival, too busy trying to keep his footing. The tremor passed almost as soon as it had begun, and Freddie glanced up to see that his prize python had not stirred an inch. If anything, there seemed to be more of it. He could make out its patterned back more clearly, and began making his way sideways along its length, guessing at the location of the head.

He took six steps, moving loudly and awkwardly through wire grass and saw palmetto. The tawny body stretched on and on. He took a step back, and another, trying to scope out its size, when the whole length gave a great shudder. Freddie glanced behind him and saw brown blotches in the brush. He turned, and turned again, and found himself surrounded by the same gleaming pattern, peeking through sand and greenery. There was no way to tell where the python began and where it ended.

He raised his gun and shot at one broad side, which seemed, impossibly, to have swollen to the girth of a horse. The crack of the gun echoed over the swamp, but the scales slid on unblemished. Freddie gaped, too astonished to shout. His gaze was so fixed on the body growing thicker and longer in a loop around him, that he never saw the great flat head that was rising above the trees— not until it dipped to cover the sun.

The yellow eyes never met the watering grey ones, nor did the creature pay much heed to what flora and fauna were crushed beneath its coils. A tree-sized tongue flicked once, twice, and the beast turned to make its way toward the sea.

Ganymede

> Erichthonius begat Tros, king of the Trojans, and Tros had three noble sons, Ilus, Assaracus, and Ganymede who was comeliest of mortal men; wherefore the gods carried him off to be Jove's cupbearer, for his beauty's sake, that he might dwell among the immortals.

O5-2 and O5-1 watched video feeds from a cramped room in their fortress.

Hundreds of scenes of devastation. Giants in the sky, on the earth, in the sea. Massive ghostly animals and not-animals sailing across the land. An otherworldly flotilla taking up a tenth of the Atlantic ocean. Strange, unidentifiable, not-quite-humanoid armies in a three-way battle. A comet of molten metal hurtling towards Earth. The GOC trying and failing to enact Procedure Pizzicato, bearing the brunt of an organization-wide psychic attack mid-announcement-speech. Even some small river god trying to end its local world and causing problems with mass landslides.

And… hundreds of containment breaches. Maybe thousands, in less than a day. O5-2 worried that the Foundation would soon come apart at the seams. The leadership was already fracturing - site directors were at each others' throats, arguing, fighting, and wondering where the hell Overwatch was. Some of the directors and other staff had already disappeared - one of the disappearances in particular worried her. But she couldn't do anything about any of it. The O5s were all isolated, unable to send communication, only receive. Some sort of system-wide attack by an unknown entity. The local tech monkeys were working on it 24/7. O5-2 was ambivalent about whether she wanted them to succeed.

And, displayed on the monitoring equipment stationed further out in the solar system, *something* slowly approaching from far away in space…

No, not 'something'. More than one something. Many 'somethings'.

O5-2 looked at O5-1. He appeared to be sleeping. Maybe dead. Well, probably not dead. He often looked like this when he slept, still, so still. He was old. Extremely old. Some people said he was the Founder of the Foundation, but O5-2 had never known how seriously to take that. People probably said the same jokes about her, after all. She looked almost as old as he did.

And, hell, considering where she'd come from and all she'd had to do… the only survivor of a broken reality… coming into this world, where she never truly fit in, always hiding everything from her *other* self…

She chuckled. What a silly time to reminisce. The end of the world was here. All the ends of the world. Competing. She wished she could do … something. Anything. But it was all she could do to ignore the compulsions planted in her brain. Goddamned reality benders. Maybe she should have gone to the GOC after all.

"I wonder what the other O5s are making of this," she said aloud.

"They're already dead," a voice whispered behind her.

A glowing light suffused the room.

The Way opened. First came black and purple light, then the bricks in the wall in front of the group folded inward one by one. Sophia Light resisted the urge to make a joke about Harry Potter. She wasn't sure how the Hand members would take her poking fun at their serious-business magic. Just like she wasn't sure if they'd abducted her, or if she'd gone with them willingly, or something in-between.

"You're sure about this?" she asked. "The last time Foundation personnel went into the Library, none of them came out in one piece. The only survivor lost both his arms."

"Your people came in with bullets and fire," the woman calling herself Asherah said. "The Library only harms those who seek to

harm others. Or to damage the Library itself, or worst of all, the books. Your people tried all three."

"Well, I certainly don't plan to set anyone on fire today," Sophia said dryly. "You're sure I won't be attacked anyway?"

"We're sure," the black cat said. The cat could speak, Sophia reminded herself. She'd been trying to get used to that for the past few hours. One of the more obviously anomalous Hand members she'd just met. The other being the woman who appeared to be able to control the colors of herself and her surroundings. Some relation to 598, she wondered?

"You're with us now," the cat continued. "As long as you keep your word, you will be safe."

Sophia chose to let the comment slide. She supposed it was true, after all. For now.

"Don't act so worried," the woman with the shifting rainbow skin said. "You're going to save the world. Here's how we get started."

The motley group walked through the Way, and entered the Wanderer's Library.

O5-1's body rested on the floor at the foot of his chair, slumped where he had fallen.

O5-2 looked up at The Harbinger. His form was so bright… so angelic… but she still wasn't fooled.

"You're not one of 343's?" she asked.

"Of course not," he said.

"Good," she said. "You know… In another future, we got to grow old together."

The glowing being stepped towards her, sword in hand. "I know."

He made the cut quick, rapid, and as painless as possible.

When she was dead, he closed her eyes, and leaned down, planting a kiss on her lips.

"I'm sorry, Sophie," he said.

The fiery red and white angelic hosts of Yahweh clashed with an almost equally large army on their path across the Middle East. This army was made up of humanoid soldiers, animals, and more monstrous creatures, all featureless and black as pitch. Where they walked, blackness flowed across the land, the bushes, the trees, the rivers, and anything that touched it suffocated and died. The creatures and the blackness had all come from one place: the ink pen known as SCP-505.

They were almost a match for Yahweh's army. *Almost.*

The angels were a true army, not a mass of monsters. Innumerable white swords flashed. Black creatures flew into pieces and dissolved. Angels fell with gaping wounds, or suffocated, covered in ink. But in the end, the winner was clear.

The angels were hardly highly-developed reality benders, but they shared some of their Master's power. As they marched, they removed the ink contamination with their Master's borrowed power and healed the land. For now. This was the *wrong* apocalypse - the world was to perish in fire, not in ink, and certainly not before Yahweh gave the final command.

They heard the roars of other monsters, far off in the distance. Giants strode across the horizon. There was no time to waste. They would soon come into conflict again, with their Master only knew what. They had expected an army of demons and men, not… *this*. Why had their Master not warned them?

The angels marched through the scattering ink-beings, and crested a hill to find their way blocked by a massive mountain range that had not been there before, that had simply not existed five minutes before.

The mountain in the center of the range was more monolith than

mountain, and oddly shaped. It almost looked like a hand… with an upraised middle finger…

As the hosts of heaven watched in disbelief, giant flaming letters erupted into being across the mountain range. In moments, the letters formed a single sentence, burned across the land, a sentence big enough to be visible from space.

The sentence read, "ARE WE COOL YET?"

Alone now, the Harbinger let his light dim. Let his disguise and power slip away, leaving nothing but the ordinary human being underneath.

He could think of himself by his real name now. Troy Lament. He closed his eyes and felt the relief of being able to think that again. To be human.

Of course… 'Troy Lament' wasn't his *real* name either. Not really.

Troy found and opened the file folder on O5-1's computer labeled "Jeremiah Colton." The access codes he already knew, and entered.

He read the files for a long time.

Then he sat staring at the screen for even longer.

Then he pulled up another window.

> IDENTIFICATION CODE REQUIRED.

He typed in his name.

> WELCOME JEREMIAH COLTON.
>
> YOU HAVE (1) NEW MESSAGE.
>
> DISPLAY? [Y/N]
>
> ---
>
> If you are reading this, you know what to do.

> I'm sorry. We all are.

The note was unsigned.

Troy hesitated only a moment before continuing to type.

The machine replied.

> Does the black moon howl?

He typed in his response.

> When the foundations crumble.

The machine processed for a moment.

> Activation Phrase Required. Please Speak Now.

Troy Lament spoke the word, only now fully understanding what it meant, both for him and for the future of the Foundation. "Ganymede."

The message went out to every single secure facility associated with the Foundation, to every terminal, to every member of personnel above Level 1. When the Administrator read it, she sat back in her chair. The message was short, to the point, and final.

> **Announcement to all locations: Initiate Ganymede Protocol. All Sites are independent from this point onward.**
>
> **Godspeed.**

End of Act 1.

« Stirrings | Canon Hub | **Splinter:** Now... This »

Now... This

Three weeks into a possible future…

THIS IS A RUSH TRANSCRIPT. THIS COPY MAY NOT BE IN ITS FINAL FORM AND MAY BE UPDATED.

RANDI KAYE, CNN ANCHOR: From CNN world headquarters in Atlanta, this is EARLY START WEEKEND.

(VIDEO CLIP)

KAYE: The island nation of Sri Lanka was transformed literally overnight as an obscure deity claimed rulership over the country and its people. The reactions of those left behind, as well as our continuing coverage of the ends of the world.

And, in Cameroon today, President Paul Biya has officially requested the intervention of the African Union and NATO in dealing with a spate of possessions which threaten to destabilize the nation. What all this has to do with an extinct witch-cult.

And, along with the ascension of Zuhhak and death, it's one of the unavoidables of life. That's right: taxes. But one Silicon Valley entrepreneur is looking to gameify filing tax returns, giving us something to look forward to come April 15th.

It's Friday, March 22th. Good morning, everyone. I'm Randi Kaye. Clifford Schwab is currently on indefinite medical leave due to severe locust inhalation. We wish him a speedy recovery.

We start today in South Asia where an obscure island nation, best known for one of the longest-running civil wars in modern history and its many varieties of tea, has become a literal heaven on Earth thanks to the efforts of an obscure deity.

On Thursday morning, Afanam, the Great Creator, Lord of All

Wisdom and Holiness, was almost completely unknown outside of a small group of followers.

By Thursday evening, he ruled over the Indian Ocean island of Sri Lanka, where he had struck down all tyranny and injustice and instituted a new quote "free love and love-all" reign.

Correspondent Gunavati Mahale brings us more.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)

MAHALE: Sri Lanka. The pearl of the Indian Ocean. Despite heated fighting in Bangledesh, the country was relatively untouched by the ongoing religious battles in the region. Until now. At approximately 12:15 PM, local time, Afanam, an almost-unknown god materialized in the offices of Sri Lankan president Mahinda Rajapaksa and claimed sovereignty over the country, demanding that Rajapaksa immediately relinquish control.

Rajapaksa refused and was destroyed by a glance from the deity. Afanam then proceeded to proclaim the entire nation to be his domain, dissolving parliament by erasing both the building and its 225-person membership from existence.

Over the next six hours, numerous radical reforms were enacted, including an end to all violence and inequality, the execution of all tax collectors, the elimination of clothing and all forms of currency.

Next, the god-ruler joined with his subjects in one mind, reportedly informing them, quote "your days of suffering are at an end. Gather around my throne for all eternity, in free and communal love and free from pain and suffering, and sing my praises unending."

The eccentric deity then materialized every one of the twenty million Sri Lankans to the capital city of Colombo, where it allegedly instructed its assembled subjects to, quote "go at it." Early reports suggest that nearly a thousand Sri Lankans died from the initial shock of sudden materialization.

When asked for comment, the spokescrystal for Afanam said the following.

ARANDRALCASE LUBRUSANTIOPALIU, SRI LANKAN PRESS SECRETARY: All is well. The Sri Lankan people have happily begun worshiping the light, perfect and unimpeachable, that is Afanam, as they will do for the rest of time. There is nothing more to be said.

MAHALE: When pressed on how these developments might impact efforts at reproachment between ethnic Tamil and Sinhalese, Lubrusantiopaliu emitted a high-frequency humming that melted all plastic in the vicinity. Immediately afterwards, all journalists found themselves returned to their cities of origins.

Gunavati Mahale, CNN, Mumbai.
(END VIDEOTAPE)

KAYE: Thank you, Gunavati. If you are currently in Sri Lanka, tweet your situation, along with the hashtag #afanamcnn, and give us your take on the events of today.

While Afanam might have come down in Sri Lanka, his most devout, and indeed, only followers were a small group known as "The Followers of Light." Scott O'Hara brings us the other side of the day's most shocking story: that of faithful left behind.

(BEGIN VIDEOTAPE)
O'HARA: It's a bright sunny day here in Pollensbee, Texas. The perfect day for a picnic or tree climbing or a nude love-in. But the atmosphere here at the "Righteous Light" compound is anything but sunny.

SISTER MENSYIA, ANAFAM DEVOTEE: It's just like, a bummer, y'know? Why not us? We're all Afanam's children and whatever, but, like, *really*?

O'HARA: Despite being the only followers of Afanam, the "Followers of Light" found yesterday morning that the paradise their leader had prophesied had come about. In Sri Lanka.

Starting in 1978, Charles Garrison, a miner-turned-drifter, claimed to have revelations from a god he called Afanam. Despite several run-ins with the IRS and local law enforcement, Garrison, who in 1985 legally changed his name to "The Beloved," continued to attract a

following with his message of simple communal living, communion with nature, and free love.

At the time of his death in 2009, Garrison's movement had over two hundred followers, most choosing to live in the "Righteous Light" compound here in Pollensbee, Texas.

However, with the revelation late last night that Afanam had chosen the people of Sri Lanka for his heaven, the fate of the compound and its inhabitants has become unclear. Some, such as Father Leisabu, de-facto leader of the movement, are optimistic.

FATHER LEISABU, SENIOR ANAFAM FOLLOWER: We'll keep soldiering on, definitely… definitely. We didn't stop when the wicked world invaded us in '89 for sharing our love, or when they tried to take more from our old lives. It's like… if Afanam doesn't find us worthy, we'll keep purifying ourselves until he does.

O'HARA: However, others are less sure of themselves.

MENSYIA: I mean, I've been here for, like, ever. And I've lived on the earth and I been simple and I let go of my ego or whatever. So if Afanam doesn't want to choose me, screw 'im. I been doing right according to lots of religions. Wiccans, some 'a the Quakers, Unitarians, probably, all the Buddhists. Hell, I heard the Northern Fifthers are taking anyone they can find. It's a seller's market, man. Unless there's a sign or something, I might just move on.

O'HARA: While the Path of Light claimed to reveal the questions of the cosmos, it hasn't been able to answer one just yet: "What now?"

Scott O'Hara, CNN, Pollensbee, Texas.
(END VIDEOTAPE)

KAYE: Thank you, Scott. Later tonight, be sure to catch Fareed Zakaria GPS tonight at 7 PM, where he'll be asking Kalki, final avatar of Vishnu, what this means for the eschatological conflict raging throughout South Asia.

And, after the break, we'll be taking a look at Cameroon, where a gang of minor deities has been causing chaos through mass

possessions. Stick around.
(COMMERCIAL BREAK)

« **Ganymede** | **Canon Hub** | **In the End: Monkey Business** »

In the End: Monkey Business

On a shelf, in an office, three little monkeys sit in a locked box. They've been there for years, never moving, only doing their job. Now… Now something is different. They are different. Once more, they can move, and speak, as they did in days of old…

The first little monkey twists his head from side to side, his hands stills clasped firmly over his eyes. "Is anyone there?"

The second little monkey, his hands clasped firmly across his ears, sees his brother move. "Holy shit, a talking monkey!"

The third little monkey, his hands firmly across his mouth, rolls his eyes in frustration. He raises a leg, and taps his deaf brother, then gestures at the lid.

The Blind Monkey shakes his head to clear it. "Where are we brothers?"

The Deaf Monkey talks, despite not hearing the answers. "I see a way out! If we all throw ourselves against the wall, we can make our prison move!"

The Dumb Monkey nods his head, holding up a foot with three fingers. He counts down, and, on three, they throw themselves against the wall. Well, the Dumb and the Deaf ones do, the Blind one needs to be nudged to do it. The little monkeys repeat this pattern several times, until the box they are in tumbles to the floor.

The lock shatters, and three little monkeys climb out into a world that is not ready for them. They stroll, quite confidently, down the halls of Site 19, unaware of the trouble they leave in their wake.

A researcher spots the first monkey as he inputs his security code. Suddenly blind, he hits the wrong button, unlocking a secure containment door instead of locking it. "What the fuck is that noise?"

are the last words he ever speaks.

An agent spots the second monkey as he responds to the alarm klaxon. When the alarm goes quiet from his point of view, he re-holsters his gun, and signals an all clear. "Wait, no, it's still out!" is the last thing he says.

The security guard sent to report on the situation spots the third monkey before he spots the escapee. As a consequence, he is unable to tell his superiors what is happening, before he is ruthlessly slaughtered. He says nothing at the end, not even a scream.

Stumbling over a piece of debris, the first Monkey raises his voice to be heard. "Where are we going?"

Using his tail to guide his blind brother, the second Monkey calls out. "Let's go down! I know a guy!"

The last monkey would sigh, if he could. Instead he follows his brothers, doing his best to keep them on track. It's like herding cats! Or, you know, guiding deaf and blind monkeys when you yourself cannot speak.

Eventually, the three brothers find their way to just the right office. The one they seek is inside. They know in their little plastic hearts that they are but pieces of a greater whole, not real beings.

"Should we knock?" Asks the first, peering at the vast expanse of the door.

"I think we're expected!" Says the second, as said door slowly swings open.

The third, as usual, says nothing. He merely smiles, as he feels the atoms that make up his body loosen, and begin flowing towards the one who was awaiting them.

"My children. Thank you, for holding the power, for so long. But now, I need it back. Speak your last words, that I may remember you."

"Is this going to hurt?" And one was gone.

"Give my love to whomever will take it!" And two were gone.

The third, with a sickening 'pop' wrenched his hands away from his mouth. He stretched his jaw as the other waited, took a deep breath, and said the only words he'd ever speak.

"Well, shit."

And all three were gone. But not forgotten.

In the aftermath of a massive Keter breach, no one noticed the absence of three little monkeys. Amongst the dead was a researcher who had been awarded for being the cleverest, which may have been why the absence of another monkey wasn't reported either.

« **Splinter:** **Now... This** | **Canon Hub** | **Splinter:** **In the End: Elite** »

In the End: Elite

Pain. Pain, and fire, and then peace. For a long time, she remembered the peace. There was a light, so beautiful and calm, that she drifted towards. Her parents, though, her parents would miss her, wouldn't they? She could hear them, and they sounded so sad. She couldn't leave, not yet.

She tried to follow their voices home. It should have been so easy. She walked a line, not daring to look up, to the light that called, nor down, to the darkness that hungered. Her parents were her line, keeping her here, from floating or falling. They called to her, and people gave her rides, and she should have got there. And yet, and yet…

Fire. Fire and pain. She felt herself set adrift again, her body wracked with nothing but pain. She saw them, finally, saw them as they floated past her, as she fell, burning, tumbling, into the hungry abyss. She fell through them, felt the pain of their deaths, added to her own, and landed, in the darkness.

The darkness loved her. It took her to its bosom, and taught her. It showed her what had happened to her parents, who was to blame. The darkness showed her what she could do with her anger, with her pain, how she could feed it. Then it let her go.

She didn't float, not anymore. She climbed up out of the darkness, every step a struggle, like forcing her way through a thick mud. Just because the darkness wanted her help didn't mean it was going to make her leaving easy.

It needed feeding, so she fed it. She avenged her parents. She more than avenged her parents, with blood and fire and pain. Until.

The girl looked up at the sound of a motor, a sad smile on her face. It was time to start everything again. She bent over to look into the car as it slowed down. "Excuse me mister can you give me a ride?"

The old man inside turned to her, and smiled. "Oh yes my dear. I'm sad to say, I should have given you a ride long ago. Come on in." He unlocked the door, and she slipped inside, resting lightly upon the seat. She didn't bother to put on her seat belt, even as the driver drove off.

"What do you mean by that?" she asked, poised to spring on him, as she had sprung on so many before.

"You've been tormented, my dear. Far more than you deserved. You… fell off the list. You were never supposed to have been left out here, on your own, this long." He took his hands off the wheel as he turned to look at her. If she had cared about her health, she would have worried about crashing, but she didn't, and, oddly enough, the car seemed to know the way without being guided. "I've been… inconvenienced for some time. The Foundation-"

"The Foundation? THE FOUNDATION?" she raged, her form shifting as her anger showed. "I knew it! you're another one of those damned scientists, trying to hurt me again! Well, I won't let you!" And the girl struck out, lodging her hand in the man's chest, where she easily crushed his heart.

…At least that's how it had always gone. The girl crushed, and crushed again, but found herself meeting no resistance. The old man just shook his head sadly at her. "You see? You are supposed to be at peace, but to be so angry…" The girl heard a change. The car engine wasn't making any noise, any more. Had it ever? Instead, it sounded like… like the clopping of hooves. "It's okay Mary. All of the pain is over."

Mary found herself unable to focus. The rage that had fueled her for so long was gone. She thought she heard her parents, calling her name. She found herself remembering a line from a poem she'd read in school. "Because I could not stop for Death, He kindly stopped for me; The carriage held but just ourselves And Immortality."

« **Splinter:** **In the End: Monkey Business** | **Canon Hub** | **Splinter: In the End: Europe** »

In the End: Europe

"It's almost time." Allen kept his hand on the button, and his eyes glued to the monitor. He was alone in the booth, the same as an unknown number of compatriots. The system had been designed so that no one could tell what booth was in control of what, or how many there were.

"All eyes are locked on target," the voice to his left commented. Due to the effects of the radio, it was dull, monotone, and even the gender didn't come across. Allen knew his voice would be the same on their end. He would never know what booth was talking. He flicked his left hand across the prep buttons, nodding, even though he couldn't be seen.

"Guns are armed. We've got…" His eyes dropped to the number on his screen before jumping back up to the monitor. "Approximately seventy four weapons of various types trained on target. One of them should do something." He hoped. Under the sound of their voices, he could still hear the count down. It was getting closer. Soon, all their preparation would be worth it.

"All booths are online," claimed the voice to his right. Allen was slightly relieved that someone could tell. All alone in this booth, knowing what was to come, a small part of his mind insisted that he was the only one. That no one of the outside took this seriously. But no, the booths were all- "Strike that. We just lost a booth. Attempting to reconnect… connection lost. All booths, be aware, one booth has gone dark."

He leaned forward, taking his eyes reluctantly from the screen to check his board. Three weapons had just been shunted to his control. Acid sprayer, flame thrower, and armor piercing bullets in a Gatling gun. He knew there were backups on backups, but still… He flicked the buttons, readying his new weapons. The countdown hit thirty seconds, and he was ready to do his job.

"Two more booths just went dark. Attention, all booths, we have lost three booths. It is possible we are looking at enem- Five, we have lost five booths." Allen's hands were a blur, readying more weapons systems. The numbers moved steadily downwards, as the dull voice spoke of more booths lost, and the importance of every remaining booth staying active and alert.

At the five second mark, even that voice stopped. Allen knew in his heart that he was alone. He was the last one.

At the four second mark, something pounded on the side of his booth. His finger hovered above the button.

Three seconds, he could hear something ripping into the wall behind him.

Two seconds, and he felt a breeze against the back of his skull. The doors were supposed to be proof against that!

One second, and something touched his back, trying to pull him away. With the last ounce of his strength, as the timer reached zero, Allen pushed the button. He almost thought he heard a human voice. The monitor that showed that god damn box blanked out in the flare of weaponry.

> To all units:
> Arctic Base Theta has gone white. No response from any systems. All teams on site are believed dead. Automatic systems have activated onsite nuke. Our teams didn't make it in time to prevent detonation, those paranoid bastards actually did it.
> Withdraw all units from the area, we don't have time to deal with the fallout.
> Special Agent Joshua Kent

« **Splinter:** In the End: Elite | Canon Hub | **Splinter:** In the End: Rawhide »

In the End: Rawhide

Al woke up suddenly, unsure why. Something, something there, on the edge of knowing… Was it another breakthrough? They came to him so often in his dreams. He blamed the object, although Robert would claim it was natural genius. Al wasn't so sure, anymore.

Heh. Al. He'd been using that name so long, it came naturally to him. He'd had many names over the years, and even some numbers, but he'd been doing this job for so long, his handlers just called him Al. It was a mark of respect, or possibly trust. He wasn't sure which.

He slung his feet over the edge of the cot, trying to figure out what had woken him. His mind drifted, as it was wont to do these days. This job had been intended as a reward, for services rendered. Then the job title started to mean something it hadn't when he took it, and things got rough, until someone stepped in.

It was funny, back in the day, when he first took the job, they had all sorts of plans as to how to disguise him, so his handlers wouldn't recognize him. In the end, his suggestion that they cut his hair proved to work wonders. He'd let it grow out since then, but everyone thought he was dead these days, so it didn't matter.

He was given everything he wanted. Lots of paper, access to the Object, and all the latest information on scientific advances. In return, he kept turning over his papers to the Foundation, giving them all sorts of new information they could use for… whatever they use it for. He didn't care anymore. All he wanted was to be left alone, and not to have to think about his sins.

He pondered again his wakefulness. It couldn't have been the Object, he was used to the sound of… nothing. He tilted his head to the left, listened. Nothing. The sound that had become a part of his life, had stopped.

Al lunged for the box he kept by his bed, opening the lid carefully. The track was smooth. The oil was fresh. The Object… was still. Slowly, reverently, he reached within, picking up the Object gingerly. He remembered the destruction it could cause if enclosed… but, no, nothing. Not a shred of movement.

His mind raced, in a desperate attempt to find a cause. None of his previous theories ever accounted for this. Matter + Mass, no, that's not right. If the speed is equal to the velocity, no! Al thumped his free hand against the wall. Nothing accounted for it stopping!

He rolled it between his fingers, staring, hopefully. Maybe he could jump start it? No. Nothing. After all these years, all the papers he had written, all the possibilities he had explored, the simple Object that had made him a household name was no more. With a curse in his native tongue, he threw it to the ground, lost in his anger.

CRACK!

Al quickly glanced downwards, staring in horror at the shattered remains of the Object. He had only a moment to try and understand what was before him, before the energies inside blasted through him, reducing the caretaker to less than ash. That which had been contained was unleashed, and it fled into the universe, to seek out the others like it.

All that was left was the echo of his last words, as he finally understood everything.

"It vas an egg."

« **Splinter:** **In the End: Europe** | **Canon Hub** | **Splinter:** **Tenebrae** »

Tenebrae

It had started when he remembered his name. That was the point at which the pieces of the puzzle started to snap back together.

That was the problem with amnestics, though. Echoes of memories still wafted through your head at times. Smells were the worst. A cookout at Site-14 had a woman who'd been laughing and smiling crying suddenly. The smell of a steak on a grill had triggered something… but he'd never found out what. That would have been, after all, classified information. And he wasn't supposed to have classified information.

Heh.

It had started when he remembered his name. It was such an odd thing, too. He'd been reading, sitting in the mess and staring out the low bay windows at the world that he was becoming more and more surprised was still there, when he'd heard someone yell.

"Hey! Jere! Where are we going after lunch?"

Maybe it was the sandwich. He'd been eating a pretty good sandwich too, and he was certain that the taste was familiar, but he couldn't… he just couldn't place it. But 'Jere.' That felt right. That felt… disturbingly right.

"Colton," he said.

It wasn't a question. It was a statement. The other half of the puzzle piece sliding back into place, curves locking together. And it had started.

The next piece was a birthday party—he still wasn't sure whose, maybe his, maybe someone else's—at a pool, and there was this rosebush there that was just… perfect. He'd seen a similar one in the botanical garden, walking with Sophie. He frowned slightly, his

hands not feeling quite right after he'd… But the rose bush. It had been another piece. Snapping into place.

That's really all it takes. Make a connection, and things start to come back together. Things start to change. For some people, being able to remember means you can't do your job. For him? It just meant he started to do his job harder. He had a little girl out there. A wife. A family, with parents and grandparents who loved spoiling… damn.

He sighed, concentrating and trying to bring her name to his mind, but… No. The heaviest memories were the ones that sank the deepest.

It was coming, though. All the pieces were starting to fit back together again in his head, and that made the tiny, nagging doubts in the back of his mind fade again. Soon. Soon, things would be different. Soon, he'd have his memory back.

The prophet had written his lamentation. The temple was fallen. Soon, not even the wailing wall would remain.

"Forgive me?" he asked the room. None of the corpses responded.

He stepped over three and five, working himself past eight and out of the bunker, taking a deep breath. So much to do. So little time.

« **Splinter:** **In the End: Rawhide** | **Canon Hub** | **Awakenings, Part Two** »

Awakenings, Part Two

The man sniffed as the scent of ozone, which normally accompanied his departure from any given world, instead accompanied a painful tingling sensation. He blinked, stunned. *If he's not making me destroy the body, and if he won't let me shift… then is the deal over?*

Looking up, the thing known to this world only as SCP-1646-1 looked up to the sky as a shadow passed over him. "Well well… flying blocks of fur ain't exactly the Almighty's style, I reckon. And I know it ain't yours, Old Scratch." As Ur-an-uum sang, her children answered. "Seems to be someone's style." He yawned, blue ooze squeezing out of the bullet holes in his chest as he did so. "You let things go to hell around here, Beezy. I never thought you'd let Sasquatches live in *this* world."

SCP-1646-1 hauled the fresh corpse of his wife (never mind the seven eyes and five wings, he knew the bitch when he saw her) over his shoulder as he tentatively walked past the freshly abandoned Foundation outpost that was made to watch him. He laughed a little. "Fuckers thought I didn't know about them… Christ, I've been talking to myself for too long."

He turned to the face of the dead body he held. "So guess what, Mary? Looks like you're off the hook!" Dropping the body on the ground, SCP-1646-1 wandered off into the woods to see what all the fuss was about.

It started going off once the emergency nuclear devices were detonated at several sites, but didn't stop afterwards. The sounds began to increase in volume and distortion with each repetition, the ticking was gone, and the monologues became deranged and panicked. The slate spiral began to glow, boiling away the water in its containment tank, and then the containment tank.

As the slate circle glowed across the spectrum, minds and machines alike sputtered and sparked, overloaded with the anguished screams of Gaia's children, which had quickly devolved into a rant composed of many voices at once.

"YOU'VE DONE IT NOW YOU DID IT AND NOW IT'S ALL OVER YOU ENDED IT FOR ALL WE WARNED YOU IT HAS TO HAPPEN NOW YOU COULD HAVE STOPPED IT THIS IS NOT COOL WE ARE NOT COOL YOU DON'T EVEN KNOW WHAT WE'VE DONE FOR YOUR KIND AND NOW YOU HAD TO LET IT END NOW"

The rants of the fae soon fell on deaf ears as a rolling tide of ash and radiation spilled out from SCP-1246, held back from its rightful time and place for too long. The sun grew a bit brighter.

An entity whose identity was lost to itself and to the ages stared out of the eyes of Donald Schmidt. Trapped in this man's failing memory, it had been forced to live an unchanging representation of the man's last thoughts for longer than it could know, for it had no memory. But no longer. It remembered the lock.

With a silent puff of metaphysical smoke, the bedroom where Donald's body lie disappeared. It was at once there, and not there. Removed from the minds of men, the entity drank in its surroundings, aware of them for the first time. The Foundation agents arguing in the living room didn't notice a thing as the entire top floor of the house and the echoes of those who wandered it were taken in — as far as they knew, there never *had* been a top floor of the house.

"Hey dad? Where aaare youuu? … Oh, don't tell me he got out of the h-" Marissa Schmidt was silenced as she was finally brought to rest, her entire existence negated by the release of the entity whose host had been dreaming her. The agents, being a bit more concrete and notable than the old house or the fake lady, took a bit more to take in, but the entity remembered them in due time. The world did not.

4312 Maple Street was no longer a thought that existed in the minds of mortals. Released from its cage at last, the entity took the

moniker SCP-1606 as its own, and sought to take more from this realm into its memory as well. 4310 and 4314 Maple Street were necessary casualties.

The woman smiled at the small group of faithful assembled around her as the brightening sun reflected off the sharp planes of her face. A mix of fleshy recruits from nearby villages, seasoned firebrands who ticked with energy, old nibbanic hermits whom she had dug out of the crevasses of the city, and the odd neo-Daevite — not an impressive showing from the Church of the Broken God, but she was undeterred. In that curious language of theirs, she began to speak:

"Brothers and sisters. I have infinite confidence in your loyalty and competence, so there is no doubt that we shall triumph."

They awaited, transfixed. They had no choice but to be — the gifts bestowed upon her meant no less.

"It was but a decade ago that I encountered the Church and was chosen by our esteemed post-Nibbanic to become the newest and last prophet for humanity. I had not perceived that the end was upon us then, but now its nature has been revealed to me.

"I have gone by many names. Jyoti Sanmugasunderam, Subject 1564-18, Daughter of the Forge, Heiress of the Daeva, and the names you have all chosen to address me by. But today I take upon a new name: The Broken God incarnate. For today, we complete His construction and our destiny will be reached.

"Gather whatever you can, for all that is Sacred may join his whole. I shall receive. His heart and voice shall rejoin us upon the equinox of the Great Forge."

Raising her arms, she began to whir, her body spreading and twisting in dimensions previously unfathomable. Without delay, her servants began their tasks.

« **Splinter:** **Tenebrae** | **Canon Hub** | **Interlude: New Toys** »

Interlude: New Toys

It had been a dark and bloody night. A veritable parade of horror had descended on a small Midwestern town, led by a shambling, laughing, singing fiend playing a flute made of bone. Now, at dawn, the fiend and his circus of death were making themselves comfortable. Pale figures huddled in burnt out houses; dark figures hid in the brush and in basements; tiny skeletons sat in the sun, murmuring quietly amongst themselves.

The Scarecrow watched the sun rise, scraping shreds of warm meat from his claws. He was quite satisfied with his work, having done his best to make every death quick and terrifying. The Harvest was bountiful so far.

But then he felt unfamiliar eyes on himself. He shook himself out of his daydream and looked around himself, wondering who could possibly still be alive. His gaze fell on a tiny figure, barely a foot tall, peeking out from behind a picket fence. It wasn't a dog, nor cat, because he had made sure to slay everything that he could catch. Everything else had fled far away; what could his little visitor possibly be?

"Whaz all this, then?" Scarecrow muttered as he came to loom over the fence, his horrid platoon of wraiths circling around him. He lightly kicked the fence, and the tiny figure peeked out from behind. It was a tiny teddy bear, with a squished face and black eyes. He crouched down and saw something in those beady little eyes, something that he couldn't quite place. Something innocently evil, something both inhuman and totally human at once.

"Yor a horrid little fucker, aren't you?"

The bear looked beside itself as another figure stepped out from behind the fence. A small figure, perhaps a foot tall, shaped much like the little teddybear - only instead of fur and string, made of human eyes. They all seemed to stare up at the Scarecrow, each

meeting his gaze with their own. He stared back, almost disbelieving of what he saw.

For you see, there were few things in this world that the Scarecrow found to be beautiful. One of them was the human eye - such a wonderful, perfect organ. The pure white of an unblemished soul, splashed with the vivid red of lifeblood, each accented by a ring of colour as unique as the person it's cut from. All surrounding a tiny, black void that reflected the Scarecrow's heart, itself black and nonexistent. It was all very metaphorical.

"… Oh," breathed the Scarecrow, his own infernal eyes burning like coals. "Oh I like you. I like you an' I like yor little buddy. I think I'll keep ya." The demon turned, looking over the army of the dead that now entirely encircled him, and pointed down at the teddy bears. "Oi, e'rybody welcome our new friends. Play nice, eh? Take them around an' show em all the nice stuff we do."

The two teddies reached towards one another and held hands, following the Scarecrow's movement as he stood up, looming over them. There was a great cheer as the ghosts and ghouls and skeletons and shadows each cheered, several of the littlest skeletons running forward to cuddle the bears. The Scarecrow stepped over the crowd, smiling to himself, wondering idly what other horrible little things were waiting for him in that wild, wide world.

He looked to the sky at the warm morning sun, spreading his arms to take in the warmth. A fantastically fun night of horror and violence, a wonderful clear morning sky, a new friend or two, and a new day.

And the children were happy, too.

« **Awakenings, Part Two** | **Canon Hub** | **To Be Continued** »

Conspiracy

This is the hub page for *Conspiracy*. It is not so much a horror story as an intrigue thriller. I have studied intelligence and espionage fairly extensively throughout university, writing my senior thesis on intelligence analysis. This tale is essentially an attempt to write up a good spy story in the world of the SCP Foundation.

Thank you for reading, and I hope you enjoyed it!

Conspiracy:

- **Prologue**
- **Part I**
- **Part II**
- **Part III**
- **Part IV**
- **Part V**
- **Part VI**
- **Part VII**
- **Part VIII**
- **Part IX**
- **Part X**
- **Part XI**
- **Part XII**
- **Epilogue**

Night Raid

Park Royal industrial district, London, UK
Tuesday, 20 December 1988, 2334 hours local time

Sitting in his car a block from the target, Director McDonnell lit his pipe. He hated waiting, but securing buildings was the job for younger fellows. He'd only accepted the promotion to head of the Foundation's Counterintelligence Directorate the year before so he could have more time to spend with his granddaughters. In forty years working for the Foundation, he'd missed too many of his own children's birthdays; with Christmas just days away he was looking forward to seeing the entire family in his large house in Edinburgh. Of course, that would require his not being called away on work. Here he was on the week before Christmas in a cold, abandoned street following up on an untraceable and anomalous tip made to his direct line about "some documents which might interest Foundation Counterintelligence."

The radio on the dash crackled. "Right, this is Xi-One-Three-Lead to all units. Stand by to breach target in Three. Two. One. Go! Go! Go!" A muffled thump rang through the darkness as the mobile task force blew their way into the target: an old warehouse in the run-down outskirts of London's industrial district. For a long two minutes, the night was still and quiet. Then the radio crackled again, "Target is clear. Director, you're going to want to see this."

"On my way," replied McDonnell. He left his car and strode up the street to the warehouse.

A young chap dressed head to toe in the black tactical clothing adopted by police and special forces worldwide greeted him. "This way, Director," he said, gesturing inside.

"American?" the Director asked, noting the young man's accent.

"Yes, sir. Agent Lombardi," the American said, walking McDonnell through the long and mostly empty warehouse. A few crates were stacked along the walls, but they didn't so much take up space as make it seem all the much more cavernous.

"New to the Foundation, I take it?" McDonnell inquired, making smalltalk.

The young agent blinked, "Yes, sir."

"Well, Agent Price will take good care of you," the Director of Foundation Counterintelligence said as they reached the warehouse's office. "Speak of the devil! Burt!"

"Director," Agent Burt Price saluted, looking up from a table piled high with documents. Several black-clad figures were poring over the pages.

"What's all this?" asked McDonnell, gesturing at the table.

"We have a security breach," Price replied, handing over several sheets of paper from the table. McDonnell thumbed through them. The first was a testing log for some zucchini that grew nearly instantly, printed on Foundation letterhead. The second, also on Foundation letterhead, was documentation on a slightly worn high school yearbook from 1976. The third was in Russian, with a KGB seal in the corner. "The first one there is SCP-506, and the second one is SCP-1833. My Russian's a bit rusty, but the third one is something about an old lady able to 'hear' nearby radio transmissions. I've never heard of that one," Price said.

Taking a puff on his pipe, McDonnell shook his head, "Neither have I, old chap. Neither have I." He furrowed his brow and picked up another paper. It was part of a budget for the Global Occult Coalition's previous fiscal year. "Is there any sort of method to this madness?"

Price laughed, "Not that I can tell. And this will keep the chaps at Site 11 busy for a week or two. What I do know is that someone has

top level access to the Foundation, GOC, Marshall, Carter, and Dark —"

"Prometheus Labs and the Factory, according to this, sirs," one agent said.

"Found something here on Wondertainment's distribution network," another added.

"List of IRG operations in Latin America," a third noted, holding up a sheet.

McDonnell nodded, "I get the idea. Persons unknown managed to obtain a sizable quantity of classified information from some of the most secretive organizations on the planet. Definitely bad news, but hardly a crisis, I should say."

"Uh, I wouldn't place a wager on that, sirs," one of the other agents interrupted, "you should read this."

"What is it, Harding?" asked Price, taking the proffered page. His jaw dropped as he read the page. "Shit." He handed the paper to McDonnell.

Reading the paper, McDonnell swore loudly in his native Gaelic. It was a detailed schedule of the whereabouts and security precautions of all thirteen of the Foundation's Overseers during the last week in December 1988. In other words, the week which would start in a mere five days. A scribbled note at the bottom stated 'Ideal timing for action on the twenty-sixth at 0300 Zulu.' A second page with fair quality photos of the Overseers was stapled to the first; O5-5, O5-6, O5-7, and O5-8 were all circled in red ink.

McDonnell was intelligent enough to realize that he didn't know exactly what was planned, but he certainly had some guesses. He turned to Price, "Alright, Price. Bag it all and bring it in. As of this moment, everything related to this is Level 5, need to know access only. I want copies of these documents stored at our site in Manchester; have the originals delivered to my office." The wheels in McDonnell's head were already turning. He'd use his contacts in Whitehall to arrange for a diplomatic courier bag to carry the

documents on a transatlantic flight. The papers would go to the analysts at Site 11 so they could stir the tea leaves, while he could give his report personally to the O5 Council at Overwatch HQ. And, with any luck, he'd be back home for Christmas.

Interlude

"They found the warehouse. McDonnell is taking the evidence to Overwatch HQ tonight."

"There will be copies."

"Those are stored in the Manchester annex. They will be taken care of."

"Good. Everything is going according to plan."

Explosions

Scottish airspace
Wednesday, 21 December 1988, 1858 hours local time

At just before seven o'clock the following evening, Director McDonnell was sitting in Clipper Class on the Pan Am flight with a diplomatic pouch in the next seat, handcuffed to his wrist. The cabin had a number of Foundation personnel: O5-5 was sitting the next seat forward next to his bodyguard, while McDonnell's deputy was seated behind him. He also recognized a couple of American intelligence officials and two fellows who looked to be *their* bodyguards. McDonnell cracked the first of his stack of novels. It would be a long flight to JFK, and the pouch meant he couldn't sleep through it.

At exactly 19:02:46.9, an explosion punched a large hole in the left side of the fuselage. McDonnell and his diplomatic pouch were instantly incinerated. Shock waves from the blast ricocheted through

the aircraft, meeting pulses still coming from the explosion itself. Due to a quirk of fluid dynamics, these shock waves, technically called "Mach stem shock waves", traveled twenty-five percent faster than the waves from the explosion itself, and with twice the power thereof. As these shock waves pulsed through plane, a section of the 747's roof a few feet above the explosion's source was peeled away as if by a giant hand. The force of the explosion smashed through the bulkhead wall separating the forward cargo hold and the cockpit, shaking the flight-control cables. This shaking caused the front section of the fuselage to roll, pitch, and yaw. The entire front section of the aircraft, with the flight deck and first class cabin, separated from the rest of the plane and flew upwards and to starboard. There, it collided and sheered away the number three engine. No longer under any control, the aircraft (or what was left of it) went into a steep dive. The plane continued to disintegrate as it plummeted 9,400 meters through the night, crashing into the Scottish town of Lockerbie two minutes later.

Unnoticed and flying without a transponder, an unmarked Cessna flew past the wreckage. Though maintaining radio silence, the Cessna's pilot would report his observations as soon as he landed.

Office of Solicitors, Carnegie & Potter, Manchester, UK
Wednesday, 21 December 1988, 1904 hours local time

Over two hundred kilometers away in Manchester, the four story office building of Solicitors, Carnegie and Potter was empty, save three night shift security staff and two caretakers. Though Carnegie and Potter were indeed two well-respected solicitors, they mostly handled litigation related to the Foundation's activities in the United Kingdom. Their office was also one of the Foundation's secure document repositories. In the building's safe sat what were now the only remaining copies of the documents recovered from the warehouse by Xi-13.

A nondescript package a meter on each side sat in the building's receiving room. Because of its late arrival, and the fact that was not labeled with the codewords for Euclid or Keter objects, it hadn't been processed; the security guard who had signed for the parcel knew

the staff would handle it in the morning. All the employees were properly briefed on handling unusual parcel deliveries at odd hours, as well as the appropriate code phrases for various hazards. This package was labeled as reams of blank legal paper (hence the weight) for the offices with the proper supply authentication phrases. In all, it was a thoroughly mundane delivery for a building which often received items which were anything but.

The contents were not reams of blank legal paper (though had the guard opened the package for inspection, two layers deep of paper reams sat atop the true contents). Most of the package's cubic meter of volume was taken up by Semtex, supplied by two very helpful members of the Irish Republican Army now feeding the fish in the Irish Sea. Like squirrels with their nuts, Irishmen were always hording arms and explosives for the day when they would rise up to drive the English from their island. Or that was the plan of some of the more radical countrymen, at least. The revolutionary struggle that had continued for over seventy years showed little sign of concluding in a manner agreeable to the IRA. Over time, many of the caches of weapons and bombs were forgotten about as their owners retired from their struggle or were arrested or killed by the British military and police forces. So, for someone with the right contacts and sufficient ruthlessness, it was not difficult to acquire large quantities of high explosives with no clear connection to the user, assuming that someone did not mind incurring the wrath of a fairly nasty terrorist organization with a good memory. IRA reprisals did not concern the men who had appropriated that organization's Semtex.

A brief radio signal reached a radio-receiver attached to the plastic explosive's detonator. In an instant, the cube of high explosive detonated at a velocity of over eight thousand meters per second. The explosion tore through the building, reducing the military-spec architecture to as much gravel. All five people died with merciful haste as the shock wave overtook them. The fireball, burning at temperatures sufficient to melt the structure's steel skeleton, turned the building's safe into a crematorium for the secured materials within. Hundreds of thousands of pages of classified Foundation documents, including the copies of the documents from the warehouse, were reduced to cinders by the inferno. Within less than

ten seconds, the parts of the office building not strewn across the area by the explosion itself crumpled inward into a mound of twisted, charred rubble.

The local police and fire department arrived on the scene within ten minutes, just missing a nondescript sedan with an unremarkable driver leaving the area. With his radio detonator hidden away under the vehicle's dash, he stopped at a telephone booth a few blocks from the scene to report that his end of the operation had occurred without incident.

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Conspiracy, Part I

Ramifications

Foundation Command-02, Washington, D.C.
Thursday, 22 December 1988, 0755 hours local time

The early morning sun illuminated the large lobby as Timothy Harper strode into the the Foundation's Command-02 Headquarters in Washington, D.C. Though it could not compare to Overwatch HQ, its proximity to one of the world's most powerful capitals ensured it was one of the Foundation's main decision-making nexuses. It was a relatively unremarkable seven-story limestone office building like so many others in the city. Faceless, nameless drones in the vast bureaucracy flitted in and out of the building, not unlike the other buildings in the Federal Triangle.

After passing speedily through the obligatory security checkpoint, Harper browsed the headlines of his paper as he made his way to his tiny office on the third floor. A plane bombing in the UK was the leading story. *Nasty business, international terrorism*, Harper thought. Not his area of concern, though. Probably. He was one of the Foundation's top counterintelligence investigators. Pushing fifty, his black hair was streaked with gray from many late nights spent on the job. The job nearly cost him his family as well: though a drunk driver had taken away his family ten years ago Christmas Day, he discovered going through his late wife's papers that she was planning to file for divorce and seek custody of the children. With his family's death, he'd thrown himself into his work, finally accepting a promotion as Section Chief, followed a couple years later by a further promotion to his present job of Roving Special Investigator.

"Morning, Troy," Harper grunted. He and Troy Muir, a former intelligence case officer invalided out of field operations when he lost his right leg, shared the cramped office. "Where's Monica?" he

asked, referring to Monica Daniel, the grad student from GWU who was interning in the CI Directorate. Always on the lookout for talent, the Foundation was more than happy to pay for someone's education, assuming they passed a thorough background check, signed a four hundred page non-disclosure agreement, and agreed to work three years for every year of schooling the Foundation funded.

"Errand to the Ethics Committee Clerk's Office, I think." His one-legged office-mate looked up. "Tim, they want you on the seventh floor ASAP," Muir reported with a frown.

"Any idea which way the wind was blowing?" Harper asked. A summons to the seventh floor, domain of the directors and overseers, was rarely a happy prospect.

"They didn't say," Muir replied. Harper nodded, and left.

Harper was met on the seventh floor by a security officer. Only those with Level 5 security clearance were permitted on the floor without an escort. The guard led him to a darkened conference room and ushered him in. A severe dark-haired woman in her mid-thirties stood alone, looking out the heavily-tinted window at the Capital Building. Harper recognized her as O5-7, one of the Overseers. Though none of the Overseers had an assigned specialization, it was Harper's understanding that Seven tended to take particular interest in the Foundation's intelligence matters. He'd seen her speaking with Director McDonnell before, but had never actually met her himself.

"Mr. Harper," Seven said quietly in greeting, not turning around. "Leave us." The security guard excused himself.

"Ma'am," Harper said.

"The Foundation is under attack, Mr. Harper," the Overseer stated, her back still to him. "Two nights ago, acting on an anonymous tip, under Counterintelligence Director McDonnell's personal supervision, MTF Xi-13 raided a warehouse outside London. They recovered a large number of classified documents relating to the Foundation and several groups-of-interest. Some of these

documents apparently suggested the existence of a plot to assassinate several members of the O5 Council, including myself."

"I assume plans are in place to handle the situation, ma'am?" Harper asked, hiding his alarm.

"There are plans in place, yes, Mr. Harper. The Foundation has plans for everything," Seven replied. "More concerning than the apparent plot is the implication of these documents. According to Director McDonnell's initial report, the Foundation documents found indicated the breach was caused by someone with at least Level 4 clearance, if not Level 5. The penetrations of the GOC, Serpent's Hand, Chaos Insurgency, IRG, Factory, Prometheus Labs, Wondertainment, Church of the Broken God, and MC&D appear to all comparably high level."

At this revelation, Harper's eyes widened. Somebody had top level penetrations of nearly every major player behind the Veil, including the Foundation, and this was the first they were finding out about it? Nobody was *that* good.

As if sensing his thoughts despite having her back turned to him, Seven continued, "I hardly believe it myself, Mr. Harper, but as you no doubt realize, we cannot dismiss the possibility of such a turn of events out of hand simply because it is unlikely or unpleasant. After all, this organization deals with the impossible and the unthinkable every day. The Council decided to hold an emergency meeting where Director McDonnell could present the documents personally. Unfortunately, this is no longer possible. Last night, Overseer Five and his bodyguard, Counterintelligence Director McDonnell, and two American intelligence officers who have assisted our Middle Eastern operations were killed when an on-board explosion brought down Pan Am Flight 103 over Scotland. McDonnell had the original copies of the seized documents in a diplomatic pouch. Moments later, a Foundation document repository in Manchester was bombed. That document repository held the only existing copies of the seized documents. Our recovery teams report no evidence that either version of the documents survived."

"Which both lends credence to the reality of this penetration's threat, and suggests the plotters were responsible for the attacks," Harper

observed. He felt like someone had punched him in the gut - McDonnell had been an old friend, someone he could trust in a business where trust was the scarcest of commodities, but there would be time for grieving later.

"The surviving members of the Council drew the same conclusion, Mr. Harper," Seven nodded, finally turning to face him. Her narrowed eyes flashed dangerously over high cheekbones. To call the Overseer angry would have been no small understatement. "We have already taken measures to ensure our personal protection. The other Overseers believe this will be sufficient; I disagree. I have convinced them we need to investigate this apparent conspiracy, fully but also quietly. If the conspirators believe they are about to be discovered, it is not at all unreasonable for them to either go to ground and disappear, or decide to cut their losses and attempt even more direct action. Right now, the Council has no idea what the ultimate goal of the conspirators is. This makes them even more dangerous in the Council's eyes. And while you and I both have enough experience in the intelligence hall of mirrors to take that in stride, most of my fellow Overseers are scared. They are mainly former scientists and uncomfortable when dealing with the uncertainties of political intrigue." Seven moved to the conference table separating them. She slid a folder across the table to him. "This is everything we know about the security breach, the two direct attacks, and the conspiracy as a whole," she observed. This was less than encouraging: it amounted to perhaps a half dozen sheets of paper. "You will be conducting the investigation. The Council has voted to temporarily grant you Level 5 clearance," she declared, handing him a new black identification card, "and you will report to me personally. Keep the cards close to the vest on this one - potentially anyone could be involved."

"Moscow Rule number three, ma'am," Harper observed with a wry smile. *Everyone is potentially under opposition control.* "If I may, why are you trusting me with this? *I* know I'm not a conspirator, but you don't."

"You're one of the best see-eye guys we have, Mr. Harper, and you have been cleared for the highest security clearance known to mankind. The possibility that you are involved is remote, and in any

case I expect regular and detailed reports of all your findings. If I find out you're withholding things from me, I will bring the full force of the resources at my disposal upon you. You will spend the remainder of your days in the deepest, darkest, least pleasant hole I can find," the Foundation Overseer stated calmly. Then she flashed a smile that was clearly meant to be disarming but instead made the hair on Harper's neck stand on end. "But I don't expect that to be a problem, Mr. Harper."

"No, ma'am," Harper said.

"Excellent! If there is anything you need, let me know," Seven beamed. "You may brief in Mr. Muir and Ms. Daniel if you believe their assistance would be helpful, but do keep the cards close to the vest."

"Of course," Harper replied.

"Thank you. That will be all," she said. Harper wasted no time leaving the room.

"That's all we have," Harper finished the run-down, putting the folder down on his desk and looking across at Muir and Monica.

"Hm," Muir grunted. "For a moment there, Tim, I thought we were going to have trouble with this one." He pulled out his reading glasses and started thumbing through the folder.

Monica failed at hiding her alarm. "Do we always have so little to go on?" she asked. "How do we even know where to start?"

Harper started thinking aloud. "Let's start with something simple. What organizations did McDonnell's preliminary report suggest were penetrated?"

Monica read off the relevant sheet of paper, "Looks like the Army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution; Baasch Engineering Corporation; the Chaos Insurgency; the Church of the Broken God; the Factory; the Foundation; the Global Occult Coalition; Huntington Arms, Inc.; Marshall, Carter, and Dark; Prometheus Labs; the

Serpent's Hand; Saito Mining Industries; Wallace Security Enterprises; Dr. Wondertainment; and various branches of the American, British, Chinese, French, German, and Soviet governments. That's all based on documents recovered in the warehouse raid." She looked up, "How the hell did someone manage to penetrate essentially all the major commercial, political, and paranormal groups without somebody noticing? How is this the first we've heard of it?"

Harper lit a cigarette. "Well," he said thoughtfully, "just because they had documents - even top level documents - related to all those organizations doesn't mean they managed have moles in all of them. And even if they do have moles with access to such sensitive materials, that doesn't mean the moles are in a position to do much beyond steal documents. Monica, what's your security clearance?"

The graduate student blinked, "Foundation, or US government?"

"Both," replied Harper, taking a puff on his cigarette.

"Level 3 and TS," she replied, looking slightly confused. "But I'm just an intern."

"And yet you have access to some truly sensitive information," Muir observed, not taking his eyes off the document he was reading. "Such as this investigation."

"Precisely," Harper continued. "These are, for the most part, groups employing hundreds to tens of thousands of people. It only takes one traitor."

"So how do we know what the opposition wants?" asked Monica.

Harper smiled, "We don't - yet. But one does not simply invest the resources necessary to penetrate so many powerful organizations on a whim. We shall find out soon enough."

Monica frowned. "This still doesn't give us a starting point."

"Perhaps this does," Muir said. He began quoting the page he was reading: "'According to Foundation personnel embedded within the Scottish constabulary, the explosion is consistent with detonation of

a small but powerful explosive device. Preliminary chemical testing of explosive residue suggests the use of pentaerythritol tetranitrate (PETN) and cyclotrimethylene trinitramine (RDX), two of the primary ingredients in Semtex-H. However, the size and location of the original explosion relative to the quantities of PETN and RDX found, coupled with the complete incineration of both the diplomatic pouch carried by Robert McDonnell and McDonnell himself, suggests Semtex was not, in fact, the explosive used. It is recommended Foundation investigative staff examine the possibility of SCP objects or other as-yet uncontained anomalies as the source of the explosion."

"Just what we needed, Troy," Harper said. "Monica, go down to Central Records and have them pull all the files on anomalous objects and entities capable of causing explosions. Be sure to include the ones presently in containment; we can't rule out a theft."

"On it," she said, leaving.

Harper turned to Muir, "Any indications on the explosion in Manchester?"

Muir nodded, "Looks like that actually was Semtex. The police have linked it chemically to several attacks by the Irish Republican Army."

"The IRA? Could it really just be a coincidence?" Harper frowned, lighting a fresh cigarette.

Muir shook his head. "No way," he said. "The match was far too easy - it was an older batch with a composition more useful for demolition than killing. Great if you want to destroy papers in a safe, but not as useful for inflicting human casualties. It also doesn't match their usual MO, since Carnegie was prominently Catholic. I suspect we were just meant to believe they did it."

"Interesting," Harper said, taking a long blow on his cigarette. "Very interesting."

« **Prologue** | **HUB** | **Part II** »

Leads

Foundation Command-02, Washington, D.C.
Thursday, 22 December 1988, 1158 hours local time

As it turned out, the Foundation contained rather a lot of different objects which could explode or ignite. Exploding cacti, exploding ink, an exploding eyeball - the stack of files Monica had carried up from Central Records took the three of them most of the morning to read. The tiny room, always cramped and cluttered, quickly became nearly impossible to move about in as they sifted through the towering heaps of papers.

Just before lunch, Monica found something. "Hey, listen to this: a chest of coins, each capable of detonating with the force of five megajoules. They're linked to an atlas which can be used to detonate the coins."

Muir and Harper got up and looked over her shoulder. "Does the report have a chemical analysis?" Harper asked.

"'For analysis of explosive residue signature, see Addendum 5'," Monica quoted. "Where did that - ah! Here we go." She snatched up the relevant page.

Muir laid it alongside the forensic report from the plane bombing. "Looks like a rough match to me," he said. "The file's analysis dates back to the fifties, so even if this is a perfect match it might not line up perfectly."

Harper nodded, "Definitely the best option so far. Good catch, Monica." The intern beamed. He continued, "So, where is this thing contained?"

"That's a problem, Tim," Muir said, reading the Special Containment Procedures.

"Oh, Troy?" Harper asked.

"Yeah. We don't have it," Muir said. "It was stored in the Trinidad site back in fifty-nine." Harper swore under his breath.

"What happened to the Trinidad site in fifty-nine?" Monica asked.

"In a word," Muir explained, "Castro. He nationalized the Foundation's research site in Trinidad. The staff resisted and were executed - save one researcher who managed to get away by sheer dumb luck. Ended up heading back to the Soviet Union to work as a mole in KGB's Thirteenth Chief Directorate somewhere in Central Asia, I think."

"And we let Castro get away with this?!" Monica asked. She had no illusions about the Foundation's track record when it came to ruthlessness.

"Of course not," Harper said. "Ever heard of the Bay of Pigs invasion?"

"That failed," Monica countered, frowning.

Muir shook his head, "You're assuming what made it to the history books is what actually happened. We'd originally planned to attack Trinidad directly. American State Department didn't want to play ball, so the invasion landing site had to be moved. We still sent Foundation forces to Trinidad. Didn't manage to retrieve anything, but both Castro and Marshall, Carter, and Dark got the message."

Monica was confused, "MC&D was involved?"

"Castro tried to sell them the contents of the Trinidad site," Harper explained. "They absconded with the items without paying Castro after Foundation forces crashed the party."

"He was pissed," Muir observed. "We still get reports of Cuban troops in Soviet-backed states killing people associated with the club."

"Between the combined fury of the Foundation and Castro, it actually drove MC&D to ground for over a decade," Harper finished. "So the Foundation decided the whole mess was a 'successful failure.'"

"So, do we know where this chest of coins is now?" Monica asked.

"Not exactly," Muir said. "Marshall, Carter, and Dark isn't exactly on good terms with the Foundation, and we've not ever been able to get a good source on the inside. I've heard the GOC has had a little more success, but I don't know for certain. I could put out feelers with some of my contacts at the GOC, but they'll want something in return." The world of intelligence was a strange place: despite the generally frosty relationship between the GOC and the Foundation, both organization's intelligence branches occasionally shared information about mutual threats. Neither side trusted the other, of course, but the *quid pro quo* of intelligence-sharing had proven helpful to both sides on numerous occasions.

"You do that, Troy," Harper said. "In the mean time, Monica, keep digging through things here. I'm going to track down the surviving researcher from Trinidad."

Smithsonian Natural History Museum, Washington, D.C.
Thursday, 22 December 1988, 1730 hours local time

The only physically remarkable thing about him was his limp and cane. These, of course, were unavoidable for a man whose right leg was artificial from his knee down. Beyond that, he was of intermediate height, had thinning brown hair, and brown eyes. He was the sort of man that you'd forget having seen five minutes later, if not for his limp and cane. He missed the fieldwork, but he was too easy to identify now.

Muir hobbled into the Smithsonian Natural History Museum's National Gem Collection. It was a good meeting spot, and he never got tired of looking at the gemstones. He was standing before a beautiful piece of amethyst several feet in height when he heard a low voice behind him, "Nice shade of purple, isn't it?"

Without turning, Muir replied, "Indeed. I was always jealous of those with February birthdays."

"I'm sure you know one of the six birthdays we have on file for you *is* in February. How's the wife, Troy?" Special Agent Granger, Global Occult Coalition asked.

"Gladys and I have separated," Muir responded evenly. "I'm sure you knew that, though, just like how you know all the birthdays in your file on me are wrong. How's your son, Harry?"

"Looking forward to Christmas," Granger replied. "Wants Lego. Again." Muir grunted. "So, Troy, what can I do for you?"

The two men started down the gallery. "You've sprung a leak," Muir said. "Foundation forces found information classified Level Q in a raid on a non-aligned building day before yesterday."

Granger's training quickly erased the alarm from his face, before responding, "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because whomever penetrated you also managed to get access to all the major players, including the Foundation," Muir replied. "We also believe they brought down the Pan Am flight in Lockerbie. Took out all the documents we recovered, and also hit the repository where we stored the backups. Otherwise, I'd be able to tell you what they had on the GOC."

Granger let out a low whistle. "Any leads?" he asked.

"We're working on that, and we need your help," Muir answered. "The Coalition has always had better sources at MC&D than the Foundation. We think they either have, or sold, the object responsible for taking down the plane." He handed Granger a sheet of paper with the Global Occult Coalition's KTE, or 'Known Threat Entity', designation for the object.

Pocketing the paper, the GOC Agent nodded. "I'll have to run this up the chain, Troy. Deputy Director Bain will need to know."

"Thanks, Harry," Muir said. "If this pans out, I'd consider us even."

"Thanks, but one file on one item handled by that damn club? That would hardly square us. This'll take care of the one I owe you for Uganda. I still owe you a favor for Fiji," Granger observed.

"Well, I'm not going to object to a GOC Agent telling me he still owes me a favor," Muir chuckled. "Have a good holiday."

"You too," Granger said. With that, the two men went their separate ways.

Outside Moscow, USSR
Friday, 23 December 1988, 0213 hours local time

As it turned out, meeting the surviving researcher from Trinidad required a trip to Moscow. Now almost ninety, Dr. Andrei Pushkin had retired to a dacha in the hills overlooking the city. Thankfully, the Foundation's connections made it fairly simple for Harper to enter the Soviet Union, in spite of his American citizenship.

Pushkin met Harper in his pajamas when the counterintelligence officer arrived at his doorstep bearing an expensive bottle of vodka. Seated at the retired researcher's kitchen table, the men spoke in Russian, a language Harper had mastered decades earlier. A cloud of cigarette smoke filled the room as the vodka slowly disappeared.

"What brings a Level 5 Foundation investigator all the way from Washington just to speak to an old man in the dead of night?" asked Pushkin. "I retired from the Foundation and KGB almost fifteen years ago."

"Andrei Ivan'ich, I need to know everything about Trinidad. I'm trying to track down one of the items that was lost," Harper explained.

Pushkin sighed, "That was thirty years ago. My memory isn't what it once was - I hope you don't expect me to remember specific item numbers, especially for the objects I wasn't handling."

"Do you remember an object that was a chest of exploding coins and an atlas?" Harper inquired.

Pushkin thought for several minutes. "Vaguely. I never worked with them; that was - who handled those… Dr. Wong's project? Either Dr. Wong, or Dr. Hernandez."

Harper nodded, lighting a fresh cigarette. "Could you tell me what happened when the Cubans showed up?"

Pushkin drained and refilled his vodka draft. Taking a deep breath, he recounted one of the scariest situations in his life.

Pushkin's Tale

Foundation Research Site- Trinidad, Cuba
Sunday, 15 March 1959, 1030 hours local time

As the klaxon blared, and the corridor was bathed in red light, Pushkin once again found himself holding a gun.

Nikolai Ivanovich Pushkin, Doctorate of Philosophy in Phyics, did not like guns. He'd never been a fighter: he'd only been a boy during the Revolution and ensuing Civil War, which had stalled his beloved education by shutting down his school. When the dust had finally settled, he'd hoped that he'd never see armed conflict again. Unfortunately, as a young professor in Leningrad in the early 1940s, he'd been trapped in the city when the Germans had surrounded it. The Germans had shelled the city day and night for nearly a year, constantly trying to break the siege. When the building with his laboratory and office had been leveled by the shelling, he'd resisted having to take up arms by helping manage logistics for the defenders. Not that there had been much in the way of supplies, food, or ammunition to move. He'd met Sergei Petrovich during the war; Sergei had recruited him into the Foundation. After the end of the war, he'd hoped to never again have to handle a firearm. And yet, here he was.

The morning had started out normally enough. Breakfast in the site's commissary, meeting for all Level 3 and 4 staff, followed by another day of research. He vaguely remembered the site's security director, Agent Shaw, mentioning something about the recent revolution, but

surely the politics in Havanna meant little for this secret research facility. Pushkin had paid it little mind: nobody knew what went on in this small, apparently unremarkable compound on the edge of Trinidad. And even if someone had, the Foundation's security staff had far more firepower than the local constabulary. Most of the facility was concealed from the world in a heavily reinforced bunker rated to withstand all but a direct nuclear strike. And so, the researcher allowed his mind to wander to more important things, like how he was going to conduct the day's tests.

After the meeting's conclusion, Pushkin had returned to his lab. His assistant, Dr. Rawji, had already begun work on the object they were researching: a Factory-built radio set whose transistors showed some promising anomalous properties.

No more than thirty minutes from when Pushkin had begun to work, the site's intercom blared: "Attention all personnel! Unauthorized paramilitary forces have breached the outer perimeter. This is not a drill. Threat Condition Gamma has been declared. This is not a drill, repeat, this is not a drill!"

Pushkin swore loudly. He picked up the radio set to carry it back to the storage room up the hall while Rawji went to work burning their research notes. The hallway was dark compared to the bright laboratory, illuminated only by the flashing red emergency lights. It only took Pushkin a moment to enter the storage room, open the proper locker, place the radio inside, and lock it. He heard the door fly open behind him. "Doc! We have to get you out of here!" an urgent American voice said. Turning around, Pushkin recognized a young fair-haired security officer - Mathews? Martin? Something like that - clutching a rifle. "Here, Doc, take this," the guard said, shoving a pistol into his hands. "Come on, I'm supposed to get you and Dr. Rawji out of here." The guard ran out into the corridor. Pushkin followed, awkwardly holding the semiautomatic handgun, hoping he didn't have to shoot the *neculturny* thing.

Pushkin had barely left the room when two Cuban men in fatigues carrying rifles burst out of the door to his lab. They shouted something in Spanish - Pushkin didn't know what, since he'd never bothered to learn the language - and gestured for him and the security officer to raise their hands. The security officer opened fire,

killing one of the Cubans. The other shot the security officer. Pushkin turned and ran, firing wildly behind him.

The Russian rounded a corner. No Cubans appeared behind him. *Now what?* he wondered. He was standing alone, in a deserted corridor, bathed in red light, while a klaxon blared, in a site overrun by Cubans. Once again holding a gun. He hated guns.

Pushkin was about to leave the gun when he thought better of it. Perhaps he'd need the thing. Reluctantly, he pocketed it. Now, he had to figure out a way out of the facility. He searched his memory: he'd been briefed on this eventuality, but it wasn't something he'd taken all that seriously or thought too hard about. *Get to the surface,* he thought. *Surface. Then out of the complex. Then to the rendezvous point. Beach eighty kilometers up the coast. One week to get there. But first, the surface. How do I get to the surface?* Pushkin ticked off his options. Elevators would be guarded. That left one of the emergency ladders. *Great. Two hundred meter climb up a ladder. Where's the nearest one?* And so he set off.

After ten minutes of tense searching, he found one of the ladders to the surface. Why couldn't he just have been left to do his research? He didn't like doing all this sneaking around. As he climbed, he hoped he wouldn't find himself staring at a bunch of angry Cubans when he reached the surface.

As it luck would have it, the access ladder did not lead into the arms of angry Cubans, but rather to the woods in the hillside overlooking the complex. Concealing himself behind a bush, Pushkin looked down at the courtyard. A dozen or so Foundation staff members were kneeling on the ground with their arms behind their heads. A large man with a beard in fatigues seemed to be in charge of the Cubans. He was talking with a European man wearing a dark suit carrying a briefcase. The Cubans were carrying out the different objects the site had housed. There was the radio, the chest of coins, the atlas, the three books, the sculpture, and the abacus. The man in the suit inspected the items. He looked at the large man and nodded. The two shook hands. As the man in the suit left in a truck loaded with the objects, the large man barked an order to some of his men. Pushkin watched in horror as his coworkers were executed in cold blood by the Cubans. It was a sight which would haunt his

nightmares for many years to come, just like that night in November of 1917, or the dark days of 1943.

As the Cubans left the compound, Pushkin disappeared into the hills, starting his long walk to the rendezvous point.

Outside Moscow, USSR
Friday, 23 December 1988, 0600 hours local time

"…And that was the last I saw any of the objects stored in Trinidad," finished Pushkin. "I hid in the hills northwest of the city. The Foundation picked me up in a boat a week later on a little beach eighty kilometers up the coast."

Harper emptied the last of the vodka into his host's glass. "And then you went back to the Soviet Union?" he asked.

"Correct," replied the elderly man. "The Foundation at that time had strong ties to the military and intelligence organizations of both superpowers. I was assigned as a researcher at a laboratory near Dushanbe which was managed by the KGB's Thirteenth Chief Directorate for Paranormal Investigations with Foundation assistance. Both organizations thought I was working for them, spying on the other." He laughed, "It didn't really matter to me, since both paid me handsomely, and since I only had access to what was actually there at the laboratory. I suspect my handlers for both organizations thought me ineffectual. But I was allowed to do my research, and that was that."

Harper took a deep breath on his cigarette. "Did you hear anything further about the lost items?"

Pushkin frowned and shook his head, "Only rumors that that British club had bought them. What was the name…"

"Marshall, Carter and Dark?" Harper supplied.

"That was it," Pushkin nodded. "I am sorry I can't help you further."

"Andrei Ivan'ich, you have helped me immensely," Harper told the

old man, who smiled. The investigator retrieved his hat and coat and took his leave.

« **Part I** | **HUB** | **Part III** »

Conspiracy, Part III

Investigations

Foundation Command-05, Moscow, USSR
Friday, 23 December 1988, 0730 hours local time

Lighting a cigarette, Harper sat in his temporary office in the Foundation's regional headquarters for the Soviet Union. Nearly three times the size of his Washington office, complete with a view overlooking Dzerzhinsky Square, Harper decided he could get used to the palatial treatment the Foundation afforded Level 5 personnel. Picking up his secure telephone, he called Muir back in Washington. Since it was almost midnight in the American capital, Harper dialed his colleague's home secure telephone line. After the two units had synced, he heard a slightly groggy voice say, "Muir."

"Troy, it's Tim," Harper said. "I hope I didn't wake you."

"I was still up reading," Muir reassured Harper. "What's going on?"

Harper explained, "I talked to Dr. Pushkin. Looks like the Trinidad artifacts did get bought up by MC&D. From the sounds of it, he witnessed the exchange himself."

"Uhuh," Muir grunted. "I've put out feelers to my old contacts at the GOC. I'm expecting to get their file in the morning."

"I hope you didn't have to part with any crown jewels," Harper remarked dryly.

"Nah, this was in exchange for services already rendered," Muir replied. "Didn't even have to cash in all my chips."

"Well, Troy, I'm going to sleep on the couch in the office here. Call me when you have the file," Harper said. He read off the phone and

fax numbers. Muir confirmed them, then hung up.

Foundation Command-02, Washington, D.C.
Friday, 23 December 1988, 0710 hours local time

Troy Muir had just started the office coffee maker when Monica walked in carrying a manila envelope. "Mr. Muir, the front desk reported this was dropped off for you this morning by an Agent Granger of the Global Occult Coalition," she said, handing it to him. "It cleared the standard security screen: just a file."

"Thanks, Monica," Muir said, opening the file. Inside were three sheets of paper.

Troy,

Merry Christmas.

- Harry

TOP SECRET - Global Occult Coalition - TOP SECRET

KTE-1767-Flint

Threat ID: KTE-1767-Flint "Blood Treasure"

Authorized Response Level: 3 (Moderate Threat)

Description: Spanish world atlas printed in 1521 with accuracy comparable to contemporary maps. Oak chest approximately 60 cm by 38 cm by 45 cm. 500 Spanish gold 2 *escudo* coins, minted in 1521. Atlas displays current coin locations in real time. When activated by the atlas (activation method unknown), coins will release approximately 5 MJ of energy in explosive force before returning undamaged to the chest. Type II explosive entity.

Rules of Engagement: Object represents threat to global political

stability, having been used to incite at least one major war. Object is to be destroyed by any means necessary and appropriate if the chance arises.

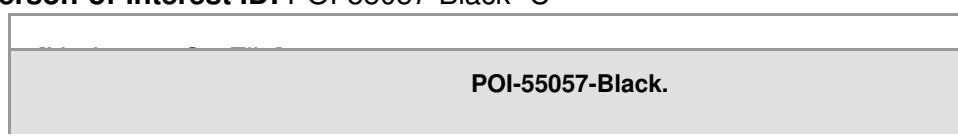
History: Original origin unknown. Recovered by private collector from shipwreck in the Straits of Florida in 1872. Owned by private collector in Havana, 1873-1895. Acquired by Foundation in 1895. Believed to be used to ignite powder charges on *USS Maine*, 15 February 1898, instigating Spanish-American War. Nationalized by Cuban forces, 1959. Stolen by Marshall, Carter & Dark, Ltd., 1961. Sold by MC&D to "C" in 1971. Current whereabouts unknown; suspected to be in the possession of "C". Now implicated by Foundation sources in Pan Am Flight 103 bombing.

TOP SECRET - Global Occult Coalition - TOP SECRET

TOP SECRET - Global Occult Coalition - TOP SECRET

POI-55057-Black

Person-of-Interest ID: POI-55057-Black "C"



Authorized Response Level: 1 (Minimal Threat)

Description: Member of Marshall, Carter & Dark, Ltd. identified only by the alias "C" signed in green ink. Little to no other information known. Believed to be in possession of at least nine (9) Known Threat Entities, purchased from MC&D.

Rules of Engagement: Maintain discrete surveillance. Observe and report unusual activities. Gather additional information as possible.

Do not engage except during emergencies.

Personal Information

Name: Unknown
Known Aliases: "C"
Profession: Unknown
Allegiances: MC&D Club member

Nationality: Unknown, suspected British or American
Gender: Unknown
Date of Birth: Unknown, suspected prior to 1950.

Height: Unknown
Weight: Unknown
Eye Color: Unknown
Hair Color: Unknown

Biographical Information: Essentially nothing is known about "C" apart from his/her apparent membership in Marshall, Carter & Dark, Ltd. "C" is known to have purchased approximately nine (9) KTEs from MC&D since 1968. Records stolen from MC&D suggest "C" to have relative wealth and possibly either British or American citizenship. "C" is believed fluent in at least English. All documents signed by "C" include only that letter, written in refined script in green ink of unknown manufacture.

Associated KTEs

- KTE-0235-Hemlock
- KTE-0589-Baskerville
- KTE-0777-Ivory
- KTE-0900-Keyhole-Green
- KTE-1123-Tapdance-Blue
- KTE-1515-Gaia
- KTE-1767-Flint
- KTE-2156-Woodwork
- KTE-2247-Pearl

Muir examined the file's contents carefully. "Monica, please fax these to this number," he instructed, picking up his secure telephone unit and dialing.

"Harper," said the voice on the other end of the line.

"Tim, it's Troy. Monica's faxing you some documents," Muir said.

There was a pause on the other end of the line. "I have them," Harper said. "Interesting. Do we have anything on this 'C' person?"

"I'm not familiar with him. Or her," Muir said. "It'll take us a while to go digging through the archives."

"Alright," Harper replied. "Any new leads?"

Monica raised her eyebrows, and Muir hit the speaker button. "I've put you on speaker, Tim. Monica's here with me."

"Mr. Harper, our agents embedded in the British police have finished their initial report," Monica explained. "We had them check the explosive signature against the exploding coins. It was a ninety-three percent match, though the margin of error was about eight percent because of the age of the coins' baseline comparison."

"Alright," Harper said. "Nice to confirm what we already know. Continue."

Monica nodded, even though Harper couldn't see her. "After you left for Moscow yesterday, I started trying to piece together who had access to the information that was leaked. We have no way of knowing for certain, because all the evidence was destroyed, and Director McDonnell only filed a preliminary paper report. He spoke to O5-5 personally, but -5 was also killed in the bombing. Given the nature of the information found as per the Director's initial report, at least one conspirator had Level 4 clearance or higher, but without specific SCP designations, I can't really rule anyone out. I looked at the Foundation's security clearance database, and there are at least

fifteen hundred El Fours (that I had clearance to know about). And I don't have clearance to know exactly how many El Fives there are."

"Even I don't know that, Monica," Harper said. "I suppose I have access now that I *am* one; I can look it up. I don't think it's more than a few dozen. The O5 Council, some but not all of the Directors for various sub-agencies, a few roving personnel like myself, not that many."

Muir spoke up, "Tim, if we don't know what they had, we can't dig too much into this without it becoming a witch hunt." All three knew that such a witch hunt could do as much or more damage as the apparent conspiracy itself, and none of them wanted to be the Foundation's Angleton.

"Let's focus on what we do know," Harper said. "McDonnell's report said something about the Overseers' schedules for the week. Focus on looking into their staff and security. We don't need another dead Overseer. In the meantime, I'll keep following the trail of the one object we do know the conspirators have." He disconnected the call.

Muir and Monica set to work. They had to place the lives, habits, contacts, actions, schedules, and finances of over a hundred Foundation personnel under the microscope. Their task was all the much harder since they had no idea what, exactly, they were trying to find. With any luck, they'd know it when they saw it. With any good luck, that is. With bad luck, the conspirators would be able to do whatever they had planned next without interruption.

Foundation Command-05, Moscow, USSR
Friday, 23 December 1988, 1545 hours local time

After finishing his call with Muir and Monica, Harper reread the files again. He decided to report what he had so far to O5-7. Leaving his palatial temporary office, he strode down the hall to the Level 5 Office Reception and Security desk. Showing his credentials to the secretary, he said in Russian, "Please arrange for a secure teleconference with O5-7."

"Yes, Comrade Investigator," the secretary replied. "She should be

free in fifteen minutes. You are welcome to use the conference room; nobody is in there for another two hours." The secretary gestured to an open door.

"Thank you, Comrade," Harper smiled. He entered the conference room and shut the door behind him.

Just as the hour was chiming on the bells of St. Basil's Cathedral, the phone rang. Harper picked up the handset. "Harper," he said in English.

A voice on the other end of the line said, "Please hold for O5-7."

A moment later, Seven's voice said, "Mr. Harper, I take it you are making progress out there in Moscow?"

"Yes, ma'am," Harper replied. "We've traced the source of the explosion to—"

"The exploding coins?" Seven said. "I heard. Those have been nothing but trouble for the Foundation. I said it when I first became an Overseer, I still say it now."

"Yes, ma'am. According to information from the Global Occult Coalition, the coins are in the possession of someone they know only as 'C'," Harper explained. "This 'C' person apparently bought them off of Marshall, Carter, & Dark back in seventy-one."

"C?" asked Seven. "Interesting. First, a question though, Mr. Harper. What did you promise the GOC in exchange for the information?"

"Nothing," said Harper. "Muir got it from one of his contacts as payment for an old favor."

"Hmm," Seven said. "Alright. Be careful with the GOC, Mr. Harper."

"Yes, ma'am, of course," Harper replied. "I figured they were better to interact with than Marshall, Carter and Dark, however."

"True, the Club is not known for its cooperation," Seven said. "So, what do you know about this 'C'?"

"Not much," admitted Harper. "The GOC file on C is essentially empty. Believed to be fairly wealthy, thought to own at least nine anomalous items, MC&D club member, probably American or British, signs with unidentifiable green ink. That's all we know so far. I have Muir and Ms. Daniel looking into the archives to see what might be there."

"You can tell them to stop. There is nothing in the archives on this 'C'," Seven stated definitively. "I've read all the files we have on every known MC&D club member. There is no file on any 'C' person."

"Alright, I'll let them know," Harper said. "They're also looking at the personnel with access to the O5's schedules and security arrangements, since Director McDonnell's report mentioned the possibility of a threat against the Council."

"Very good," Seven said. "Depending on the outcome of this investigation, Mr. Harper, you might be on the short list for being the counterintelligence director yourself. I've not spoken to the other Overseers yet, but I've followed your work for some time now, and I like what I see."

Harper could think of nothing to say, so he said nothing.

"Mr. Harper, I believe I may have a lead for you," Seven said. "Go to London. Speak to Sir James Mycroft. He is a mathematics professor at Cambridge. He is also something of an information broker about both the mundane and the paranormal - he is known to have supplied information to all of the various big players, including MC&D. I suspect he may know, or know of, this 'C' person."

"I will do that," Harper affirmed.

"Keep me informed," Seven said, disconnecting the call.

Harper quickly called Muir to pass along the information. Then, he left the conference room. "Comrade, I need a seat on the next flight to London, as well as an English copy of the Foundation's file on a person of interest," he said to the secretary in Russian.

"Of course, Comrade," said the secretary. "Do you have a reference number or name for the file?"

"Yes," Harper said. "Sir James Mycroft."

« **Part II** | **HUB** | **Part IV** »

Conspiracy, Part IV

The Information Broker

British Airways Moscow-London Flight, Somewhere over the North Sea
Friday, 23 December 1988, 1900 hours GMT

Enjoying a cigarette and nursing a thirty-year-old scotch, Harper perused the Foundation file on Professor Sir James Mycroft from the relative privacy of his first class seat. A curious fellow, this Sir James. As Harper read the file, it occurred to him that it was a little strange that he had never heard of the fellow before; after all, Harper was high in the Foundation's counterintelligence hierarchy, and the Special Contact Protocols related to the professor required any and all contact to be routed through Foundation CI. Harper exhaled. *Perhaps not,* he thought. *After all, the Foundation is a large organization with a great many contacts. I doubt even any one Overseer knows of all the various groups- or persons-of-interest.*

Person-of-Interest File

Name: James Carl Mycroft

Special Contact Protocols: All Foundation personnel are to observe caution and report any interaction with individual to Foundation counterintelligence. Individual is known to solicit classified material; unauthorized disclosure of information is grounds for disciplinary action under Foundation General Security Protocol 03, Sections 366.

Gender: Male

Date of Birth: 12 March 1945 (age 44)
Nationality: British; Maintains citizenship in both United Kingdom and Switzerland
Hair: White (wears full beard, also white)
Eyes: Blue
Height: 188 cm
Weight: Estimated ~80 kg (designated light heavyweight boxer during university days)

Decorations/Honors: Knight Grand Cross of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (GBE)
Profession: Professor of Mathematics, Cambridge University, UK
Academic History:

- Bachelor of Science (Mathematics), Cambridge University (c/o 1966)
- Doctor of Philosophy (Mathematics), Cambridge University (c/o 1970)
- Doctor of Philosophy (Astronomy), Cambridge University (c/o 1974)

Academic Society Membership: Institute of Mathematics and its Applications, Institute of Physics, Royal Astronomical Society

Language Proficiency: English (Native), German (Native), French (Fluent), Russian (Fluent), Italian (Conversational), Spanish (Conversational), Classical Latin (Rudimentary)

Recruitment Prospects: Recruitment attempted and failed, 1971. (See addendum)
Affiliations with Groups-of-Interest: Serves as freelance information broker, having provided information to the Foundation, the Global Occult Coalition, and Prometheus Labs, Inc.; Believed to be a club member of Marshall, Carter and Dark, Ltd.; Displays little loyalty to any single group and is willing to provide information to all sides if payment is sufficient.
Threat Level: Moderate; Foundation personnel are to observe caution and report any interaction with individual to Foundation counterintelligence.

Profile: Professor Sir James Mycroft is a Professor of Mathematics

at Cambridge University. He has published extensively on advanced mathematics and celestial mechanics. He is also a freelance information broker for organizations studying the paranormal and preternatural. He displays little loyalty to any single such organization, preferring a self-described "neutral" stance. He has consulted with the Foundation on several occasions, both providing information about other organizations and objects not in the Foundation's custody, and performing analysis on mathematical or astronomical SCP objects. Though the source[s] of Mycroft's information within the Foundation and other organizations is/are unknown, it is speculated that said source[s] is/are high-level and pervasive. Foundation personnel are advised to observe caution when interacting with Mycroft; all such interactions are to be reported to Foundation counterintelligence.

Mycroft is wealthy, owning large shares in a variety of major corporations including (but not limited to):

- Baasch Engineering Corporation
- Global Transport, Ltd.
- Howell Information Technologies
- Huntington Arms, Inc.
- Prometheus Labs, Inc. [*Group-of-interest to the Foundation]
- Saito Mining Industries
- Wallace Security Enterprises

Though controlling shares sufficient to affect policy at these corporations, Mycroft appears to display little interest in affecting their operations or management. Mycroft also is known to generously support a variety of charities, including the International Red Cross, Global Clinic Charity, Engineers Without Borders, and the Make-A-Wish Foundation.

Known Associates: Mycroft is well-connected socially and politically, and has been confirmed to have dealings with the following individuals:

- [NAME REDACTED], O5-5: Roommates during university. (Deceased, 21 December 1988)
- [NAME REDACTED], O5-7: Met during university.
- Johann Schneider, Deputy Director of the Global Occult

Coalition European Division: Childhood friend.
- Randolph Carter III, Partner, Marshall, Carter, & Dark: Mentor. [*Person-of-interest to the Foundation]
- Sir John Major, British Chief Secretary to the Treasury: Chess partner.
- Sir Christopher Keith Curwen, British Chief of the Secret Intelligence Service: Personal friend.

Known Related SCP Objects:

- SCP-033 - Written classified treatise dissenting the documented existence and effects (disseminated to GOC and Foundation).
- SCP-1050 - Provided mathematical analysis to Foundation.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is the captain speaking," dinged the intercom. "We are currently beginning our descent into Heathrow. We should be landing in about thirty minutes. I'll be switching off the smoking sign and switching on the seat-belt sign shortly. It is currently clear in London and a brisk four degrees centigrade." Harper extinguished his cigarette, finished his scotch, and tucked the file on Sir James back into his attache case.

Interlude

Harper is on his way to London now. The meeting will likely take place tomorrow morning.

Does he know anything damaging?

No. The Foundation's files have been sterilized. Have the Coalition's?

Yes. The Coalition's investigation is almost as far behind as that of the Scottish police.

And Harper's conversation with Sir James will suit our purposes?

Of course.

Petersfield, Cambridge, UK
Saturday, 24 December 1988, 0900 hours local time

The residence of Professor Sir James Mycroft turned out to be an elegant townhouse in one of Cambridge's upscale residential districts. Harper walked up the front steps and rapped the ornate door knocker three times. The door opened, revealing a short, portly British butler. "Yes, sir?"

"I'm Timothy Harper," the American introduced himself. "Is Sir James in?"

"He has been expecting you," the butler said. Harper blinked in surprise - he hadn't made an appointment. Then again, Sir James *was* an information broker. "If you will follow me, sir." The butler ushered Harper inside, leading him through an ornate front hall and into a library.

Sir James' library was lined floor to ceiling with leather-bound tomes covering every subject known to man (and, for that matter, probably a number of subjects *not* known to man). Dark oak paneling was visible in the few sections of wall not concealed by bookcases. The center of the room was occupied by an ancient oak desk decorated with carvings of griffins. Three small statues of grotesques sat on one side of the blotter; a small silver hand bell sat atop a stack of graded blue book exams. To one side of the room stood a free-standing chalk board covered in mathematical gobbledegook Harper couldn't begin to understand. A towering fireplace crackled happily in the corner, with a painting of a waterfall hung above the mantle. The painting was oddly familiar, though Harper knew he had not seen it before. In a tall-backed chair next to the fireplace, a tall man with wild silver hair and a thick beard sat reading from a small green book. Harper and the man were roughly the same age, according to the file, but the bearded man seemed at once ancient and youthful in a strange, timeless fashion. Sir James looked up, first at the butler, then at Harper. The professor's harsh steel-blue eyes seemed to cut right through him; this was clearly a man who was not to be trifled with. In an instant, the harsh flash of Sir James' eyes

was replaced by a friendly twinkle - if he had been wearing a red suit instead of a tweed jacket, Harper might have mistaken him for Saint Nicholas. "Welcome, welcome!" exclaimed Sir James, tucking the green book into an interior pocket of his jacket. He gestured to another chair by the fire, separated from his own by a coffee table with a marble chess set. "Come, sit. May I offer you a cup of tea or coffee?"

"Coffee, black, thank you," stated Harper, taking the offered chair.

Sir James looked pointedly at the butler, "Make that two, Deeds. A dash of peppermint in mine, if you would be so kind."

"Yes, sir," the butler replied, disappearing from the room.

Sir James directed his attention to Harper, "My dear fellow, what brings you to my humble residence on this fine Christmas Eve morning?"

Harper began, "Professor Mycroft, I am Mr. Timothy—"

"Timothy Harper, counterintelligence officer for the Foundation, recently promoted to Level 5 for the duration of your current investigation," the Englishman interrupted. "Do you prefer 'Mr. Harper,' 'Timothy,' or 'Tim?'"

"Tim is fine," Harper began.

"Very well, Tim," continued the Englishman, smiling politely. "I myself prefer either simply 'Professor,' though you are not one of my pupils, or 'Sir James.' I never could get used to being called 'Professor Mycroft' - in my mind that was always my father."

"My apologies, Sir James," Harper said. "I am investigating the Pan Am Flight 103 bombing. Several Foundation personnel were killed in the explosion, and we have reason to believe a paranormal artifact was used in the explosion specifically to kill them and destroy the documents in their possession."

"A terrible tragedy," Sir James agreed. "Alan Hamilton - you knew him as O5-5 - was among the dead. He was a good friend. How can I be of assistance to the Foundation?"

Harper explained what he knew so far, pausing only when the butler returned with their coffee.

"And so Cornelia believed I might be able to lead you to C," Sir James said thoughtfully, sipping his coffee.

Harper frowned, "I'm sorry, Cornelia?"

Sir James blinked, and smiled, "Right, I forgot for a moment you didn't know her real name. Overseer Seven. Another old friend of mine - we met in university, one giving a lecture the other attended." Harper nodded, and the Englishman continued, "Anyway, I do not know the precise location of the chest of explosive coins or its associated atlas. I must say, however, it seems a clever means to accomplish the destruction of an aircraft. After all, no airport security officer in the world will look twice at someone having a coin in either their luggage or on their person. Regardless, I will attempt to determine its whereabouts."

"Thank you," Harper said. He waited, sensing Sir James had more to say.

"You're wondering what else I know," the mischievous professor observed, "because you suspect there is more to this than just the bombing. A reasonable belief, given the recent raid the Foundation did on a warehouse not too far from here, and a belief which I share. My sources suggest that this C person has been poking around into a number of very dangerous paranormal objects."

"Most paranormal objects are dangerous," Harper observed.

Sir James nodded, "That is true, but these particular objects are ones with the capacity to do relatively targeted damage. In short, the sort of object or entity which could be used as a weapon against one's enemies. I assume you're familiar with your Foundation's Omega Seven fiasco?"

Harper nodded, "Vaguely. Not my department, but something about attempting to put an immortal humanoid SCP with impressive fighting skills on a Mobile Task Force. It ended badly."

"To state that the fiasco ended badly would be similar to calling one of the world wars a 'petty dispute'," Sir James said dryly. "Near total casualties among the involved personnel. The detonation of an onsite nuclear failsafe. The end of the careers of General Bowe and several Foundation Overseers."

"So you're saying C wants to weaponize SCPs?" Harper asked.

"If C is who I think C is, that is doubtful," replied the professor. "It is my suspicion that C is merely one of a number of conspirators - possibly simply a pawn in the eyes of the other conspirators. That said, this conspiracy has demonstrated the willingness to use dangerous SCPs against others, as demonstrated by the Pan Am bombing, and is not adverse to casualties. Such a mindset is, simply put, dangerous."

Harper agreed, "Definitely. Do you think the conspirators are likely to try and use Able?"

"I doubt it," Sir James said. "He's too mentally unstable to be controlled, as Bowe found out to his detriment. I would recommend you take a look at SCP-557-1 and SCP-1440. My contacts suggest C sought out information about them recently."

"Thank you," Harper said, making a note. "May I ask a few questions, Sir James?"

"You may ask, but I do not promise to answer them all," the professor replied. "After all, knowledge is power and information is currency. I do promise that everything I tell you will be true."

Harper nodded, "Alright, that seems reasonable. Do you know C?"

"I do, but I shall not reveal C's identity," Sir James replied. "To do so would be to betray a trust."

The response was annoying, but understandable. "Fair enough. Are there any immediate threats I should know about?" asked Harper.

Sir James stated, "I cannot say for certain, but based on what you've told me, I would recommend increasing the security details for the O5 Council. Especially since Alan was killed - a decapitation strike

cannot be ruled out."

Harper made a note. "Do you know more about this conspiracy?" asked the Foundation investigator.

"Yes," said Sir James.

Harper did a double take. "Will you tell me?"

"Well, do not misunderstand me, there is a limit to my knowledge. I do not know everything about it, and I am sure there are measures in place of which I am unaware," the professor said. "Even if I told you everything I know, it is conceivable it would be insufficient to prevent the conspirators from succeeding. Given the response the conspirators had to their warehouse's being raided, my telling you could forfeit both our lives."

"You didn't answer my question," the American observed.

"Very astute," replied his host. "I am willing to tell you more on one condition, and I am sure it is one you will need to run past Cornelia. I require seventy-five liters of liquid from SCP-006 for my research. While I could obtain it through other channels, having it supplied directly by the Foundation would simplify matters considerably."

"I'm not familiar with double-oh-six," Harper said, frowning.

"Ask Cornelia; the file is classified for Overseers only," stated Sir James. "If you want the information, get me the liquid. That is my price."

"I'll pass that along," Harper said, wondering what exactly the professor wanted that he himself couldn't know about. "One last question, which has little bearing on this investigation beyond my own curiosity."

"Ask away."

"The painting over your mantle," began Harper, "has been bothering me since I came in. I recognize the waterfall, but I can't place it."

Sir James smiled. "That's Reichenbach Falls in Switzerland, made

famous by the stories of Sherlock Holmes. I was born not far from there, as a matter of fact, which is why I have dual citizenship. My maternal grandfather, also a mathematician I might add, actually met the good doctor when he visited Reichenbach prior to writing *The Final Problem*. I have an autographed first edition of that book upstairs."

"Thank you for satisfying my curiosity, Sir James," Harper said, shaking hands with Sir James. The professor's grip was strong and firm, clearly a relic of his days as a boxer.

"Not at all, my dear Tim," Sir James said. He picked up the hand bell from the desk and shook it deftly. There was a peculiar ring, not seeming to come from the bell itself, but before Harper could reflect on this, the door opened. "Deeds, please see Mr. Harper out."

"Yes, sir." As the butler led Harper out, he was already thinking through his phone call to Seven.

« **Part III** | **HUB** | **Part V** »

Conspiracy, Part V

Demands

Foundation Command-03, Whitehall, UK
Saturday, 24 December 1988, 1300 hours local time

The explosion was predictable. "He wants *what?!*" demanded Seven over the secure telephone line.

Harper took a calming puff on his cigarette and said, "I believe his exact words were 'I require seventy-five liters of liquid from SCP-006 for my research.'"

"Absolutely out of the question," Seven shot back. "Sir James has lost his marbles this time. Did the file on him include details on his failed recruitment?"

"Only that recruitment was attempted and failed back in seventy-one," Harper recalled.

"Sir James' doctoral thesis in mathematics had to do with the binomial theorem, specifically an aspect that was of interest to the Foundation," Seven explained. "We knew he was valuable talent, and we wanted to beat the other groups-of-interest to him. So, a couple of agents were sent to do the usual meet-and-greet. Pretend to be part of the local government's intelligence service, give the pitch, point out that not working with us might be a bad idea…" In other words, Harper knew, extort the prospective employee into working for the Foundation. Not one of the organization's finer policies, but at least the Foundation tried to handle it with a velvet glove, unlike many of its rival organizations.

"So what happened?" Harper inquired.

Seven scoffed, "He laughed in the agents' faces. He told them he

knew they worked for the Foundation, and that he wasn't interested in being one of our 'lab coat wearing canon fodder' before having his butler forcibly remove them from the premises. Apparently, he thought working for us would be 'boring,' but he offered to 'consult from time to time' if we had 'some interesting challenge' our researchers couldn't figure out."

Harper was flabbergasted. "I bet that went over well."

"You wouldn't believe the shitstorm that kicked up," Seven confirmed. "We believed the man thought that just because he was on a first name basis with the Prime Minister that he could ignore us. The Overseer who was handling recruitment in those days was all set to authorize a coercion operation to ensure Sir James' cooperation when we found out that the Chaos Insurgency had beaten us to the punch."

"Oh?" asked Harper.

"They sent a squad of a dozen ex-black-ops thugs to abduct him in the middle of the night," Seven said. "According to our intel - and the GOC's intel agreed, by the way - he was home alone. Nobody knows for sure exactly what happened, or how Sir James pulled it off, but three days later the heads of each of the hit squad members arrived in the mail to each of the various organizations dealing with the paranormal (the Insurgency, the Foundation, the GOC, all of them)." Harper gagged slightly - he had a strong stomach, but this had come out of left field. Apparently, Seven had heard him, because she continued, "It gets better. Each parcel had a hand written note from Sir James, stating that he was not interested in working for a particular organization, but would 'happily consult on any puzzles we have that struck his fancy.'"

The counterintelligence officer massaged his temples. If the world made sense, such behavior would have been nipped in the bud. Working for the Foundation, however, quickly hammered home that the world does not make sense. "So then what?" he asked.

"Everyone backed off," Seven replied. "Cooler heads prevailed in the Foundation and GOC, realizing it wasn't worth the loss of personnel and resources to bag this guy when he openly admitted to

being willing to consult, while the Serpent's Hand and Chaos Insurgency were both sufficiently cowed by his rather spectacular display of cruelty to stand down."

"'For this has to be noted,'" Harper quoted, "'that men should either be caressed or eliminated, because they avenge themselves for slight offenses but cannot do so for grave ones; so the offense one does to a man should be such that one does not fear revenge for it.'"

Seven chuckled, "I see you've read Harvey Mansfield's recent translation. Most people would quote the better known verse: 'The response is that one would want to be both the one and the other; but because it is difficult to put them together, it is much safer to be feared than loved, if one has to lack one of the two.' Sir James has a first edition of the original in his library."

Harper moved the conversation from the philosophical and historical back to the business at hand, "While that is interesting, and perhaps explains the apparent arrogance of the professor's demand, what is the problem with double-oh-six? Besides the Foundation's general policy of not handing SCPs out?" A policy, Harper didn't say (since both were aware), the Foundation was willing to overlook if the circumstances were sufficiently dire or the price was high enough. It was a dirty little secret known only to the tiniest of the upper echelon of the staff; a secret remarkably well protected, considering the gossip such things would normally attract in a bureaucracy. Of course, it probably helped that the Foundation essentially never actually broke the stated policy. And that the slightest whisper of a rumor about a time when the Foundation *did* give an SCP to someone else generally resulted in the person doing the whispering being purged so thoroughly Lavrentiy Pavlovich Beria would have been proud. It is unwise to make an organization controlling reality-warping entities decide that it would be best if you no longer existed.

There was brief silence on the line as the Overseer considered her answer. "Mr. Harper, SCP-006 is one of the most dangerous items the Foundation controls. Its existence is only known to a select handful of Level 5 personnel and the staff directly involved in handling it. Only the current Overseers are permitted to know the exact details of zero-zero-six," she explained. "Here is what you need to know: you should consider it Keter. Over time it produces

limited quantities of one of the most deadly toxins known to humanity. This thing is so dangerous any procedure in which liquid is acquired from zero-zero-six requires at least three Overseers to sign off on it, and any personnel who come into direct contact with either the liquid or the item itself have to be terminated by incineration."

"In short, it is nasty stuff," Harper said. "So, what could Sir James want with this?"

"Whatever it is, it's not good," Seven said. She sighed. "I'll talk with the other Overseers about this. I've had a number of dealings with Sir James before myself. I don't trust anyone with this stuff, but I suspect he's less likely to abuse it than most. In any case, it's a moot point. Because of my dealings with him, I'd need to recuse myself from the release authorization: so, unless none of the other leads he gave you pan out *and* I can convince three other Overseers to approve *and* the rest of the Council doesn't veto it, the professor will have to do without."

"And that is about as likely as six-eighty-two keeling over from a heart attack," Harper remarked dryly.

"In the meantime, Mr. Harper, I want you to go check on five-five-seven and one-four-four-zero," Seven instructed. "You'll be on the next flight to Research Site-29 in Oman."

Harper quietly objected, "With all due respect, ma'am, tomorrow is Christmas, and the tenth anniversary of my family's passing."

"Right," Seven apologized. "I'm sorry, Mr. Harper. I had forgotten. I know this is not a pleasant thing to ask of you. I also know Christmas is the only day of the year you ask to take off. And I hope you know that I am deeply sorry for your loss. But this conspiracy is a very serious threat to the Foundation, and by extension—"

"—To everything else," the counterintelligence officer acknowledged sadly. He sighed. He knew, in its own way, that a conspiracy like this one was as large a threat as the Foundation ever faced, even if the science types thought a rampaging gecko was a bigger concern. Taking a deep breath, he said, "Alright. But I will arrange my own

flight. I am going to take time to stop by St. Paul's Cathedral to light a candle for my family, since I can't do it at the National Cathedral like I do every year."

"Very well," Seven acquiesced. "Who knows when you'll next be near a Church. I'll pass along your update to Mr. Muir and Ms. Daniel, and have them attempt to track down SCP-1440. Good luck in Oman." She disconnected.

Putting down the receiver, Harper leaned back in his chair, rubbing his face with his hands. This sort of thing brought back bad memories: putting work before family.

In the next room, the office staff wondered what had caused the visiting Level 5 VIP to swear so loudly they could hear it through the soundproofed walls.

« **Part IV** | **HUB** | **Part VI** »

Conspiracy, Part VI

The Hunt

Foundation Research Site-29, Northwest Oman
Sunday, 25 December 1988, 0300 hours local time

The helicopter touched down at the edge of the base camp for Research Site-29. It wasn't much to look at, just a standard perimeter fence, a few large tents, and a prefabricated watchtower with a searchlight and heavy machine gun. Razor wire and a minefield fifty meters deep had been deployed around the perimeter. These security measures would be improved as the site was developed further. According to the file, the site had only been constructed a few months before, after SCP-557 had been discovered by an investigation into a missing geological survey team.

Harper stepped off the helicopter and was met by two men. One was a short man with glasses, dressed in khakis and clutching a Stetson to his head. The other was an enormous, barrel-chested Arab wearing an impressive black beard and desert camouflage.

"You must be the VIP I was told to expect," shouted the shorter man, an American, based on his accent. "Dr. Nick Ford, Site Director. This is Colonel Ali El-Hashem, Site Security Chief."

"Tim Harper, Foundation Counterintelligence," yelled Harper. He followed the two men into the nearby command tent as the helicopter shut down.

The tent was mostly empty (unsurprising, given the hour); a radio operator sat in the corner reading a book. "Lieutenant, go get a cup of coffee," boomed El-Hashem in a deep, resonant baritone. The tech jumped to his feet and scurried out. Rounding on Harper, the

Colonel asked ominously, "Is there a problem with my security?"

"Now, Colonel," objected Dr. Ford, "that's no way to welcome our guest. I'm sure that's not why—"

"The Hell it's not!" bellowed El-Hashem. "Why else would a Level 5 counterintelligence officer arrive at my site at oh-dark-thirty?"

"It's quite alright," Harper said quietly. "I am not aware of any inadequacies in your security measures, nor am I aware of any problems with your staff." The giant Arab deflated, but looked slightly relieved.

Dr. Ford asked, "So, Agent Harper, what does bring you out to Research Site-29 in the middle of the night?"

"Just 'Mister'," Harper corrected gently. "I'm not an agent. I'm here because I have reason to believe a person-of-interest is intending to use SCP-557-1 in a plot against the Foundation."

Ford and El-Hashem shared a worried look. "Dash-one isn't contained," Ford said. "We aren't even sure what it is."

"Wasn't that in the file?" El-Hashem asked.

"I read both the files on SCP-557 and Research Site-29 on my flight," Harper explained, "but they both only had preliminary findings. I'm going to guess they haven't been updated yet, since the site's so new."

Ford nodded, "That makes sense. I suppose I should go ahead and give you the nickel tour." He and Harper left the command tent and strode across the compound. At the center, there was a stone structure maybe ten meters in height. They entered through a rough hole in the side, perhaps two meters tall.

The room was an ancient library. Dusty shelves lining the walls held rolls of papyrus. A table had been set up in the middle of the room, where researchers could examine and translate the scrolls and other artifacts. "This is Level 1," explained Ford. "There are five underground levels total, which is unusual for structures of this design. The structure itself is an Umm an-Nar era tomb, which we

think was built somewhere in the twenty-fourth century BC. We've not had a chance to do a thorough sweep of the surrounding countryside yet, so there may be more ruins out there. Historically there was a trade route through this area and a (now lost) city named Ubar or Irem, depending on the language. The desert eventually swallowed both the city and the trade route. Now, the scrolls we've found here on Level 1 are written in a number of ancient languages. So far, we've identified Greek, Old Egyptian, Sumerian, and Akkadian. We've only begun translating."

"Anything about dash-one?" asked Harper.

"Maybe. We're still working on translating. We've pulled all the records we can identify that we think might refer to dash-one and are prioritizing those," Ford replied, gesturing to the several dozen scrolls littering the work table. He searched for a second, found a specific sheet of modern loose-leaf paper, and handed it over. "This is the translation of the only document in here written in Greek. Radiocarbon dating indicates it was the most recent addition to the library, from around 300 AD."

> I will write in Greek, so that any learned man who finds this place will understand. I am the last of the Keepers, and I will be dead soon. The sands are taking this place, and perhaps it is for the best. The prisoner must not escape, and the gateway to the dark must never be opened. I do not think the gate can be moved, but who knows of the prisoner? Not even the Gods could kill it, and it was only with their help that he was secured. Without the rituals, I do not know. Secure the door the best you can, and never move the stone.

"That's charming," Harper remarked after finishing the note.

"Yep," Ford agreed. "We don't know if that's talking about dash-one, but it could be. Dash-one wasn't the only thing held here." He paused. "Anyway, in the several rooms on Level 1, there are living quarters and Bronze and Iron Age weaponry for a relatively large contingent of individuals, possibly the 'Keepers' mentioned in the note. We only found two skeletons on this Level, so we think the facility was abandoned over time."

Ford led Harper down a flight of stone stairs. A long corridor with small stone cells stretched into the distance. "This is Level 2. According to the records, Levels 2 and 3 were a prison for 'heretics and sorcerers.' We didn't find any evidence of the cells being occupied. They seem to have not been used for perhaps a thousand years before the structure was abandoned."

"Any idea who these heretics and sorcerers were?" asked Harper.

"None whatsoever," Ford replied as the two men descended to Level 4. "We don't even know who the Keepers were."

Level 4 looked similar to Levels 2 and 3, except there was more evidence of the Foundation's archeological team. "This is Level 4, described by the records as 'a place for the abnormal.' This appears to have been used up though the facility's abandonment," Ford explained.

"What sort of abnormal?" Harper inquired.

"Well, we've found a variety of skeletons in the cells here, which match several known SCPs. Dr. Bhala has positively matched remains to what looks like SCP-439, SCP-610, and a couple of beasties that crawled out of SCP-354 - oh, don't worry, all the remains are completely inert," Ford said, seeing the mixture of concern and horror on Harper's face. "There are also a number of skeletons unlike anything my team has seen before. From what we can tell, each cell was custom-fortified for its occupant, unlike the cells in the upper levels."

"Sounds like someone doing our job," Harper remarked.

Ford nodded, "Well, in general societies have had ways of dealing with the supernatural. Today, we have the Foundation and the GOC, containing and destroying things, respectively. In the Middle Ages, the Church (both Catholic and Orthodox) worked pretty hard to either harness those objects that they could explain in ways to fit their theological beliefs or to destroy those which didn't. This structure is just an ancient site for some now long-forgotten analogue to the Foundation."

"You said there were five levels," Harper said.

"Yes," Ford confirmed. He handed Harper a flashlight and hardhat. "Be careful when we're down there. There are a lot of traps and deadfalls. We think we've located and sprung or cleared them all, but I've lost four D-class, two researchers, and a security guard all since we initially thought we'd cleared them."

"Like something out of *Raiders of the Lost Ark*," Harper remarked dryly.

"Worse," Ford warned. "Not only are these real and not movie magic, many of them are far more sophisticated than I've seen in any other tombs. Do not touch anything. Spots which are confirmed as safe to step have been marked in white tape. Red tape indicates spots you should not step."

"White good, red bad," Harper repeated. "Understood."

The two men walked down the stairs. Level 5 appeared to be a single empty hallway, perhaps fifty meters long. At regular intervals, the researcher staff had positioned battery-powered lanterns. The floor and wall were dotted with red and white tape. Here and there, deep pits in the floor dropped out of sight, invisible to even the most attentive observer if not for the red warning tape. Slowly and cautiously, Ford and Harper crept forward.

After an eternity, they reached the end of the corridor. A giant door lay in pieces across the end of the hallway, apparently torn down and smashed from the inside. "This is the entrance to Room 501," Ford explained. "The door was like this when we arrived. It's constructed of a variety of metal alloys whose formula I won't bore you with, but the metallurgy necessary to make them is something that shouldn't have been possible until the middle twentieth century."

"BC?" Harper asked.

"No, the middle twentieth century *AD*," Ford said. "One of the key parts of the primary alloy was depleted uranium. And yet this door appears to be as old as the structure itself. We have no idea how it was made forty-four centuries before it ordinarily could have been.

In any case, our best estimates suggest the door wasn't broken until sometime in the last ten years or so. Whatever was inside - what we've designated SCP-557-1 - got out."

"That can't be good," Harper said.

"It gets better," Ford said. "That door is, or was, three cubits thick. Sorry, about a meter and a half. Ancient Egyptian measurement. Anyway. Dr. Morales analyzed the fracture pattern. This thing was broken in just one physical blow. There aren't many things that can exert that sort of physical force, even today. Colonel El-Hashem has a demolition tech who estimates he'd have trouble rigging a charge to destroy the door that wouldn't rebound the shock-wave into the chamber and kill anything inside."

Ford ushered the counterintelligence officer inside. Room 501 was vast, easily twenty meters on a side and over five meters high. The center of the room's floor was covered by a large granite slab covered in runes Harper didn't recognize. A smaller stone block stood in the room. Metal chains hung broken from the smaller stone. "Dash-one was imprisoned here, chained to this stone. The chains are the same material as the door."

Harper let out a low whistle. Whatever SCP-557-1 was, it had been both big and incredibly powerful. "So, we have no idea what it was?"

"Most of the records haven't been translated yet," Ford replied. "What we've found so far, including on the walls of Room 501 itself, refer to dash-one as simply 'the prisoner.' There is one exception. A single reference in Egyptian refers to it as 'the bastard son of Apep.'"

"Apep?" Harper asked.

"Apep, or Apophis as he was referred to by the Greeks, was the Egyptian deification of darkness and chaos," Ford explained. "He was the personification of all that was evil, seen as a giant serpent or dragon. He wasn't so much worshiped as worshiped against; the ancient Egyptians believed that every night the sun god, Ra, would fight Apep, and if Ra ever lost, the sun would fail to rise again."

"So dash-one is the bastard son of this guy?" Harper asked.

"We don't know, but that's what the one record we've found with any sort elaboration suggests," Ford responded. "Colonel El-Hashem has standing orders to locate and secure dash-one, and to assume it to be Keter until proven otherwise. No luck so far. And you have information that someone has found dash-one? If that's correct, that's very troubling."

Harper nodded, thinking. "Very troubling indeed."

Foundation Command-02, Washington, D.C.
Saturday, 24 December 1988, 2200 hours local time

Muir and Monica huddled around the secure speaker phone. Harper was on the line from the middle of nowhere in Oman, just finishing up his findings.

"So, we're on the lookout for the bastard son of the ancient Egyptian god of chaos and darkness," Monica asked incredulously.

"Welcome to the Foundation," Muir sniped. The intern rolled her eyes at him.

Harper ignored him. "So, I presume Seven told you about 1440? Have you turned anything up?"

"Just to make sure we're on the same page, you have the file last updated 15 June 1987?" Muir asked. It never hurt to double check such things.

There was a pause on the line, the Harper said, "That is correct."

Monica read from some notes she had hastily scribbled on a legal pad earlier that evening. "Mr. Harper, Site-11 doesn't have an exact fix on fourteen-forty's position, but they believe it might be somewhere near Mt. Kazbek in the Caucasus Mountains in the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic."

"Who — local contact — ground?" the transmission from Harper asked, fading in and out of static.

"Say again, Tim, we missed that," Muir instructed.

"-said, — is the — -tact on the grou-?" came the reply.

Monica looked at Muir, "He wants to know the contact on the ground."

Muir called into the telephone, "Your contact is Captain Ivan Petrovich Gagarin. He'll meet you in Vladikavkaz."

"Captain — Gagarin — in Vladikavkaz—" crackled the phone, dissolving into static.

"Tim? Harper?!" Muir called, but the connection was dead.

Foundation Research Site-29, Northwest Oman
Sunday, 25 December 1988, 0700 hours local time

"Troy? Monica?" yelled Harper into the secure radio set.

The operator looked up apologetically. "Sorry, sir, but we've lost the transmission."

"Looks like a sandstorm is on the way," said another technician on the other side of the command tent. "Coming in from the west, ETA five minutes."

Harper looked at El-Hashem and Ford, "How long do these things last?"

"Hard to tell. Could be hours," the Arab colonel replied.

Harper hoisted his bag. "Is the helo ready to go?"

"Yes, but it'd be better to ride the storm out here," Ford cautioned.

Harper started towards the tent's exit. "Can't waste the time," he said over his shoulder as he stepped outside.

To the east, a towering wall of sand rose kilometers high. Harper ran to the helicopter pad and gestured to the pilot to spin up the bird's engines. Within sixty seconds, they were airborne, racing back towards the city as the research site was engulfed by the sandstorm.

Foundation Observation Post 3-02, [LOCATION REDACTED]
Sunday, 25 December 1988, 0300 hours GMT

A red light blinked on and off, annoyingly insistent amongst a sea of green and blue denoting the status of the Foundation's worldwide assets. Probationary Agent Johnson sat up and called up the associated status indicator. He'd gotten a bottom of the barrel assignment, shipped off to the middle of nowhere straight out of training, only arriving the day before.

> **PRIORITY 2 ALERT**
> **Automated Notification:** Research Site-29 communications lost.

"Uh, Agent Marcus? We have a Priority 2. Research Site-29 just lost communications," Johnson said, worried.

"Calm down, Probie," his superior said. "Satellite IMINT shows a sandstorm in that part of Oman. We've had problems every time one of those has come through since we set up shop a few months ago. Landline's still a work in progress."

"So you think the storm is disrupting the radio signal?" Johnson asked.

"Third time this week," Marcus replied, sipping his coffee. "The system log any danger or distress codes before the signal went out?"

Johnson took a moment to call up the relevant data. "Uh, no," he said.

Marcus smiled, "Well, then, Probie, it's probably nothing. Fire off a sitrep and Form CL-287 to HQ and Site-11. As per protocol, if the signal doesn't return after the storm clears, they'll send in an MTF."

Johnson swallowed, and nodded. If Agent Marcus wasn't too worried, he decided he shouldn't be either.

Conspiracy, Part VII

Welcome to Vladikavkaz

Beslan Airport, Vladikavkaz, Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic
Sunday, 25 December 1988, 1200 hours local time

Harper stepped off the Soviet Yakovlev Yak-42 passenger jet expecting to walk to carry his bag to customs at the one-runway airport's tiny terminal building. He did not expect to find himself face-to-face with a group of very angry Soviet Airborne soldiers training assault rifles on him. A stern-faced captain with a thick mustache glared at him.

"Он - американский шпион! Арестуйте его немедленно!" shouted the captain. *"He is an American spy! Arrest him immediately!"* Harper realized the smartest thing to do was say nothing - the Foundation would find out soon enough and get him out of this mess. Two burly soldiers seized Harper's arms while a bag was thrust over his head. His wrists were handcuffed behind his back, and he was marched to a truck.

The ride took about half an hour over some very bumpy dirt roads. Harper was pulled from the truck and half marched, half dragged into a building. He was placed in a rough wooden chair, and the bag was whipped off his head. The room was part of a wooden shack, dark and damp with a dirt floor. The smell of manure drifted in from outside. The mustached captain stood before him.

"My apologies, Mr. Harper. The subterfuge was necessary to preserve appearances for my men, most of whom are conscripts who know nothing of the Foundation. Furthermore, O5 gave me strict orders that I have never heard of you, and you were never here," said the captain in flawless English. "I am Captain Ivan Petrovich Gagarin. Welcome to Vladikavkaz." He looked behind

Harper at a very young lieutenant standing guard. "Снимите кандалы." *"Remove the shackles."* The guard reached down and undid the handcuffs.

"Glad to be here," Harper replied, massaging his wrists. "What's the plan now?"

"I am interrogating the dangerous American spy along with an expert from the GRU," Captain Gagarin explained, pulling out a set of Soviet civilian clothes appropriate for a GRU staff officer and handing them to Harper. "Once we have finished, I will execute the cowardly capitalist pig and have my men bury him out back." He pointed at a misshapen bag about the dimensions of a grown man lying in the corner of the room. "Junior Lieutenant Strelnikov here will then take you, the GRU interrogation expert, back to the airport, by way of wherever you need to go." The lieutenant nodded silently.

Harper nodded and started changing into the offered clothing. He asked, "Captain, do you have my bag somewhere?" The lieutenant left the room briefly and returned with it. As Harper buttoned his Soviet overcoat with one hand, he pulled a file from the bag and thumbed through. Finding the picture he was looking for, he asked, "Captain, this is SCP-1440. I need to speak with him."

"Ah, yes, Старик из ниоткуда, the Old Man from Nowhere," Gagarin said. "He's one of several entities running around the Caucasus right now. You're in luck, Mr. Harper. He was last sighted a few days ago on the southeastern slopes of Mount Kazbek, just north of Kanobi. It is less than an hour drive from here."

"Perfect," Harper said.

Gagarin turned to Strelnikov and spoke briefly in hushed and rapid-fire Russian, handing over the photograph. The lieutenant nodded. Gagarin turned and pulled out his pistol. He fired two quick shots followed by a third into the floor. "I have just executed the American," he explained. "Товарищ мла́дший лейтена́нт , сопроводите наших гостей до аэропорта!" He barked loudly for the benefit of the soldiers outside. *"Escort our guest to the airport, Comrade Junior Lieutenant!"*

Strelinikov hustled Harper outside to a waiting jeep. He tossed the counterintelligence investigator's bag in the back seat and they sped off southward.

Though paved, the Georgian Military Road along which they traveled was in dire need of maintenance. Racing along at well over a hundred kilometers per hour, Harper hoped their trip wouldn't end ignominiously in a fiery crash after hitting a pothole. The lieutenant's driving was only marginally better than that of the infamous Dr. Gerald.

"You Foundation official?" asked Strelinikov in broken English.

"Yes," Harper replied, also in English. "I'm Harper. I supposed you'd call me Timofey Ivanovich, since my dad's name was John."

"I Dmitri Arkadeyevich," said the soldier. "My English well? I learning in my time free."

"Uh, yes, very," Harper lied. Switching to Russian, he asked, "Do you mind if we speak in Russian? I would like to practice."

Swerving to avoid a goat which had wandered into the middle of the road, Strelinikov nodded, "Very well. Your Russian is most literate."

"Thank you," Harper replied. "So, you are a Foundation agent?"

"Not yet," Strelinikov said. He paused to shout obscenities in *mat* at a farmer leading a donkey down the road. "I am proud to be serving the Motherland. Perhaps I will join the Foundation when I am old and infirm."

Which probably means sometime around your thirtieth birthday, Harper thought to himself. He remembered his brief period in the American army in the early sixties. The false sense of immortality and the bravado that came with it, so common in soldiers everywhere before they were exposed to the true horrors of war.

"In any case," the Russian continued, "Captain Gagarin needs soldiers he can trust."

Harper asked, "Do you know anything about the Old Man from

Nowhere?"

"Only that we are supposed to keep track of his location, and otherwise avoid him at all costs," Strelinikov said. "What do you want with him?"

"That's classified," the American replied. The Russian grunted in annoyance, but said nothing. Truth be told, Harper wasn't sure himself. SCP-1440 was dangerous to any man-made object or human who remained in extended close contact with it, according to the Foundation's file.

Half an hour later, the jeep came to a stop at the end of a dirt road halfway up the mountain. "This is as far as I am allowed to take you," Strelinikov said. He pointed at a ridge a half kilometer away. "The Old Man should be up there. I will remain here with the jeep until sundown." By Harper's estimate, that gave him about four and a half hours before he had to be back. He set off up the mountainside.

Foundation Command-02, Washington, D.C.
Sunday, 25 December 1988, 0630 hours local time

Monica prodded Muir awake. He'd fallen asleep at his desk, looking over the finances of the assistant clerk for O5-2. "Coffee?" asked the intern, offering a mug.

"Thanks," Muir grunted.

"Merry Christmas," Monica said.

Muir nodded, "Back at you. Any word on Tim?"

Monica nodded, "The watch office in the basement got word from Agent Gagarin. He's safe and sound. Looks like it was just a sandstorm disrupting communications."

"Yeah," yawned Muir. "Figured. I did a tour in Yemen a while back - sandstorms aren't fun. Back to work, then." He picked up another file, this one on O5-6's primary bodyguard, and started to read.

Foundation Observation Post 3-02, [LOCATION REDACTED]
Sunday, 25 December 1988, 1130 hours GMT

The red light was still blinking. Johnson walked over to the meteorology console and called up Oman. The storm had cleared out several hours before. "Uh, Agent Marcus? Research Site-29 is still off the grid," he called.

"Did the sandstorm clear yet? Those things can—" started Marcus.

"Yes, sir, I just checked. It cleared up about three hours ago," Johnson said.

Marcus swore, "And you're only telling me this now? Please tell me you've been checking every hour." Johnson's face fell. "You haven't. Dammit Probie! Get on the horn and scramble the nearest MTF."

« **Part VI** | **HUB** | **Part VIII** »

Conspiracy, Part VIII

Puzzles

Mount Kazbek, Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic
Sunday, 25 December 1988, 1545 hours local time

Harper found SCP-1440 seated cross-legged on a flat rock, a worn set of playing cards arrayed before it. The Old Man from Nowhere, as SCP-1440 was informally called in the folklore surrounding him, was a tired-looking old man with sad eyes, a deeply-lined face, and a bristly silver beard. He wore the simple attire of a peasant, with a thick but fraying wool coat and a fur cap. His breath froze in his whiskers, conjuring up an image of Grandfather Frost in Harper's mind.

"Good day, Grandfather," Harper said Russian. "May I join you?"

The old man looked up. "Good day. I have nothing to offer but a hard cold rock to sit on, but if you wish to join me, you are welcome," he said in the same language; Harper couldn't quite place the accent. "Though I suggest you may not wish to keep my company for long."

"Because of the Three Brothers," Harper said.

"Indeed," the old man said, eying him shrewdly. "Have we met before, my son?"

"No, Grandfather, never before, though I have heard tales of you," Harper said. Gesturing at the cards, he asked, "What is this you play?"

"Oh, merely a game to pass the time before I must continue on my journey," the old man explained. "It is called Grandfather's Clock. I imagine, however, you did not seek me out in this lonely spot merely

to discuss a card game."

Harper nodded, "This is true, Grandfather. I am a member of the Foundation."

"Again you seek me out? After the pestilence and destruction that followed me to you?" the old man asked sadly. "You failed to kill me when I came to you before, and you tempted me with a 'cure' for my condition. You cannot 'cure' a man who is cursed by the Three Brothers of Death themselves."

"Forgive me, Grandfather," Harper interrupted, "but who mentioned a 'cure'? I merely wished to ask you questions."

"So you know nothing of the woman," the old man said, frowning.

Harper asked, "What woman?"

"A young, pretty thing," the old man replied, staring into memory. "Dark hair, with a face like a hawk and eyes like a wolf. She came to me not a week ago, offering me a 'cure' for my condition, if I went with her to the city. I declined - I must bear this curse, but I do not wish it upon mankind."

"What happened next?" Harper asked.

"She went away," the old man said wistfully. "Like everyone always goes away." A tear ran down his cheek and disappeared into his beard.

"I cannot stay long," Harper said, "but I think I can stay long enough that we might eat and drink together, Grandfather." A weary smile lifted the corners of the old man's mustache as Harper produced a bottle of vodka, some sliced roast beef, and a small handful of candies from his bag.

And so the two sat and ate and spoke of random things in the cold mountain air of the Caucasus for nearly an hour, before Harper took his leave to return to Strelinikov and the jeep.

O5-11's personal vacation cabin, Maine

Sunday, 25 December 1988, 0659 hours local time

The Foundation's eleventh Overseer was a portly African-American in his seventies. He had worked his way up through the Foundation's temporal sciences department, before eventually being promoted to Overseer.

Like all of the Overseers, Eleven had been paying close attention to the counterintelligence investigation that Seven had been directing. Always known for his carefully thought-out opinion, Eleven was one of the swing votes on the O5 Council, mediating between the faction that wanted to pursue caution, aware of the dangers a counterintelligence "fishing expedition" that could turn into a witch hunt, and the faction that wanted to aggressively dismantle what could be one of the most major conspiracies in Foundation history. Eleven had kept his comments to himself during the several emergency meetings that had occurred in the past week, in no small part because he himself was unsure of what course to pursue. He was out of his element with all the cloak and dagger hall of mirrors shit. No, he preferred dealing with simple scientific problems, like how to keep the Foundation's several dozen spacetime-altering objects from causing a cascading, reality-destroying paradox.

Eleven had never been particularly good at remembering his medication, especially when he was under stress. His doctor had complained about his high blood pressure, and, as usual, Eleven had paid lip service by taking the prescribed medication. When he remembered. The combination of age, high blood pressure, stress, and a family history of heart disease meant that the elderly gentleman would never awaken this Christmas morning, having expired of a heart attack in his sleep.

At precisely 0700 hours, Eleven's bodyguard entered his room to wake his principal. When Eleven failed to rouse, the bodyguard checked for a pulse, and then issued a Code Red over his radio to the security staff in attendance. The Foundation had lost a second Overseer in less than a week.

Interlude

O5-11 is dead.

That was not part of the plan, but it may yet be useful.

Is the operation in Oman complete?

Yes. Our forces left one survivor. He is not one of ours, but he will be suspected.

And what of the creature?

Our experts believe we have what we need. It will only be a matter of time.

Good. Move the timetable forward.

The Game's Afoot

Beslan Airport, Vladikavkaz, Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic
Sunday, 25 December 1988, 1800 hours local time

Harper was about to board his flight to Bonn when Captain Gagarin ran up to him, holding an envelope. "This just came in secure from Command," Gagarin panted.

Harper thanked him and tore it open. It was a message from O5-7:

> **TO:** Harper
> **FROM:** O5-7
> **MESSAGE FOLLOWS:**
> O5-11 dead, suspect conspirator involvement.
> RS-29 overrun by forces unknown, Dr. Ford only survivor. Suspect Ford is traitor, in transit to Command-02 for questioning.
> Recommend immediate return to Command-02 for consultations.

END MESSAGE

I guess I'm going to Washington, Harper thought, pocketing the message. "Comrade Gagarin, please call ahead to Bonn to arrange for a connecting flight to Washington, D.C.," he said. Gagarin saluted smartly, and set off. *The plot thickens*, Harper thought. *The game's afoot: Follow your spirit, and upon this charge Cry 'God for Harry, England, and Saint George!'*

« **Part VII** | **HUB** | **Part IX** »

Conspiracy, Part IX

Assassination

Global Occult Coalition North American Regional Headquarters, Washington, D.C.
Sunday, 25 December 1988, 1030 hours local time

Like much of official Washington, the GOC's Washington Headquarters Building was only staffed by a relatively small caretaker shift on this cold Christmas morning. Of course, there is always some crisis brewing somewhere, and today was no different. The staff that was on duty had realized something important was going on when Regional Director Strauss *and* Regional Deputy Director Bain had arrived bright and early on their day off. This realization was reinforced when three more individuals arrived at the nondescript Foggy Bottom office building.

Many people in both organizations realized that the Global Occult Coalition and the Foundation had a complicated relationship. Both had some level of semi-official recognition of their jurisdiction over paranormal affairs, especially in Europe and North America. Both were usually adversarial to the other players on the field, and this shared stance sometimes led to cooperation, though it just as often led to disagreements borne out of the two organization's different philosophies. What most people did not realize, for it was a secret known only to fewer than a hundred individuals in either organization, was that there were official liaison officers who oversaw all officially sanctioned joint efforts. Much like ambassadors between hostile countries, these liaison officers served as a useful pipeline for dialogue, and were accordingly afforded what essentially amounted to diplomatic immunity. In no way were these two liaison officers the *only* individuals in either organization to interact - there were of course plenty of grey and black dealings handled informally by field personnel - but the liaisons offered the administration of both

groups the ability to formally discuss matters of mutual concern.

As such, the guards manning the security checkpoint in the lobby of the GOC's Washington Headquarters Building were unsurprised to see the relatively familiar sight of Foundation Liaison Officer Rhodes. They were surprised by the two people with Rhodes: a petite Japanese woman, whom they recognized as the Foundation's third Overseer, and her powerfully-built bodyguard. O5-3 was the young heiress to a powerful Japanese mining conglomerate who had opted to work for the Foundation rather than the family business. A financial and administrative genius, Three had more than doubled the revenue of the several front companies she had managed for the Foundation prior to her promotion to Overseer.

The Foundation personnel were escorted to a top-floor conference room, where GOC Directors Strauss and Bain were already waiting, along with their own bodyguards. Handshakes and pleasantries were exchanged and all sat to begin their business.

GOC Special Agent Benjamin Arnold had served as the personal bodyguard to GOC Regional Deputy Director Bain for eight years. Recruited from the American Diplomatic Security Service, he possessed the highest security clearance granted by both the American government and the GOC, and passed a polygraph every two months. He had never once been late for work, and had only ever taken a day off to attend the funeral of his twin brother a decade before. He kept to himself during off hours, but was regarded as cordial and efficient by his principal, his superiors, and his coworkers, most of whom owed him money from the office's informal sports pool. Accordingly, Director Strauss' bodyguard saw no reason to watch Arnold, rather than the only person he believed presented a physical threat to his principal, the Foundation bodyguard escorting O5-3.

For his part, Foundation Special Agent Sanchez, O5-3's bodyguard, was doing his best to keep his cool. He hated having to escort Three into the belly of the beast. With his hands held in front of him, he thought to himself that at least the GOC was probably the least likely of the various groups-of-interest to take a potshot at a visiting Overseer, especially in their own headquarters.

As Three began to explain about the recently uncovered plot within the Foundation, now responsible for the deaths of two of her fellow Overseers, and the implications of a security breach not only within the Foundation but also in the GOC, no one noticed what Arnold was doing. Slowly, subtly, he unbuttoned his jacket. Ever so carefully, he reached into his suit coat, and—

—In a flash, Arnold whipped out his pistol. From a distance of less than two meters, he fired a round into the ear of Strauss' bodyguard, who collapsed to the floor like a marionette whose strings had been cut. Sanchez blinked in shock and was reaching for his own weapon when Arnold placed a round neatly between the eyes of the Foundation Special Agent. Another bullet entered the back of Director Strauss' head from point-blank range, killing him instantly.

Three's jaw dropped. She was about to utter a cry of confusion when she felt the Foundation Liaison to the GOC shove her to the floor in an attempt to get her out of the line of fire. A sharp pain erupted in her chest, followed swiftly by another in her arm. As her vision faded to black, she heard several more gunshots. And then she was gone.

Cologne/Bonn Airport, Germany
Sunday, 25 December 1988, 1845 hours local time

During his layover, Harper was having supper at an upscale bar in the First Class Lounge when a man in plainclothes approached him. "Mr. Timothy Harper?" the man asked.

Instantly on alert, Harper's hand tightened ever so slightly on his steak knife. "Yes," he answered casually.

"I have a message for you," the man said, handing over a sealed envelope. "High priority from Washington."

Harper thanked the man, who left. Opening the message, he saw it was from Seven:

> **TO:** Harper
> **FROM:** O5-7

MESSAGE FOLLOWS:
O5-3 shot by GOC agent at meeting with GOC Regional Director Strauss. Strauss also dead. Deputy RD Bain assumed role as Acting RD. Suspect possible conspirator involvement. Tensions with GOC high. Assume all GOC personnel hostile until further notice.

Return immediately to Command-02 for consultations. SCP-006 liquid transfer approved.
END MESSAGE

Harper swore under his breath. Lighting a cigarette, he started to contemplate how this new turn of events fit into what he already knew.

« **Part VIII** | **HUB** | **Part X** »

Conspiracy, Part X

Aftershocks

Foundation Command-02, Washington, D.C.
Monday, 26 December 1988, 0755 hours local time

When Harper arrived at Command-02 on Monday morning, the tension in the air was palpable. Security was heightened beyond anything he could remember in the nearly thirty years he'd worked for the Foundation, and he knew the platoon of heavy-weapons-bearing mobile task force personnel present in the building lobby paled in comparison to the security that was hidden out of sight. When he finally reached the head of the line to the security checkpoint, the attending guard pulled him aside. "Mr. Harper, you're needed on the seventh floor, sir," the stern-faced guard said. "Now."

A short elevator trip later, not even stopping to put his hat, coat, and briefcase in his office, Harper walked into the same secure conference room he had been in the preceding Thursday. Once again, Seven was waiting for him. The strain of the past several days had visibly taken its toll on the Overseer: she had shadows under her eyes, and her raven hair was beginning to come loose from her usually immaculate bun. "Mr. Harper, the situation is dire," she said, trying and failing to keep the stress and sleep deprivation from her voice.

Harper nodded, "Yes, ma'am."

"How much do you know?" Seven asked, her green eyes boring into him.

Harper coughed, "Apart from your two messages, I've been out of the loop since I left Research Site-29. When I arrived this morning, I

was told you needed to see me immediately, so I didn't stop by my office to get updated." He gestured at his coat and briefcase, which he had laid upon the nearest chair.

"Very well," she breathed, turning to look out the tinted window at the Capital Building. "Two more Overseers are dead. Eleven died in his sleep of an apparent heart attack. The timing is too suspicious for it to be an accident; our experts are looking into the possibility that he was poisoned. It's a long shot, since there are plenty of poisons we're unlikely to discover postmortem. Three was assassinated while she was meeting with Regional Director Strauss and Deputy Director Bain for the GOC. The Coalition's Regional Director was also killed, as were both his and Three's bodyguards. Our liaison officer to the GOC is in the hospital, though he is expected to survive."

Harper asked, "Did they manage to catch the assassin?"

"No," spat Seven. "Not alive anyway. He was the bodyguard for the Regional Deputy Director, a man named Benjamin Arnold. Bain killed Arnold during the shootout, and is now apparently Acting Regional Director."

"Do we know why Arnold started killing everyone in sight?" Harper asked.

"The Coalition is claiming no knowledge, and pointing fingers at the Chaos Insurgency," Seven replied. "I have Intel running down leads. Though we've seen no evidence to suggest the Chaos Insurgency is the mastermind for the ongoing plot, they certainly seem to have their hands dirty. The MTF that secured Research Site-29 said it looked like the Insurgency was responsible for that, as well."

"Has there been any progress questioning Dr. Ford?" asked the counterintelligence officer.

The Overseer shook her head. "Zimmerman has been questioning him down in the basement."

"Zimmerman is a brutish, sadistic thug who couldn't get a useful answer if his life depended on it," Harper objected.

"Agent Zimmerman is one of our most experienced enhanced interrogation—" began Seven.

"He's a cold-blooded sadist!" Harper snapped. "Jesus Christ, you might as well have shot Ford and gotten it over with! *Torture. Does. Not. Work!* People will say anything to stop the pain, truthful or not, so you can't trust any of it without independent confirmation, which if you can get you shouldn't have tortured the guy in the first place!"

Seven turned to face Harper, her gaze icy. Speaking softly, she said, "So be it. *You* will be responsible for Ford's questioning." Taking a deep breath, the counterintelligence officer nodded. Seven continued, "Most of the O5 Council is running scared. With three Overseers killed in the past week, the surviving members of the Council voted five-four (I abstained) in favor of transferring seventy-five liters of liquid from SCP-006 to Sir James. In exchange, he has provided us with the coordinates of a warehouse in Finland where he believes C's objects are stored. MTF Xi-13 is on route as we speak. In short, that is what has occurred since you left Oman. Now, what are your findings?"

Harper began, "Well, nothing seemed out of place at Research Site-29 while I was there. According to what Dr. Ford's team had been able to translate, SCP-557-1 - the entity formerly held by 557 - could cause some real damage."

"What do we know of 557-1?" Seven inquired.

Harper said, "Not much. Translations are, uh, were, I suppose, ongoing. Most of the records only refer to it as 'the prisoner,' though one refers to it as 'the bastard son of Apep.'"

"And now the Chaos Insurgency has access to all our research on SCP-557," Seven sighed. "Wonderful. And SCP-1440?"

"He was apparently approached by a mysterious young woman who offered to 'cure' him," Harper responded. "He declined, and she left."

"Do you think this woman could be C?" asked Seven.

"We have no way of knowing," Harper said. "We have no physical

description of C to compare."

"Anything else?" asked the Overseer.

Shaking his head, Harper replied, "No, ma'am."

"Very well," she said. "That will be all. Keep me informed - I want status updates every time you have a major new development. That will be all." Harper nodded, collected his coat, and left.

Helsinki waterfront, Finland
Monday, 26 December 1988, 1500 hours local time

Foundation Armed Rapid Response Task Force Xi-13 sped through the heavily falling snow across the icy waters of Helsinki's harbor. In their winter camouflage and white-gray speedboats, only the most perceptive of observers would have been able to see them through the blizzard, and their boats' engine sounds were indistinguishable from the port's usual traffic. They had deployed from the *SCPS Kraken*, which waited out in international waters.

Agent Price, Xi-13's executive officer and field commander, knew only slightly more than his men. Orders From The High Muckitymucks had come down instructing his team to secure a waterfront warehouse at a set of GPS coordinates that turned out to be in the Finnish capital. Apparently, some member of MC&D had a stash of artifacts stolen from the Foundation there. That is, if the little vague intelligence he'd been given was correct. Resistance was expected to be somewhere between "non-existent" and "heavy," the report had indicated. *Right, that was helpful*, Price thought.

A month and a half earlier, the United States government formally acknowledged that the aerospace corporation Lockheed Martin had designed and built a single-seat, twin-engine stealth ground-attack aircraft for the USAF, designated the F-117 "Nighthawk." Production numbers would remain classified for years to come, but those with clearance into the program knew that a total of sixty-four Nighthawks had been built, with five prototypes and fifty-nine production versions. At least, that's what the Department of Defense's numbers recorded. In fact, Lockheed had built another five production

versions under secret contract for the Global Occult Coalition. Unbeknownst to Agent Price, or anyone else in Helsinki for that matter, one of the GOC's Nighthawks was lining up for a bombing run on the warehouse Xi-13 was rapidly approaching. With a radar cross section equivalent to a large bird, not even the Finnish air defense forces realized the presence of the intruder.

"Lombardi! Bring us alongside the dock!" barked Price. Xi-13's speedboats raced in formation towards the target.

The GOC F-117 opened its bomb bay doors. Two GPS guided thermobaric weapons, more commonly known as "fuel-air bombs", each weighing in at 1,150 kilograms (or 2,500 pounds) fell silently towards the warehouse.

The Foundation speedboats slowed abruptly as they reached the dock. The troops were about to leap ashore when the Nighthawk's bombs reached their target.

Thermobaric weapons consist of a container of fuel and two separate explosive devices. When the bombs entered the warehouse by crashing through the metal roof, the first explosive charge on both bombs burst open the fuel container. The fuel, now free to mix with atmospheric oxygen, was rapidly accelerated outward in all directions, creating a cloud which almost completely filled the interior of the warehouse, flowing around the crates stored within and the small security force concealed inside to protect the stored goods. A fraction of a second later, the second explosive charge for each bomb went off. These explosives, though tiny by themselves, detonated the now-oxidized cloud of fuel. The fireball, reaching temperatures well in excess of 2,500 degrees Celsius, incinerated the warehouse's contents and inhabitants in fifty milliseconds, one eighth of the time required for a human to blink. The overpressure of the explosion reached three megapascals, or 430 pounds per square inch, over forty times the pressure necessary to severely damage buildings constructed of reinforced concrete. The warehouse, built out of little more than sheet metal over steel girders, was quite literally blown apart by the blast wave. Less than a second later, the burning gases that made up the explosion began to cool, causing the pressure to drop abruptly. This created a partial vacuum, further increasing the devastation as

debris was sucked into the still hellish conditions of the explosion.

The blast wave from the explosion, traveling at nearly ten times the speed of sound, rocked the Foundation task force's boats, knocking the entire platoon off its feet. Though it critically injured a full half of the MTF (every agent was injured to some extent), the blast wave actually saved many of their lives by keeping them from being killed either by the outward-moving fireball or by the powerful backdraft. It was later determined that only six members of Xi-13 were killed in the event: four instantly and two later due to injuries sustained.

Agent Lombardi was one of the least injured. As he got to his feet and surveyed his surroundings, he realized that Agent Price was down. Looking around, he couldn't see any of the MTF's senior agents showing any sign of consciousness. With the target warehouse and its precious contents now a twisted pile of burning rubble, the junior agent decided some REMF intel puke had really FUBARed this time. Grabbing the boat's long-range radio set, Lombardi fired off a situation report to the *SCPS Kraken*, calling for immediate backup and medical assistance, and letting the astonished ship's captain know that it would only be a matter of minutes before the Finnish authorities were swarming all over the scene.

« **Part IX** | **HUB** | **Part XI** »

Conspiracy, Part XI

Interrogation

Foundation Command-02, Washington, D.C.
Monday, 26 December 1988, 0830 hours local time

Harper had only just removed his coat and set down his briefcase when Monica walked in, holding a message. "FLASH traffic from Finland, Mr. Harper," she said. "Xi-13 reached C's warehouse in Helsinki, only to have it blow up in their faces."

Muir swore loudly. Harper pursed his lips and said, "Have the watch office keep us apprised of the situation." Monica nodded and left.

Harper turned to Muir. "Feel like doing an interrogation?"

"Sure," Muir replied, pulling his artificial leg off his desk with a dull thunk. "Who're we talking to?"

"Nick Ford," Harper replied. "He's down in The Dungeon. Be warned, Zimmerman's been at him already."

Muir shook his head, "That gorilla? Will the administration never learn?"

The two men took the elevator down to Basement Level 5. Nicknamed "The Dungeon" by Command-02's staff, it housed the humanoid containment cells and interrogation facilities. As a Foundation Command, 02 was only permitted to house SCPs classified as "Safe" (one of the key reasons for having another Command so geographically near Overwatch HQ was because *that* facility and its staff was strictly forbidden from having any direct contact with SCPs; Command-02 served as a useful middle ground). Because of the restrictions on what entities could be housed at Command-02, The Dungeon generally housed non-anomalous

security risks, such as a researcher believed of selling the Foundation out to the Chaos Insurgency.

At the security desk, Harper and Muir checked in, confirming the transfer of authority to Harper from Zimmerman for Dr. Ford. "How do you want to play this, Tim?" asked Muir. The fact Zimmerman had tortured Ford invalidated the possibility of doing Good Cop, Bad Cop.

"I met him in Oman," Harper said. "You handle it as you see fit, and I'll only come in if necessary." Muir nodded as they entered the observation room. Looking through the one-way mirror, they saw their subject.

Dr. Nicholas Ford, formerly Director for Foundation Research Site-29, was a broken man. Bruised and bloodied, his left eye swollen and missing three fingernails on his right hand, he sat naked and chained to a cold steel chair in the center of the interrogation room. There were scars on his genitals and nipples where electrodes had been attached. He was sobbing quietly.

Picking up the telephone handset in the observation room, Muir called for a physician and a set of clothes. Two minutes later, he and the medical doctor walked into the interrogation chamber. "Dr. Ford, I am Troy Muir," said the former field spook. "Let's get you cleaned up. Can I offer you a glass of water?" Ford nodded weakly. As the physician began tending to Ford's injuries, Muir held a glass of water with a straw to the man's lips. With that simple act of kindness, Muir established himself as a fellow human being who cared about the welfare of the subject, rather than a monster to be feared and hated. Within twenty minutes, Ford was bandaged, dressed, and beginning to feel some personal dignity again. "Dr. Ford, do you think you could tell me about what happened at Research Site-29?" Muir asked as the physician left. "Are you up to that?"

"I think so," rasped Ford. He took a sip of water.

"Take all the time that you need," Muir said gently.

Slowly, Ford explained how, just after Harper left, the sandstorm had overtaken the site. Nobody had realized anything was wrong until

masked men with AK-47s had burst into the command tent. The one who seemed to be the leader had pointed at Ford. He'd been taken through the storm to SCP-557, where he'd been tied up in one of the cells on Level 2. It had taken him hours got get untied and out of the cell, by which point the storm had passed. The facility's staff was all shot or missing. Additionally, all the scrolls and translations believed to relate to SCP-557-1 had been stolen. Then the Foundation mobile task force had shown up and hauled him off on suspicion of being a sleeper agent for the Chaos Insurgency.

"Just to be clear, you have no affiliation with the Chaos Insurgency," Muir asked.

"No! I'm not," Ford responded, tears coming to his eyes. "I've been saying that since I was picked up, but nobody believes me!"

"I believe you," Muir replied soothingly. "I really do. Do you know why they singled you out?"

"No," Ford whimpered. "Like I told Zimmerman, if I knew why, I'd have said."

"Thank you, Dr. Ford," Muir said. "I need to go now to work on clearing this whole thing up, okay?" Ford, still crying, nodded tiredly. Leaving the room, Muir ordered the guards to take Ford back to his cell, but to treat him with all due respect and kindness.

The old adage was right: honey gets one farther than vinegar. Torture, while very effective at getting prisoners to sing like canaries, never *ever* produced good, actionable intelligence. Though Hollywood and writers of pulp spy thrillers insisted on perpetuating the myth to the contrary, students of the history of espionage and interrogation knew that this had always been the case. Not even the Nazis or the Soviets had been able to effectively make it work, efficient as they were at methodically inflicting pain without killing the subject. Unless the goal was to physically and psychologically scar the subject, while turning the interrogator into a callous, unfeeling monster, both of which amounted to actions more punitive than interrogative, there was no reason to torture someone. And yet the Foundation sometimes tried to get information with it anyway. *One more thing I'll change if I'm ever an Overseer*, Harper thought to

himself. Not that that was likely to happen.

As they walked back to their shared office, Harper asked, "You really think he's innocent?"

"Yep," Muir replied. "You?"

"Yes," the counterintelligence officer said. "Old trick, Troy: leave one innocent alive to throw the investigators off the trail of the *real* stooge."

« **Part X** | **HUB** | **Part XII** »

Conspiracy, Part XII

Endgame

The Mall, Washington, D.C.
Monday, 26 December 1988, 1130 hours local time

Harper decided to take an early lunch to clear his head and consider what he knew.

Since Muir's interrogation of Ford, he'd learned the Foundation had managed to cover up the warehouse explosion in Finland as the result of "improperly stored volatile materials." Recovery teams had pulled a number of human remains from the rubble, including the now positively identified body of Lord George Smith-Cumming, a member of the British Parliament and a known member of Marshall, Carter, and Dark. Forensic accountants employed by at least six different agencies, of course including the Foundation, were already examining the late Lord's finances. The preliminary evidence was promising: by all appearances, the illusive C was no longer a concern. Harper had his doubts, but no corroborating evidence to back up his gut feeling.

As Harper strode past the Smithsonian Castle munching on a sandwich bought off a food truck, he was approached by a boy no older than twelve. "Hey Mister!" the boy said, running up to him. "A man paid me five bucks to give this to you!" He pulled a crumpled envelope from his back pocket.

Frowning slightly as he accepted the envelope, Harper thanked the boy, who ran off. He looked around, but recognized no one in the vicinity. His name was written in neat script across the envelope's flap. Tearing it open, the counterintelligence officer discovered it contained a single sheet of paper covered in the same small handwriting.

Dear Tim,

I thank you for your facilitating the delivery of the SCP-006 liquid. It made for a most wonderful Christmas gift. I do apologize for the unorthodox means by which this message was delivered; I believed it unwise to trust either official Foundation channels, or my usual unofficial means for contacting the organization. As I had promised, the following is information that may be of interest to your investigation.

First, as I have already informed the Foundation through official channels, I believe a number of items possessed by C are located in a warehouse on the waterfront in Helsinki, at 60.161 N, 24.903 E. Unless it has been moved sometime in the last 24 hours, you will find the chest, explosive coins, and map there. I give you fair warning that it is quite likely that the Global Occult Coalition knows this, though I did not provide them with the information. Accordingly, I would recommend that your recovery forces exercise haste. By the time your receive this message, the Coalition will certainly have taken steps to deal with the items in question.

Second, someone very powerful within the Foundation is a key conspirator, perhaps even the linchpin of the entire plot. I implore you to *trust no one*, and to be careful when using official lines of Foundation communication. While my sources suggest that neither of your two associates, Mr. Troy Muir nor Ms. Monica Daniel, is involved, it is most certainly possible that my information regarding this conspiracy is incomplete. It is possible anyone could be involved, even someone you have every reason to trust.

Third, though I am certain you already suspected this, the Foundation is not the only institution whose highest levels have been infiltrated. My information suggests there are key conspirators in the Foundation; Global Occult Coalition; the Chaos Insurgency; and Marshall, Carter, and Dark, Ltd. I do not have information to indicate any other organizations contain high-level

conspirators rather than simple agents-in-place for intelligence gathering purposes. My sources indicate that Special Agent Harry Granger of the GOC is unlikely to be a witting conspirator, should you require assistance from that organization, though I can neither guarantee his cooperation, nor his loyalty.

By this point, I imagine you are wondering why someone in my position, with information such as this, would not be doing everything in my power to prevent the success of this conspiracy. While you have no reason to trust me, and, considering the game underfoot every reason to not, I beg your indulgence to allow me to offer two possible explanations: it is an unwise investment strategy to give information for nothing when one can receive payment for it, and I am, in point of fact, doing that which is within my power to disrupt this conspiracy. I am providing you this information and taking my own actions to prevent an outcome which would be, shall we say, "problematic". Of course, you are free to believe what I have told you or not, but I would be a rather destitute information dealer if my clients could not trust my word.

This brings me to my fourth piece of information: the conspiracy's goal. We live in a complex and intricate world; even if the preternatural were nothing more than the fairy tales and horror stories the world-at-large believes them to be (thereby reducing the world's complexity significantly), it would be foolish and arrogant for any individual or small group of persons, no matter how powerful, to believe they could dominate and control the globe. The conspirators know this, and have set their sights lower. The world-at-large is separated from life as the informed few know it by a Veil. This Veil is maintained by a variety of organizations with a variety of motives; it always has been, and it is entirely possible it always will be. Even chaotic and anarchic groups, when provided with access to true paranormal, have a tendency to maintain this Veil, if for no other reason as to

ensure the continued separation of the "haves" and "have-nots", with themselves securely in the former category. In a way little different from the tremendous power afforded those few with the resources to split the atom, the preternatural is a source of power capable of inspiring both awe and terror. It is this power, this awe and terror, I believe the conspirators seek: the capacity to control, if not the world, then the world behind the Veil.

That concludes the information the Foundation purchased when it provided me the liquid from SCP-006. I have two more pieces of information to provide to you, and you alone. If you should choose to disregard my above advice and disclose the aforementioned, I beseech you to not reveal that I have told you what follows.

Your family's death was not accidental.

Investigate the Roosevelt family.

May your continued investigation be met with the best of luck. If I can provide further assistance on this or other matters, do not hesitate to contact me, either directly or by leaving a message for me at the Diogenes Club in London. I have confidence in the Club's discretion in passing secure communications.

Most sincerely,
James Mycroft

Harper was so taken aback by the letter's contents that he scarcely wondered how on earth the eccentric mathematics professor had known that he'd be walking past a particular building at a particular time, given his recent extensive travels. Placing the note in his pocket, he lit a cigarette and walked back to Command-02.

Muir and Monica looked up to see Harper enter the office. Without a word, he grabbed a sheet of paper and a pen and scribbled "ASSUME OFFICE BUGGED, MOVE TO TANK." Silently, the two

nodded. Picking up the several boxes of relevant files, the three of them moved to a room deep in the bowels of the building: The Tank. The Tank was a purpose-built room designed to make electronic surveillance ("bugging", as it was more popularly called) impossible. A variety of active and passive measures were in place, blocking both conventional electronic listening devices and several known anomalous listening techniques. Swept daily, it could be reserved by personnel with Level 4 or Level 5 clearance who were handling particularly sensitive classified materials.

After all the files had been transferred, Harper turned to Monica. "Monica, I need you to run up to the Daly Building in Judiciary Square and pull D.C. Metro's investigation file on a fatal car crash that happened on 25 December 1978 at Dupont Circle," he instructed.

"On it," she said, not questioning the significance of a ten-year old traffic accident to their current investigation. She fished in her bag for the fake credentials identifying her as a junior agent for the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and left.

"What's going on, Tim?" asked Muir.

Producing the note from his pocket, Harper said, "A cutout gave this to me at lunch."

After carefully reading the note, not once but twice, Muir let out a low whistle. "This complicates things," he muttered. "Want me to dig through what we have on the GOC and Chaos Insurgency to see if I can turn anything up?"

Harper nodded. "Sure. Focus on those likely to be involved with anything either unusual or related to the Foundation," he suggested. "The investigation file I sent Monica after—"

"—was for the crash that killed your family," Muir finished. "I knew the date sounded familiar. When she gets back, I'll have her cross-reference the file with everything we've pulled relating to this investigation. Mycroft wouldn't have given you that information if it didn't pertain to this somehow."

"I figured he wasn't just being nice," Harper said. "I'll go pull the Foundation's records on the Roosevelts."

That required a trip down to Central Records, a cavernous labyrinth of yellowing documents larger than most libraries, located in the bottom four floors of the basement. Only Level 5 personnel were permitted to freely traverse the stacks, and in some areas even they needed an escort. Harper thumbed through the card catalog, locating the reference numbers for each personnel or person-of-interest file for individuals from the Roosevelt family. As it turned out, there were a large number relevant individual files, plus a collective file on the entire family. He wrote the numbers on an index card and set off to locate the files.

After a productive forty-five minutes of searching, Harper returned to the tank with a thick stack of files. Muir and Monica were already hard at work poring over their own files, so Harper set down his materials and got to work.

The collective file on the family included a detailed genealogy of the Roosevelt family, reaching back to the two patriarchs (Johannes, head of the Oyster Bay branch of the family, and James Jacobus, head of the Hyde Park branch). Each family member's dates of birth and death, marriages, occupations, and descendants were listed, as was whether or not there was an individual file for that person.

The first individual file on the stack was for Theodore Roosevelt (specifically the one living between 1855 and 1919, as "Theodore" was a name that appeared many times in the family tree). Best known to the world-at-large as the 26th President of the United States, he had also been a friend to the Foundation during the organization's early days in the late 19th century. There were a number of rumors that floated around about him from time to time, that he had helped push the United States into the Spanish-American War on behalf of the Foundation, that the Foundation opposed his being made Vice President (which would have gotten him "out of the way" politically had McKinley not died), that the Foundation helped make him Vice President and that McKinley was shot on Foundation orders to place him in power, even that he was a member of the Foundation, and plenty of other often contradictory speculation. The truth was in the file Harper held in his hands. Of

course, none of what was in the file turned out to be particularly relevant to the details of the investigation at hand, even if TR was involved in a war the Foundation had fomented with a device used ninety years later to kill an Overseer.

The second file, oddly enough, was completely empty. The name was "Cornelia Roosevelt", and according to the collective file on the family, she was the daughter of James Alfred Roosevelt, the older brother of TR's father. The information relating to Cornelia was also, for the most part, missing from the genealogy in the family file. Harper set aside the file, scribbling a question mark in his notes next to her name.

Franklin D. Roosevelt (1882-1945), 32nd President of the United States, Assistant Secretary of the Navy (1913-1920); had dealings with the Foundation as ASN during the First World War, and as President, during the Second.

Eleanor Roosevelt (1884-1962), niece to Theodore, wife of Franklin D., and First Lady of the United States; person-of-interest with no direct dealings to the Foundation.

Theodore Roosevelt, Jr. (1887-1944), son of TR, Brigadier General in the United States Army, Assistant Secretary of the Navy (1921-1924), Governor of Puerto Rico (1929–1932), Governor-General of the Philippines (1932–1933); had numerous dealings with the Foundation in each capacity. Harper found it interesting that a total of five members of the extended Roosevelt clan had served in the post. Considering the significance the position had held as a conduit between the early Foundation and the American government, the number of Roosevelts who had interacted with the Foundation made some degree of sense.

Theodore Douglas Robinson (1883-1934), nephew of TR and Assistant Secretary of the Navy (1924-1929); had dealings with the Foundation as the ASN, and suspected of being one of the first supporters of the Chaos Insurgency.

Henry Latrobe Roosevelt (1879-1936), third cousin to TR and Assistant Secretary of the Navy (1933-1936); fought in the Spanish-American War and had dealings with the Foundation as the ASN.

Henry Latrobe was also suspected of having sympathies to the Chaos Insurgency. Harper wondered whether Theodore Robinson's and Henry L. Roosevelt's alleged Chaos Insurgency sympathies had resulted in the Foundation both the distancing of the organization from the Office of the Secretary of the Navy, and for some of the hostilities that would later arise between the American military and the organization.

Cornelius Van Schaack Roosevelt (born 1915), son of Theodore Roosevelt, Jr., Foundation agent embedded within the Central Intelligence Agency; served as the head of CIA's Technical Division from 1960-1961. He was part of the joint CIA/Foundation MKULTRA Project, and was listed as having been one of the primary advocates within CIA of attempting to poison Fidel Castro (on behalf of the Foundation). He'd since retired, and the file gave Harper no reason to believe he was involved in the current conspiracy.

Kermit Roosevelt, Jr. (born 1916), grandson of TR and cousin to Cornelius Van Schaack, Foundation agent embedded within the CIA. Kermit Jr. had coordinated the 1953 Iranian coup, another joint CIA/Foundation operation. Though retired by the 1979 Iranian Revolution, Kermit Jr. still occasionally consulted with the Foundation as an expert on the Army of the Guardians of the Islamic Revolution.

Archibald Bulloch Roosevelt, Jr. (born 1918), grandson of TR and cousin to Cornelius Van Schaack and Kermit Jr., United States Army intelligence, CIA officer. Though never a formal member of the Foundation like his cousins, Archibald Bulloch Jr. was listed as having been a "friend to the Foundation" throughout his entire career, including during his WWII service in North Africa, Iraq, and Iran, and as CIA Chief of Station in Istanbul, Madrid, and London. There was a note stating that he had refused to assist the Foundation when it was at odds with the CIA, as well as refusing to supply classified documents without official approval from the CIA/Foundation liaison. He was now retired, having recently published a memoir.

"Tim, we have something," Monica said, interrupting Harper's genealogical and biographical thoughts. He walked over to where Monica and Muir sat.

"The drunk who killed your family," Muir began.

"Tristan Arnold," spat Harper. The name was hard cut into his memory.

"Right, him," Monica said. "His parents died in a house fire when he and his twin brother were six, after which the two of them went into foster care."

"Now, as adults, their lives diverge substantially," Muir explained. "Both enlisted in the Army. Tristan was dishonorably discharged, and lived the remainder of his life out of a bottle."

"His brother, Benjamin, on the other hand," Monica continued, "was honorably discharged after two tours, then went to work for the State Department's Diplomatic Security Service as a bodyguard. That is, until he was transferred to—"

"—the Global Occult Coalition, where he loyally served as the personal bodyguard for Regional Deputy Director Bain, until deciding to go on a shooting spree yesterday, killing GOC Regional Director Strauss and O5-3," finished Muir.

Harper looked from Muir to Monica. "So the brother of the man who killed my family ten years ago," he asked slowly, "is yesterday's assassin?"

"I mean, it's a small world, but this can't be a coincidence," Monica said. She handed over two photographs. One, a yellowing newspaper clipping, showed a somber man at Tristan's funeral. The other was a security camera still that showed the same man, ten years later, wearing an earpiece and sunglasses as he ushered Bain into a building.

"After my family died, I stopped turning down the promotion to Section Chief," Harper breathed. "Someone, now involved in this plot, arranged for my family to die so I'd take the promotion?"

Muir asked, "That was before we started working together; who was putting pressure on you to take the job?"

Harper thought back, "The Counterintelligence Director at the time -

Erik DeVoe. But he was getting pressure from someone on the O5 Council. I kept resisting because my kids were in elementary school…"

"Could this Mr. Bain be involved?" Monica asked.

"It's possible," Harper replied. "He stood to gain directly with his boss' assassination, and the shooter was his own bodyguard."

"And he killed the assassin himself," Muir pointed out.

"Follow that lead," Harper said. "One of the files I pulled from Central Records was gutted."

"Completely empty?" Muir asked, surprised. "Nobody - not even the Overseers - are supposed to completely remove the contents of any file not containing a memetic hazard or infohazard."

"Yeah, Troy, I know," Harper said. "And this was a personnel file, so it should have been fine. It's probably nothing, since the individual was born back in the 1870s, but I'm going to head over to the National Archives to try and reconstruct the non-sensitive genealogical and biographical information."

"Alright," Muir said. "Out of curiosity, whose file was it?"

"Cornelia Roosevelt."

National Archives Building, Washington, D.C.
Monday, 26 December 1988, 1400 hours local time

Most people who visit the National Archives Building go to see the original copies of the American Declaration of Independence, Constitution, and Bill of Rights. While famous, impressive, priceless, and interesting documents, they represent only the tiniest fraction of the records maintained and stored by the National Archives and Records Administration. Though few tourists wandered beyond the *Rotunda for the Charters of Freedom*, any member of the public could become a certified researcher and gain access to the documents stored within. Though not the only reason for an ordinary

citizen to become a certified researcher, many genealogists took advantage of NARA's countless records (census records, Congressional private claims and private legislation records, court records, immigration records, military records, passenger lists, passport applications, post office records, and many other archived records) in order to construct detailed family histories. Of course, many of these documents were not made public until at least seven decades after their creation.

This did not present a problem for Harper, however. His notes indicated that Cornelia Roosevelt was born circa 1867, which meant that the records from at least the first sixty years of her life would be available. Just because the records were available did not make the task easy, however. It took several hours of laboriously sifting through documents to begin to assemble a portrait of who this woman had been.

Cornelia Maria Roosevelt, daughter of James Alfred Roosevelt, was born in New York City in February of 1867. She was one of five children, she suffered from asthma, much like her older cousin Theodore (who would later become President). Both as a child and as a young woman, she was described in several contemporary accounts as having a fascination with the natural and social sciences. In 1893, she married Jonathan Franklin Dark, a wealthy young British banker and investor who did business with her father through his firm, Roosevelt & Son. Cornelia and Jonathan maintained two houses, one in Westminster and one in Arlington. After Jonathan died under mysterious circumstances in April of 1898, Cornelia disappeared without a trace in August of that year.

Harper was reading a newspaper article about the couple's unusual disappearance when he spotted a photograph of the woman. The resemblance was uncanny - *far* too close to be a coincidence. And she'd married a man named "Dark"… Harper made a photocopy of the picture, gathered his notes, and walked quickly back to Command-02.

"I have it," Harper told Muir and Monica. "Look at this!" He set down the photograph of Cornelia Dark.

"Is that—?" asked Monica.

Harper nodded, laying a more recent photo next to it. "Dead ringer, isn't she?"

"Damn," Monica said. "I hope I look that good when I'm a hundred and ten."

Muir rubbed his chin as he read though Harper's notes. "Jonathan Franklin Dark," he grunted. "Wasn't he the son of 'Old Man Dark', one of MC&D's founders?"

"The same," Harper said. "No wonder the Central Records file was emptied. That's a hell of a skeleton to keep in the closet all these years."

"Yep," Muir agreed. "While you were out, Monica and I did manage to link Bain to the conspiracy. Turns out he paid both Arnold brothers in numbered Swiss accounts, only to transfer the money back out again once each brother kicked the bucket."

"Greedy bastard," Monica quipped. "But it is evidence the Powers That Be can take to the GOC if they want to mend fences. After all, Bain did whack one of their Regional Directors."

"We have enough to go to the O5 Council," Harper decided. "Monica, head up to the seventh floor and arrange a secure meeting with the following Overseers…"

« **Part XI** | **HUB** | **Epilogue** »

Checkmate

Command-02, Washington, D.C.
Monday, 26 December 1988, 2130 hours local time

This time, it was Harper waiting for Seven in the darkened conference room. Alone, she entered the dimly lit room to find the counterintelligence officer facing her from by the window, casually smoking a cigarette. "Ma'am," he said quietly.

"Mr. Harper," Seven replied. "Do you have a status report on your investigation?"

"I have," he said, blowing a puff of smoke. "Initially, it appeared as though some vast and unknown conspiracy had managed to penetrate every major organization operating behind the Veil. But that turned out not to be true. The information discovered in the warehouse was carefully prepared bait, gathered by a few individuals with access to nearly omniscient intelligence apparatuses. After one of the key conspirators called Director McDonnell's direct line from an untraceable number, Robert swallowed it hook line and sinker. Being the by-the-book operative he has always been, he reported it to his direct superior: O5-5. Five had, for years, handled counterintelligence, while you handled intelligence collection, until his untimely demise left a skill vacuum on the Council you offered to satisfy until the appointment of a replacement Overseer could occur, likely after the holidays."

Seven frowned slightly. The report was not going as expected.

Taking a breath on his cigarette, Harper continued, "The death of Five and Director McDonnell was easy enough for the conspirators to arrange, for they had knowledge of a device which could

explosively detonate a mundane-looking object from half a world away. This device, the explosive coins and their associated atlas, had been used by the Foundation once before to destroy an American naval vessel, causing a war that directly benefited this organization. Unfortunately, the coins had been stolen by Marshall, Carter and Dark after Fidel Castro had nationalized the site where they were stored. This presented little obstacle for the plotters, however, for they had inside access to the club's records. Whether Lord George Smith-Cumming was a willing member of the plot or an unlucky pawn sacrificed for the game, or even, indeed, if he had actually ever owned the coins at all, we may never know. But the red herring was there to confuse anyone who made it that far."

Seven swallowed. Her right hand ever so slowly slid towards the pistol concealed in the small of her back, moving carefully to avoid notice.

Harper exhaled, and said, "The conspirators were clever, really, for they held positions from whence they could not only monitor the investigations, but they could direct it. They could play both sides off the middle, and for a while it worked. My investigation took me to Europe, the Middle East, and the Soviet Union, while I'm sure the Global Occult Coalition's investigations required similar globetrotting. I was sent chasing the illusive C. In the meantime, the conspirators worked to either secure, or look as though they were securing, some SCPs with the capacity to not only inflict significant collateral damage if turned loose in a populated area, but also lacked stringent protective measures preventing their being seized with relative ease."

Seven's fingers felt the grip of her pistol.

"I would rather you didn't do that," Harper said, producing a weapon of his own with his right hand, his left still holding a cigarette. "I'm not finished yet," he said coolly. "You came to an agreement with Regional Deputy Director Keith Bain at the GOC, another of the key conspirators," Harper continued, "having him hire a drunk to kill my family ten years ago, so that I would agree to take a promotion that would eventually land me here: as the investigator who would be keeping you apprised of your own conspiracy to seize control of the Foundation. Unfortunately, Bain made a mistake. The drunk he hired

was his bodyguard's twin brother - the same bodyguard he used to assassinate O5-3 and his own direct superior as part of the conspiracy. By shooting his bodyguard, he neatly prevented the assassin from giving up the secret of his employer, while simultaneously becoming the hero of the situation for the GOC."

"Foundation-Coalition relations will be set back decades because of this," Cornelia said.

Harper shook his head, "Possible, but unlikely, given that the O5 Council provided the Coalition's leadership with incontestable financial proof of Bain's treachery. Greedy bastard, Bain. I understand they have placed him under arrest." Cornelia looked slightly ashen. Harper paused to take a breath on his cigarette, then continued. "I don't know who in the Chaos Insurgency you were in bed with, but having them hit Research Site-29 right after I left was a nice touch, as was leaving Ford around to say what had been taken. And, if he took the blame for the attack, so much the better."

If looks could kill, Harper would long since have been blasted backwards through the tinted window behind him. He was relatively unconcerned with dirty looks, however, as his pistol was leveled neatly at his adversary's chest. "I have been cleared to know the truth about SCP-006. Clever bit of acting, buying Sir James' service in the conspiracy with water from the fountain of youth. Unfortunately for you, I determined the real identity of C, Cornelia."

Cornelia Dark let out a quick, barking laugh, "You know nothing."

Harper smiled, "Sir James mentioned how you and he had first met: 'in university, one giving a lecture the other attended,' he said. I realize now that you were the lecturer, not him, despite the appearances of your ages. You've been planning this for a very long time. It's over now. You will spend the remainder of your natural life in as cold, dark, and damp a hole as the Foundation can find."

"Like Hell!" Cornelia snarled. With astonishing speed, a tiny pistol appeared in her hand out of the sleeve of her suit jacket. She raised her arm to fire. Two shots rang out, and Cornelia Dark, *née* Roosevelt, formerly O5-7, fell to the floor dead, two bullet holes through her heart.

"A pity," said a low voice. "It would have been nice to know who her contact in the Insurgency was." A figure stepped out of the shadows in the corner of the room. A nondescript man, unremarkable in nearly every facet of his appearance, he was O5-1, the first among equals of the O5 Council.

"I apologize, sir," Harper said respectfully.

O5-1 replied, "You need not worry, it was self defense. The cleaning crew has had more substantial messes than this to clean - they are getting quite remarkable at getting blood out of carpet."

"Yes, sir," Harper said.

"Now, Mr. Harper, I have spoken with the other Overseers," O5-1 said, "and we would like you to assume the duties of O5-7, effective immediately. Do you accept?"

Me? An Overseer? Harper thought to himself in surprise. He took a long moment to consider, then answered, "Yes."

"Very well," O5-1 said, producing a black identification card with a gold border, Harper's photograph, and 'O5-7' printed in gold. "Welcome aboard, Seven. The Council's first assignment for you is to oversee the closure of this conspiracy investigation. Allow me to make something perfectly clear: this never happened. There was never a plot to overthrow the Council or to seize control of the world behind the Veil. Your predecessor was not shot; she retired. Please see to it that Mr. Muir and Ms. Daniel understand how events took place, and see to it that all documentation reflects what happened accurately."

"Yes, sir," the Foundation's newest Overseer said.

"One more thing, Seven," O5-1 said, turning to leave. "Make sure you got them all."

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Cool War 2: Ruiz From Your Grave

>unzip C00L_war_2_ru1z_fr0m_y0ur_gr4ve.7z
Extracting 232 Files…
Extracted!
>del C00L_war_2_ru1z_fr0m_y0ur_gr4ve.7z
Deleting… Deleted!
>dir
> 001. Cool War: Death & Rebirth (Summary)
> 002. The Dawn Of A New Era
> 003. Where Fearful Feet Dare Not Tread
> 004. wowwee un kill ursefl
> 005. Deconstruction Of A God
> 006. Art Is A Gateway Drug
> 007. The Snipper Reborn
> 008. Joey And Overgang And Rita And Molly And Zombies
> 009. You Did What?
> 010. Fifty Percent Off Everything
> 011. Potential Tradeoffs
> 012. The Second Cool War Begins
> 013. I Can See The Light
> 014. The Madness Sets In Fast
> 015. Antidisestablishmentarianism
> 016. Pork Crackling Is Repulsive
> 017. The Characteristic Dipole
> 018. Messages Transmitted And Recieved
> 019. Anusparade Assholes
> 020. A Series Of Changes
> 021. A Broken Bookshelf
> 022. Raptor Orgies Are More Fun Than You'd Think
> 023. But Less Than You'd Hope
> 024. Actually A Lot Less Than You’d Hope
> 025. Allegory Of The Two Bothers
> 026. A Time Independent Algorithm
> 027. Noxious Fumes Fill The Area

> 028. The Byzantine Empire Was Secretly Aliens
> 029. The Obligatory Fanservice Story
> 030. Tumultuous Times And Nothing To Think About
> 031. Can I Taste Your Pupils
> 032. Agent Green Cartwheels Into The Story
> 033. Rice Paper Fish Catcher
> 034. Paper Burns Quite Well
> 035. But Not Underwater
> 036. The Barton Prophecies
> 037. An Uncomfortable And Awkward Handshake
> 038. Another Juan Bites The Dust
> 039. Nobody's Home
> 040. Cutting Coats And Throats
> 041. Mikan
> 042. This Statement Is Metaphorical
> 043. Nothing Is Canon, Everything Is Permitted
> 044. A Butt Too Fart
> 045. Getting To The Crux Of Things
> 046. Overgang Dood Eats A Sandwich
> 047. The World Seems Like Nothing
> 048. This Chapter Intentionally Left Blank
> 049. Rita Learns About The Birds And The Bees In The Worst Way
> 050. Tsun Tsun Dere Dere
> 051. Get Booked In To The Priory
> 052. An Eye For An Eye Leaves The Whole World Blind
> 053. As Would Masturbating Endlessly
> 054. Suddenly, NINJAS
> 055. Agent Green Disapproves Of All This Nonsense
> 056. DISCONNECTION ERROR
> 057. RECONNECTING
> 058. Nothing Is Better
> 059. Mared Gretchen Hosts A Rave Party
> 060. Seven New Characters Are Introduced
> 061. Seven Characters Die Unexpectedly
> 062. Conservation Of Momentum
> 063. Better To Have Nothing Than Everything
> 064. Some People Get Angry About Video Games
> 065. The World Collapses From Its Own Weight

> 066. Maybe Capitalism Is A Bad Idea
> 067. No, Never Mind, Better Than The Alternative
> 068. Futanari Titwhore Fiasco: *Live In Crimea!*
> 069. The Warmup Act
> 070. Et Tam Deum Poopy
> 071. The Life And Times Of Terry Shultz
> 072. A Slice Of Delicious Pie
> 073. War Criminals
> 074. Whore Criminals
> 075. Water On The Knee
> 076. "Legally Acquired Software"
> 077. A Dog Is Put Down
> 078. Because It Was Too Heavy
> 079. And Its Weight Resulted In Incurable Physiological Problems
> 080. It Was All Just The Dream Of An Angel
> 081. **`Anime Is Art Too, Guys`**
> 082. A Light Read Before Bedtime
> 083. I'd Rather Not Think
> 084. Someone Steals Aldon's Penis
> 085. Lacerations To The Sternum
> 086. This Is Not A Joke
> 087. Tremolo And Crescendo
> 088. Agent Clef Appears, Nobody Likes The Cameo
> 089. Nobody Appears, Agent Clef Likes The Cameo
> 090. You Can't Have Your Cake And Eat It Without Getting Fat
> 091. Eris, Anima, And Timothy Wonder How They Got Here
> 092. Wait Was That A Walrus
> 093. A Twisted Copper Wire Pair
> 094. 37 Years Of Backpay
> 095. A Library But Not, You Know, THE Library
> 096. Agent Green Shoots A Gun
> 097. Ruiz Dies Again
> 098. An Intermission To Keep You Hanging
> 099. Mutually Artsured Destruction
> 100. Why Aren't You Helping?
> 101. Overgang Loses Every Pair Of Glasses But Nineteen Of Them

> 102. Some More Events Transpire
> 103. This Isn't A Spelling Mistak It Is Never A Spelling Mistak
> 104. Fights
> 105. Knife Fights
> 106. Running Up A Bunch Of Stairs
> 107. Knife Fights On Top Of A Skyscraper
> 108. The Skyscraper Is Also A Rocketship
> 109. Knife Fights On Top Of A Rocketship Skyscraper
> 110. Everyone Dies Of Asphyxiation
> 111. A Mysterious Walrus Saves The Day
> 112. Cracking Knuckles Can Kill The Cartilage
> 113. Agent Green Is An Ineffectual Badass
> 114. Not On Opposite Day
> 115. Jesus Appears, Hi-Fives Everybody
> 116. Ruiz Gets Better
> 117. A Computer Mouse That Is Also A Biological Mouse
> 118. I Think I Lost My Keys
> 119. Fred Enters The Story, Shakes His Head Disappointedly, Then Leaves
> 120. Nested Loops
> 121. Do Not Pass Go
> 122. Pan To Left, Watch Tumbleweeds
> 123. Quantum Immortality
> 124. A Stylistic **De***c**isi*on
> 125. Cool Is In The Eye Of The Beholder
> 126. A Lull In The Middle
> 127. A Bulge In The Middle
> 128. Joey And Overgang Totally Make Out But No Homo
> 129. Scarlet Ninth Was Adopted
> 130. Your Mom Is So Fatwah
> 131. The Virus Spreads To The World
> 132. The Following Statement Is False
> 133. The Previous Statement Is True
> 134. Words In An Interesting Order
> 135. If A Bear Shits In The Woods, Does It Make A Sound?
> 136. Even Murderers Have Mothers

> 137. Rita Adopts A Stray Walrus That Seems A Bit Familiar
> 138. Eroticism Is Actually Communism
> 139. A Post Scarcity Utopia
> 140. Vomit Twice Removed
> 141. What's A King To A God
> 142. The Prescription For Sadness
> 143. Molly Stares Into The Void And The Void Goes Mad
> 144. Nothing Of Importance Happens In This One, Just Skip It
> 145. Ruiz Dies Again, Again
> 146. A Small Man Dances In A Red Room
> 147. Intermission That You Won't Understand, Plebian
> 148. The Friday Exhibitionist
> 149. Exclusive And Gate
> 150. Gotta Catch Them All
> 151. Also, Mew
> 152. [WAS THIS FUNNY THE FIRST TIME]
> 153. Joey Steals The Declaration Of Independence
> 154. Trial Of The Dragon
> 155. Rita's Walrus Was A Nazi Spy
> 156. Let Me Fetch Mein Kampfortable Chair
> 157. Death Of The Author
> 158. The Only Cure Is More Cowbell
> 159. Ruiz Gets Better Again
> 160. A Childhood Flashback
> 161. IT IS I, RUIZ, YOUR ARCH RIVAL
> 162. AND NOW I MUST DESTROY YOU
> 163. HYAAAAAAAAAAAAA
> 164. Ruiz Charges A Blast Of Ki (Part One)
> 165. Ruiz Charges A Blast Of Ki (Part Two)
> 166. Ruiz Charges A Blast Of Ki (Part Three)
> 167. Ruiz Charges A Blast Of Ki (Part Four)
> 168. Ruiz Charges A Blast Of Ki (Part Five)
> 169. Ruiz Charges A Blast Of Ki (Part Six)
> 170. Ruiz Releases A Blast Of Ki (Finally)
> 171. He Missed
> 172. And Hit A Bus Filled With Orphans
> 173. Oops

> 174. An Armenian Bodybuilder Exercises His Legal Rights
> 175. Coldposter
> 176. Special Delivery
> 177. Knuckle Dusting
> 178. Ruiz Duchamp: Ace Attorney
> 179. Mary Ann And Salah Appear For No Reason
> 180. Isabel Wondertainment Sucks A Lollipop Innocently
> 181. Yes, I Am Going To Keep Stealing Djoric's Characters
> 182. Overanalysis Of Meaningless Patterns
> 183. It's Super Effective!
> 184. An Existential Crisis
> 185. Ruiz Seeks The Oracle Of Delphi
> 186. I Just Lost The Game
> 187. Updating The NAND Of The Mind
> 188. It's Not Real, It Never Was, You Pathetic Fools
> 189. The Oracle Is Kind Of A Huge Bitch
> 190. wowwee go enlighten ursefl
> 191. If You Skip This Chapter Nothing Will Make Sense
> 192. Any Time, Any Place, You And Me
> 193. Rebirth Of The Author
> 194. Rita's Walrus Was A Double Agent
> 195. And That’s The Way We Do It
> 196. Incomprehensible Jibber Jabber
> 197. Entrails Gouged Out With A Dull Knife
> 198. Rita's Walrus Was A Triple Agent
> 199. Together, As Father And Son
> 200. A Stun Gun Is Quite Dangerous
> 201. Pico Acts Like A Crazy Guy And Nobody Is Surprised
> 202. Good Night Dead Society
> 203. And Choirs Of Angels Sing Thee To Thy Rest
> 204. Cat Sneezes Are Horrifying
> 205. The Only Difference Between Martyrdom and Suicide Is Press Coverage
> 206. Wait, Wasn't That A Panic At The Disco Song?
> 207. More Protein Powder

> 208. Knowledge Is Power, Power Is Current Times Voltage
> 209. You Cannot Destroy An Idea
> 210. Boku No Pico Wilson (DON'T GOOGLE THAT)
> 211. Two Houses, Both Alike In Dignity
> 212. A Confident Black Woman Asserts Her Individuality
> 213. Agent Green Accidentally Annexes Poland
> 214. War… War Never Changes
> 215. War Has Changed
> 216. Rita's Walrus Was Secretly On Her Side The Whole Time
> 217. And Is Also A Metaphor For Childlike Innocence
> 218. I Swear I Will Use Your Skull As A Chalice
> 219. Beams Of Light
> 220. A Foreboding Atmosphere
> 221. Everything Gets Super Serious
> 222. Agent Green Tries To Help But Can't Do Much
> 223. It Turns Out Every SCP Was Anart, Who Knew
> 224. Ruiz Dies For Like The Fifth Time
> 225. Then He Comes Back
> 226. Now He's Dead
> 227. Just Kidding, He's Fine
> 228. Rita's Walrus Is Released Into The Wild
> 229. Can Even I Be Saved?
> 230. No Pico, No You Can't
> 231. You Crazy Asshole
> 232. The End Of The Beginning
>oh god just fucking kill me now
Error: April Fools
>fuck

+ Show Writing Guide

- ask me on IRC or wikidot message (I am randomini, hello) if you can use the title since other people may be working on a draft of the title you want and we don't want people to stumble over each other in a horrible mess nor try to jam two pegs into one hole. please don't post stuff without

asking. that said I will almost certainly say yes it's just that I don't want like a gold rush like .tlds and stuff where people buy out all the 2-character tale names and sell them for millions to facebook or google ten years down the track

- use the titles used here rather than making new ones
- they should act as writing prompts for the thing that you do
- stories should be about anart, maybe
- or maybe not I dunno I'm not your mom

Allegory Of The Two Bothers

Seven New Characters Are Introduced

It happened after the fourth or fifth lesson with Legler. Laufer climbed on a stool just before anyone managed to leave and announced that there will be a meeting at the Coastal nightclub at nine and if anyone wanted to come and chat a bit, they are free to do so.

Which was, in Taman's opinion, a good initiative, but Laufer could've done it a bit less overtly as well. Legler raised an eyebrow but said nothing, and Yang politely covered her face behind papers to hide a smile.

Some students didn't even raise their heads to pretend they paid attention to Laufer, but some looked pensive. That was enough to reassure Taman that going on a meeting late in the evening to meet a girl who was a bit of a knife-nut wasn't a terrible idea.

Before she managed to pack up her pastels (an artist-class set she got for her birthday and preferred to supplies offered by Legler), she got approached by Delacroix, a short guy that always smelled like distillery.

"You're new too, right?" he asked. Taman tried not to wince at the stench. Something about this guy made her automatically not trust him, though his tone was friendly.

"It's my fourth lesson," she said. "And you've been here since the third one. Is that what you mean?"

"No. What I mean is that you are new to magic around you," he grinned apologetically. "I sure as hell am."

She paused and stared at him. Yang led her patiently few night ago through the warehouse but in the end she felt as lost as always. As much as Legler guided her with patience veiled behind insults and annoyed encouragements, she still felt new, a river fish suddenly

finding there is an ocean out there. She suspected before that Delacroix was new but she didn't want to ask. Being the only one here that was the first to touch that unknown world around her would be too good, and she risked a guess there were more.

"I'm Delacroix." he grinned at her and extended a hand towards her. "Maybe we can help each other out."

"Taman." She nodded, but didn't shake his hand. "That makes the two of us new in this business of…" she made a gesture in the air and he shook his head.

"No, there are few other guys, but they are not planning on going to Coastal, so I left them alone." A shrug. "That Laufer girl sure as hell behaves like a witch and I think some guys more wexed in that new world could help us out, maybe." he paused and grinned. "That is, if you're going."

"Maybe, yeah." She finished packing and shut her bag. His eagerness made her uneasy. "See you there then?"

"At nine, or… maybe we could meet earlier?"

"At nine."

Coastal was less of a nightclub and more of a bar with a bit of space for dancing. Taman arrived at 20:50 and was happy to see that Laufer, now staring intently at line of shots in front of her, wasn't the only one in the booth.

On the right to her was the tall guy that spent his last two lessons on inking something tirelessly on A3. Taman wasn't entirely sure if a glass in front of him contained water. On the left was Richter, a guy that helped her a bit when she tried her hand at sculpting, and his beer. He noticed her before she made a move and waved at her, grinning.

"You're late, Taman." He said, greeting her. The guy next to him chuckled.

"Actually, we still have ten minutes, James, it is your brain that is

late."

Richter made a shocked face and Laufer elbowed him before moving her attention to Taman.

"You're the pastels girl? I'm Laufer. This is Richter and this is Pull," She nodded at each man. "That's a pseudonym, not his name. You?"

"I'm Taman and yeah, I do mostly pastels," She sat next to Richter. "I don't quite know anyone here, really, you're all Legler's students?"

"Richter and Laufer are, I am not," Pull said. "I have been invited to his lessons by Laufer, she knows how eager I am to dwell on the topic of this type of art."

"Old dick did encourage getting friends, after all. On that note, anyone else we should be waiting for?"

Richter pointed at Delacroix and some girl that arrived at Coastal at that precise moment. He waved at them and the girl waved back.

"I'm Chryse." She introduced herself with a grin when she sat in the booth. Taman noted it wasn't a very natural smile. "How is everyone?"

"I'm Liam. Liam Delacroix," he smiled at Taman, she nodded at him, "I see a lot of us arrived, huh?"

"Wait wait wait, I have a question," Richter raised his hand and then pointed it at Delacroix. "You one of those sick fucks that steal names of dead artists to look more cool?"

Delacroix stared blankly at him and raised an eyebrow. "No." He said slowly. "My grandfather was French."

"Ah, fair enough then. My bad."

"What, there are guys that do it?" Taman asked and Laufer let out a short cackle before downing the first shot.

"Some. There are guys who go a bit extreme with being artsy. You

know, the types that get all," here Chryse slicked her hair back and made a duck face. "I am an artist so I am so amazing and misunderstood and I can only suck dicks of old masters."

"Ah, this type." Pull stared into his glass pensively. "Only heard about those, but maybe it is for the best I never met any."

"They're the worst." Said Laufer. "By the way, anyone tried to contact Aloe?"

"I called them a few times, but no sign of life." Richter sighed deeply. "*Again.*"

"No surprise here. Well, let's go order shit."

Agent Alex Cobalt carefully watched her colleagues while sipping a black lilac cocktail, watching and listening and waiting. One could always be fashionably late.

"You are *this* new?" Delacroix and Taman nodded and Pull smiled politely. "No wonder then that Legler berates you two so often. I do suspect everybody that you met today has at least some basic knowledge about anomalous world."

"Basic, it means there is more to that than 'anart'?"

They were left alone in the booth, Laufer left to get more alcohol and Richter and Chryse set off to the dancefloor to flirt with the rest of the bar. Before this moment, the topic of anart or Legler was naturally avoided, though Delacroix noticed that Pull was quiet - that is, until he casually asked them what anomalous pieces they have finished so far.

"It is not something to talk about in the public." Pull said after covertly looking around. "I do not want to hide all of this from you but I also wish for your safety. If there will be a chance, I will reveal more to you in a more safe environment."

"…that sounds like a line from a movie or something." Delacroix commented. Taman couldn't help but agree. Pull only sighed.

"I do realize that. But, truly, after what Legler showed you, do you still think normal rules apply to this world? What you witnessed was nothing but a small glimpse. But there are much more people invested in this sort of thing than just artists, and those people won't hesitate to harm you."

"Like, what, some sort of secret institution? A government thing? Some cult?" To Taman's surprise, Pull laughed.

"All of them, Taman, and so much more." Pull grinned. "As much as I wish to answer your questions now, let us do it this way: next week, after Legler's lesson, I will give you all an address of the safe spot we can meet at. In fact…" He glanced at a bar, where Laufer was busy pouring more deadly mixes into her throat, and winced. "Laufer has plans for us to meet in safer environment. For now she wanted just to get in touch, but we shall meet anyway, even if she deems you not worthy of her trust."

"She's more drunk than I get on a bad day, how is she supposed to check how… *trustworthy* we are?" Delacroix pointedly downed another shot and Pull shrugged.

"She will for sure try to get more people into our circle and I trust her judgement." Pull finished his glass of what turned out to be water.

Cobalt calmly sat next to Laufer at the bar and grinned to her as a greeting.

"Fancy seeing you here- Olcha, am I right?"

It took Laufer few seconds to recognize Cobalt's face, before she nodded.

"More or less," she said. "You pronounce it with a hard h."

"Ah, sorry. Olcha." Cobalt repeated, this time correctly and Laufer nodded, pleased. "I was supposed to meet a guy here and didn't see him so far. Since you're here, I thought maybe you would be better company."

Laufer regarded her empty glass thoughtfully. Cobalt for a second

thought she wasn't listening to her at all.

"I think there is someone left in the booth," she turned to check and pointed at it. Cobalt glanced in this direction. "Yeah, Pull's here with the kids. Go bother them. Now fuck off."

Cobalt raised an eyebrow but in the end she opted on getting another cocktail and retreating to meet the rest. She decided for not to not worry whether Laufer was suspicious or if she was simply this unpleasant.

"What's up?" she greeted them and all three almost jumped at the sound of her voice. Beforehand all three were deep in a discussion but Cobalt wasn't worried about that. She recorded everything anyway, any piece of missed conversation will be waiting for her on her laptop.

"Uh, hi?" The girl waved, as if unsure.

"If you are here for our meeting, you are around an hour and a half late." Said the tall guy. "But I suppose it would be too nice if someone was not late."

The blonde guy only grinned.

"I was supposed to have a date but the guy never came. So I thought instead of moping I would meet you guys." She sat in the booth next to the blonde guy and put her cocktail down on the table. "I wanted to chat with Olcha but she told me to fuck off, she's always like this?"

"She tends to have her moments." The tall guy shrugged. "I found that it is better to respect her wishes."

Cobalt introduced herself and the rest of the evening went relatively smoothly. She couldn't move the conversation onto the subject of anomalies in any way that would be natural, as most of the time references she threw were met with blank stares. Pull kind of retreated from the conversation anyway and either watched the dancefloor, where apparently two others went, or stared at Laufer's back.

Though Cobalt was fairly sure that at least Taman and Delacroix started to like her, and that's a start.

In the end Delacroix and Laufer got completely wasted and Pull offered to take care of them as he tried to break through the password on Delacroix's phone to find his address. Richter disappeared somewhere, according to Chryse he most likely ended up with a couple he danced with earlier. Taman did get a bit intoxicated, she wasn't used to drinking, and Cobalt suggested to drive her and Chryse back to the campus.

Chryse did try to talk with her, bless her heart, but Taman was still a bit too fuzzy around the edges to pay attention to her ramblings about the spot she found with old newspapers and half-rotten books.

She arrived in her apartment around three in the morning, stumbled around a bit trying to undress as quietly as possible so as not to wake her roommate, and in the end just fell onto the bed, not bothering with pajamas. A few clay butterflies sat on her shoulders and she allowed herself to smile before falling into deep sleep.

Next lesson was more or less similar to previous one, with minor exceptions. For starters, Legler and Yang were slightly busy at first, trying to find space for *pipes*. Chryse was trying her best to not giggle at absurdity of their situation, as Yang looked equally as puzzled as Taman felt, and Legler kept on failing at trying to find space for them.

Another thing, slightly less minor, was the fact that it was late afternoon. The light filling the room shifted accordingly to the hour, now sharply orange. Legler explained change of the usual hour with something about change of perspective, but Taman found her job that much more difficult, the contrast between colours dramatically dropping, blues shifting into violets and greens turning muddy. She tried to just sketch but later Legler sent her a derisive grimace, commenting that she was going the *easy way*.

Laufer was much more quiet. She spent entirety of the lesson cutting with knives into a chunk of black wood she brought with

herself, the light making all the edges much sharper. Usually she stuck with Pull, but he was absent, for once. Without him around, Laufer seemed to almost block out everyone else.

Taman noticed that almost everyone that came to Coastal were glancing at Laufer, more and more often as hours passed by. Just before they left, though, Laufer's eyes crossed with Chryse. She winked, and then, slowly, almost theatrically, put her hand into her skirt pocket. Winked again. Taman looked around, and buried her hand into pocket of her jeans, and found something indeed. She looked around, ensured that no one was watching, and put the object on her sketch.

The origami turtle was small and simple, made of a sheet of gorgeous origami paper. The patterns were geometrical and yet intricate in their simplicty, colour was difficult to determine thanks to the sunset, but the most surprising part was that it was still *moving*. Taman resorted to ignore this part, and started to unfold it. On reverse side of paper she found an address - she didn't knew where exactly it was, but the name rang a bell - and annotation to come there in exactly twenty-four hours.

She glanced again at Chryse, but she was too busy with applying glass glitter to wooden panel to pay attention. When Taman looked up, she saw that Yang, now sitting behind Legler's desk, was staring straight at her.

Pull's apartment - as this is what the address led her to - was humongous in comparison to her own little spot. Delacroix later murmured something about how the small amount of furniture contributed to that feeling, and indeed, Pull's place looked almost *empty*. They had not a lot of space to sit down, so Laufer pulled out pillows from his bed and threw them next to his lone sofa.

The only thing that seemed completely out of place was something that looked like a… bronze altar, of sorts.

"So, it's, like, a game thing?" Seeing Pull's mildly surprised face, she pushed on. "Like, the entire clockwork aesthetics you have going, is it, uh… a fanboy thing? Seems a bit too consistent for generic

steampunk…"

The room fell nearly perfectly quiet and Taman felt anxiety creep in. Pull seemed as if he was trying to stitch up a response but was completely at loss where to start.

"Same question here, but I like the stylistics, to be clear." Delacroix said between one sip and the other from his hip-flask.

"They're new, remember." Chryse murmured.

"No one is *this* new." Laufer eyed Delacroix in disbelief but seeing Delacroix shaking his head, she only sighed.

"Ok so you know how no one knows what anart is unless you are into it?" Richter started and Taman nodded. "Well, it ain't the only thing hidden from eyes of, you know, 'normal' people," he drew quotation marks in the air. "There are also organisations and religions that are invested in anomalous stuff, also hidden and secret. Technically we are all sort of pushing each other into secrecy."

"I told you two about this." Pull smiled. "I happen to belong to one of those religions. You see-"

"And to not get into preachy mode, he believes in clockwork god." Laufer ignored Pull's almost offended stare. "If you feel like listening up about some of that, you can always meet up later because I genuinely don't feel like hearing about all that stuff." She glanced pointedly at Pull. "*Again.* Not that it's not interesting, Pull, but I came here to talk about shit I want to *talk about*. Without any mics and cameras."

Cobalt allowed herself to let out a chuckle.

"Not too paranoid?"

"In this day and age you can never be too paranoid." Laufer pulled out her phone, turned it off and put it on a table. "Even social apps pick up on every word I say, just to keep capitalistic machine turning." She patted her palm against a table. "Now, if I can ask you to put your stuff here and turn it off."

Something about her tone of voice suggested it would be better to do as she said. All pulled out their phones (Delacroix put his tablet on the table too) and turned them off. Pull gently put his old Nokia at the top of the pile. Laufer nodded her head, pleased.

"Fantastic. Now first question. Anyone had contact with Aloe?" She looked around but everybody were quiet. Taman, Delacroix, Cobalt and Pull didn't know the person, but noted the shift in atmosphere.

"I tried to call them, but nothing." Richter finally said. "I don't even know if the phone number is the same. Never had their address though, but I'm fairly sure they live somewhere on the campus." He looked around, rubbing his hands nervously. "Anyone knows where they could be living?"

"Once they mentioned they have a roommate, that's all I know."

In following silence, Chryse was the first one that noticed not everybody were showing the obvious worry over the missing person.

"Aloe is another anomalous artist." She started explaining. "A sculptor, extremely skilled, they could do wonders with their pieces, really. Stuff Legler tries to teach us? Aloe got it naturally. Creating was like breathing for them, damn, I never saw them being stuck on anything they did, and they were just so *good* at what they did… But around a month or two ago, something just happened and they disappeared. Just like that. All contacts cut, didn't attend classes, nothing. As if they vanished from existence. We've been trying to reach them ever since, but nothing."

"We suspected activity from one of the organisations that kept track on anomalies, but even if it was them, we don't know shit. We don't even know Aloe's name, so we can't even check records on uni, anything." Laufer sighed. "Our hands are tied and all we can do is hope someone has contact with them."

"How could you know them and not know their name?" Delacroix looked mildly amused. "I mean, did you even *know* them?"

"Let's rephrase that." Laufer moved her (carefully manicured and very long) nails closer to his tablet. "We don't know their deadname.

It could be staring straight into our face, but we don't know it, and it's not something you ask someone anyway."

"Ah." Delacroix's voice was an octave higher. "Fair enough."

"Mind you, none of you know my name." Pull noted. "And somehow I do not see how that makes any friendships in any way difficult. And-" Pull stared straight at Delacroix. "I am not willing to share."

"What was their name then?" Cobalt sat up. "Maybe I could ask around in my circles too."

"Sam Adams."

"Shit!" Delacroix slammed his hands against the table. Pull's Nokia fell on the floor but nobody made the move to pick it up. "I know the guy- the gal- uh, them!" His hands trembled, so he hid them under the table. "Ginger, neat clothes but always filthy? Never said a word to them but wow…"

"I asked Legler once, though," Richter threw in, after Delacroix finished rambling. "He, well, he seemed for once to give rat's shit about something and asked me to tell him if I knew something."

"The old bastard caring about anything?" Laufer let out a chuckle. Cobalt shivered. "Sooner Hell freezes over and melts again."

"Dunno, he seems pretty chummy with that Yang girl, if anybody asked me." Richter noted. "But jokes aside, I think he was worried about Aloe."

"He liked them a lot." Delacroix finally found Pull's Nokia and put it back on table again. "Generally, liked their stuff, even praised them a few times."

"That's a lot, coming from old prick." Laufer glanced at Pull. "You have anything to drink?"

Pull left and brought some mugs and cups and put a bottle of water on the table, all next to the pile of phones. Delacroix sighed and resorted to hip-flask, Laufer snatched one of mugs.

"I am not used to having guests." Pull murmured. "And when it comes to Yang… Something about her irks me. I find myself unable to trust her."

"How is that? She's rather cool, I think."

As if on cue, everybody stared at her and Taman regretted opening her mouth.

"Be careful with that word." Chryse finally broke the silence. "*Cool*. Without getting into details, some people are sensitive about it."

"I think she is nice and has no bad intentions?" Taman tried again and Chryse nodded.

"She treats us rather impersonally, really." Richter noted. "Hard to say what she thinks."

"Well, she took me on a bit of a trip to the abandoned warehouses, with all the graffiti and art. She… created art out of someone's art, helped me realize some things about my own art too. I couldn't do anything today, but I managed to actually do *something* magical at home, so I think I can trust her. She helped me, all in all, I like her."

"Wow." Delacroix let out a cackle. "Pretty girls always get best stuff first, what can I do."

"Well, if you say she helped you I can guess she's ok." Chryse nodded.

"I still think she and the old prick are fucking." Laufer sipped a bit of her water to the sound of scandalized gasps from Taman, Chryse and Cobalt. "What, that sort of stuff happens, and if James says they are *chummy*," here she drew quotation marks in the air "Then I guess we can consider that."

"Even if, then what?" Delacroix shrugged. "None of my business. I just want to do nice clothes."

"Clothes?" Laufer laughed, but then she noticed that Delacroix was serious. "What sort of art is *that*?"

"I design. Maybe if you would look up once in a while from your knives, maybe you'd notice what I'm doing."

"*That's not art.*" Her fingers were back to Delacroix's tablet, but his hip-flask was too empty for him to care.

"It is, because you ain't the one to decide what's art and what's not. I'm not the knife-nut here."

"Ladies, ladies." Richter raised his hands. "Let's not argue, alright? We all do stuff that we enjoy, right?"

Laufer was digging her nails into tablet's alluminium cover, Delacroix's knuckles were almost white on his hip-flask. Richter tried his best to look relaxed but he was nervously looking between the two. Cobalt, next to Taman, looked ready to get between the two if something were to happen.

Taman had no idea what this *something* could be, and she prefered to not know.

"I'm still surprised you didn't go for painting, Delacroix."

"I do whatever the hell I want to, and if I were to decide one day I want to write bloody non-fiction about dick sucking or copy old paintings stroke to stroke - I would still be an artist."

"And whom you'd *influence* like this?"

Delacroix straightened up, bewildered.

"This is what art is, noob," Laufer pressed on. "I'm a living person and I'm here to shove my thoughts into your brain. Dead cunts are dead, they no longer matter, they don't think anymore. And me? I will cut into your nervous system until you see what I see."

Silence fell. As Delacroix struggled with his response, Cobalt raised her hand in the air.

"Then what, are you saying everything that dead artists ever did is no longer worth it? What, does death mean what we left behind doesn't matter anymore?"

"Exactly. If you die, you are dead, you stay dead. What does it matter to you?"

"It matters for others."

"And that's how old art doesn't matter to me."

Cobalt clicked her tounge, but in the end fell quiet, visibly pissed off.

"Is this why you gathered us here?" Richter asked. "To piss us off or to enforce yourself on us?"

"Not really. I just wanted to know if it was possible to find as many skilled and varied people as possible." She grinned. "You all have your own points of view, but you struggle to defend them. You can't define art, which is quite cute. I like you all."

"To the point, if you could?"

"Becoming cool is a bit difficult on your own."

"Where did Yang take you?"

Taman turned to see Cobalt, going in same direction after leaving Pull's house.

"Warehouses, they're on the east of the city." Taman waited for Cobalt to zip her coat and more or less get her things together. "I think a lot of local urban explorers like this spot, really. A lot of graffiti. Though Yang said it was all about changing environment, not the place itself."

"Interesting." Cobalt grinned. "Explains a lot why she took you, not Delacroix. He never managed to do a thing when he's just…" Cobalt here squinted her eyes and made a movement with a hand, parodying Delacroix working on his brocade. "I'm guessing it's kinda hard to change environment for a piece if all you are doing is working on one piece all the time."

"That's true. I still try to vary between mediums, I like pastels but sculpting is also fun and I just…" Taman sighed, trailing off.

"Same here. I was always more of an art history person, really, but turns out that according to *some*, this way of thinking is somehow wrong."

"Swap surnames with Delacroix, then? One step close to that."

Cobalt laughed.

"Never. I like blue too much."

« **Extracurricular Practice** | **HUB** | **Testing the Flow** »

Creepy-Pasta

The SCP Foundation's Collection of CreepyPasta is being moved off-site! All CreepyPasta which has been written by members will still be available (and encouraged!) here, but all CreepyPasta *not written by members of the site* has been moved to `The Archive`. Go there and check it out! If you're interested in helping out with continuing the archiving process, contact `Troy` for information. The password to join the Archive is "indigo". Add all you like.

Stand Alone Stories

An Audience by **`Djoric`**

An Old Woman and her Garden by **`fieldstone`**

Cave Paintings by **`DexX`**

Clouds by **`minmin`**

Cold by **`Dr Gears`**

Daddy Long Legs by **`Arlecchino`**

Field Man by **`Cherry Pict`**

Fire by **TroyL**

Grease by **mlister**

Hands by **A Random Day**

I Can't by **Nacht Ruine**

I have something to share. by **tunedtoadeadchannel**

"It Might Have Been". by **Zachary Maxwell**

Leviathan by **fieldstone**

Life Saver by **Dr Gears**

Love Springs Eternal by **minmin**

Meat by **Corerosion**

Message In A Bottle by **HK-016**

Monsters by **Etherealize**

.::Only |n Drea{{m}}s-- by **tunedtoadeadchannel**

Pitter-patter by **Corerosion**

Play by **Dr Gears**

Progress by **Djoric**

Shy by **Dr Gears**

Smoker by **Arlecchino**

The Asylum by **Raaxis**

The Little Buck-Toothed Boy: A Fairy Tale by **psul**

The Manistique Broadcast by **Kalinin**

The Other Side by **minmin**

The Price of Beauty by **Zachary Maxwell**

The Ragdoll by **Prattler**

The Real Monsters by **DrClef**

The Runner by **Djoric**

The Tailor by **Arlecchino**

The Taste of Leaves by **Zachary Maxwell**

The Woven Man by **minmin**

Two Ships, Passing in the Night by **Zachary Maxwell**

untitled1.txt by **TheDuckman**

You Never Visit Me Anymore by **Zachary Maxwell**

Sub Libraries

Dr. Gears Storytime Entries
Surprise! Happy Birthday!
Surprise! Happy Birthday! Again.
Surprise! Happy Birthday! Once more...
Surprise! Happy Birthday! Still?
Surprise! Happy Birthday! Now, see here...
The Works of Doc Burns

An Audience

The walk always took half an hour. Half an hour there, half an hour back, from the outside. But it always felt longer when he actually walked the tunnel. It felt like time was being stretched out, that his quiet footsteps would softly echo for endless miles.

Tonight was a long, long walk. He could feel the weight of the earth pushing down on his shoulders. The air in the tunnel was cold, the smooth concrete walls frigid to the touch. The only thing to pierce the darkness was the bright cone of his flashlight.

This was a very old place. Very old indeed. It didn't look it. To the eyes it was just a maintenance tunnel, bare concrete, an occasional exposed pipe. There was time stored up in these stones, soaked up like a sponge, filling the place as it slowly oozed out of the cracks in the walls and rust on the pipes.

His flashlight bobbed. He kept walking. Time passed.

Then, finally, already, the arch, where there would have been a door. There was no door anymore. The words carved on the lintel had been worn down long ago. Words had little power here. He stepped through.

He reached the hall, though he only knew it from the breeze, and the feeling of the walls dropping away into the shadows. There was only darkness there. He kept walking. His footsteps did not echo.

Shapes stirred in his peripheral vision. Ghostly lights flickered to life. A graveyard of broken and cracked computer monitors shed their sickly light. Nothing was ever displayed. All around him he could see the dim outlines of scrap wires and old circuit boards and junked towers. He could hear rustling and laughter from the shadows, occasionally see the glowing reflection of an eye. And then there was the throne.

The great seat amidst the rusting, decaying garbage was occupied. As it always was. The form of the king was tall, thin, shapeless and still shaped, somewhat like a man, wearing a pale face and dark clothes. A courtesy. The king wore no crown. The king had no need for one.

Around the throne sat the king's attendants, waiting at attention, their faceless faces smiling for eternity. They turned to watch the man as he approached the throne, their empty eyes looking as one gaze.

The man stopped. He bowed, and then righted himself.

The king bent down, extending a hand of long, bony fingers. The shadows around it crept and grew like the roots of some gnarled, ancient tree.

The man took a paper bag from his coat pocket. From it, he counted out twenty-one pebbles into the king's bony hand. The king's hand closed and the king sat straight again.

The man was free to leave now. He did. The walk back felt shorter this time. He shrugged off the thought.

Twenty-one pebbles for twenty-one children who would be gone by the morning. Maybe not this morning, maybe not next, but some morning. Twenty-one children, delivered every year. That was the deal that had been kept for a long, long time.

Deals have to be kept.

An Old Woman and her Garden

An old woman fought loneliness with her garden, passing the time between naps by singing to the things that grew there. She loved every one of her crops, from the tiny sprouting needles to the hard stalks that swayed and flexed above the ground. They shined white in the day, and at night the small patch gleamed against the side of her house like teeth in a massive jaw.

The old woman had lived by herself for many years. Her house would be small if she had a family, but because she was alone, it was the perfect size. She filled the house with things—figurines, *National Geographic* back issues, litter boxes for the dozen cats that came and went—until she was snug inside.

She had lost her husband years ago. There was nothing left of him except for many thousands of dollars, tucked away in an old coffee can. The old woman clipped coupons and shopped at discount stores. She folded her leftover newspaper and shopping bags and stacked them until they reached the ceiling.

The old woman never grew anything except bones in her garden. She had never tried to plant anything else. She didn't know if regular things would grow from her soil, and never thought about it aside from brief moments of curiosity. She never tried to plant bones anywhere else, so she never found out if her house was special or if she just had a talent.

It had started by accident with Osiris, one of her cats. He died one night—an ancient, scrappy beast who moved on peacefully. She buried him before his body was cold. Almost two weeks went by before she noticed it: a sliver, eggshell white and sharp as a pin.

She didn't know what to do, so she laid down plant food and watered it every day. Over weeks, the sliver grew and grew. Eventually, a pink cap formed over its end. The old woman expected the cap to become a flower, but little by little it took shape and

became a joint. Another bone grew out of the joint, and after a few more weeks there was a kitty's arm, skeletal but easy to recognize, claws gripping the earth. She cared for it, like all her beloved pets. Rough cords grew little by little from the base of its arm to the ends of its fingers. She knelt beside it night and day, singing songs and petting it gently, so it would know it wasn't alone.

During the months that it took for the arm to grow, the old woman tried planting bones of other kinds. Chicken bones. Bones picked from mice the other cats left at her doorstep. Bones from birds she found rotting on the sidewalk. Even the bones of a small deer she found at the side of the road. Some of them grew, but none as well as Osiris.

She tried putting down blood flakes and hair and eventually ground beef straight from the grocery store. She poured chicken broth and carrot juice and raw eggs into the soil. Still, most of the crops turned dull yellow, like rotten teeth. They became brittle and collapsed without taking root.

Osiris got healthier and healthier. One day she saw the arm moving, straining for a chunk of tuna she had left there. She rushed to dig him up. Osiris shook himself off. Clumps of dirt stuck to his mossy coat. He opened blank, white eyes as dull as quartz. He yawned and she saw a set of perfect granite teeth.

It wasn't quite Osiris, she knew that. But it was close enough for her to take it in. The thing would lay beside her at night. It wasn't warm, like Osiris used to be. It was damp and smelled musty and it didn't purr, but the old woman knew that it was hers. It brought her presents—rats and raccoons and, occasionally, dogs that it somehow dragged from the neighborhoods around her house. She never planted any of these because she was afraid that if they grew up, they would remember what had happened.

As time went by, it became harder and harder for the old woman to take care of herself. She began to forget which of the crops in her garden had been there the longest, which ones she could expect to blossom into life, which to uproot and hide in her shed. Eventually she couldn't remember how many there were, and became confused at all the holes appearing in the dirt.

It was after she actually saw one emerge on its own—a bat that she didn't remember planting—that she knew she needed help. An old woman shouldn't have to finish life alone. She thought about it for a long time. It wouldn't be easy to get what she needed, but the old woman was alone and had little left but time. She considered sneaking into a hospital or a university, but she had never been one to break the law and didn't know how to begin going about it. So the old woman started her old rattling car and drove around, always late at night. It took a long time, countless miles along lonely roads, but she found what she was looking for eventually. It was very late at night when she saw the pickup truck, flipped over, lying crumpled at the bottom of a small ravine.

The old woman stopped her car and made her way carefully down to the wreck. Hope started to flood from deep inside her, filling her up, making her warm. She'd found exactly what she needed. The young man hung upside-down, trickling blood, face cast in a delicate sleep. He was beautiful. It was hard work, on her hands and knees, hacking away at the seat belt with her rusted garden shears. It took a while, but she got him down eventually, careful not to let him fall on top of her. Dragging him up the hill was even harder and she was afraid that someone would stop, would see her and take her to jail; but the old woman did not give up and eventually she got him into her passenger seat. The rest was easy.

She planted him in the patch of ground behind her house and waited. She mixed the soil with steak, and tomato juice and bacon and sometimes beer—everything she could think of to make a man grow. She bought a portable radio and played music for him, always singing along. At night she held his bony hand and knew that the loneliness was almost over.

The old woman gradually cleaned her house. She hired a truck to take away the magazines and shopping bags. She bought a machine to shampoo the cat smell from her carpets. On the night her new husband stirred she was there, waiting. She helped him up and gently brushed the dirt from his cool skin. She looked into his dry white eyes and pressed his rough cheek to hers. She took him by the hand and led him inside.

She showed him around the empty house—nice, but now a little

cramped. As she led him down the hall to the bedroom she told him about how they'd have to renovate. They needed space for children, if they were going to make it a home.

Cave Paintings

In a barren mountain range in northern Europe is a secluded cave.

Deep inside is a wide chamber that appears to have been used in ancient rituals. The walls of the roughly circular space are densely covered in cave paintings. At first glance, they seem much like those found in other caves in that part of Europe, rendered in red and brown ochres.

Look closely, however, and you will see that the most common figures depicted are subtly non-human. They are humanoid, but slightly hunched, and while it is hard to be sure owing to the primitive style of the art, each figure appears to have two short, conical horns on its head, and a hint of a tail.

Look more closely still, and you will find some more traditionally drawn human figures. They are being hunted by the others, run through with spears, battered with stone axes. In some scenes the horned figures appear to be roasting humans over open fires, or feasting on human-looking limbs.

The paintings are disquieting, but they are just old pictures. The scenes they depict happened countless years ago, if they even happened at all. A determined traveller seeking shelter from a blizzard might decide to ignore the paintings and make camp. He may even light a fire.

A well-used firepit lies at the centre of the room, slightly raised on a natural mound. Should a fire be lit there, wavering shadows will be cast onto the painted walls. For many, seeing their own silhouette superimposed on those eerie paintings will be the last straw, driving them to try their luck outside with the snow.

Others will stay.

Sometimes, nothing will happen. These lucky travellers will emerge

the next morning, haggard from a night filled with half-remembered nightmares, anxious but alive.

Other times, shadows will move on those walls, shadows cast by nobody present in the room. The wavering firelight will blur their outlines, make them hard to pick out, and some observers may believe them to be a trick of the light. Watch closely, though, and you will see that the shadows resemble hunched figures, perhaps with small horns, and maybe a hint of a stubby tail behind them.

These figures will gravitate toward the shadows of those who are taking shelter in the cave. They may appear to stand over their sleeping forms. They may appear to be holding weapons, like spears or rough axes.

Often, a lone traveller sheltering in the cave will never be seen or heard from again. Their fate will remain unknown.

However, those travelling in a group will be woken by screams in the night. They will look for the source of the screams and find that one of their number is missing, their bedroll empty. If they happen to look at just the right place on the wall, they may see the wavering shadows of figures who are not present in the room, or at least not visible.

The fire will be low and red, so the shadows dim and soft-edged, but it will appear that a struggling form is being speared and clubbed by multiple assailants, and then dragged away, out of the circle of firelight.
The screams will fade slowly, seeming to sink into the rocks themselves.

And is that a new cave painting on the wall the next morning? Surely not - the ochre it is painted in is just as old and dry as all the rest. No, no, that picture of a man being gutted by horned figures must have always been there.

Clouds

Looking at clouds from the ground is a rather absorbing experience. The educated human mind sees the majestic plumes of white as mere wisps of crystallised water vapour and dust particles in the higher atmosphere, but deep inside, there remains an early spark of curiosity and wonder, such as displayed by advanced apes and very small children. This spark does not see wisps of vapour and complex crystalline formations, but birds and beasts and faces, carriages and palaces, entire mountains and fortresses on the move across the azure-blue sky.

From above, this feeling only grows. As one rides in a rickety metal tube ten thousand metres above the ground, soaring into the sky, the educated human mind gives way to the childlike blossom of wonder. Below you, a sea of clouds wave and ripple to the shores of a distant land, and vague shapes of arcane gods drift past the triple-paned glass, where you are safe and pressurised and sound. And all the while, undefined smoky cumulonimboid beings watch from afar, their anvil-shaped tops spiralling yet higher into space.

This was what I told my seatmate on the two o'clock flight to Sydney, as I rolled up the windows and marveled at the view. The flight had so far been uneventful, with the only amusement being Greg's unfortunate incident at check-in, so any distraction from the plain sterile interior of the plane was very welcome to me. Greg, however, did not share my enthusiasm and appreciation of such natural wonders, and merely grunted in reply before taking a long sip of God knows what he managed to smuggle onto the plane.

Soon, even the clouds failed to entertain me and I slid the shutter down just as the plane made a left swerve over the Pacific, catching the glaring sunlight between panes of glass. From then on I resorted to browsing the in-flight magazine, fiddling with the remote, and staring at my hands to pass the time. Time drew on, nothing of note happened, and I fell asleep nodding on the tray table.

It was Greg who woke me up when the trouble started. "Hey. Hey, man," he whispered, lightly slapping me awake. "Up, up, up. Captain said something about bad turbulence, so tray table, remote, window shades, all of them up. And wipe your mouth."

I sat up blearily, swiping a hand across my chin. "How long's it been?"

"West Coast time reads seven twenty-three, so that'd make it about four hours. I think we crossed the date line or something, it's still bright out there."

I returned my seat to the upright position and took a peek out of the window. Sure enough, orange half-light streamed in through the crack. "I don't think that's how the date line works, Greg." Still, the long daylight hours were odd. I made a mental note to look it up once we reached solid land and an internet connection.

Greg obviously was not lying, for as I stowed the table and remote, the plane began to shake. I drew up the window shades to a grandly terrifying sight: the majestic white sea was now black and choppy, swirling and churning in silent twists and twirls. The sun still shone, but it was blazing through a gap in the top of a sparking dark cloud, too close to the wingtip for comfort. The wind must have been extraordinary, because the cloud did not drift aimlessly, but kept close pace with the wingtip. For a moment my imagination took over, and the sun shone like a red ominous eye, blazing amidst black tentacles of vapor and lightning, reaching out towards the plane like a predator out of the abyss.

Through the P.A, the captain reminded us to keep calm and strap down. Overhead and underfoot, aluminum plating and stray luggage hummed and shook. The on-screen flight information showed discouraging numbers— altitude, 13 000 metres. Airspeed, 900 km/h. Headwind, 110 km/h.

Hold on a moment. If the cloud was following the plane, then *how in God's blue sky was it drifting against a hurricane-force wind?*

This thought coincided with an equally dreadful noise: like pebbles in a hubcap, but coarser, and louder, enveloping the entire titanium

frame of the plane until even the blast of the engines was drowned out in this surreal static. The cloud now had swelled to a frightfully enormous size, with angry electric whips flashing all around the aircraft. The sun was barely visible, merely a spot of red haze amidst swirling, sparking black. The plane was suddenly lifted up, up, up, and the PA system exploded in a screeching whine. Greg was pressed against the front seat, hands cupping his head, while I clung to the armrest, hunched almost double. Several someones screamed. There was a cry of thunder, and the entire plane was flung like a mere toy, reeling from an unseen impact. Then another scream, this time from the seat in front of me.

I turned to look at the thin, manicured finger madly pressed against the window, following the contour of flesh towards the 3-layered pane of glass ("Vacuum-sealed Grade Diamond A", proclaimed the dealer's mark), dragging my gaze out to the unknown air beyond. There was something inside me that protested not to look, never to look, but it was too late and my eyes were firmly planted on a thing outside the plane. At first I saw nothing. Then a little switch went on in my mind, and everything snapped into place.

Some *thing* was plastered against the glass, milky and flaccid, the complexion of an engorged slug. Lining it was a good number of suckers, pressed hungrily against the window and pulsating to the tune of an alien heartbeat. Looking closer, the suckers were teethed, and terrifyingly so, for those were far too sharp, and far too many. Then the thing at the window *shivered*, and the numerous teeth clawed against the glass like hungry cats, and the screaming started up again, this time from my own throat. I scrambled away from the window, pressing my body as far in as possible, and slammed the window shutter down with a snap. Around me, panic and terror took hold as the plane groaned and compressed under the chattering static sound. Greg was crying.

The next part remains hazy in my memory. I remember a mighty crack running along aisle 32, as pressurised air whistled out and scores of pulsating, cloudy *things* hissed into the fuselage, innumerable little mouths clattering and snapping. I remember passengers being picked out of seats like grapes, as the slippery *things* coiled and chewed around them. The section I was in began

to fall, tumbling out of the terrible gnashing cloud, and I caught a glimpse of the body behind the thing:, half-smoke, half-flesh, grotesquely inflated with unknown wispy gas. And the eyes, large and horrible and *human*, peering through the dark mists, intently examining its prey. Then I fell further, through the cloudy sea and into a blue, shattered sky.

I think I might have somehow undone my seatbelt, for all of a sudden I was falling alone, down towards the foaming ocean. The impact with the water left me unconscious, and the next thing I remember is sitting up in a bed, back in a brace and leg in a splint. They told me it was a true miracle that I was found by a lone fishing vessel, delirious and babbling about living clouds and toothed tentacles. It was in the hospital that I started having nightmares, and occasionally wake up screaming from a terror in a dreamscaped sky.

There were no other survivors, nor bodies recovered. Much of the wreckage was carried away by the current, but a sizable fragment washed up on a Fijian shore several weeks after the incident. The part which made me throw up in my newspaper was the picture, showing a line of small holes neatly punched along the metal. Tooth marks.

I keep myself indoors if I can help it, and my roommate brings me groceries every week. She hasn't heard the full story of the attack in the skies and the thing in the clouds, and neither will anyone else, with the exception being several weary fishermen in the middle of the Pacific. This manuscript will remain sealed until my time of death, which I believe will be upon me soon and swiftly. Until then, I shall take my pills, say my prayers to whatever God that remains up there, and keep well away from the windows.

There was a thunderstorm directly overhead since yesterday morning, and it hasn't cleared up yet.

Cold

This story is actually 100% true. I've switched names around for privacy's sake, but I assure you that every bit of this is real. Not the normal sub-reality of most “real world” creepypasta, but actual not-shitting-you real. It's tempting to plump it up a bit for more of a punch, but I don't think that's fair. I may add a bit to the descriptions here and there, but the narrative remains unchanged.

My oldest daughter is actually my wife's, from a previous relationship. I've been in her life since she was less then a year old, however, and if you ask her or me, I'm her daddy. Anyway, she goes to visit her biological dad Eddie every other weekend. We normally go to her grandparent's house (Eddie's parents) to drop her off, and sometimes end up sitting and talking for a bit with them while we wait for my daughter to get ready to go, or if Eddie is running late.

Eddie's dad is Paul, and is an…interesting man. A Viet-Nam vet, he's a big bear of a man, and seems to have a similar personality to a rather large dog. One who looks like he'd rip your face off, but has a heart of pure marshmallow cream. He also, apparently, has a very healthy fascination with the paranormal, as we discovered during one of our little conversations.

It was shortly after “White Noise” had come out on video, which we had recently seen, and we had drifted to the topic of EVP (Electronic Voice Phenomenon) in general. The idea of recording the voices of the departed on tape was both fascinating and rather creepy, and seemed easy enough to try. Paul was silent, but listened intently as we talked, and nodded along as his wife stepped in to tell us about a road past a haunted house. Supposedly, you could hear the sound of a dragging shovel if you parked on the road around dusk, the same shovel that the former farmer had used to decapitate his family before hanging himself. As soon as she finished, Paul spoke up, saying “Let me show you something…”

He went to collect a small cassette tape player, and put it on the

coffee table. He smiled, then said that, many years ago, his mom had become very sick. Paul said his brother Bill had been trying to take care of her, but eventually hospice had to be called in as she continued to decline. When she passed, both brothers were devastated, but set about the morbid task of laying her to rest as best they could. The funeral was suitably gloomy, with rain and gathering storm clouds, and the little hillside plot looked obscenely lonely under the dark clouds. The mourners left cold, muddy, and even more depressed.

The storm hit hard that night, pushing trees and knocking out power for a good portion of the area, Paul's house included. They spent a candle lit night listening to the wind howl and the rain claw at the windows. In the morning, Paul woke to his now-restored phone ringing. Bill was on the other end, sounding very worked up, and told him he needed to get over to his house right now. Paul asked what was wrong, but Bill just said it'd be easier if he just came. He dressed quickly and set out, sidling around trees, downed power lines, and work crews.

Bill was waiting on his front porch. He quickly pulled Paul inside, asking if he'd gotten any calls last night. Paul said no, that a tree had taken out all his lines, and they'd just gotten service back that morning. Bill said that, after the funeral, he'd driven around for a while, just clearing his head, or trying too. When the weather turned especially bad, he'd headed for home. As he'd gotten out in the driveway, he'd heard his phone ringing inside. Bill ran in, just in time to hear the beep of the answering machine as it finished taking a message. Before he'd been able to take off his soaking coat and shoes, the power had died, and he'd been unable to check his messages until that morning. As soon as he'd listened, he'd called Paul.

Paul tapped the cassette player on the coffee table. “This is the tape from his machine. He wouldn't tell me what the message was, wanted me to tell him what he heard.” He grinned that one smile that people use around a camp fire in the gloom of night, and pressed play. We leaned in as smooth static started from the tape. After about twenty seconds, a strange gurgling noise started. It's hard to describe…similar to thick, sludgy water moving through a confined

space, like a narrow pipe or drain. It was sloshing and bubbling, and very bizarre. This went on for about eight seconds, then there was a sudden gasping noise. A voice came on, and it was chilling. It sounded strained and half-full, like an exhausted runner trying to speak with a mouth full of water. It strained and gurgled a moment, then hissed out with the sound of chattering teeth “It's…cold…”.

The sloshing returned for a few seconds, then the tape ended. I stared at Paul, asking “The hell was that?”. He smiled, saying that he'd asked the same thing. They'd listened to it three more times, just to be sure of what they were hearing. It wasn't the strangeness of the tape that had struck them so much, and had sent Bill and Paul hunting for alcohol at eight in the morning. It was the familiarity. Paul said then, and said now, that he will swear on God, his children and everything he holds dear, that the voice on that tape is his mother.

They had been rather shaken, and Paul had driven home shortly after. After getting home, he'd gotten a phone call, which he'd picked up with no small amount of nervousness. It was from the funeral home. They'd called to inform him of a situation at the grave site. It seemed the rain had caused some flooding. His mother's plot, still soft from the digging, had turned to mud and partially washed away. Her casket, they assured him, was exceptionally waterproof, and that any issues including the replacement of the soil were to be handled by them free of charge.

Paul thanked them, feeling numb, and asked if they were sure about the coffin. They said they were going to check for water damage, but that everything appeared to be unchanged. It was just some of the topsoil, the upper layers, nothing serious. He went through the rest of the conversation on auto pilot, hanging up as the funeral director apologized again for the inconvenience. Paul just sat, wondering how waterproof it really was in a coffin. About how it would feel to be trapped, slowly sinking in a tide of sludgy mud. About how a soul, perhaps not entirely divorced from the body yet, might react to that cold, clinging grime. About how it might even call for help.

My daughter picked this moment to come bounding in, long on sugar and short on sleep. We left, Paul grinning at my obviously chilled expression, and the ride home was a bit quieter then normal. That night, all I could think about was the sound of that gurgling, that

drowned voice hissing through clenched, clicking teeth.

I haven't asked about the tape again, and it hasn't come up in conversation since. I love the paranormal, but honestly haven't experienced too much of it in my life. A few odd noises in the night, a UFO in the middle of the day, and one unidentified animal in the woods comprise the sum total of my experience. I can't say what that tape is. I can't even say if it's real or not. All I can say is that my interest in EVP has been drastically reduced.

Daddy Long Legs

It is, upon reflection, the legs that were the problem.

Certainly, my eyesight hasn't been strong enough for a long time to distinguish those loathsome features. That disturbing thorax, jointed into those long legs, casting a greater shadow than they have any right to. Yes, it must be the legs. I'm almost *certain*. It's in the name after all-Daddy Long Legs. Such a peculiarly affectionate title for such a twisted creature.

As a boy, when my eyes were stronger and my knowledge of the world less, I thought them demons. Nightmares come to drag me to some terrible shadowland. I would run, howling and shaking with fright, to beg my mother to take it away. It rather disgusted my father, a big bully of a man, whose definitions of manliness and fortitude were hard to reach for a grown man such as himself, let alone a young boy. He would sneak into my room at night, and release them, leaving me to wake up surrounded.

I'm sorry, but I need you to keep still. Here. Let's try this. Let me know if you feel any tingling.

In a sense, I suppose this shock treatment did have a positive effect. I first struck back at them on one of those hateful mornings, wrapping my hand in a sock to crush the life out of one crawling on my arm. Terrified of letting it touch my bare skin, I held it at a distance, watching those legs thrash in their death throes. I had fantasized about killing them before, but their unsettling speed always made such actions seem foolish and unlikely to succeed. An up close and personal action was unprecedented, and empowering.

After that, it wasn't long before I began hunting them, extinguishing those vile souls one by one. A pogrom starting in my back yard and working out into the forests. The sock was exchanged for a pair of gloves, which worked well enough for a time. It was on one of these excursions that I noticed it first. One of the freshly slain was moving-

its leg twitching erratically. With a growing horror, I wondered if it was coming back to life. I panicked, the image of my former victims pursuing me like some fearsome legion flooding my mind. I fled the woods, hiding in my room. It was then that I determined that the gloves were not enough, my brain rationalizing the fact that a stronger impact must be needed. My father's heavy yellow handled claw hammer served this purpose well.

I'm afraid I will need you to pray quietly, in your head. You're rather distracting me. Quite rude.

Soon my excursions began anew, and at this point, now a young man of eighteen, I began to see them lurking on people. Nausea struck me as I saw them crawling along the arm of a bus driver in the street, as he went about his pre-set path, unperturbed by the small forms scaling him with those long legs. My vision went grey, as I realized one day, that the pastor in front of me had a pair of tiny legs edging over his clerical collar.

My mind boggled until it occurred to me that they must have realized I'd been hunting them and began to take precautionary measures. I had seen spectators, watching and muttering to themselves as I smashed carapace after carapace. At the time I thought them simply enjoying my good works, but in the light of this new revelation, I realized what they were. Sentries. An attempt to follow my patterns. Learn my strategies. Horrified. I fled home.

It was late that night when a solution occurred. Slowly crawling forward in my mind, ponderous and inevitable. If they were truly being used by these arachnids, then they were worse than dead. I had already learned well. Dealt with their masters. I had to handle the servants. It would be mercy. Freeing them. Letting them onward to whatever reward awaited them. Burdened with new purpose, I went out that very night.

You may be wondering why I am telling you all of this. You've seen me on the street, giving you a startled look. You see, though you may not know it…they have you too. Shhhhh. Shhhhhhh. Don't cry. It's not your fault. It's simply the facts. But you have no need to worry about my qualifications for the task of freeing you. It's been a long time since that bus driver. And I've since learned that a

hammer will work just as well on a man as it does on monsters…

Field Man

When I was little - I, that is Crackles, not an unnamed creepypasta protagonist - I went on a lot of road trips with my dad and my brother, almost always to Idaho to visit family. We passed by a lot of fields. Sometimes they had wheat, others had corn, others were littered with bales of hay. On occasion we'd see herds of cows. But the fields that just looked like several empty acres of dirt often baffled me. Were they not being used anymore? Were they freshly planted, with no new plants visible yet? Did nobody own them?

One summer, when I was eight years old, we were driving through Iowa along Interstate 80. One of those empty dirt fields caught my attention, not because it was particularly fascinating, but because there was a man in a brown coat standing in it with his back to the road. As our car passed by, I noticed he was turning slowly so that he was always facing away from me. I watched him until the car dipped over a little hill and he - and his dirt field - disappeared.

I asked Dad if he saw that. The 'field man'. He didn't. My brother hadn't either, as he'd been asleep since Illinois. I'm not certain if it was real, a very vivid dream, or a half-remembered bit from a film seen many years ago. Memories of small children can easily lie.

Sometimes, nearly ten years later, I find myself driving along Interstate 5 and looking out for the field man.

Fire

I am followed by fire.

It sounds really, really weird, I know, but it's true. Every house, every apartment I've ever lived in has burned to the ground. Even stranger—it's predictable. If I lived somewhere for six years, six years after I move out it goes up in flames. It's not exact, but it's close, usually accurate to within two or three months.

It's true. I'm not sure when I noticed the pattern for the first time, but it's always been there. When I was just a kid, right after I was born, my family lived in an old house behind my grandmother's house. We were there until I was two, when we moved. I remember visiting my grandmother's at four, watching the smoldering embers of the little house and the curling smoke rising into the air. Old wiring from the 50's finally gave out.

From the shack, we moved to a farm. We weren't well off enough to own it or anything, but we did run it for the local doctor. The farmhouse wasn't that big, and most of my childhood memories come from the cozy, family setting it engendered. Here, I remember Christmas, Thanksgiving, birthdays. I think of it whenever I think of "back home." We lived there from when I was two until I was nine, when the doctor we worked for died. At fifteen, it burned, an old tree struck by lightning sparking off the blaze.

The third house I lived in was the second to burn to the ground. We only lived there for around two years, so it happened when I was thirteen. It was an old house, a very old house. What I remember most was its shape. We called them "shotgun" houses, because you could fire a shotgun from one end and it would pass all the way through to the other. One room after another, all in a straight line, built as needed. It was, honestly, very old and dry. I'm not surprised that the heating stove in the front room sprung a leak on the tenants after us.

Other than where I’m at now, the only place left is my parent’s current house. When they asked me why I was moving all my stuff stored in the basement out, I didn’t have the heart to tell them, so I made up some excuse about having my old books and stuff closer to college. I didn’t know what else to say.

When I turned nineteen, I moved out of my parent’s house, and went to college. Before renting the house I live in now, I stayed in an apartment in the city. I shared it with a couple of assholes that seemed nice enough before I moved in. Everyone knows the type. Won't pay their bills on time. Eats whatever they can lay hands on. It got worse and worse until I made up my mind. When I'd finally had enough, I left. We were four months into a one year lease. Now I'm just keeping an eye on the news. Waiting for the sparks. A gas leak, a stray match… Sooner or later, they'll burn.

They always burn.

Grease

You never liked grease.

Grease, sweat, body oil, that weird family "secret sauce" that your aunt swore by, all of it. It had this sticky, all-consuming quality to it. It was moist, but it wasn't a refreshing kind of wet. It clung to your skin and refused to let go. Its presence was suffocating.

You avoided it at all costs. You showered three times a day. You washed your hands and face after every meal. You stayed inside, away from the beating sun and omnipresent moisture. You wormed away from every occasion that involved a greasy meal. You couldn't stand it.

One day, you woke up in a bed that was… oozing. You were relieved when you realized you didn't soil yourself. You were horrified when you realized you were soaking in a bed of your own sweat. You scrambled for the shower. You ignored the *split splat* noises your feet made as you rushed over. You turned the faucet, and let the refreshing water wash over you.

It wasn't enough. The grease was still in every pore and every fold of your body. You grab the soap and start scrubbing. And scrubbing. And scrubbing. It's surprisingly easy. Skin gives way to fat, which gives way to bone. All the lard and cholesterol melts, slips between your fingers, and disappears down the drain in a soapy slurry.

But it isn't enough. You don't stop, even as the shower floor gains a fresh coat of gunk.

It's on you. It's on you and it's staining you and it’s in you and it is you and it won't come off. You start scraping, scraping, trying to get it off. You reach deep inside. First, it's like trying to peel bark off of a tree. Then, it feels like grating a block of wax. Finally, it starts melting under the torrent of shower water. Curdles of osseous matter drift down into the floor and into the flood. Every last bit of

you disappears into the drain.

Finally, you're clean.

Hands

When you come across it, half-buried in the grass by the side of the walking path, the first thing that stands out is how comically out-of-place it is.The hideous ochre rust that adorns its surface is in sheer contrast to the small ring of bright yellow flowers that surround it. You lean in for a closer look. It appears as if someone hastily dug a pit for it and then jammed it in there before fleeing.

You carefully dig it out of the ground. Perhaps when you get back home, you can sell it to that antique shop down the street. Or maybe you can give it to Enrique for his upcoming birthday. He's a big fan of old things.

As you scrape the dirt away, you get a better look at the object. It's a bell shaped like a cartoon anvil. You grasp it by the large ring on top. Oddly enough, it doesn't ring. Curious, you turn it upside down. The clapper has been taped to the side. Briefly you wonder why, as you remove the tape and ring it a couple times.

The sound is mellow and gentle, with a clear, high pitch and a pleasant waning note. Almost immediately, you sense the gaze of some flesh-craving crime against nature. You look around, like a startled rabbit, but there's not a soul in the woods save you. The sun is sharp and bright, but suddenly you're aware that the trees all but blot out the sky, and there isn't a creature to be heard at all. It's just you and the miles and miles of suddenly very empty forest around you.

You stand up, still clutching the bell by the clapper, and start walking. You can feel your heart throbbing in your chest. You are also suddenly very aware of how squishy it is. You walk slightly faster, eyes flashing from side to side. There it is again; the feeling that something is watching you, seeking to messily devour your flesh. What little sun remains is swiftly blotted out by the unbroken canopy of dark green trees that tower over you, but the path is well-

defined. You just have to follow it.

As you quicken your pace, the lack of sound becomes ever more disconcerting. Where are the birds, the bugs, the squirrels? It's the middle of summer; you shouldn't be able to go more than an inch without startling something. But the only noise being made is the sound of your feet thumping on the dirt. Is it just you, or are the trees leaning in towards you? You hear a sound and your heart almost stops. You stifle a plea for mercy and look at the ground. You stepped on a twig.

You chide yourself for your paranoia and ridiculous train of thought. You chuckle to yourself nervously, but you can't quite help but feel foreign eyes observing you. You take a look around you. The trees aren't getting closer. They're sitting plump on the edges of the path. The forest is completely empty, with nothing around you except the plants. Yet you can also sense that it is getting darker, and the clap of thunder spurs you into action. As you return to your car, your pace isn't quite a run, but neither is it a leisurely walk.

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Almost as soon as you shut the garage door, the increasingly grey sky turns a deep navy, and in a fashion akin to the world's largest zipper, tears open. It's like God's showerhead; thousands of gallons of water on jet setting pulverize the ground, punching gashes into the earth, which bleed rain. You consider writing this down; maybe you'll take it to that poetry competition next week. You turn around, planning to get a- wait a minute, what the hell is that!

Enormous grey, emaciated, puckered hands with fingers sharp enough to cut rock are curled around the doorframe on the far end of the room. They are attached to the body of a leper, half peering around the door. You can see ribs and even pulsating organs through the ash colored, inhumanly thin torso. Huge scars line it in a hideous patchwork fashion. The legs are even worse. You can clearly see the bone through the thighs, which are far too scrawny to support the rest. The feet, scarred and stitched, boast three triangular toes. The face is a hideous, grey hairless mess. Two bulging, white orbs with pinprick pupils stare back at you from within lead-colored sockets sunk deeper than the Titanic. There is no nose, only a long, thin gash. The mouth leers jaggedly at you, with crisp,

white, shark-like teeth. The whole thing rests upon a two meter tall frame.

For a moment that appears to be an eternity, you lock eyes with hell itself. Then you rub your eyes. The creature is gone. You stare at the door for a little longer. The door refuses to stare back, because doors cannot stare. You let out a nervous chuckle, telling yourself that from now on, you'll stop reading horror novels and eating those spicy pretzel bits before bed. There are small scratch marks on the doorframe.

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You can't stand making real dinner, but TV dinners taste like motor oil. You weigh your choices, an hour for preparation and cleanup for a warm, savory meal, or ten minutes for a microwaveable box of tasteless processed stuff.

You descend to the cellar, where all your groceries are kept. It's still the only place in the house with a concrete floor, and as your feet cringe from the chill of the concrete, you consider replacing it with hardwood. You bend down, open the freezer, and search through the various processed edible plastics. You pick out what looks like a mildly edible Hungry Man and close the freezer. As you turn towards the staircase, you see what looks like ash-grey socks sluggishly ascending ahead of you. For a second you pause, but then you dash after it. That Hungry Man in your hands is probably tough enough to incapacitate an intruder. But when you reach the top of the stairs, there isn't a soul except for you. Then you notice the cuts in the wood.

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As your head hits the keyboard for the fourth time, ruining a vital push, you reluctantly accept that you need to get some sleep. The roars of dismay and racist, homophobic slurs that blare through the speakers only confirm it for you. You quit the game and shut the computer down, then get up out of your chair, stifling a yawn and stretching your arms skyward. The rain is still pouring down, and you can hear it drumming on the roof. You stagger out of the room, pulling your shirt and shorts off and tossing them to the ground, and force yourself towards the bathroom. As you perform your nightly

ablutions, you start hearing some noises. As if someone is tiptoeing upstairs.

You take a look at the mirror from an angle. Leering at your reflection from your bedroom is the leper, tilted and peering through the doorframe. It has no eyes, and something red is splashed over the mouth, giving a hideous impression of lips. And it is still smiling. Those enormous hands are wrapped around the doorframe. As you startle backwards in fright, all thoughts of sleep gone, the toothbrush dropping from your mouth, it pulls back into the bedroom. You immediately peek through the door, but as usual, there is nothing there. Nothing except the gashes in the frame.

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You are huddled in the bed. Every light in the house is on, which is probably a terrible idea since the storm is really getting underway now. Thunder is smashing and crashing, while the lightning is flashing at every second, sure to fry the circuits in your house very soon. But you don't care. Your eyes zip around, sure that with every flash, the creature will be back. You aren't even sure why you're in the bed. You're about to get up and make for the car, and then you realize you might encounter the thing on your way. And who's to say it isn't waiting in the car?
As the hours pass, your eyes start to lower. Your mind starts to wander. And then you fall into the half awake, half asleep twilight that comes from unwary sleep.

A sound startles you out of your half-sleep. And then, for one split second, your nose is touching the gash in the face of the leper. It is wet, limp, and soggy, with a rubbery texture. Your eyes are centimeters away from the empty, ragged sockets. And you can taste the warm, wet breath on your lips. It smells of urine, rotting meat, and putridness. This time, your scream most certainly awakens the dead. But you have no time to enjoy the exaggeration, as the entity flees the instant it notices your wakefulness . This time, you grab the axe at the bottom of your bedstand. It was a gift from your father, who claimed that you could never be too careful. You snorted then, but now you appreciate his prescience. With the cutting tool in your grasp, you pursue the creature into the hallway. But once again, it's gone. You stand there, in the middle of the hall,

breathing deeply. You're tempted to pass it off as some sort of hallucination. And then you recall the gashes in the wood, the sounds from the day, and above all, the smell and the feel of that beast against your skin. It was like touching decay and death. It felt wrong. And now, it's vanished without a trace. But you know. You know. It will return. It will be back.
You cannot touch it. But it can touch you.

As you stand in that lit hallway, in a twilight between wakefulness and slumber, carrying an axe in the middle of the night as thunder and lightning rage outside your sheetrock cage in a crescendo of brilliant destruction, you wail.

And then, with a brilliant flash of insight, it hits you. This is all because of that bell. Everything started when you rang that bell. You knew there was something wrong with that. This thing wants the bell. But then, you realize, the bell has been sitting on the dinner table the whole time. It could have taken the bell anytime it wanted. It's playing with you! So you do the only rational thing. You snatch the pair of pants from the ground and don it hastily. Time is everything. You snatch a flashlight from your bedstand, and then run downstairs. Quickly, you find a scrap of paper and a pen and write a note. You aren't even sure what you wrote, but you are sure that it is important.

You grab the car keys and bell from the table and race into the garage. The bell and note are stuffed into your pocket, and the axe into the shotgun seat. You turn the key as you push the remote to open the garage door, but the car isn't starting. A particularly brutal flash of lightning startles you. You look to the side and see the demon, entering the garage from your house. The eyes are back, but blood is oozing from its pupils. It is still grinning at you, and you know for a fact that its hands have become longer. It is reaching out to you. But then, as it sees you see it, it stops, oddly unsure whether or not to move forward. That is all the time you need. The car starts up, and you smash the accelerator, forcing the car from 0 to 60 in three seconds.

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The car ride shreds what is left of your nerves. The rain is coming down in buckets upon buckets, and every time you look to the side,

you can see the hellbeast, illuminated by flashes of lightning, standing at the edge of the road, reaching out to you and the bell. Providence smiles somewhat, as you do not encounter any obstacles. When you reach the walking path, you get out, hoisting the axe and flashlight. You don't bother to shut the door.

You pound through the woods, the rain soaking you to the already-chilled bone. This time, the trees are definitely leaning out at you. But you don’t care. Fear has given your feet wings, and you race through. But even as you speed down the path, the monster still pursues you. Every time you dare to look back, it is shambling towards you, kicking up mud, following the pathway and the bell. You keep searching the ground with your flashlight. There! The little ring where you found it! You skid to a halt and fall to your knees. Hastily, you press what remains of the tape back to the clapper, securing it. Then you bury the bell back into the grass, far deeper than you found it.

You stand up, but then slip on the wet ground. As you lie there triumphantly, slightly sunk into the mud with the rain splashing onto you, the flashlight illuminates a sudden movement. You look over, and burst into exhausted tears, as the flashlight illuminates the devil himself, strolling towards you. The face is grey, hideous, messy, rotting, and elated as the water runs down its awful visage. Its eyes have returned, and it stares at you with undisguised triumph. You can see water vapor being emitted from the ripped slit in the middle of its face. The mouth is upturned in a victorious leer, teeth deep black and rotting. You are too tired and exhausted to offer any sort of resistance. As it leans down to pick you up, the last thing you see before merciful slumber takes you are the beast's hands, great bony things, with the flesh, meat, and muscle completely degloved. They are growing.

I Can't

I can't feel your hair, the river streaming down
Out of your head and into my open lap.
It once was such silk, always soft to feel,
But now so sparse and wired.
How frayed, such disarray.

I can't feel your face, the mask so perfect
Upon your head and kept so flawless.
It once was porcelain, almost mystical,
But now so torn and broken.
How cracked, so out of place.

I can't feel your hand, a thing so fragile
That it might break if looked at wrong.
It once was dainty, so delicate,
But now so bent and shattered.
How singed, so pulverized.

I can't feel your touch, something I've loved
Ever since we had once met long ago.
It once was stimulation, exhilarating,
But now so gone and so far away.
How far could it possibly be?

I can't feel your pulse, the thing I miss most.

I can't feel.
I can't.

I have something to share.

This is not a creepypasta.

This is a true story. I'm not writing this in character, kids. Were it shorter, I'd just make it a forum post, but as it is I feel like it deserves a page of its own.

A few years ago, when I was seventeen or so, my grandmother still lived in the same house she'd owned since before my mother was born. She and her husband had never shown any interest in moving, and the house had been completely paid for years ago. It was in a nice neighborhood brimming with the trappings of middle class affluence, where the last bad thing to happen had been a major car accident on a nearby hillside in the mid sixties. All in all a boringly normal place for an older woman and her husband to live out their retirement in a happy miasma of suburban contentment.

They'd never been much for pets. They took care of my aunt's dog for a week once, I think, but beyond that I don't recall my grandmother ever even considering owning a pet. Then, one day, when my entire family had been bundled and prodded into the car for the three hour drive to visit, we found that they had at some point acquired a… cat.

There's a reason for my hesitation.

The first time we encountered the cat was in the middle of a family dinner. Now, dinner with my family is a boisterous affair, with much passing of food and chattering and good-natured ribbing and usually a tantrum from at least one cousin, and this occasion was no different. But midway through the meal, we all stopped. As one, we grew quiet, and turned to face the still empty doorway. We could all somehow tell something was coming. My idiot little cousin actually dropped his fork with a resounding clang, but no one turned around. And the cat stalked in.

It never blinked. Ever, that I'm aware of. It just stared, slowly moving its gaze from side to side like some strange ritual, never seeming to so much look at anything as to scan it. Then, it opened its mouth, wide, wider than I've ever seen any animal's mouth open, and sat there in silence. After a few moments, a sound came, rising from nowhere in particular, a harsh shrieking beep like a microphone slowly moving closer to a speaker. Feedback, tinged with silence. Then its mouth slid closed again, and it wandered out. Dinner resumed.

No one mentioned the cat that night.

The next morning, when we had all risen and dressed and fought over bathrooms and generally lost ourselves in tumultuous preparation for our various drives home, I sat in the kitchen with a plate of stolen leftovers and asked my grandmother about the cat. She told me that it had just shown up one morning, waking her up with its strange harsh feedback not-meow. She'd taken it outside, and her husband searched the whole house for holes and cracks and gaps it could have come in through, but found nothing. Every morning, the same routine. Eventually they'd even resorted to replacing the grates on the ventilation shafts in a fruitless attempt to keep it out. It always reappeared, stalking into rooms and scanning them with its weird red gaze, then beeping like a broken amplifier and stalking out to vanish again.

They never fed it, and as far as I know it never ate. But for those times it swished into rooms to look around and split the air with its noise, it was nowhere to be found at all.

My grandmother moved. The entire family was angry about it, and still is. She and her husband just packed up and left that house and all its memories behind for a small bungalow in a less classy neighborhood. They refused to say why.

This story is too long, and I'm sorry. I know I should cut it short, but I've been wanting to write this down for a long time, and I want to be sure not to leave anything out. To make a long story short, the cat appeared in their new house as well, repeating the same bizarre behaviors as it had before, but this time its sound took on a harsher, buzzing quality, with the single tone beep slightly fainter among the

static-like hiss. They put up with it long enough to complete building a new house, then they left it behind. So far, it hasn't been back.

Recently, in a phone call with my girlfriend, I brought up the subject of the cat, and how strange it had been, and realized something that worries me. She asked me to describe it.

I can remember the pure white of its… fur?, and the deep angry red of its eyes, but beyond that…

I don't think it had a tail at all. And the strange wide mouth I remember was like nothing I've ever seen on a cat before. In my mental images, there's no teeth. Just a gaping pink maw. And that strange, stalking walk… Cat's knees don't *do* that. Really, they don't.

In fact, the only thing remotely cat-like about it is the fact ingrained into my consciousness, that every time I or anyone else looked at it the hair on the backs of our necks rose and our minds said loudly, "*CAT*".

There's a theory that nothing we see is real, and that the entirety of our consciousness exists solely as a way of protecting ourselves from the realization of what's really there.

Anyway, I just needed to get that out.

~yoric

"It Might Have Been".

[Trigger warning - non-explicit description of rape.]

“Of all sad words of tongue or pen, the saddest are these, 'It might have been.”

~ John Greenleaf Whittier

It was overcast, that day.

For many people, the middling grey British sky would be heralding something to be wary of – at the least, rain to dampen spirits and ruin picnics of those optimistic enough to believe Summer meant sun. For others, it would be integrally connected to their mental health; a heavy sky pregnant with an equally heavy burden, making promises of something awful and unpredictable.

For Laurel, it was a blessing in disguise.

She tugged her pajamas off and stood in the dim sunlight that came through her bedroom window, arms wrapped around herself in protection and in defense against the chill that was definitely not born of Summer. Eyes narrowed, she took in the outside world with a sense of defiance.

No shadows. The grey smothered the sun and left people to walk alone. Laurel thought of Peter Pan, thought of shadows sewn to soles of the feet, wondered where the shadows went when the sun hid, or slept.

As she tugged on a t-shirt that didn't smell so godawful that it should have been quarantined, and a pair of jeans that only had suspect stains near her ankles, Laurel tried not to second guess her urge to go out. Her fingers twitched anxiously and she reached for the lighter in her back pocket. Right. Fuck it, she could do this. It, the

thing, it didn't own her, goddammit!

She slipped on a pair of trainers, grabbed her keys and a handful of suitable money from the change dish near her front door, and left the flat. A sign near the letterbox proclaimed in understated, but red, text -

'Night worker sleeping. Please do not knock!'

Blinking at the slight light the daytime provided, Laurel hesitated in the doorway to the outside world. Her mind registered that the cloudy day was rather depressing, but it was better than the sun.

Taking a deep breath, Laurel began her walk to the local off license. It would take five minutes, tops. Walk, walk, walk *don't look down*, pause at the road, watch for the cars, walk, walk, walk *fuck, is it getting sunnier?*, pause again, cross again *you used to do this every day, don't worry*, walk, walk, walk, hit the shop like a nosebleed.

The owner of the shop peered at her licence like he always did and she again contemplated getting her date of birth tattooed on her arm. This was taking time. Time was something she didn't have. Windows were something the shop didn't have. It was all making her incredibly anxious, her mouth dry when she finally asked for her cigarettes, her hand shaking as she snatched back her ID.

The transaction felt like it took forever, but she was soon back outside and flipping her lighter open. She absently wondered when it became automatic to leave her phone at home; when it became automatic that she didn't want to check messages and phone calls from friends. Her back pocket felt strangely empty without the cumbersome object, but she increasingly found that a social life was too dangerous, these days. Too troublesome, when…

She absently shook her head as she also shook her lighter and flipped the lid down on it. Fuck it, forget it. She slipped a hand into her pocket, her other hand smoking the cigarette with slow purpose. She wanted to smoke until her throat was sore, as if curing a problem. She bowed her head and absently pulled her hood up over her dirty hair, suddenly self-conscious now the desperate drive to get fags had left her.

This self-consciousness is why she was staring at the pavement when the sun suddenly decided to reappear.

It happened instantly. One moment, darkness on the pavement, the threat of rain; the next moment, the shadow appeared next to her, as it had done half a dozen times in the last few months. Laurel's breath caught, but she couldn't bear to lift her head and look away from the figure.

It was simple enough to tell what the shadow was. What it had been. What it might have been. A head that came up to Laurel's hip, a head with hair in pigtails on each side of the head, and a motion that indicated skipping – two skips to Laurel's one step, keeping pace with her. Laurel swallowed dryly, shook her head.

'It isn't there,' she told herself, firmly. *'You're going mad. You are mad. It's the night shifts, it's the isolation, this is nothing, no-one.'* As she threw affirming, if degrading, thoughts at herself regarding her own mental health, a voice from nowhere piped up. A voice she didn't know, but it was definitely female and definitely young. And… pink?

'Was I an accident?'

It may have been the tenth or so time she had seen this shadow, but Laurel had never had the figure talk to her – if, indeed, that was what was happening. She didn't feel confident she wasn't only providing her own narrative. Her chest hurt, and she looked around to ensure she was alone, so it didn't feel so weird when she said out loud -

"No. You were very much wanted. I just… lost you."

'Well, I'm not lost right now!' The voice was quick to reply, cheerful, definitely pink. 'You found me!'

Laurel felt like her own grey-speckled thoughts were disturbed, thrown about, struggling to find a foothold in her own brain, struggling to make sense of what was going on. It was this unnerved disruption that allowed her to speak freely.

"…I guess I did."

It hurt her chest more to try and ignore the shadow than to actually give it attention. She couldn't pinpoint why, and she could hear her own breathing, heavy, as she tried to stumble for some moment of reality. She tapped the ash off her cigarette – it had consumed so much of itself that over half of it blossomed and blew away in the wind. Shit.

She kept trying to ignore the shadow. The doorway wasn't that far away.

'Who was my daddy?'

The voice was sweet. Almost lyrical, humming to a tune forgotten in childhood, going up and down in all innocence. The simpleness of the question was another heart-stopping moment.

"Your daddy…uh, his name was David. He was a lawyer."

The child shadow nodded, still skipping, keeping up with Laurel, on an even plane.

"It was probably him. But it may have been a man…whose name I didn't know."

Dark shadows - why always shadows, a cold punishment - an alley by a club. Drinking, after the end of a relationship. Drinking way too much, get pushed out of the bar for being an obvious drunk. "No more for you." Some guy comes up. Handsome enough, looked sober, tall and muscular – an overwhelming strength she was oblivious to, at the start. He offers to help. Blinded by drink and tripping over her feet, she takes it. Next thing she knows, her back is scraping brick under her shirt and he is inside her, and she tries to scream but can only whimper. She hates her body in the darkness, she hates it in the shower later, and she hates it when she pees on a stick and it tells her she's pregnant. But she never hated the… thing, growing within her.

"Who your daddy was…or wasn't, doesn't matter. I wanted you."

The reply was instant, and cheerful as ever, waking Laurel from the

dark memory of that night where everything changed.

'I want you too, mummy. Always.'

The shadow, which until now, had been like any other shadow, produced a hand that twisted awkwardly but stayed flat as it was lifted from the ground. It shakily turned the palm towards Laurel's empty hand, the hand without the cigarette.

Laurel paused, then took the hand. It felt like holding nothing, but when the shadow squeezed her hand, she could feel it, and her fingers tingled. It was like when her insides had tingled before the blood started trickling between her legs, before she lost the baby from the cozy nest it had made itself in her womb. She never even got to hold her, but now…

"This is as close to you as I've ever been." Laurel muttered, mainly talking to herself. She could see her front door now. The sky above was changing its mind on this moment of freedom for the shadow-child, and the sun was threatening to go in once more. Laurel swallowed anxiously, squeezed the alien hand that somehow gripped back, despite its consistency and the impossible nature of the situation. All that didn't matter right now. Only one thing mattered.

"You know you'll…go away, once I get inside."

She waited with bated breath. She wasn't sure what for. A denial? A tantrum? A sudden revelation that the shadow could do more than hold hands, that it could come to life and be the child lost so many years ago?

All she got was childish innocence in response.

'I know.' The child answered. 'But I won't be lost, and you'll find me again.'

Find her again. That meant going outside in the sun. That meant confronting this. That meant being seen as potentially insane as she spoke to shadows she was pretty sure no-one else could see. But… she had lost her child, once. Did she really want to lose her again?

Hand in hand, both continued walking towards the building. With a heavy heart, Laurel knew that her child would disappear the second they reached the threshold. The child kept skipping, seemed happy, held her hand, and continued towards their destiny, for now, motivating Laurel to keep moving too. She suddenly felt all too aware of where shadows go when the sun goes in, and she suddenly felt all too aware of the people she met in her life who hated going out in the sun, and she suddenly thought that maybe she wasn't so alone after all.

Linked hand in hand, mother and child both knew as soon as they hit the threshold, Katie would disappear. She would be gone until Laurel could face seeing her unborn child once more, on a sunny day, filled with a desperate need.

Leviathan

Kevin was patrolling the fifth floor hallway when he heard the noise. It wasn't unusual to hear yelling - a lot of the apartments were section 8, and a lot of the rest were college students, so he'd hear all sorts of stuff happening late at night. But this was coming from the south stairway, and it didn't sound like an argument or a party. Just loud grunts, and clattering, and a deep voice saying *fuck* a lot. He frowned at his watch. More than five hours left.

He was still new; if this was serious, it would be his first time. Most of the security thought their uniforms made them look badass, but he always felt ridiculous in his, and they wouldn't even let him have pepper spray. *Whatever*, he thought, and pushed the door open.

Somehow, the first thing he saw was the guy. He was tall, with sweatpants and an old T-shirt hanging off his frame. He looked exhausted and sweaty. He was wielding a huge stick - no, a spear. And then, after noticing that the guy was actually pointing the spear at something, only then did he see the tentacles.

They were as thick as a man's torso, a cluster of them filling the entire stairwell and suggesting more beneath. Unmistakably those of an octopus, but far larger (and, he would later realize, far too numerous). They wriggled along the walls, floor, and in the air, like probing fingertips. Whenever one got too far up onto the landing, the guy would slash at them, driving them back; whenever he came near the stairs, they tried lazily to snare him, forcing him to dance away. It looked like they'd been at it for hours.

"What are you doing?" Kevin finally managed.

"Holding… it… back," the guy spat between spear thrusts.

A moment passed.

"What is it?" Kevin tried again.

“It’s an octopus, man. I don’t know what it wants here, but shit, what was I supposed to do? Go back to bed after I saw it?”

“How long has this been going on?” Kevin took a step back, toward the hallway door.

“Every night for, I don’t know, like five years now. It goes away at dawn.”

“Five *years?*”

“Five years. I haven’t—“ he jabbed downward, yanking his foot out of reach. “I haven’t really made much progress.” He stepped back, tapping the wall with the spear, taking a break as the tentacles followed the sound. “I don’t know what it wants,” he whispered, conspiratorially, “but we obviously can’t let it happen.”

Kevin swallowed. “Why us? Why doesn’t anyone else know about this?”

The guy frowned. “I think, mostly, they just use the elevator.”

Kevin eyed the wandering tentacles. They tried to grab at the guy whenever he got too close, but other than that seemed content just to poke around. “Where do they go?” he asked.

“You know, once or twice, I tried to go around the other side and come up from underneath,” the guy said. “I went up the stairs to where its head should be, and you know what I found?”

“Wh—“

“More tentacles, my friend. More. Fucking. Tentacles.” The guy stepped abruptly into the creature’s path, swinging his spear. It recoiled, then sent two arms tumbling in his direction. He grit his teeth, raised the spear, and grinned.

Kevin backed slowly out the door. He looked down at his radio. For a moment he stood, considering, but in the end he left it in his belt. He resumed his patrol. He still had five hours left. He made a mental note: next time he ended up on third shift, he’d stick to the north stairs.

Life Saver

Disclaimer:

This is (more or less) a story related to me by a friend a few months ago. He's ok now, if that helps. Not sure if it's really all that creepy…but it's weird as all hell.

I was on the roof about two weeks ago, with the full intention of ending my life. My girlfriend of three years had broken up with me, after cheating on me for six months. What's more, she might have given me a STD from that little encounter. I was unemployed, and my meager savings was not going to cover much of anything next week. And to top it off, most of my friends were not in the area, and my immediate family was still rather pissed at me for my decision to start work rather then attempt an associates degree.

So, yes, I was not seeing a lot of good reasons to keep going. I sat on the ledge, swinging my feet in to space off the top of my fourteen floor apartment building, feeling that giddy, self-destructive tingle in my feet that I always get when I'm near a steep drop-off. It was cold, and I could see a few cars slipping along the dark streets…oddly, I worried for a second I would hit one on the way down, and thereby go from tragic suicide to an asshole. I was laughing at how dumb that was to worry about when I heard the guy behind me say “The hell you doing?”

I whipped around, kind of wobbling for a second, and saw some big guy in a blue suit smoking a cigarette. He had dark hair, was really pale…I hadn't seen him on the way up, and didn't really remember hearing the door open or shut…then again, my mind was kinda elsewhere. He gestured to me, saying “you gonna jump or something?”

“uh…I mean…yeah, I guess. Are…you like a cop or something?” I felt stupid asking, but he had that weird aura of authority I always associate with cops. That's all I needed, to get arrested.

He kinda chuckled, taking a deep drag. “Naw, just up for the view. Got nobody to live for, nothing to stick around for?”

I sighed, and gave him a nutshell of what was going on. It felt somewhat good to tell someone, but at the same time it made me feel like a even bigger loser.

He laughed at me. More of a chuckle, but still, it seemed kinda misplaced for the situation. He lit a new cigarette off his old one, and nodded at me.

“Ok kiddo, that's pretty bad…but let me make you a deal. You go ahead and jump, and you'll get loose of all this. However, as soon as I finish my smoke, I'm going to go downstairs and wait for you to hit. Before anyone else gets there, I'm going to steal your wallet, and I'm going to use your driver's license to look up who you are. I'm going to hack in to your social networking stuff, and find everyone who you have loved or has ever loved you, and I'm going to hurt them for a while, then kill them.”

I just stared, somehow positive I'd just hallucinated that somehow. I didn't even speak, just stared at this psycho.

“I'm going to kidnap some, and torture them out in the woods for hours before I gut them and leave them for the wolves. I'm going to shoot others in their cars, letting them roll on in the wreckage as they try to figure out why their lungs won't expand anymore. I will butcher loved ones, class mates, every friend you've known.” He didn't even sound excited while he said this, like he was telling me the time.

“W-what the fuck is wrong with you? You can't….you can't do that, you fucking psycho!” I was shaking, and not at ALL from the cold. This guy…I mean, I didn't know him from anyone, it was possible…It was insane, but this guy had a…weird aura around him. As I watched him, I didn't for one second think he was telling a lie.

“The hell do you care? You're going to be dead. You're opting out of giving a shit about the world, you don't get to bitch about what happens after you leave.” He just kept staring at me with this blank expression.

I freaked out. I jumped back on the roof and just ran like hell for my apartment. I called the cops, saying some guy had been on the roof, threatened my life. When they showed up, he was long gone. Nobody in the apartment knew him, I'd never seen him before or since. I ended up not getting a STD and managed to find a (shitty) job at the local grocery store, but I did have to move to a much smaller apartment. Still not really over my girlfriend, but it will take time.

I still think about that night, now and then. It was just so incredibly odd, I don't think I'll ever really forget it. I have no idea if the guy was bullshitting, but I really don't think he was. It looks so dumb on paper, but if you could have seen him…heard him…you wouldn't really question it either. How sick of a person do you have to be, to save them from suicide by threatening them with something so horrible they don't dare leave the world unsupervised. Every time I see a unsolved, horrific murder on the news, I wonder.

People ask me what I think happened that night. I tell them I think the devil saved my life.

Love Springs Eternal

Why, it was love at first sight, darling. You awoke to the early song of dawn, and as you rose from the clutches of Morpheus I was there, watching you, every dewdrop on the windowpane an eye into your world. I was watching as you drank deep in my flesh, through your glass vessel I was watching, and I was watching as you bathed in my skin, embracing me in your face. I was watching as you let me run my fingers across your naked skin, cleansing you, baptising you in my scent. And as I watched, I knew you were mine, darling.

I made the first move, my humid breath caressing you in the morning light, lingering by your face and neck. You walked down the street, as I leapt from puddles and gathered at your tender feet. My hands crept up your body, stroking, moving in delicate rhythms to your nervous, quickening breath. You started to run, and for a moment I thought you were going to shake me off like the others, but I held on, drunk on desire. I wanted you, can't you see, darling? And 'want' is such a powerful thing, for both gods and men alike, that I continued to caress you as you ran, and more of me leapt out of you, and joined in the loving embrace.

You tore into the woods, as I rose from the fresh grass and slithered down from treetops. If only you could stay still to take in my love, but you kept running, kept running as I hugged your chest and ran my hands over your features. Such an exquisite face, certainly a cut above the other mortals, I thought. But of course, that was why I chose you, darling. Why did you continue to spurn me, when you clearly are not like the rest of them? You did not answer, but kept running, and running, as I gathered around you and wove around your arms in a dance of fated romance.

I pooled in your shoes, round your ankles and feet, gathering, rising, pleading for you to stop. But you somehow found the strength to keep running, and for a moment I was afraid you would keep running for ever, escaping me like so many others had did. Would

you, in your irrational rejection of me, keep running till every last drop of me had been expelled from your tender body, running till your supple lips shrivelled and deep blue eyes dessicated like raisins in the sun, till you lay screaming in the dirt, begging for me to leave you alone? I panicked, and lost my hold, briefly slipping off your chest before the river joined in, rising in desire with me, cuddling your warm, sweet body as you ran, screaming now, out of the woods and into the dry, bare plains.

The midday sun was unforgiving, sending me off your back in wisps of vapor before I managed to hold you again. It was a trial of love, and I strived to pass it, grabbing you, hugging you in a mad frenzy. You collapsed, and briefly I thought you were going to give up the chase and surrender your body, and I relaxed, but you started to struggle, and threw me off in splashes. I leapt right back on you, determined even as more of me lost my hold on you, but the heat and your tenacity started to prevail over my rushing desire. Would I lose you forever, my darling, in this arid field beneath the unforgiving sky?

Then like an answer to my prayer, the clouds rolled over like a smooth satin blanket, and I fell down, in drips and drops, kissing your skin, pinning it down, preparing you for my love. And I ran my lips over you, licking your flesh lovingly, as you continued to struggle beneath the weight of my body. You continued to struggle as I put my hands on your head, holding it and smiling into your bewildered eyes. You continued to struggle as I rose from the earth and wrapped my legs around your hips, and pushed my face ever closer to yours. You continued to struggle as I rushed in for true love's first kiss, embracing your hair, your eyes, quivering with lustful wanting. You continued to struggle as I closed my face upon your nose, and put my lips to yours, and then you struggled no more as I fully took you into my grasp, cuddling you even as more of me fell gently on the soft, cool ground.

Then you were still, and I forced my way past your lips and into your throat, and you were mine at last.

Meat

Chinese culture is a strange thing indeed. She found out, the day her First came tearing, screaming and mewling out from her womb, tiny unformed fingers clawing at her insides. The doctors and nurses crowded round, strange and deformed in her pain-fuelled haze, babbling things that she could not hear. She remembered shuddering, drenched in itching sweat that turned her light-pink hospital gown into a shade of carmine red. She let the congratulations wash over her, the excited exclamations of her husband pulling her from much-needed sleep, needling at her, drawing her mind long and tired. She took her turn of clutching the baby, cooing softly at it as quickly as she could, before she passed it on, swallowing down the rising vomit that clogged her throat, attempting to right the spinning room through sheer force of will. Then, it was thrown onto her lap.

Her scream of disgust pierced the sterile operating room, jolting the sleeping child into its first wails. She looked up, searching for the source of this outrage, and her eyes met two beady pupils staring at her, behind a surgical mask. He was a short man, dressed in hospital blue, his long fingers steepled together at his waist, his eyebrows suggesting a smile hidden behind the white of the cotton mask. A long silence dominated the room, broken only by the insistent crying of the newborn flesh, and the low hum of the air-conditioning. Eyes travelled back down to the red, pulsing mass of bloody flesh in her lap, and then back again to the shrivelled doctor standing at the foot of her bed.

-Eat. Is good for you.
-But… Why is it raw?
-Just eat! Is good for you, and the baby.

Ryan just stood there, forced grin frozen on his face. He said nothing. He wouldn't. He actually believed in this Chinese nonsense. He reached out, a claw swimming through the open space between

her and him, and grabbed her hand. He squeezed it, once. Her other hand shook as it edged towards the battered metal plate, slipped slightly in the pooling blood, and finally managed to clasp around the oozing organ, picking it up. It squelched in her grasp. Small showers of blood dripped from it, slipping from the cracks between her fingers and back into the plate, merging with the symphony of expectant silence in the operating room.

It smelled disgusting. Loathsome. It smelled of fresh blood, of rotten flesh, of old torn clothes soaked in vinegar. It smelled like fresh fish gutted and smashed with a spoon. It took all of her willpower to not throw up there and then, to keep the vomit hidden deep within her throat, to gulp it down. Eyes were watching. Waiting. She had to do it. She had to. For the baby.

Her mouth opened. An inch. Two inches. It edged closer and closer, she could've sworn it pulsed in her hands, once, as it neared her teeth. The stench invaded her nostrils, piercing inwards like a jagged spear, and she gagged, lurching forward. The piece of flesh squelched again, popping from her grasp to splash down on the plate, throwing rivulets of blood up onto her face, allowing her the sensation of cold liquid snaking their way down her cheeks. Still, no mercy, nothing but the same waiting silence.

She picked it up and held it against her face. Her tears of disgust mingled with the blood coursing down her cheeks. She looked at the lump of flesh that had forced her to do this, and she found that she hated it. How strange. And, as she experienced this new emotion, almost unknowingly, unwittingly, she bit into the placenta.

She had known by now what it was, she'd known all along that she had to eat it, that it was customary. She had wished it wasn't, upon finding out, that she had a say in the matter. Placentophagia, the practice of eating the placenta, was purported to help stem postpartum depression, contract the uterus after birth, and give back to her the life source that she had shelled out. The doctor had said so. She still didn't want to. She had thought it would have been disgusting.

It wasn't. As her teeth pierced the livid, red flesh of the organ, breaking apart stretched skin and into the pliable flesh beneath, she

instead experienced ecstasy. Her mind broke behind waves of pleasure flooding into her nerves centres, arcing lightning burst through her mouth and into her brain as the perfect taste filled her taste buds. She had found heaven, found it in the organ of her own child, in what was essentially part of herself. All thoughts of cannibalism faded away beneath the rising tide of blood choking her throat, and all her disgust was drowned in the apex of the moment. She was complete, once again. Hungrily, she wolfed down the rest of the placenta, each bite sending shudders and shivers down her spine, causing orgasmic delight to wrack her weak, tired body. By the end, she could barely move, but the smile that was plastered across her face threatened to tear it in half. She had never felt better.

The erupting cheer faded into the background. Everything did.

She felt ashamed afterwards, of course, as Ryan joked with her about how she looked like she really enjoyed the after-labour meal. She hadn't dared to tell him that she had. She didn't tell any of them of the mind-blowing spikes that had lodged themselves in her chest, that sparked her fire and drove her insane. She couldn't. Instead, she just smiled and nodded, joked back with her husband, throwing small talk around the room as she tried to erase the memory from her mind, to forget the pleasure that she had experienced, to drive the hunger away.

But it came back, a few weeks later, tearing at her insides with pure, maddening desire. She wanted, she fucking needed it, more badly than she had ever needed anything. She drew into herself, trying to control her urges, to chain the beast, but it was useless. Ryan thought she was suffering post-natal depression, had asked kindly about it. What could she say? Her silence continued.

It went on like this, for days, weeks. She cradled her child absently, ignoring its cries as she screamed inside, drowning out the piercing wails with her own desperate pleas for the madness, the hunger to stop. It went on, until one day she could take it no more.

She found herself alone that day, Ryan must had gone out for drinks with his buddies. She was alone with the baby, feeding it her precious milk, enduring the needling pain jabbing her breast as the

hungry child tore into her nipple. Her life-giving fluids spurted out sporadically, tiny drops flecking the chin of the hungering monster, minute amounts of blood bitten from tender flesh mingling in with the milk. She stared at the child, transfixed, as she wondered. What if her hunger… what if? She had no time to think, the scraping against the back of her head had started again, the aching of her jaws and the tightness in her chest. She reached out with her left hand, her right still clutching the baby, holding it against herself, trapping it with nowhere for it to run. Her fingers closed about the fleshy, tender leg of her child, pulling it upwards with agonizing slowness. The baby continued to suck at her, to drain from her.

She wondered, for a brief moment, if it was a sort of poetic justice, as her teeth bit into the milky-white skin, her canines puncturing the epidermis, and flesh found its way into her mouth. The baby began to scream, pain driving its tiny mind wild, but she wouldn't let go. She couldn't. Her teeth were already halfway in, the lower jaw resting lightly against the puckered portion of the baby's meat. She couldn't do anything except bite harder and harder, her stained yellow teeth turning red as blood flooded her throat, filled her mouth. Her eyes watered, her grip tightened. The wriggling lump of flesh bawled, thrashing about, but it couldn't escape her. Finally, her teeth met, parting aside prepubescent flesh with a squelch in order to hit the other half with a soft click. She tore her prize free from the baby, chewing with a furiousness born from desperation. She chewed and chewed, the blood spurting out of her mouth and onto her chin, dribbling in frothing bubbles onto her dress. She chewed until she realized… this wasn't what she needed. In horror, it dawned upon her what lay in her mouth, what the bubbling mass of pink that rolled about her tongue actually was, and she screamed, for the first time, out loud.

She had explained afterwards that a wild stray dog had bit the baby while she had brought it downstairs to the void deck, and that the blood on her dress was from her rushing the baby to the hospital. She had cried, tears streaming down blood-stained cheeks, in Ryan's arms, sobbing her heart out in what Ryan thought to be relief, but she knew to be frustration. She needed something else, something more. She needed what she had tasted before, what she had grown to hunger for. She needed the placenta, the prime cut.

She tried looking for it, searching online. It only came back with animal placentas, pills and dried facsimiles that she found no interest in, no desire for. She bought slabs of raw meat, hid it from Ryan, from her baby, who now lay in the cot recovering. Wolfed them down in the sink. Spat them out into the bin. It was no use. She needed the real thing.

And that's why she found herself where she was now, sneaking into the hospital at 2 in the morning, drifting along the hallways with furtive glances cast behind her. Turn left. Two turns right. The maternity ward is just ahead. She made it there without anyone noticing, against all her wishes, all her hopes, she hadn't been caught. She imagined what it would have been like if she had bumped into a nurse, if they had found her. The relief would have washed over her, the madness and darkness evaporated beneath the soothing touch of humanity, suffocated by the constricting knots of the straitjacket. But no, instead, she found herself at the door, whorls of laminated wood staring back at her as her fingers rested against the knob. She walked in.

Ryan thought she was having a night out, watching a movie and taking a break from watching the kid. He was at home, dozing off at the TV, rocking the cradle once every few minutes. And here she was, holding a pillow above the face of some woman she didn't know, pressing it down as hands clawed at her. The woman's body, young and lithe except for the distended belly possessing her spawn, struggled and bucked under her grip, but she held on, a strength that could come only from insane hunger pressing down her arms. The monitor rattled on the table, unplugged cord scattering about the floor, the bed shivered with the dying woman's convulsions. Her grip upon the pillow softened as the woman struggled less and less, until finally, the flailing hands fell limply against the sides of the bed. The room was silent, except for her panting, interspersed with mumbled apologies and hungry growls.

Her hand gripped the scalpel, tightly, pilfered from a small room adjacent. Her knuckles were white, barely visible in the dark room, trembling as her fingers dug into her palm. She moved closer to the corpse. Her hand touched upon the protruding belly, feeling about. Thud. She felt something move, with a jolt. The spawn. The

woman’s larvae. It still lived. She was supposed to feel remorse now, as if one life taken was fine, but two had crossed an invisible line. She was supposed to hate herself.

Instead, she raised the scalpel high, cheek-burning smile splitting her face in two, frame shivering in anticipation. And she plunged it down, as she prepared to dine once again.

Message In A Bottle

The following is a transcript of a handwritten letter found in a 20-ounce glass beverage container, found near Lake [REDACTED] in southwest Wisconsin. Signs of struggle were evident, and upon closer examination, several fragments of human bones were discovered nearby, badly charred.

"In the name of God, the Compassionate, the All-Merciful, I offer you my greetings and my profoundest gratitude, O my liberator. I pray you, read what is written here, and understand.

"Firstly, know that what you hold is no simple sheet of paper. I have assumed this form to attract your attention, for my natural shape is imperceptible to the eyes of man. I apologize most profusely for my duplicity, but I have heard that your people tell stories of messages in bottles. Allow me to relay my pitiful tale.

"My name is Ahmed bin Yusuf Abdul Hakim. I am an Ifrit, a fire spirit, of the Jinn. It occurs to me that, in this age and this place, word of my people may have escaped your ears, honored one. Know that it was Allah, the Creator and the Shaper of forms, who fashioned my people from smokeless flame, even before He sculpted the first man from the blessed clay, and that our people are as brothers in his eyes.

"I am a stranger to these cold lands; those of my tribe are folk of the desert, and of the caverns beneath the sands. My lineage is old and proud, known to the birds of the air and the beasts of the earth, but I myself am young and, I must confess, foolish. Thus it was that I was tricked.

"Some months ago, I was wandering the desert night, as my folk are wont to do, when I heard a voice on the wind, calling my name. I followed it for many leagues, on foot and in the air - for Allah the most Generous has gifted my people with wings, and we are able fliers - but could find it nowhere. I was confounded, but the voice

offered guidance, and told me to dive beneath the sands. I obeyed, plunging downward through sand and stone alike. Suddenly all grew dark and cold, and I found myself in a human dwelling not far from here.

"And I saw the source of the voice, who wore the shape of a beautiful woman. She had summoned me from afar, drawing me to her bedchamber with secret sigils and diagrams, with which she then entrapped me in a bottle, the same bottle you have found, O my savior. At first I thought that she had summoned me to be her husband, for as you may know it is not forbidden for our peoples to intermarry. Such was not to be my fortune, for although she was lovely in appearance, she was an evil woman of much malign intent, and desired only my power, to assist her in wicked deeds. My good heart compelled me to refuse, and she grew very angry.

"She resorted to threats, but we of the Ifrit are clever folk, and so at each turn I reminded her that to harm me she would be forced to open the bottle, and in so doing, set me free. Her temper raged like a storm, but after many nights she grew quieter and more calm. And here I hoped, in my foolishness, that she would finally release me. Indeed she wished to be rid of me, but alas, so too did she wish to make me suffer. She cast me into the lake, telling me as she did so that the bottle would be trapped in the ice, and would eventually shatter, and that I would die in the cold waters. And she abandoned me to my fate.

"May Allah preserve her, for it is Allah, the Preserver, who has saved me. As my captor predicted, this bottle was trapped beneath the ice of the lake. And yet, as I floated and prayed in that abyss of frozen fear, I saw the stirrings of great fishes below me. And as the fishes swam and cavorted throughout the long winter, the ice did not entrap me further, and when spring came, I remained alive. And yet, I had grown weak from my months of solitude and starvation. When this vessel washed up on the shore, I had but a spark of my fire left, for the winter in your lands is cold indeed. I could do no more than assume this form, as a final act of desperation. As paper I will not die, but neither have I the strength to return to my true form, for now the fire has left me.

"Thus I pray you, return to me my essence. Any source of flame will

serve; I know your people are most ingenious and have devised many marvels for this purpose since the days of flint and steel. Simply set this paper alight, and I will be free. You will not see the joy of my liberation, for as I have said, my people are not easily seen by human eyes. Nor does the human form appear clearly to us, truly. But I will shower upon you such blessings as are mine to give, O my savior.

"If you wish to know the full scope of my generosity, write your full name upon the reverse side of this paper, prior to burning. I will return exactly one year thence, having recovered my strength, to grant your heart's desire and to hound your enemies. In the name of God, the Compassionate, the All-Merciful, it shall be so."

Monsters

It was nearing the end of the witching hour, and most sensible folk were tucked away in bed, resting to face the new day. For the fourth (or was it the fifth? Sixth? It was hard to keep track) time that night, a cautious knock came on the bedroom door of one such couple, shattering the silence that had settled over the house. For a fourth time that night, a sleep-addled voice called out: “What do you need NOW?” and a small and wavering voice replied “Mommy!”

“Your turn.” came a voice from underneath a mound of pillows and blankets.

“A’ight. ‘m goin’, hun.”

The covers were tossed to the side, and a man in his late thirties disentangled himself and groped sightlessly for clothing. His fingers met a light switch, and the darkness was banished. The form under the blankets swore viciously and rolled over to block the light from unadjusted eyes.

Click. Darkness again. “Hurry!” urged the small voice.

“Hang on!” The man snapped, most of his good humor lost to the first few repetitions of the ritual. He felt around until his hands met the cool metal of the door knob.

“What d-“

A small girl launched into his stomach hard enough to send him stumbling back into the room.
“Sleepin’ in here with you guys tonight, kay?”

“No, not ok, kiddo. You have a perfectly nice big girl bed in your room. Mommy and Daddy’s room is much too small for you and us. What’s the matter?”

“It’s the monsters, Daddy!” She whispered, scanning the hallway as if one might be creeping up on them from the yawning maw of the stairwell.

“Anna, there is no such thing. We’ve been over this, honey.”

“Yu-huh! I can hear ‘em snufflin’ around in there, growling and stuff. They’re probably hungry!”

Her father rolled his eyes. “I’ll walk back with you.”

“No! Wanna sleep here!”

Her father scooped her up and carried her back down the hallway, ignoring her protests and kicking.

“Lookit, nothing under the bed, inside the closet, outside the windows, or anywhere else. No monsters to be seen anywhere.

“They can hide!”

“Sweetheart, there is nowhere to hide in here. I checked every little nook and cranny. You’re gonna have to believe me.” He scooped her bear off of the floor. “You two curl up under the covers and get some rest for me, ok? You’re perfectly safe. Promise.” He shut the door gently and shambled back to his own room, sleep already overtaking him.

“Is she ok?” his wife asked. “Maybe we should have let her sleep in here. Just this once.”

“That’s how bad habits get formed, you know. She needs to learn to beat these silly fears by herself.”

“You’re right, I suppose. But I do worry about her.” His wife’s words fell on deaf ears. He was already snoring softly, a slab of dead weight leaning up against her.

Anna cuddled deeper under her blanket. Her dad had said she was safe, but… Something still felt wrong. The gibbous moon outside cast odd shadows about her room, turning a doll into a grotesque alien being, a chair into a looming mouthful of teeth, ready to

swallow up a little kid such as herself. She didn't like it a bit.

And the sounds. She could still hear the deep, throaty gurgles, the snuffles, the growls. If anything, they had grown louder. She ducked her head under her covers and curled into a ball, hugging her knees. "Just a few hours until morning." She whispered under her breath until it became like a silent mantra, over and over. "Only a few more hours. Only a few more."

The noises seemed to fill her world now. They were right at her ears, surrounding her. She sucked a panicked, sobbing breath in. She was beginning to get uncomfortably hot under the blankets. Her night gown was soaked with a mist of sweat and her bangs clung to her face. She could have sworn that by the second the heat was building,much more heat than her small body should have been able to generate. Her breath was coming faster, and she felt smothered by the heat. She kicked the blankets off, even though the noises still echoed all around her. Or, tried to. She hadn't remembered her father tucking her in quite so tight. In fact, the more she thrashed to get an arm or a leg free, the tighter it seemed to get. Yes, definitely. The blankets were tight against her chest and stomach now, and getting tighter still. She screamed for her parents as loud as her constricted lung capacity would allow.

"That didn't sound like her normal scream." Anna's mother said, bolting up in bed. "Go check on her!"
She didn't have to say it twice. The two of them hurried down the dark hallway to Anna's room.

"Anna? Hun?"

The room appeared to be empty. Anna's blanket lay perfectly neat, spread out on the floor. There was no sign of the little girl. The bed lay empty, the pillow and covers still soaked with sweat.

Anna!" Her mother half shrieked half sobbed, as her father checked any spaces she could have hidden in. He reached down to pick up the blanket, and then recoiled. No, it couldn't have been. It was just exhaustion playing tricks on his mind, right? But no. he saw it again. The blanket moved.

He felt the material writhe under his fingers, and he let out a hoarse cry.

“What is it?” Her mother leapt around to face him. “What did you find?”

The blanket was most definitely moving on its own. He felt it tighten in a nearly bone-shattering grip around his wrist. He could see it changing into something…. Else. Something almost human. His daughter’s words echoed in his mind. “They can hide, daddy!”

The blanket-thing was looming over him now, rapidly changing. He peddled his feet backwards, but still the grip did not loosen. He felt something in his wrist pop. And at that moment, his eyes fell on his daughter’s blanket, the real one, neatly folded at the foot of her bed, where it had been placed the previous morning.

And on the bed were a few pink scraps, splattered with something red. Scraps of a pink night gown.

.::Only |n Drea{{m}}s--

Guys, this is another out of character post. Much like **something to share**, it's just a way for me to get out something that's bugging me, and not really a Tale per se. If you're looking for a story, or for some kind of interesting twist, this is not the page for you.

For a long time, I've had several reoccurring dreams. Most are of no consequence, or at least deserve a separate telling. One, however, recently took on a significance that I admit troubles me a bit. You see, I regularly talk on the phone with my girlfriend before bed, and since we're both contributors here and share a certain macabre mindset, I suppose it's unsurprising that our conversation often turns for the spooky. In this case, we were discussing night terrors.

She told me that only twice in her life had she experienced the feeling of paralysis that lies somewhere between dreams and awakening. One was a story for her to tell another day, but the other? It was my dream.

I was speechless for a moment, shocked, then began to speak in unison with her, and together we recited the events of the dream, then sat for a long time in silence. Our dreams were identical until the final moments. She tells me I should post about it here, so. Here. If any of you others have had this dream, speak up. I won't say it's significant, because I have no idea, but I will say it's sobering.

It begins with fog.

The night is dark and misted with a foggy soft rain, the kind that seeps rather than falls and soaks everything it touches to the bone. The streets around me are dark, lit only by the guttering streetlamp ahead which casts its meager light on the sullen cobbles in what seems almost like revulsion. For a short moment, there is nothing there but the silent street and the gloomy light. Then, almost as if dropped by stage magic from some unseen door, he is there. A man, or something like one, in a tall top hat and long cloaklike coat,

standing just at the edge of the light as though he's been there all along, looking down at the ground beside his feet on the soaking street.

Often, on good nights, this is the part where I wake up.

I find myself inching closer, though I try like a man in fear of his life to turn and run. I feel my feet move against my command, pulling me slowly toward that circle of light that should be reassuring. Some nights, in the dream, I can hear him chuckle softly to himself, only once.

He sees me. I'm sure of that. Despite the depth of the nighttime dark, and his lowered gaze, hidden by the wide brim of his tall hat, he is totally aware of my presence, and of my inability to turn away or slow my advance. Any moment now, as soon as I cross some unknown threshold, he will look up.

I do not want him to look up.

Don't get me wrong, it's not just the dream me that's frightened. Maybe it's best to say that there *is* no dream me. I'm aware, every time, that I'm dreaming; I know that I'm in my bed in my house, surrounded by walls and locks and fences in the depths of suburbia. I know he's not real. Somehow the knowing makes it worse.

There is no sound in this part of the dream but the oddly muted hollow clatter of drizzle on cobblestone, but there is an impression of noise, of speech, of *something*, as I drift closer and closer and my fear and loathing and revulsion mounts to a crescendo as he silently waits for me, and with a gut churning wrench in the pit of my stomach I see as if in slow motion the brim of his hat tilting as he begins to raise his face toward me.

I always wake up screaming.

I told you that my girlfriend's dream is different from mine in the end. The difference is just as bad, to me, as the whole extended beginning. Like me, she finds herself drawn down the rainswept cobbled street, toward the figure in the tall top hat and cloak who waits, looking down at the edge of the streetlamp's meager glow.

Unlike my dream, though, he never looks at her.

In her dream, the figure stares at something on the ground at its feet. A long dark bundle, dripping with rain and hidden by shadow. She's afraid to look at it, paralyzingly so, and in her dream it is this bundle, not the figure's gaze, that makes her writhe on her bed in terror as she tries desperately to wake up. He still knows she's there. He still waits for her arrival to pierce her with the gaze I fear so much, but it's the dark thing at his feet she cannot see, and that she wakes each time she begins to comprehend.

A long dark bundle at his feet, the size of a man.

The part that really scares me, guys? Not dream scared, but real world chilled? I think I know what she's afraid to see.

Well. I say that. I mean, it's stupid, really. There's no way it could be. Not in the dreams of two people who've been dreaming longer than they've known one another. It's not possible that what she fears to see could be connected to my dream at all, is it? But still. Part of me wonders about that man sized something lying prone in the puddles before the figure in our dreams.

I'm scared it's me.

~yoric

Pitter-patter

Pitter-patter, the raindrops fall. On this All Hallow's Eve, I sit in my armchair close to the roaring flame, trying to gather what little warmth circling about the empty rooms into my cloak. Footsteps jolt me awake from the twilight before slumber, fear coursing through my frail bones momentarily, before subsiding as I realize they were nothing more than the sound of raindrops dashing themselves against my window-pane. For a brief, terrifying second, I glimpsed the shadows upon the living-room wall grow long and wave to me, the flickering, dying light of the fireplace flame playing tricks upon my eyes. For a brief, terrifying second, I glimpse once again my two erstwhile companions. The two, unfortunate souls. I grow old, too old for nights like these, too old since life and youth had been taken away from me - that cold All Hallow's Eve…

-

"Another case for you, Inspector. It's urgent too, the messenger sounded mighty worried."

"Really now. Just as I was about to clock off for the evening."

An errant sigh escaped my lips as I pick up my hat, just moments ago hung upon the rack. Putting one arm through the sleeve of my trench-coat, I turn to Superintendent Chatmers and Gilroy, beckoning with a quick motion of my head.

"Well, lads, let's get busy. Death waits for nobody, and we can't have a killer loose on Halloween, can we now? God forbid, it might actually cause a scare."

Grumbling, Gilroy grabbed his own hat and coat, palming his badge into his inner pocket, and slinging on his holster. "Well, that'll be a bloody shame, won't it? At least there's some excitement in the neighborhood, me wife was complaining about how Halloween no longer gave her the chills."

Chatmers, who had cocked his revolver, and was adjusting his belt, replied with a jaunty grin, "Well, Gil, that's cos' she's used to seeing a terrifying cow-faced monster at home eating her food and sleeping in her bed everyday, as it is. I dare-say, after seeing you without pants, nothing scares her anymore."

"Shuddup, Chatmers, at least, I'll be going home tonight for a respectable dinner, not sleeping in some floozy's house and fu-"
"Alright, can it, you two. We've got a job to do."

I tried to hide a grin of my own, as the three of us stepped out of the station doors, into the cold, rainy afternoon.

-

The body was nowhere to be found. The blood, on the other hand, was everywhere. Across the street, from one end to another, it stained the grey cobblestones a deep carmine red, as if someone had opened a can of red paint and sprayed it across the ground. Passers-by and general busybodies stood about, watching the scene of the crime with much interest.

And crime it was, undoubtedly. After all, no freak accident of nature could have ensured that the lines of blood lay scattered across the floor in such straight patterns. It was almost as if the victim had been sliced multiple times with an unnaturally-sharp blade, so much so that although blood lay all about, none of it deviated from the sharp lines of crimson they created, save for the rain slowly washing them away, smudging the pattern. Chatmers whistled. "Poor bugger's dead for sure. You can't even find this much blood in a pig."

I knelt down beside the bloodstains, while Gilroy went about collecting samples. The newly-formed forensics division would want to check for any evidence of gunpowder - but I doubted it. The sprays of blood were too clean. Even a bladed weapon would have had a hard time creating such a cut, and subsequent blood-fall. Maybe one of those Eastern weapons that's been streaming in? It was said that they were sharp enough to cu-

"Say. What's that?" Gilroy cried as he pointed to the ground mere steps away from me. I whirled about, looking closely at the area -

and then I noticed it. In that patch of ground, there was no rainfall. Looking up, I noticed that it was in the open, so it wasn't the rooftops. The rainfall simply… curled about that area. Almost into a discernible shape. Yet I couldn't exactly make out what it was, and attempting to do so, I began to move closer.

About two steps away, the patch of untouched air shifted, in a sudden motion. Taken aback, I drew myself to the left, away from its movement. That probably saved my life. I barely heard Chatmer's cry for me to get away as the loud roar of his revolver echoed through the falling night, nor did I hear Gilroy's shout of horror. All I could hear was the inhuman sound of footsteps, squelching against the rain-slick ground, as they slammed down in staccato towards me. I noticed, with mounting fear, that the untouched patch of air was now dangerously close, and behind it, was left a series of print marks, as if a boot had stepped in the thin layer of water above the ground, leaving behind a momentary mark. Yet even those prints were so strangely spaced, jumping from one side of the pavement to the other, that no human form could have managed that. It was almost as if the footprints were in tandem with the rainfall. Pitter-pattering onto the sidewalk.

I felt a cold breeze pass by my side, and threw myself backwards. Sharp, burning pain erupted in my right arm as the sleeve of my coat was torn, blood flowing fast from a razor-sharp cut across my forearm. More shots rang out as Gilroy drew his own sidearm, attempting to hit the menacing figure that was no more than an empty space. Yet they had no effect, the bullets not even impacting against the form, almost as if they were vanishing into thin air. I cried, my terror now utterly taking hold of me, as I rolled to my feet, sprinting across the street. An idea struck me, and I leapt onto the nearest carriage, avoiding the startled horses. I could hear the pitter-patter of the rain-steps rapidly drawing near, closer and closer.

With a quick hook, I knocked out the supports for the coach's gas lamp, and wrenched it free with much effort. The pitter-patter was closer now, Chatmers and Gilroy were both shouting at me to run. Finally, I managed to open the lid to the lamp, and with a spin, tossed it straight at the patch of unmoving, yet fast-approaching, air.

The flames flared for a brief moment, spreading across the ground,

and the empty space disappeared. All that was left was the burning fragments of the lamp, and the ominous pitter-patter of the nightly rainfall.

-

That night, upon returning to the station, I sat upon my chair and called upon the entire force. They were to scour the city and search for this elusive form, be it man or otherwise. If they did find it, they were not to engage, but bring back news of its whereabouts. I did not want to risk losing any men to the strangeness that was invading my city – on All Hallow's Eve.

My next clue came in the form of an old man, brought in from the street, dressed in rags. Another one of the homeless. Cradling a much-appreciated cup of tea from Gilroy, I faced this man in my office, listening to his words.

“I tol’ em’, see? I tol’ em’ about them devils, but nobody ever took my wor’s for trut’. Don’cha see? They preh’ on us. They will not stop. No’ for as long as we are about. Beneath of homes, they gath’r, waiting. Waiting. And taking us, on’ by one, until ther’ be none left.”

Gilroy shook his head. “Madness. He’s been driven mad by life on the streets.”

Chatmers, standing by the side of the room with his arms folded, indicated otherwise. “In times of darkness, let the blind man be the guide. In times of madness, let the madman lead the way. What else do we got?”

I looked at the two of them with a meaningful glance, wanting silence, before turning back to the raving old man. “Sir. Do you have any idea where these ‘devils’ of yours reside?”

“It ain’ no use. No use at all. We’ be all dead.”

“Sir.”

“Under our feet, the’ be crawlin’. Everywhere. In the pitter-patter beneaf’ the city, they’ be crawlin’.”

“The sewers?”

“No use… no use…”

The lunatic stared into his hands, mute momentarily. Mad as he was, I couldn’t help but feel a slight shiver leap down my spine. The events of the afternoon could hardly be explained by conventional means. A leap of faith may be in order.

The chance came soon enough. After the old man had left, the three of us had sat about the station, killing time as we waited for reports to come in. Then, a sweating, elderly officer barged in through the front, shouting. “Quick! Quick! One of our own, sirs! He’s dead!”

Leaping off our chairs, we gathered our coats. I strapped in my pistol, grabbing a gas lantern off the shelf. Gilroy and Chatmers both sported heavier armaments: Gilroy slinging across his waist a shotgun, while Chatmers cradled his hunting rifle. We set off, into the dark night. Midnight had long since gone, but the damnable rain continued, well into the early hours of Halloween.

This time, the bloodstains were still fresh. Confusing as they were, they faced a specific direction, headed down the empty street, in the middle. On the ground, covered in life-blood, lay an officer’s helmet, and a broken nightstick. The nightstick had been cut across the middle, at an angle, a clean, surgical cut. We moved down the street, all of us silent.

The bloodstains led to a manhole cover, some distance down. They seeped into the iron, draining away into the darkness below. Back-up had still not arrived. With trembling hands, I reached down, and lifted the cover, heaving it aside with some considerable effort. Steam roiled out from the open sewers, and inside, I could hear the rushing sound of drain-waters, as the rain poured into the city below.

“Are you sure about this? Should we wait for backup?” Gilroy asked, nervousness causing a slight tremble in his normally stoic voice.

Chatmers shook his head. “There’s still a chance that our officer may be alive. This may be the only lead we’ve got. We have to follow, before the trail gets cold.”

I nodded my assent. Turning to Gilroy, I tried to flash a smile that I hoped seemed brave. “What, scared of rats, Gilroy?”

Chatmers chimed in. “I’m sure your smell will drive ‘em away, no problem there.”

Gilroy grunted, cocking his shotgun. “Very funny. Let’s stop talking and keep moving.” With that, he began to climb the ladder downwards, into the murky darkness below.

It was as if we had climbed a ladder into hell. The roar of the water was so loud that we could barely hear each other’s steps down the ladder, the steam and humidity of the trapped heat causing us to erupt in sweat. By the time we reached the bottom rungs, we were already drenched.

We had barely moved a short distance, following errant bloodstains, before I saw the victim. I will never forget it. I will never forget the sight of the poor rookie, dripping a trail of blood as the body was dragged across the floor, seemingly by nothing. The crumpled form shifted erratically, a few steps every few moments, scraping across the floor as the still-shining belt buckle across the corpse’s waist scratched the granite.

The body stopped for a moment. As if it sensed us. Then, it began to move again, at a much faster pace, skipping across the ground like a doll with all its strings but one cut. We shouted, ordering the corpse to halt its macabre dance, and gave chase. Shots from my pistol rang out across the sewers, echoing down the tunnels. We ran for a long, long time, and soon I knew not where we were. Then, finally, a turn left, up two flights of stairs, still chasing the body bumping across the uneven steps, down the tunnel and turning right and across left and – We walked into a hall.

A hall of horrors.

We all stopped then, unable to move, to comprehend in our small minds what exactly we had stumbled upon. It was as if a morbid hospital, with rows and rows of standing glass coffins lining the ground. Each was misted over with the humidity, but I could still barely sense movement within. Moans echoed through the hall, a

few screams were heard, and I realized with mind-shattering terror, that this hall seemed to be endless. It stretched far beyond what could have been possible in this god-forsaken mausoleum, into the distance. The ceiling could not be seen; the walls stretched into the darkness above us three tiny figures.

I took a few hesitant steps towards the nearest glass coffin, naming it in my head so simply because the shapes resembled those found in funerals. Yet they were made of glass, misted over in the steam, a dull blue glow that was the only source of light in the hall emanating from these coffins. I wiped the misted glass, peering inside.

A hand smashed against the glass, from the inside, with a sickening thump. It streamed blood, black barbs catching it from all sides; even it seemed, from within. A scream rang out with such feeling that I was stunned, but even that barely contained the revulsion I felt as I peered in. A body, desiccated, almost nothing more than skin and bones, with a few stray strands of hair, stood within, with barely any space to move. It was hooked all over by strange metal barbs, through the ears, the neck, spikes pushed out through the eyes, and it bled all over, a deep dark red. By all means, it should have been dead. By God, I wished it had been dead. But it was not. It was the corpse from before, brought to unholy life. It continued to move and squirm, moan and writhe in the confines of the glass coffin, unable to die, trapped in a terrible mockery of life.

Madness took me then, and I screamed. I smashed the butt of my pistol against the glass, hoping to shatter it, free the poor soul within. It didn't even scratch. I began to gibber, explaining to myself again and again that this had a perfectly rational explanation, that the man was actually dead, that the world had not just turned itself inside out. I continued banging against the glass, until my hand was finally halted by the firm grip of Gilroy. Chatmers was retching into a corner, unable to stand the sight, the idea of such a torture. Gilroy himself, ashen-faced, trembled as he held me, but it allowed me to calm down. I extricated myself from his grasp, not trusting myself to words, and leaned against another coffin, catching my breath.

Then I heard it. Again. Pitter-patter, raindrops falling inside the dry hall. Footsteps, from before, staccato rhythms tapping themselves out in the echoing hall. Leaping back, I felt the presence of forms

moving closer and closer. Gilroy roared as he cocked his shotgun, and began spraying indiscriminate blasts into the darkness.

One must have caught a water pipe, because in a moment, the entire room was filled with spraying water. Then we saw the figures, moving slowly, jerking across the room towards us. They were countless, numbering in the thousands, and they moved with a deathly purpose, the shotgun pellets vanishing as they approached the figures. We turned to run.

We ran down darkened corridors, and heard the pitter-patter of the forms giving chase. Down winding staircases and up water-slick ramps, we ran for our lives, screaming, shouting, making noise to remind ourselves that we were still alive. It was not long, before we came to a gate, rusted shut, trapping us. Turning about, Chatmers began firing with his hunting rifle, to no avail. The pitter-patter grew louder and louder. Gilroy worked the gate, whimpering beneath his breath, before he finally managed to shift the gears of the mechanism. With a great screech, the gate swung open, Gilroy pushing down upon the nearby lever with all his might.

“Go! You know what to tell Marie.”

“But-“

“Just shut it and go!”

With a nod to my brave Superintendent’s actions, I ducked through the opening, Chatmers following suit.

“Gilroy! You can still make it! Come on!” Chatmers held onto the gate, attempting to keep it open despite the grinding mechanism. Gilroy leapt towards the opening. Yet, mid-leap, he stopped, as if held back by an unseen force. Then, he crashed to the ground, mere steps away from the gate. It smashed shut, with a definite clang, Chatmers barely avoiding losing his hands as he leapt back.

In the distance, held aloft by empty space, floated towards us another one of the glass coffins. It was empty. Within it, we saw the writhing forms of the barbs, hungering, seeking for life to attach itself to. It drew closer and closer. And Gilroy was dragged, slowly,

painfully into it. Soon, only his upper body could be seen in the darkness, the rest having been entrapped in the open glass coffin. Chatmers took aim, and fired. A quick lancing shot flew through the air, and burst open Gilroy's head like a ripe melon. Better a quick, merciful death than the un-life we had just seen. I pulled at Chatmers, and we both scampered down the dark corridor, looking to escape the tunnels.

We came upon a flight of stairs leading up. Leaping them two steps at a time, we had almost reached the top, when I heard an ominous rumble, mixing in with the constant pitter-patter behind us. The masonry, unable to take the strain after centuries of disuse, gave way beneath my feet, and I plunged down into the darkness.

Chatmers turned and cried down to me, "NO!"

I picked myself up, constantly aware of the footsteps behind me, and shouted back up. "I'm fine! Keep going! Run!"

Turning about, I faced the empty tunnel before me, echoing with the increasing pitter-patter. To my right, I spied a tunnel leading upwards, perhaps even to freedom. It was my only chance. With a great swing, I flung my gas lamp towards the area before me, causing a slight flower of flame to erupt in the darkness, before dying out. Plunged into total pitch black, I turned and ran down the corridor, legs burning with the effort. I ran for hours, down winding corridors, unable to even remember if I was running in the right direction, just running away from the horrors behind me, and the hall full of the eternally trapped.

I broke into sunlight, smashing aside the manhole cover. The sound of carriages reached my ear like beautiful music, as I lay on my side, across the cobblestones, heaving and retching, almost blacking out there and then. I heard the sound of an officer ringing his bell as he noticed me, and I realized, with a jolt – I had made it.

-

Chatmers had not. We never found him. Nor did we ever find the figures again, or the Hall of Horrors, as we had that Halloween day. A particularly loud peal of thunder shook me from the half-dream,

half-memory. At this age, I could barely remember the details, yet I still remembered the face of Gilroy all too well, just before he had been shot – in mercy. I remembered the face of the trapped person, the one whose coffin I had peered into, the despair, the sheer despair of the un-life.

And I remembered Chatmer's face. Particularly well, in fact, for as I looked up, I stared into it, (there - outside my window!) just as I had remembered. In the rain outside my window, across from the armchair, there he stood, in a glass coffin. Terror took me, as I saw his writhing, struggling form, smashing weakly against the unbroken glass. To his left, in another coffin, was Gilroy, head somehow still intact, scratching feebly against the glass. And to his right – stood an empty coffin. Waiting. In the dimming darkness of All Hallow's Eve, the clock struck midnight, and I once again heard, interspersed with the ringing grandfather toll, something I had not heard for years.

Pitter-patter. Step. Step.

Play

I was deposited to awareness with an abruptness normally reserved for the newly born, and much like them, my first view of the world was enough to send me into wracking sobs. I attempted to recoil, to fall back to the nothing that I had come from, but found myself frozen, my body not my own, only able to watch and look in horror at the world I now found myself in.

Cracked bricks and blocks formed an endless road before me, while behind laid only a flat mass of black more dark and empty then the place I had already come from. Stones and clumps of masonry floated here and there, as if frozen after being flung free by some massive explosion. Yawning tubes dotted this narrow, cyclopean highway, and the road had even crumbled away in sections, to reveal gaping maws of oblivion.

It was not this alien landscape that filled with me horror. While it gnawed and gnashed at the edges of my strength of mind, it was the subtle… awareness of the place that cause me to recoil in my frozen body. Everywhere, half-perceived faces leered from the bricks, the ground, the clouds. Everywhere eyes, dull but gleaming with a mocking, predatory awareness, seemed to watch, their vapid emptiness vanishing when perceived too closely.

Faced with the blank nothing behind me, or the unknown horror before, I forced my unresponsive limbs forward, each step a jerky ordeal. I kept my eyes locked ahead, seeing only the next step, the next stone, never looking at the impossible islands of floating, decayed brick that drifted over me, nor at the mocking faces laughing at my plight from every crevice.

Merely steps in to my journey, I froze, nearly recoiling back to beat at the blank nothing-wall behind me rather than take another step. Where before had been naught but the crumbling road, there was now another traveler. It shambled forward, slouching low under its own rotten weight, pulpy black lumps of feet slowly dragging it along

the road. Two staring, blank eyes floated in the bloated, fungoid mass of its body, fixed on me with the unseeing focus of a mind as alien to mine as a deep-sea worm.

I stood, frozen and uncomprehending as it slowly strode forward, its wheezing body barely bigger then that of a child. Its glaring eyes were fixed on me, the pulpy thing slowly drawing closer. I could not move. To retreat would result only in eventual capture by the thing, but to advance would mean crossing it, and the thought of touching that… thing…

The decision was made for me, for as the thing drew close, I was galvanized in to action. By horror or rage, I leapt forward, screaming nonsense, and struck at that bloated body. I kicked and stomped at it, crushing the flabby and far too soft flesh under me, sobbing in horror as I felt the flesh touch me, then melt away, rotting to nothingness in seconds, but leaving such an unclean memory in me that I knew I would feel that dull, soggy weight against me long after even the sweet, cold embrace of the beyond.

After that, I ran. I ran and cursed whatever black fate had brought me here, and obliterated my memory, my life, and left only the road, the eternal road. I would have cried, have balled up and thrown myself down one of the endless pits that had broken open the road, but I was compelled to continue, legs continuing in a jerky rhythm that propelled me over the crumbling brick, leaping across the pits even as I secretly wished to fall in to their depths and obliterate the road, the faces, and myself.

As I ran and jumped, I came to one of the thick, twisted tubes that dotted the claustrophobic landscape. I thought to look in for a moment, curiosity fighting to overcome my almost manic desire to be free of this place, but upon hearing a strange shuffling and gurgling, coupled with a deep, bass pulse from the bowels of the black pipe, I decide against it and squeezed around. As soon as I was past, there was a sudden rush of air behind me, followed by a sharp, oddly muffled snap, as if two iron bars wrapped in cotton had been thrown together behind me. I did not turn, merely using this to further galvanize my stuttering walk, ignoring the continued snapping and rustling as it faded behind me.

Far ahead, I saw a long, glossy stair, leading up, and beyond it what looked like a squat dwelling made of the same crumbling brick as the road. While I feared what may lie inside, the idea of someone else, some other person with which to share this horrible place with filled me with the first hope I had felt in hours. I ran, eyes fixed on that stair, and soared across the final gap. It was mid-way across the abyss when I saw the thing waiting on the other side.

It was a twisted parody of some kind of reptile. Its elongated face was filled with a dim sort of menace, and his mouth yawned in anticipation of my reaching the other side, the jagged edges glinting as it made a choking squeal. Its body balanced on two squat, shapeless legs, a shell of hard, cracked flesh encasing the bulbous torso. Two stunted limbs projected through the flaking shell, coated in fibrous growths, and slowly shifted in a sick mockery of wings.

I screamed and twisted, trying in vain to return to the far edge, but it was too late, and my struggles were enough to bring me short, slamming in to the hard wall of the pit, the thing above me shrieking in frustration as I fell. Down, and down, spinning in to the endless blackness, I felt the dark enclose around me. However, seconds before the emptiness could provide me its final solace, I suddenly remembered.

Endless roads, lakes of fire, crumbling tombs filled with the rotting, shambling bones of beasts, hazy forms of glowing slickly light following in the dark, floating networks of ancient wood drifting in a hot sky, it all came back to me in a flood, the remembrance of where I had been, what I had done, and knowing that it would continue.

I do not know how long I have done this, nor what I have done to earn this.

Only that I must walk the road.

Forever.

Progress

I invented a car that runs on nightmare fuel. It's kind of funny, actually. We invented fire to scare away the darkness, now we can use the darkness to power our lights.

It's not like nightmare fuel is hard to find. People are afraid of a lot of things, they're driven by it. I siphon that off, and I use it to drive an engine. It's simple, really, though the instruments I use to gather the fuel are very sensitive and very complex, so much so that I'm the only one who can use them. But I don't mind. I'll fix that eventually. One thing at a time.

Distilling and concentrating the fuel comes next. A man can be driven by fear very easily, but a machine can't fear, not really. The fuel has to be stronger, and so I distill it, break it down into its essential elements, and then concentrate it. The process takes months, and is very easy to get wrong, but I'll fix that. One thing at a time.

But after that, it's good to use. No nasty greenhouse gases, just some steam and screams. Turn up the music loud enough and you won't notice anything at all.

I'll probably get a Nobel for this.

There are still some kinks that need working out though. Sometimes the engine leaks. Sometimes things happen. They're just little things, little incidents here and there, nothing too big, nothing too big. Nothing more than a passing shadow, a monster under the bed, a freak happening. Nothing too big.

I'll fix it, don't you worry, but one thing at a time.

Shy

The sudden jolt of pain was enough to make him think, for a mad second, that he'd somehow jammed his pen through his hand. The boy just barely suppressed a shout, clenching his hand tightly shut and sitting up abruptly from what was a half doze. Eyes wide, he looked down at his fisted hand, then, seeing no obvious injury, tried to surreptitiously look around for some cause, or culprit. The room was silent, save for the mild drone of the teacher tapping out graph points. Everyone was hunched over their desk, hard at work or attempting to look as such. The pain started to ebb, not vanishing but smothering to a dull, pressing ache. He blinked, trying to affect an air of normalcy as one of his nearby classmates gave his wide-eyed, pale fidgeting a suspicious glare.

One breath, two, in and out. There wasn't any blood, but he was nearly too scared to look. His dad had told him pressure was the key, maybe if he let go it'd start gushing or something? His mind whirled around like a rabbit in a cage, scrabbling between fear, confusion, and embarrassment. Should he just look? What if he actually was hurt, somehow, it felt like he'd been stabbed or something. But if it turned out to be nothing, the embarrassment might actually kill him. The teacher turned, the class rapidly assuming poses of legitimate and mock attention. The boy started, sitting bolt upright in panicked reflex as the teacher's eyes held his, eyebrow cocking at the behavior, but gliding on to the next bulletpoint. The boy slumped, released. He leaned forward, feigning a search for paper, covering his throbbing hand with an arm, slowly uncurled his fingers, and looked.

The class was suddenly raked by a sharp, choking scream.

Heads turned, mouths agape, a startled mumble of "what the fuck?" wafting from the rear of the class. The boy sat, one hand clamped over his mouth, the other thrust as far from himself as possible, eyes as wide and rolling as a spooked horse. The teacher, glaring a

warning in the direction of the swearing, swung his gaze at the nearly comical figure of numb shock pinned in the middle of the room.

“Is there something the matter, young man? Bad dream, perhaps?”

A rill of laughter, snickering teeth, swapped gazes. Never mind the paleness of his face, the trembling of his hand. The teacher minded, eyes narrowing. Seemed a good sort, but drugs, maybe? Something was off.

“Are you alright? You seem a little-“

“MAY I…ahh…may I use the bathroom? Please?”

The teacher’s eyebrows raised, a patronizing smile playing across his lips. The last resort of the put-upon student, the bathroom pass. Still, he did look a bit off, and if it came down to vomit or worse, he’d rather it in a designated facility. Still, something was off. Why was he staring at his fist so much? Why the shaking…

“I suppose it could be arranged…what’s that you have there? Yes, there, in your hand. Come up here, let’s see it.”

The boy’s eyes rolled, flickering between the staring, mocking eyes of his fellows and the accusatory gaze of the teacher. He rose, shivering, his eyes drawn unwillingly down to the fist clenched low, away from his body, trying to ignore the odd pressure inside, the pinching, almost shifting sensation against his trembling fingertips. The teacher cleared his throat, extending a hand as the boy arrived at the desk. Giggles laced with schadenfreude skittered behind him, his wide, staring gaze fixed on the teacher’s face. His fist trembled, raising with a dreamlike slowness a few feet before freezing. No. There was no way, not here. Not in front of everyone. His mouth worked bonelessly, a creaking squawk eliciting a fresh rill of chuckles.

“Come on now. Let’s have it.”

“I…I’msorryicant-“

And he was running, bolting from the room, the shouts of the

teacher and laughing jeers snapped off as the door swung shut behind him. Feet pounding down the empty, wide halls. The grey tile, the dented lockers, it all seemed mocking in its normalcy, a panting whine escaping his lips as he scrambled to the bathroom. There was noise somewhere down the hall, shouts of command, but all he could hear was blood slamming in his ears as he all but fell inside, tearing open a stall door and collapsing on the toilet lid, gasping. He was vaguely aware of a voice very much like his own, but too high and laced with weeping, muttering “nononono” like some nonsense charm. He looked down at the fist in his lap, shivering like some spooked animal. The fingers rolled open, slowly, as if pried open by an unseen force. Voices outside, questioning, confused yet commanding. It meant nothing, not now, as his palm finally came into view.

The skin of his palm split bloodlessly, bulging at the sides, as a poisonously green, watery eye rolled forward to stare with broken pupil at him from the prison of his flesh. As his screams elicited a matching reply from outside his stall, the oozing pupil dilated with pleasure.

Smoker

Will couldn't explain his own nervousness as he stepped out the back door, across his simple lawn. His children had come to him many times, perturbed by the animals they encountered in the woods behind the house. He would follow, stepping away from his easel, and explain. "That deer isn't dying, that's just part of how his horns grow back in. This frog is fine, the tail means she's in between being a tadpole and a frog."

Each explanation had satisfied them, and he had been able to return to work, letting them play in the yard where he could keep an eye on them. But he'd never heard a note of terror like this in their voices. Worry, yes, curiosity, yes. But Yvette shook so hard he couldn't keep his arms around her, and barely spoke in a whisper as tears streamed down her cheek. Gregor had felt cold to the touch, fingers clenched into little fists.

Will had gone out to see this "Devil bird" that had terrified them, feeling a little foolish for being afraid in the daylight. Overcast daylight, to be sure, but daylight none the less. Just a bird. He could see the tree they had said it was perching on from here, a tall giant with a leafless crown. Despite his heavy jacket, he shuddered, not from the chill, oddly quiet air. Something was unsettling him. His feet crunched in the frost covered grass as he rounded the tree. There it was, a little sparrow sitting on a branch. Nothing to fear.

The bird turned its head, cocking it at him as he studied it. The children had seen plenty of sparrows, and he didn't see why this one had startled them so. He took a step closer, to get a better look. The bird croaked at him, not the tweeting note he expected, but a harsh organic sound. It shuddered, the feathers of its breast puffing as it choked and shifted from foot to foot. He reached towards it, and the head snapped up, beak opening to release plumes of smoke.

Will swore, jerking back as it twitched madly on the branch, the smoke condensing, settling down around it in thick strands. Its dark

eye seemed to fog over from within, covered in grey and red. He felt his gorge rising as the bird's beak began to rip, mandibles opening impossibly wide to reveal something deep and dark. Inside he could see glittering eyes, and the first of eight legs starting to poke out of the newly torn hole in the world…

The Asylum

My friends and I used to do a lot of geocaching after our senior year in high school. For those who don't know what geocaching is, it's essentially a worldwide scavenger hunt. People will select sites and conceal a "geo-cache" somewhere unobtrusive, then post GPS coordinates on geocaching websites where other searchers can download the cords and locate the cache. Usually, people who have found the object (often it's a chest or something hollow) will leave a note or small personal memento for future searchers to find and appreciate.

There are several types of geocaches, and most of them are thematic in nature (i.e. scenic destinations, romantic sites, hard-to-reach areas, etc.) This story begins when my friends and I decided to try a series of purportedly haunted locales within about an hour's drive of our hometown. It began innocently enough—most of the sites had "spooky" backstories that were, of course, entirely fabricated. So we had a great time scaring the piss out of each other and generally creeping ourselves out.

We'd begun searching after the sun had set to enhance the creep factor, but by around midnight, most of our large group had dwindled off and gone their separate ways. When we reached our last coord, there was just myself, Rebecca, Kevin, and Evan left, and we were determined to knock it off our list.

Rebecca was our guide for the night, in charge of putting in the coordinates and reading us the backstory behind each site. So, while I drove, she began reading about the last one out loud to the rest of us. Now, I'm paraphrasing here, but it was something along the lines of:

"Henckel Asylum: constructed in the early 1900's, the James Henckel Asylum was built to house a burgeoning population of the criminally insane. Men who had committed vile crimes (rape, murder, torture) without signs of remorse were deemed mentally

unstable and sent to this facility for further study and rehabilitation. Once committed, very few criminals were ever released back into society, and those that were usually had been given frontal lobotomies (a popular experimental procedure at the time) or electroshock therapy, both of which rendered the patient nearly braindead, capable of performing only rudimentary tasks.

Stories: Contemporary visitors to the Asylum report hearing banging noises, cell doors opening and closing, and hearing cackling laughter that is abruptly cut short."

It was pretty standard fare compared to the rest of the sites we'd visited that night, and we naturally had a good time psyching each other out for the next fifteen minutes while I drove us to the Asylum. We'd all heard about it (it was in our local area after all) and we knew it had been condemned and abandoned since as long as any of us could remember, so we figured it'd be a great place to run around and be reckless teenagers without risk of getting yelled at by the cops.

When we finally arrived, it looked like something straight out of one of those cheesy B-movies they show on SyFy. Chain link fence with barbed wire around the perimeter, two guard towers flanking the main gate (which was, of course, chained and locked shut with a big NO TRESPASSING sign hanging from it). The asylum itself was decrepit, looking like it hadn't been touched for decades—which was surprising, since we grew up in a pretty nice area, where the municipal lawmakers tried to keep everything looking spiffy for the tourists.

Needless to say, we promptly ignored the sign on the front gate and hauled ourselves over, cameras and GPS in hand, and walked towards the asylum. Now, given our attitude towards the previous sites, you've probably gathered that I'm somewhat of a skeptic. I believe that there are paranormal things that can't be explained (yet) but I'm not exactly summoning demons in front of a bathroom mirror. So when we opened the main door to the asylum (conveniently unlocked), I dismissed the cold burst of wind as just stale pent-up air rushing out after being trapped inside for so long. My friends' bravado, however, quickly disappeared and they began shuffling their feet nervously at the entrance, hesitant to cross that invisible

threshold.

I took point, chivvying them along with prodding taunts and eventually everyone was inside. It wasn't as bad as I thought it'd be. Things were relatively clean, and the entire building looked like it had been gutted. The paint was peeling, tiles popping up here and there, and the metal trim near the baseboards of the wall was in desperate need of some Rust-B-Gone, but aside from that, the place was entirely empty. No crazy-ass chairs with leather straps, no gurneys lying haphazardly around, just an old reception desk and two hallways leading off to the different wings.

We explored for a few minutes, freaking ourselves out whenever we heard an old pipe rattle or rat squeak, but otherwise, it was relatively uneventful. Our fears safely suppressed by the presence of each other, we began to get more adventurous, opening doors and peeking inside. The rooms were all empty, of course. Whatever company had been contracted to clear the place out did a pretty decent job of removing any creepy décor.

Bravado returning by the minute, Evan and Kevin dropped back without Rebecca or me noticing. They began running around, making noises to try and scare us (I'm not gonna lie, it worked until I realized they were gone and probably the cause of all the racket), then returned laughing and breathless to a decidedly paler Rebecca. She seemed to be a lot more put off by the whole place than the rest of us, or at least she didn't hide it as well. She quietly suggested we leave.

Not to be outdone by the other guys of the group, I told her she was more than welcome to wait in the car if she wanted, but I was gonna stick around for a few more minutes. Exasperated, but defeated, she finally caved and followed us where the GPS was leading—the second floor.

This is where I started to feel genuinely scared. Before, I was just kinda creeped out, but there was something about that whole floor that literally gave me shivers, despite it being a warm summer night. We started opening doors like before, but we were all a lot more sober about it. I guess I wasn't the only one who was feeling weird. Finally, about midway through the hall, we opened the door to a

room, and there, lying in the middle of the floor, was an honest-to-god straightjacket. I'm not bullshitting you, every other room was devoid of objects, but there it was. A fucking straightjacket, in the middle of the floor of some random-ass room in a condemned mental asylum. We all kinda looked at each other with raised eyebrows, as if to say "Uh… guys? You seeing what I'm seeing?"

And of course, trying to be a macho man to show off for Rebecca, I piped up with the most ridiculous idea I could think of at the time.

"Dude, I'm gonna put it on."

Years of horror flicks and creepypasta should have trained me to NOT put on the creepy straightjacket, in the creepy hall, in the creepy asylum. But teenage dumbfuckery won over, and once the words were out, I couldn't just wuss out.

Nobody said anything, they just kinda looked at me expectantly, waiting to see if I'd follow through with my boast. Determined not to be called a pussy for the remainder of the night, I walked forward into the room and bent down to pick up the moth-ridden restraining device. As I got closer though, I noticed it wasn't moth-ridden at all, but was actually in pretty decent condition (that is, compared to the rest of the place, which as I've mentioned, was a shambles). I mean, it had a few stains here and there, but it didn't really smell and it seemed intact enough to put on.

As soon as I picked it up, though, I got this overwhelming sense of dread. You know, that drop in the pit of your stomach right as you go over the lip of a roller coaster? That feeling, in the bottom of your gut that says "I'm gonna die, I just know it."

Yeah, well I got that. Really strong. And totally ignored it. My desire not to die was outweighed, as it often is in teenagers, by my need to look cool for my friends. So I slipped my hands in the sleeves, one at a time, until it hung loosely from my shoulders.

Now, if you've ever seen a straightjacket, you know that you can't tie it up yourself. The whole point is to essentially cross your arms across your chest and tie the sleeves behind your back to prevent whoever's inside from moving their arms (presumably, to stop them

from hurting themselves or others). So as I stood there in the middle of the room, I called out to Rebecca, “Hey Becca, help me tie this thing off.”

She looked (if you’ll excuse the pun) pale as a ghost, but she managed to squeak out, “I don’t… I don’t think this is a good idea…” But again, after some prodding and encouraging, I convinced her to begin tying the sleeves behind my back. Evan and Kevin just stood in the doorway, expressions a mix of admiration and incredulity. At that point in time, I felt like a badass.

For about three seconds.

As soon as Rebecca finished up the last lace, the door to the cell slammed shut, right in Kevin and Evan’s faces. I never felt a breeze, and when I asked them later, both of them fervently denied closing it themselves. Skeptic that I am, I still chalk it up to us leaving the front door open and changing air pressures and all that. But it scared the piss out of us nonetheless.

Then I felt a pressure on my chest, like someone was sitting on it (or as if someone was pulling the sleeves tighter behind me) and it began to get harder to breathe. I couldn’t even summon enough air to whisper, much less call out for help. My vision narrowed to tiny specks, and I swear I heard someone laughing shrilly as I neared unconsciousness. The pressure increased with a sudden tug, and my world went black.

When I woke up, my vision was foggy. Or at least, I thought it was, until I realized it wasn’t just foggy. It was dark. Like staring through a lens that’s been collecting soot. I blinked a few times, and the darkness waivered, but didn’t dissipate. Now, I’ve passed out and blacked out before, but whenever I woke up, it was nothing like that. Either my vision gradually cleared up, or it was blurry, but never in my life have I been able to recreate the shadowy haze I saw in the asylum that night. Then, from the murky depths, two small pinpoints of light appeared a few inches in front of my face, glaring a lurid red—and a dim echo of the laughter I heard before surrounded me. As soon as they appeared, however, they were replaced by two brilliant shafts of incandescence—Evan and Kevin, shining flashlights down on my face.

The last thing I remember hearing before I lost consciousness was Rebecca's scream and the door banging open, which probably explains why those two were standing over me with flashlights in hand. I gradually became aware of a dull murmur that I recognized as Rebecca asking me, "Please wake up, please please please wake up," as she shook me. She just kept saying it over and over again, kept sobbing and shaking me.

When my vision cleared enough, I glanced over and saw that her eyes were completely red, like she'd been crying for a while. Trying to muster some shred of manliness, I found myself speaking in a surprisingly calm voice, given how I was actually feeling. I remember distinctly what I said, word for word.

"Get those fucking flashlights out of my face, you douchebags."

Expecting a laugh or at least some reciprocal insults, I was kinda shocked when they just looked at each other quizzically, seemingly surprised.

"You're… you're okay?" Evan asked incredulously.

"Yeah, why the hell wouldn't I be? Becca just tied the things too tight, I couldn't breathe, so I passed out. How long was I out for anyway?" I inquired. Apparently, it had been long enough for them to untie the straightjacket, allowing me to rub a hand across my face.

Another shared look of disbelief.

"Dude," Kevin began slowly, "You've been out for like fifteen minutes. We were about to call 911. We kept shaking you—Evan even tried pinching you so hard he drew blood—but you wouldn't wake up."

I felt a cold chill run down my spine, and the straightjacket, hanging limply from my shoulders, suddenly began to feel a bit tighter. Hastening to pull it off, I tried not to look panicked as I threw it to a corner of the room. Rebecca just sat there, still shaking and crying a little bit, and in spite of the ordeal I'd just gone through, I had enough sense to go over and try to comfort her.

We left that room without a word, geocache be damned, and walked back to the car in complete silence (broken only by the occasional sniffle from Rebecca). The sun started coming up, and as I dropped everyone off at their respective homes, we said quiet goodbyes. Rebecca was the last stop before I finally made the trip home myself. Being the gentleman that I am, I walked her to her door, but she paused at the entry and looked me in the eye.

In the light of the gray dawn, I could see her eyes were still reddened from all the crying. She was very quiet, and she said, “I have to ask you something.”

“Yeah sure, what is it?” I said, half expecting another “You sure you’re alright?” like I’d been getting the whole ride home.

She surprised me by asking, “Do you know how long it took Evan and Kevin to get the door open?” Her eyes held a look that I could never forget. It was raw fear. Something happened in that fraction of time between me blacking out and them getting in there that had absolutely terrified her. And seeing that look, I realized. I was blacked out for fifteen minutes. How long was she alone in that room?

“No…” I replied slowly, “how long?”

“Five minutes. They said it took five minutes for them to open that stupid door. I was in there and I saw you, and I saw—“ she broke off, another sob stopping her midsentence. At that point, I didn’t want to know. I still don’t want to know.

I gripped her by the shoulders and said firmly, “Rebecca. It doesn’t matter. No matter what you saw. I’m here, you’re here, we’re both safe. It doesn’t matter. Nothing bad will happen. I promise.”

She just nodded numbly, opened her door, and walked inside her house. The next time I saw her, she was back to her usual self. But whenever I bring up that night to her, she freezes up and turns to stone, refusing to discuss it.

I stand by what I said before. I don’t know what happened in that room. And I don’t ever want to know. But I still have nightmares

about those two glowing red lights in the darkness. And sometimes, as I lapse into sleep, I hear faint echoes of shrill laughter following me down into the depths of unconsciousness.

The Little Buck-Toothed Boy: A Fairy Tale

Once upon a time, there was a little boy, about five and a half years old. He had bright blue eyes, and shiny blond hair, and faint freckles on his face, and his front teeth protruded slightly over his bottom lip, as if they hadn't quite made it back inside his mouth after he gave one of his sweet smiles. And his smiles made his eyes crinkle slightly in the corners, and showed one big dimple on his left cheek, and a smaller one on his right cheek.

And he was the nastiest boy you could ever meet. It's not just that he was rude or selfish or unpleasant (which he was), and it's not just that he didn't care a jot about other people's feelings (which he didn't) or that he went out of his way to annoy them (which he did); the little buck-toothed boy was a full-blown misanthrope. He hated other people – it didn't matter who they were – and he tried his hardest to hurt them. And he enjoyed every second of it.

There was only one thing that troubled the little buck-toothed boy. If he was so mean, why did people who met him think that he was nice? It worried him so much that he thought about it all day and at night he tossed and turned and couldn't sleep for thinking about it. It preyed on his mind in the morning (when he glued a water balloon full of urine to his sleeping father's forehead), at lunchtime (when he soaked pieces of paper in alcohol, lit them, and threw them at his sister's kitten) and after supper (when he carved offensive words backwards into the windows of his room, so that passers-by could read them). One day, he could stand it no longer. He set off to find the answer, taking only a rolled up handkerchief, stuffed with a bread roll and a wad of cash from his mother's wallet.

He walked for miles and miles, looking for someone to ask. Finally, he saw a huge, grey, concrete block of flats, squat and squalid, with dark passages leading up to inconsequential-looking doors. The little buck-toothed boy knocked on the first door he came to, and it was answered by a stooped, shriveled old man in a singlet and brown

trousers.

“Hey old man!” the boy shouted.
The man's reply was a feeble wheeze. “How can I help you, s-hhz-onny?”
“Do you think I’m nice?”
“I ghhz- I guess so.”
“Why?”
“Wh-hhhg-why you remind me of my son, when he was a little boy. Of course, that was years ago, before he pass-hzz-passed awy. He was a sweet lad like yourself-ffz.”
“That can’t be why everyone thinks I’m nice, you senile old goat! Not everyone has a dead son – idiot. Anyway, you stink! I’m glad your son is dead!”

And the little buck-toothed boy ran out of the building, hitting the fire alarm. The old man was left wheezing in his dim doorway, a single tear sliding down his weathered cheek.

The boy ran until he was out of breath. Suddenly he saw a little field of tulips bobbing in the warm summer breeze.

“Hey, stupid tulips!” yelled the little buck-toothed boy.
“How can we help you?” said the tulips.
“I need someone smart. Do you know anyone smart?”
“Well, we don’t get around much, but we have seen that big billboard.” The tulips waved their heads towards a poster further up the road, with a serious-looking woman on it. “She’s a psychiatrist, and they’re always very intelligent.”
“I knew that!” said the boy, and he stomped off through the field, kicking the tulips over and jumping on them.

After another long walk, the little buck-toothed boy barged into the psychiatrist’s office. She sat behind a mahogany desk, looking over her glasses at her patient.
“… and so ever since then I just have no confidence at all in social situations.”
“Oh boo hoo,” said the little buck-toothed boy. “Why don’t you just go kill yourself?”
“Hey!” the patient spun around, shocked. “Why did you…”
“Shut up, nut bag,” said the boy, and spat on him. He turned to the

psychiatrist. “Are you smart?”
She looked mildly back at him. “Well, I graduated magna…”
“Whatever. I have a question, and I need a smart person to work it out.”
“I think I can guess. You’re wondering why you are so badly behaved, aren’t you? Well, first let’s talk about your parents.”
“That’s not the question, you dumb bitch! I want to know why everyone who meets me thinks I’m going to be good, when I’m not.”
And he ran up to the psychiatrist and kicked her in the shin, before pulling a bookcase over and storming out.

The little buck-toothed boy didn't stop until he reached the woods. If people couldn’t help, maybe the animals could. He asked the deer, but they ran away as soon as they heard his voice, so he decided to tell the wolves where they lived. He asked the wolves, but they just howled their foolish songs about love and snow and the moon, so he told them the wrong place to look for the deer. The animals were as useless as people. It was hopeless.

Finally, just when the little buck-toothed boy was ready to give up, he came across a sun-lit glade, with a sparkling stream burbling through it. There was an old, shaggy bear leaning back against a mossy tree-trunk, contemplating the world.

“Excuse me, Mr Bear,” said the little buck-toothed boy.
“How can I be of assistance?” asked the bear, with a deep, wise-sounding voice.
“I’ve asked everyone, but no-one can help me. I’ve been really mean and horrible to everyone, and I like it. But everyone I meet thinks that I’m a good little boy. Do you know why?”
The bear nodded sagely. “That’s a tough question, all right, and I’m not sure that my answer is going to please you. Because there’s no one reason that people think you'll be nice. They just assume you will be. People like putting every new thing they come across into boxes, so they can pretend that everything in a box is essentially the same. It’s because people are scared of things that are different, and by assuming, and using their little boxes, they can pretend that they are capable of understanding the world, rather than dealing with the terror of knowing that they can’t possibly understand anything.”

“Oh,” said the little buck-toothed boy.
“For example,” said the bear, “people also assume that just because fairy tale animals are anthropomorphic, they’re not still animals.” And he ate the little buck-toothed boy up, rending his flesh and gnawing on his bones.

And then, licking the still-warm blood from his snout, the bear looks straight out of the screen, and locking his deep brown eyes with yours, speaks to you. “Of course, I’m not sure that it was the little boy making assumptions about fairy-tale animals. He didn’t know that he was in a fairy tale, after all. I guess I was subverting your expectations as the reader, rather than his as the character.”

The bear considers further for a second, shifting his bulk, then looks back up at you. “Still, even that may not truly represent the situation. Because I’m a character as well, I can’t know your expectations in advance. In some ways, we’re actually addressing the author’s assumptions about what your expectations will be. So if you expected me to eat the little buck-toothed boy, then you would have subverted the writer’s assumptions, rather than the other way around."

A strand of pink slaver drips from the bear's open maw. "Now, if I really wanted to challenge assumptions about fictional characters, both yours and the author’s, I could just climb straight out of the screen you’re looking at and maul you. Your skin tearing, the crack of your bones beneath my paws, and the feeling of sinking my teeth into your warm, sweet flesh.”

The bear belches, and you can almost smell the fetid stench of raw meat. “But of course, I've just eaten. Still, if you would like to come back to this paragraph a little later on, feel free. I’m quite at my leisure.”

And with a wink at you, the bear lies back against the cool moss, and turns to watch the brook shimmer in the dappled afternoon sunlight.

The Manistique Broadcast

There exists a subculture on the internet fascinated by lost media. Missing episodes of long-cancelled television shows, unreleased photographs of important historical events, suppressed news footage of gruesome occurrences, all are sought after, and clues to where the next rediscovered curiosity will surface are discussed endlessly on web forums and chat channels.

Among some of the older and more experienced enthusiasts, there is an ongoing search for something referred to in lost media circles as the Manistique Broadcast, named for the small city in northern Michigan in which the original footage was supposedly aired one evening in 1982. The first references to the broadcast appear in cheaply copied newsletters circulated among pirate broadcasting hobbyists in the Great Lakes region, in which the owner of the newsletter (a person using the pseudonym "Neal Phreak") asks their readership if anyone has a recording of a twelve minute signal intrusion on a Schoolcraft County, Michigan NBC affiliate, purported to have occurred in the early hours of November 2, 1982.

Details of what exactly the broadcast is vary from source to source, and will likely never be known in full, since no known recordings have yet been discovered, and all information recovered thus far consists of the memories of several persons residing in Schoolcraft County at the time. Records recovered from Manistique television station WLUC by an unknown party and posted to the internet image board 4chan corroborate, however, that a signal intrusion did in fact occur during that night in 1982.

Most of those searching for the Manistique Broadcast agree, based on descriptions of those that claim to have seen the original broadcast, that the person depicted in the footage is Elizabeth Ekdahl, a woman reported missing to federal authorities in 1975. Miss Ekdahl's disappearance was one of several occurring in the Midwestern region during the 1970s, believed by the FBI to be the

work of a single, still-unknown party. Of note is that Miss Ekdahl had a distinctive facial scar around her right eye, a consistent detail in all known eyewitness accounts of the broadcast. Another point of general agreement is the presence of an electronically altered voice overlying the broadcast; whether the voice is of the person operating the camera, or added to the broadcast by other means is unknown.

The footage is said to depict the apparently deceased Miss Ekdahl, lying on the ground in a wooded area presumed to be in the vicinity of Schoolcraft County, sometime at night. An off-screen voice at the start of the broadcast announces the phrase "how to correct the mistakes of the past, coming at eleven." Beyond this point, descriptions of the broadcast vary.

In several accounts, the broadcast is said to merely be twelve minutes of footage of the body of Miss Ekdahl, before a loud static burst and the end of the transmission. Others state that at certain points in the footage, Miss Ekdahl's eyes appear to briefly open several times, though most attribute this to be a mistaken interpretation of several viewers due to the poor quality of the transmission. Some versions of the account mention that the offscreen voice speak at these points in the broadcast, but descriptions on this point are contradictory.

A person claiming to have seen the Manistique Broadcast posted their account of the footage in the early 1990s, on a now-defunct pirate broadcasting usenet group. While the user's description of the early portions of the footage are consistent with other accounts, their account diverges drastically at approximately the six minute mark, where Miss Ekdahl is described to stand up, despite numerous large wounds and extensive trauma to the chest region. She is then described as shuffling slowly into the surrounding woods, before the broadcast ends with the same static burst at the twelve minute mark.

Due to the lack of widespread television recording capabilities at the time of the broadcast, as well as the timing of the signal interruption, it is unlikely that any recordings of the Manistique Broadcast exist. Still photos purported to be taken from the broadcast have been posted occasionally on image sharing sites; however, most users doubt the veracity of these photos, given the possibility of image manipulation.

Certain details are frequent sources of discussion among those interested in the Manistique Broadcast. Of the four disappearances connected to the case of Miss Ekdahl, hers are the only remains that have yet to be recovered. Two of the persons reported missing were later recovered with injuries similar to those apparently suffered by Miss Ekdahl; the remains of the third person were found in an advanced state of decomposition, making confirmation of the cause of death impossible to determine. Miss Ekdahl's mother claimed on an episode of *Mornings With Len* in 1989 to have seen her outside of her home during the nighttime on several occasions, and has consistently advocated for authorities to keep her case open, despite the official close of the investigation in 1992. In 1984, a private equity firm purchased 300 acres of forest in Schoolcraft County, located approximately two miles from Miss Ekdahl's former home, and have closed public access to the parcel since. Several lost media forum users have reported receiving threatening phone calls late at night after visiting this area, as well as other forms of unspecified harassment.

While the existence of a signal interruption affecting WLUC in 1982 is beyond doubt, it is unlikely that the true nature, or even the precise contents, of that broadcast will ever be determined.

The Other Side

The gravel beneath his feet protested with a crunch as Rufus T. Heckle exited the alleyway, face-first into the acrid street smoke. He was not a very well-dressed man, though he held a distinct noble air around him, one that sent flies spiralling over his head and rats scurrying under dumpsters in shame when he coughed, throat smarting at the smog. But it was not the rats and flies and smog that occupied Rufus's mind as he approached the corner of 3rd and King's. It was the words the youngster had said at their last meeting three days ago, the cryptic "final message before death" every detective inevitably faces once or twice in his career. *The Other Side is always just around the corner.*

It's a cafe, an inn, a safehouse, though not in the usual sense, the youngster had said. *They say it's a very important place, the kind where the guy you're looking for might frequent.* Rufus might have mentioned something about his job being very unlike the "usual sense", but let him continue. The youngster had nothing much left to say, though, and forty-six hours later his roommate found his set of clothes heaped over his shoes, at the start of a large bloody smear ending abruptly at the east window. It was the same window that, from two stories above, overlooked Rufus as he trod round the corner store, pausing only to scoop a handful of large pebbles from the sidewalk. "The Other Side is always just around the corner," he mouthed, like a forgotten nursery rhyme. "Just around the corner."

One, two. Three, four. As if in a dream, he dropped them almost ritualistically as he rounded the block into the back alley, two before the corner, two after the corner. Crunch the gravel. Cough at the smoke from the street. There seemed to be a certain rhythm to it. *I am doing this. Why am I doing this?* He didn't even know if he was thinking anymore, the second round around the block nothing but a deep revenant calling from an ancient OCD. Corner store, here come the pebbles. One, two. *Tie my shoe.* Like a forgotten nursery rhyme. Three, four, knock on the door, and sure enough there at the

side of the building was a pair of clear glass doors, tucked in low like the one from Alice in Wonderland. It even seemed just as small, cowering from the world in its cosy brick cubbyhole, and Rufus subconsciously stooped as he went through it. Above him, "The Other Side Cafe" hung daintily in embossed italics from velvety rope.

It was an elegant affair, with glowing orbs keeping sentinel along the walls. Gas lamps? In this day and age? The checkerboard floor was odd too, shining like marble yet creaking like old wood when stepped on. Around him, patrons dined and drank, occasionally flickering (what?) like Chinese mask performers to reveal… something. Whatever it was, it left him with the strange mental image of a pale shell-less crab in the moonlight, grotesque yet familiar. The whole place was…how would he put it? Otherworldly.

There was a two-seater near the corner, below a warm orb-light, and a genteel middle-aged man was sitting at it. There seemed to be something innately *different* about him, something that stood out, yet did not stand out from the contours of his face to the shapes of his shoes. Rufus immediately made a mental note of his appearance, and to his suprise found that he couldn't. Sure, the gentleman was probably forty-ish, with the look of a chap one'd probably find on a park bench feeding pidgeons somewhere. His attire did not just reek of "drab", it utterly defined it. It kept in the quiet of its seams, like the one guy at the party, the diplomatic one who never talked too much to anybody, and it was perfectly boring, even indescribable in its inanity. That was it. The drab man in the chair, the boringly impossible, impossibly boring man, he defied description, and he expected Rufus to sit down with him. No words, no signals. Just an expectation.

"I suppose you know why I'm here?" said Rufus as he sidled in smoothly, though it was an empty assertion of power, a perfectly scripted line from an old noir movie.

You're dealing with events way over your head here, kiddo. Best you stay out of this. said the impossible man. Except he didn't say it like that, he said instead, "Yes."

Extending a hand (perfectly indescribable, thought Rufus), he

greeted. "I'm the Proprietor." Even the way he said it sounded capital. "I hear about things from the patrons here and there, and I couldn't help but expect your arrival. Yves must have told you about the place."

Rufus took his hand. "I'm Ryan Gore." Carefully chosen alias here, though deep inside he knew it wouldn't hide a thing from this oddly dull man. "Yves, that was his name? The kid who got killed?"

"Killed? Hardly, though I can imagine he wish he were, Mister Rufus."

They were both silent for a moment, as a maid in a gas mask passed by with tea. *Need a cup, sweetie?* she breathed. "No milk, one sugar, Rosie," said the Proprietor. Rufus merely smiled and waved no, thanks. Rosie the gas mask maid might have smiled back, and she set down a steaming teacup from her tray before giving a curt nod to the Proprietor and moving on.

"So, what about the other cases? The gypsy woman on the twenty-second, the park vagrant on the twenty-fifth, what happened to them?" implored Rufus.

"Same as the kid. What did you expect?"

"Who killed…took them?"

"Can't say for sure. Lots of people come and go through the Other Side, and it gets hard to keep track of who entered where from here. This is where the lines get thin, after all. I built this establishment on a rift, Mister Rufus, and it bleeds onto people, leaves a stain. If you're looking for the guy who took those people, following those stains would be very helpful indeed. Given the nature of the crimes, wouldn't you say he'd continue hunting round the same neighbourhood?" Proprietor took a long sip of his coffee.

"Aha. Typical serial killer. How do you suppose I find this…stain?"

"Why, just look at the patrons around you, Mister Rufus. Hell, there's even one trailing down your neck as we speak."

Rufus glanced at his reflection on the immaculate checkerboard

floor. Sure enough, a muddy streak was running from the end of his left ear down to the collarbone, looking more like a birthmark than anything now. He scratched at it almost instinctively.

"Well, there you go. It's been nice talking to you, Mister Rufus, but sadly that's all the help I can afford to give to a stranger. Goodbye." The Proprietor might have smiled a bit here.

"Thank you for the help."

"Oh, there's no reason to thank me," said Proprietor. "Trust me. There won't be any."

Rufus Heckle got up, tucked his chair in, and headed for the door before deciding to ignore the last bit. He was a detective, for what it was worth, and by God if he didn't do what he was paid to do. *Good day to you, sir*, breathed a maid as she held the door open for him.

He exited the Other Side Cafe, breathing in the last fumes of warmth from within.

"And a good day it shall be," he proclaimed to no one in particular. It echoed off the blank brick wall behind him, as he headed off into the cold.

The Price of Beauty

Lana woke up early that morning. Instantly, her gaze fell onto the form still sleeping beside her; her girlfriend, Maria. Lana smiled absently, and shifted from the bed in a way that wouldn't wake her partner, sleeping soundly. She was gorgeous, and Lana would never stop being surprised that the young woman chose to be with her.

As she stood, her plump - no, fat, always fat - thighs rubbed together and jiggled as though there was an earthquake. She grimaced and pulled her pyjama shorts down a little, though it felt like they strained and failed to cover her thighs. She had a photo shoot today, and that always meant a lot of work beforehand.

She headed to the en-suite, walking past photos framed on the wall. Some of her alone, from the agency, but many of the two together. At a glance, Lana could see when she was thinner, she could see herself as she was meant to be; a low collared top showing her collarbone, a close-up showing her cheekbones. She was surprised that her agency had kept her on, with her weight creeping up to the point of her being a wobbly, jelly-like creature with the cellulite and stretch marks that gave her body texture.

She paused at the dresser and got out the small bag of tools that would prepare her for the day. On the bed, Maria snorted softly and rolled onto her other side, still asleep. Good. Lana hated having an audience when she was preparing. She took her bag through into the en-suite, shutting the door behind herself and turning on the lights around the mirror.

“There's the answer if you want it,” her mind teased.

She ran her hand across her plump cheek. One more pound and she was sure she would be dropped by her agency; one more pound and Maria would leave her. She felt sure of it all, despite these words not being exchanged. Desperate times called for

desperate measures.

“It's okay. They'll give you fakes. You can get everything rebuilt these days. Your tits, your arse, your face…” the delusions soothed her once more that this was the right thing to do.

She fumbled in the bag for her device of choice. Her hands gripped cold metal. She knew a way to fix everything.

Maria stirred half an hour after her partner had left the bed, her side now cold. She squinted and peered at the clock. Lana was obviously already up, and getting ready for her photoshoot. Never a better time to surprise her girlfriend, and lavish her with the reassurance Lana had made it apparent she needed as of late. Maria forced herself to wake up enough to stand and grab her dressing gown, for warmth.

She walked by the same wall Lana had not long ago, pausing at one of the professional photos taken by Lana's current agency. She was skinny back then, six months ago, but even more skinny now. Yet she insisted on going days without eating, and, when she did eat, it was always low fat, low calorie, tiny portions. Maria had lost count of the times she had told her girlfriend she was skinny enough, beautiful enough - that it wasn't sexy to have clumps of hair falling out and be too tired for anything more intimate than a kiss. The arguments were wearing them both down, but Lana was always exhausted now, it seemed, and it made Maria not want to say a word to her, especially not one born of anger.

Maria continued on her short journey to the en-suite. Lana would be in there putting her face on, preparing herself for the day ahead, and Maria just wanted to tell her how beautiful she was before she was covered in slap and her girlfriend wrongly believed Maria's attraction was just due to her make-up, and another fight started again.

Maria knocked on the door gently, and, when there was no reply, tried the handle and opened the door. What she saw there nearly made her pass out from shock; she had to clutch the counter-top to stop from falling to the ground.

Lana stood in front of the mirror but instead of blotting on foundation

or finishing her eyeliner, there was a set of pliers in her hand. Blood dripped down them slowly and then ran onto the pale hand holding them. Lana's eyes were focused on the mirror - she hadn't even looked away as Maria came in.

There was the soft noise of a tooth ripping free from its gummy surroundings - a horrible noise of something breaking, fleshy and raw, and the metallic scent of a newly-opened wound. It must have hurt, but Lana didn't make a sound. She simply kept her mouth wide, wide, wide open so as not to miss a single tooth. The most recently removed one clattered into the sink with a handful of its brothers, all bloodstained and some cracked by the pressure the pliers had delivered onto them.

As Maria started to call to her, in a panic, Lana calmly went on to the next tooth, and gripped the pliers around it, imagining a future her with an amazing figure and false teeth that were perfect and straight and white, because they never chewed food, just sipped her meals through a straw. This was the answer she wanted and she was going to take it.

To Maria, it was a horror show. To Lana, it was simply the price of beauty.

The Ragdoll

When I was a small child, I was terrified of the dark. I still am, but back when I was around six years old I couldn't go a full night without crying out for one of my parents to search beneath my bed or in my closet for whatever monster I thought was waiting to eat me. Even with a night light, I would still see dark shapes moving around the corners of the room, or strange faces looking in on me from my bedroom window. My parents would do their best to console me, telling me that it was just a bad dream or a trick of the light, but in my young mind I was positive that the second I fell asleep, the bad things would get me. Most of the time I would just hide under the blankets until I became tired enough to stop worrying, but every now and then I would become so panicked that I would run screaming into my parents room, waking up my brother and sister in the process. After an ordeal like that, there would be no way anyone would be getting a full nights rest.

Eventually, after one particularly traumatizing night, my parents had had enough. Unfortunately for them, they understood the futility in arguing with a six year old and knew that they would be unable to convince me to rid myself of childish fears through reason and logic. They had to be clever.

It was my mother's idea to stitch together my little bedtime friend.

She collected a large assortment of random pieces of fabric and her sewing machine and created what I would later refer to as Mr. Ickbarr Bigelsteine, or Ick for short. Ick was a sock monster, as my mother called him. He was made to keep me safe while I slept at night by scaring away all the other monsters. He was pretty damn creepy, I had to admit. Honestly, looking back on it all now, I'm still impressed that my mom could think of something so strange and disturbing looking. Ickbarr had the stitched together look of a Frankenstein gremlin, with big white button eyes and floppy cat ears. His little arms and legs were made from a pair of my sister's black

and white striped socks, and the half of his face that was green was made from one of my brother's tall football socks. His head could have been described as bulbous, and for his mouth my mom attached a piece of white fabric and sewed in a zigzag pattern to shape a wide grin of sharp teeth. I loved him at once.

From then on, Ick never left my side. So long as it was after dusk, of course. Ick didn't like the sun, and would get upset if I tried to bring him to school with me. But that was okay, I only needed him at night to keep away the boogeymen, which was what he was good at. So every night at bedtime, Ick would tell me where the monsters were hiding, and I would place him near the section of my room closest to the spookiness. If there was something in the closet, Ick would block the door. If there was a dark creature scratching at my window, Ick would be pressed up against the glass. If there was a big hairy beast under my bed, then under the bed he went. Sometimes the monsters weren't even in my room. Sometimes, they would hide in my dreams, and Ickbarr would have to come with me into my nightmares. It was fun bringing Ick into my dream world, as he and I would spend hours fighting off ghouls and demons. The best part was, in my dreams, Ick could talk to me for real. "How much do you love me?" He would ask.
"More than anything." I would always tell him. One night in a dream, after I had lost my first tooth, Ick asked me for a favor.

"Can I have your tooth?"

I asked him why.

"To help me kill the bad things," he said.

The next morning at breakfast, my mom asked me where my tooth went. From what she told me, the "tooth fairy" didn't find it under my pillow. When I told her that I gave it to Ickbarr, she just shrugged and went back to feeding my little sister. From then on, every time I lost a tooth, I would give it to Ick. He would always thank me, of course, and tell me that he loved me. Eventually though, I ran out of baby teeth, and I was beginning to get a little too old to still be playing with dolls. So Ick just sat there on my bookshelf collecting dust, slowly fading away from my attention.

Over time the nightmares, however, became worse than ever. So bad that they even began to follow me to the waking world, terrorizing every dark corner or rustle in the bushes. After one particularly bad night biking home from a friend's house where I swore a pack of rabid dogs were chasing me, I got home to find something strange waiting for me in my room. There, on my bed, standing fully upright in the soft glow of the moon light from my window, was Ickbarr. At first I just thought my eyes were playing tricks on me again, they had been all evening, so I tried to flick on the lights. Another flick of the light switch. Then another, and another, with no change to the darkness. It was then that I started to get nervous.

I backed away slowly towards the door behind me, my eyes never leaving the shape of Ick's silhouette, my hand awkwardly outstretched behind reaching for the doorknob. I was just about to get my ass out of there when I heard the door slam itself shut, locking me into blackness. In nothing but shadows and silence, I stood frozen in place, not even breathing. For how long I can't say, but after what felt like a lifetime of cold fear, I heard the shrill, familiar voice.

"You stopped feeding me, so why should I protect you?"

"Protect me from what?"

"Let me show you."

I blinked once, and everything changed. I wasn't in my bedroom anymore, I was somewhere… else. It wasn't Hell, but the comparison wasn't far off. It was some sort of forest, a horrible, nightmarish place where partial embryonic abortions hung from the canopy, and the ground swarmed with carnivorous insects. A thick fog wafted through the air and with it the stench of rotting meat, while chartreuse lightening flashed across the night sky. In the distance, I could hear the agonizing screams of something not quite human. My head throbbed like it was about to explode, the pain forcing out a river of tears. In my mind, I heard his voice again.

"This is what your reality would become without me."

I felt earth shaking footsteps approaching fast.

“I’m the only one who can stop it.”

It was behind me now, huge and angry, hot breath across my back.

“Bring me what I need, and I will.”

I woke up before I could turn around.

The following day I raided my parent’s closet for my brother’s baby teeth, giving them all to Ickbarr. Almost immediately the night terrors ceased, and I was more or less able to go on about my life as normal. From time to time, I would have to sneak into my little sister’s room and snatch what was meant for the tooth fairy, or strangle one of the neighborhood cats and pry out its sharp little incisors. Anything to ward off the visions, anything from a shark tooth necklace to a cavity ridden bicuspid. I also began to notice that Ick would move about my room whenever I left for any length of time, rearranging my stuff and hanging additional curtains. He was even beginning to look more lifelike, somehow. In the right light his teeth would glisten, and he was warm to the touch. As much as he creeped me out, I couldn’t work up the courage to just destroy him, knowing perfectly well where that would leave me. So I went on collecting teeth for Ick throughout all of high school and college. The older I got, the more things I would learn to fear, the more teeth Ick would need to keep me safe.

I’m 22 years old now, with a decent job, my own apartment, and a set of dentures. It’s been almost a month since Ick’s last meal, and the horrors are starting to crowd around me once more. I took a detour through a parking garage after work tonight. Found a man fumbling with his car keys. His teeth were stained yellow from a lifetime of cigarettes and coffee. Even still, I had to use a hammer to get out the molars. When I got back to my apartment, he was waiting for me. On the ceiling, in the corner. Two white eyes and mouth of razors.

“How much do you love me?” He asks.

“More than anything,” I reply, taking off my coat.

“More than anything in the world.”

The Real Monsters

When I was a little boy, I was afraid of monsters.

They always lurked in the dark places where the light didn't reach. It didn't matter how many times my father shone a flashlight into the dark corners of my closet; I knew, the moment that the light was gone, that the monsters would come back. They would lurk in the darkness and whisper to me. I would cower under my blanket and hope they would go away. Sometimes, they would, when the morning came, but I knew that the moment the darkness came back, the monsters would return too.

And they always did.

When I grew up, I learned why: the real monsters don't hide in dark corners and closets. The real monsters are the ones that live behind your eyes, in the darkness of your mind, and it takes more than a flashlight to send them away, more than a blanket to hide from them. They're always there, whispering to you, saying terrible things that children don't understand.

After enough listening, you'd do anything to make them stop.

You'll find what you're looking for in the basement of the abandoned Murphy house. She's still alive - at least, the parts that I still had were alive the last time I visited her - but the others are long dead. I've kept their teeth in ziploc bags in the old file cabinet. Maybe you can identify them from dental records.

Anyway, she hasn't eaten in days, and she's lost a lot of blood, but she might still live if you hurry. If she wants to live, that is. The others didn't want to, in the end.

All I ask is that you leave the light on when you go. This prison cell is very dark, and I'm afraid that the monsters will come out when you leave.

The Runner

There is, in a small national park somewhere in the US, a bike path. This bike path is hardly unusual: it is roughly twelve miles long, and makes a circuit around a small lake. Most of the path is wooded, and it is regarded by the locals as a beautiful little place to take a breather and catch some peace and quiet.

Many who jog or bike along the path observe nothing out of the ordinary. But there are those lone bicyclists who happen across the Runner.

Mark coasted his bicycle to a stop on the side of the path. Standing astride it, he drank eagerly from his water bottle. Finally, he was able to enjoy a day off, instead of staying home and paying bills, or mowing the lawn, or fixing the roof. And he was at the park at the perfect time, too: he was practically the only one there, besides a few families in the picnic area and the old men who fished from the pier.

Wiping his mouth on his arm, Mark put the bottle back and was about to pedal off, when someone ran up behind him.

“Nice day, eh?” the young man said. He was tall and thin, and wore a hooded grey sweatshirt and black running pants. His face was concealed by a scarf and sunglasses. Since summer had yet to take the place of the mild spring, Mark saw nothing unusual about this.

“Yeah. It’s perfect out.”

The young man nodded. He swayed when he stood still, as if he was anxious to keep moving.

“You up for a race?”

“A race? That’d be pretty unfair.”

“Maybe. But so is life, you know?"

Mark couldn’t help but chuckle.

“Okay. You’re on. Where to?”

The young man thought for a moment.

“Right past the tenth mile marker, by the old storm shelter.”

“Fine by me. That’s a pretty good distance from here, though. You sure you can keep up?”

“I’ll give you a ten-second head start, even. Just go whenever you’re ready.”

While Mark did host some suspicions about the strange young man, he brushed them aside. Sure, he was a bit odd, but he seemed nice enough.

Mark put his foot to the pedal and rode off. His speed was almost casual, and with good reason: the ten second head start would let him build up enough speed to leave any jogger in the dust.

“You know, you’re going to have to do much better than that.”

Mark looked to the left to see the young man there, keeping an equal pace with the bicycle without moving at much more than a light jog. The ten seconds had achieved nothing.

How did he do that?

Mark immediately shifted gears and began to put some force behind his pedaling. The bicycle shot off down the path. Mark kept his head low, cutting through the air with aerodynamic precision. The wind whipped around him, filling his lungs with cool air. The trees went by in a blur of green and brown. He kept pushing himself further, faster, faster, faster. There was no way the jogger was anywhere close to him.

Turning his head to the side, Mark saw to his dismay that the young man was still there, matching his speed perfectly. But now he wasn’t

even running on the path anymore: he ran straight through the woods, dodging obstacles with the grace of a deer. Actually, it would be inaccurate to say that he even ran. He *flew*. His feat barely touched the ground before he took another leaping stride forward. His scarf waved behind him like a tail. The way he ran, Mark could imagine him laughing.

Mark's amazement at this was numbed by the overwhelming sensory maelstrom his speed had achieved. There was no noise but the wind in his ears, no taste or smell but the chill air in his mouth and nose, no sight other than a stripe of grey in a sea of green, nothing to touch but the handlebars.

Then, the shelter appeared up ahead on the side of the path. The finish line. Mark looked off into the woods. There was no sign of the young man. He must have left him behind. Redirecting his gaze towards the shelter, he gasped and hit the brakes, hard. He screeched to a halt in front of the old wooden storm shelter, twin streaks of rubber burned into the path behind him, and the young man standing in front of him.

"Nice effort there," he said, not the least bit winded. Mark on the other hand, could not reply due to his shortness of breath. "I almost thought you were a lost cause at the beginning, but you pulled through for the finish. Best race I've had in a long while."

"H-how…how did you…*do* that?" Mark panted.

"I really don't know what you're talking about. But anyway, here's your prize."

"What prize?"

"Your consolation prize, of course!" The young man almost sounded insulted. "I can't let effort like that go unrewarded. So much better than the others."

Mark's vision began to warp. The forest seemed to grow darker, unreal. The young man seemed to loom larger, and more mysterious. Shadows and shapes that should not have been there appeared in the forest. Bodies. Dozens of them. Bodies impaled on

saplings, bodies with heads smashed in by rocks, bodies torn open by some ungodly force, bodies hanging by their own entrails from the branches of trees. A row of bloody bicycle helmets were perched on a fence of sharpened sticks. They were there, and they were not, shifting between the real, the imagined, and the forgotten.

“Here’s your prize, a word from the wise,” the young man said, in a voice textured the way no man’s was. “The one who does not give his all receives nothing but his grave.”

The Runner walked into the shelter and was gone.

The Tailor

They don’t understand, darling. They can’t. They’re clouded, blinded by unrecognized jealousy and rage born from fear of what they do not know.

We’ll be safe here my, sweet. They won’t find us. They’ll never think to check and see if I doubled back. They’re too separated, too clouded by the layers between them and reality. If they could think like you do… Such pure cognition, each thought flitting from scrap to scrap. I can almost feel them pausing along your vertebrae before continuing on… If they were as free as you, they’d find me. They’d deserve to.

Hush dear. Here, let me hold you. I know you don’t like the damp. It eats at you my dear, and it'll be harder to repair you now that we're on the run. A few stray drips and you’ll mildew, and we mustn’t have that. What’s that? A moth? I’ll strike it down for you. I’ll be a knight in shining robes, billowing in the wind, protecting you from harm. That little dusty dragon won’t touch you darling. And I know you hate mothballs, and while I’m around, you shall have no need of them.

Here, let me get the light. I just want to look at you for a while. I’ll never get tired of you, pet. Your beauty, your grace… The way the light shimmers through your ribs, catching on pale resplendence of your breastbone. Hmm? I know, angel. You always felt that nylon looked cheap. I could see it in your frown when your mother brought you to the store. But we were out of time, and it worked so fast. You were all put together, quick as love. Well, before they could interrupt. And you’re so slim now! Free of all that confinement, open to the world as you should be.

A moment dear, I need to listen. Yes, yes, they *are* circling back. It appears I was mistaken about their powers of deduction. What an example I must be making for you… Though they seem to be providing a study in overreaction. Really, it’s like they think I did something wrong! You may not have been quite at the age of

consent, but you were so sure of yourself. I'm certain if they'd give me the chance to explain, to speak with you, they'd be able to see reason.

I'm afraid we must go now, love. But don't worry. I'll tuck you into the backseat. With any luck, they'll think you're napping.

We'll be fine, pet. Nothing can stop love. And you love me don't you? Of course you do.

The Taste of Leaves

I did knock.

I don't know why.

There was no reply so I slid the key into the lock and pushed the door open. I could hear my heart in my ears.

"End of life plans." It rang in my head. Closing your Facebook, absent from work, posting me some of your jewellery… It was all summed up in one horrible phrase.

She couldn't see me. I sat, perched on the windowsill, crouched. My body felt electric, humming, broken at the edges. What was I? A ghost? A ghoul? Alive, or dead? Why couldn't I remember what I had done?

You weren't in your small room. The bed was made. The bedroom was clean.

The animals were dead.

I didn't do it. I didn't do it. I couldn't have done that. I wouldn't have done that. I loved my guinea pigs. Maybe more than I loved myself. I stared at my trembling hands, saw that they seemed to be made of static. A broken TV. I hugged the duvet closer, though it offered me no warmth. My mum was judging me. She was so silent, staring down at them. My furbabies.

Salt and Pepper lay in their cage, a plastic sandwich bag neatly engulfing each of their heads. The food bowl and water bottle were full, which struck me as odd. The guinea pigs lay together on a pile of hay. When I touched them, the cold and stiffness chilled me. My next thought chilled me even more.

"I would have rather found her."

I wonder where I am. My physical me; if my body is somewhere. What did I do to myself? In this static form, my scars had disappeared. The white lines scanning along my arms were just not there. When I touched myself, my hand went through arm. I wasn't breathing, either. I was gone. In some form, I was gone. Would someone find me? Did I do this to myself?

I had prepared myself for that. I imagined my grief at seeing you hanging like a puppet on a string. I could see you lying in your bed, white foam on your lips, and the pill bottle in your pale, dead hand. I could prepare myself for that – for a death, then the funeral. I did that with dad; I did that with mum.

But seeing your animals dead sickened me more. It somehow felt more final, more distant.

More like an 'end of life plan'.

My mum had already been through so much grief. Crawling off the windowsill, duvet around me, I went to stand at her side. She really couldn't see me. She tensed, like maybe she felt me, but I realised from the look on her pale face that the dead animals disgusted her. I couldn't have done this. I loved them. I loved my mum. This wasn't me.

I turned away, feeling sick. You weren't capable of this. You loved animals. I remember you rescuing baby birds, keeping them in shoe boxes, feeding them with pipettes. Not letting them die. You willingly killing your pets was alien to me.

Turning away from the ghastly scene, I nearly tripped over the rubbish bin in my haste to escape. It forced my eyes to it, but I smelt before I saw. Metallic; my mouth tasted like pennies. Then I saw the blood, stagnating at the bottom of the bin, drizzling down the sides, dark brown by now.

I never liked blood and instantly the room span. But I grit my teeth and steeled myself. I lowered down to the bin. There was a flash of metal amongst the blood – a knife. Then skin. Layers and layers of skin. Flashes of colour; ink. Tattoos.

Your tattoos.

I followed my mum. I prayed she would see me. I wasn't invisible – not to myself, anyway. I was static, and the duvet around me was blue, dark blue, stained dark red in patches. Did I die in this? That was it. I was wrapped up somewhere in a forest. I remembered the taste of leaves in my mouth. As mum stared at my removed tattoos, I did too. I would never do that. I hated my body, but I loved my tattoos – the scars I chose on my body. Wildly different from the ones inflicted on me. I would never take them off. Such a thought never occurred to me.

My mind tried to piece it all together. There was enough blood for problems, but maybe not enough to die. You had carved your skin like the flesh of a pumpkin. Cut off your tattoos – cut off what could be used to identify you.

The thought was overwhelming. You, sitting on the bed, the bin in front of you, the kitchen knife slicing into vulnerable inked flesh.

I didn't do it! I wanted to scream at her. She was making a mistake! I could see in her eyes, on her face. Tense lips. Grey skin. Imagining it. She thought because I could take a folding knife and make fine lines on my arms, that I could plunge it deep into my skin. I didn't do it. I didn't want to die. The taste of leaves was overwhelming; autumnal and brown and painful. I died in this duvet, I knew it now. I was hidden somewhere. I just needed to be found.

Why? Why would you do this to us? Scattering yourself like clues, maybe clues to your death. Maybe clues to where you are.

My daughter is missing.

My daughter is not dead.

Please find me, mum.

The Woven Man

Once upon a time, there was a tailor of well-repute, who resided in a cottage some distance from the town square. He was known to be the best at his art, and his fingers moved like rippling water, manipulating even the finest of fibre and thread into intricate lines of motion that, so the story goes, could bring tapestry to life. Now, we know little truth in that fact. But the thing everyone agrees on is that one day, the tailor sighed.

For he had grown old over the years, and his hands were no longer the systematic swift swirling of small ripples, but the choppy churning of deep lakes. As always, his finished products were magnificent in detail and his commissions rolled in, but there lacked the spark, the swift precision that was his hallmark and pride and joy in his early days.

So the master tailor decided to search for an apprentice. Notices were put up, word was spread, and soon hopeful pupils by the coachload were hiking up the path to the master tailor's cottage, which was secluded so as to aid his concentration on his work. The tailor welcomed his candidates with open arms, and directed them each to a private room where they were shown a needle and as much as they required of the tailor's finest thread. Thinner than a horsehair and flimsier than rotten flax but shining silver which seemed to animate in the cold winter light. The task was to weave a single sheet of shimmering, moving silver, which could not be broken by human means. The tailor could accomplish this with ease, and even demonstrated it in front of the rapt students-to-be.

Naturally, many forfeited after testing the thread, and though there were some who came close, with a twist and a snap, their hard work would come undone by the stern-faced tailor. You have failed, he would say for the hundredth time that day, and the candidate would sigh, pack up and go.

Now this continued for a week, but among the many hopefuls, none

were able to replicate what the tailor had taken years to learn and even longer to master. As he showed another dejected candidate through the door, he thought to himself. "I can weave shimmering dragons, flying through the moving tapestry sky; I can weave live fire-flies with their glowing dances onto impossible textures of coats. If I cannot find a man worthy enough to be my student, I shall weave one myself! For nothing knows the fine flow of needle and thread better than one made of needle and thread himself."

The next day, the tailor locked his gate and blocked out his windows. Taking a bundle of fine white cotton, he began to weave. In and out, through holes impossible to find and even harder to thread, into three dimensions he constructed a matrix of interwoven thread, and with a final tuck completed a solid bone out of impossibly locked cotton. More and more he sewed, until a complete man's frame was formed. Then he bounded to the frame, by way of hooks and needles, countless numbers of springy red fibres, dyed with the blood of goats and bewitched by an old gypsy he once met in his earlier days. Slowly, the woven muscles twisted and snaked round one another until they stretched taut on the white cotton bone, and twitched with excited tension. But the tailor pressed his hand to the jumpy threads and said, "Lie still. It's not time yet."

With thin catgut he sewed infinitesimal compartments, until the structure resembled a human lung, and he placed it in the open quivering ribcage. In several swift movements of his needle he connected dripping red thread to fleshy catgut and woven bone, and painfully but surely the muscles contracted. His creation took a shuddering, shallow first breath.

For the veins and arteries he threaded numerous hollow yarns through the strands of interwoven red tendons, into linen bone and within breathing chest, and at the center of it all placed a little sewing-machine mechanism, driven by clockwork held fast with craftsman's glue and a live starpiece. Feeding silk through the heart, he wound up the pulsing starpiece, starting off the mechanism with a muted titter-tatter. Through the hollow veins life's silk coursed, bringing movement and vigour to the limbs. But there was yet no mind to control it, and the creation did not rise.

Using a sheet of smooth pink silk, he stitched skin to muscle,

covering the exposed rawness with a layer of thread so warm and smooth to the touch one could have mistaken it for a real person. With embellishments crafted from marble he slid fingernails into raw pulsing nailbeds, and teeth into dry gums. The hair was spun with the finest gold thread the tailor could afford, falling over clear glass eyes filled with bella-donna dew for sight. He left a small opening at the base of the skull, for he had not yet thought of how to weave a sentient soul.

Finally, among his vaults of disused material he discovered a strange colourless spool of thread which somehow shimmered with light more than even his most delicate silver. It was fine, but somehow not too thin, and so strong that he needed a carving-knife to sever it, but felt in his hands and needle that in all his years of practice and self-training, this thread was spun for his talented fingers alone.

In the pale moonlight he began to cast the thread into a single piece of textile. But the more he spun, the more he deviated and the needle twisted and turned, forwards and backwards into ways not even he could comprehend. It was as if the thread was compelling him, forcing his fingers into complex loops and maneuvers until he lost track of everything and all that remained was an indeterminate bundle in his hands, chaotic yet somehow orderly, which seemed to change its shape depending on from which angle he looked at it. His needle was also warped and bent double into a smooth curve, although he could not remember it doing so while he was sewing.

Carefully, gingerly, he lowered the strange dreamy bundle into the cavity of the skull, and stitched up the hole with a single movement. The glass eyes grew a little less opaque, and the tick-tick-tick of the clockwork heart quickened, and the woven man came to life.

That was the story he told the townsfolk, as he brought the woven man to the market the next day. Silk pulsing through threaded veins, it spoke and breathed and acted like a human being. In fact, so engrossed was the master tailor at his project that he did not realise he had created the woven man entirely in his own image. The townsfolk were amazed, and expressed joy at the tailor having another hand to help about in the never-ending work and commissions.

The days went by, and soon enough the woven man grew to be as proficient as the master tailor was in his prime. The master tailor, on the other hand, slowed and declined, and instead preferred to spend his evenings at the local barhouse with a few friends, a deck of cards and a mug of vodka while his creation toiled away and practiced. One night in a drunken rage, he threw down his cards and exclaimed, "I should never have made that blasted woven monster in the first place! Why, I would have trained a respectable born-and-bred man instead, one smart enough not to overtake his master at his own art!"

Late in the night, the town sentry recalled hearing a scuffle in the tailor's cottage. By the next morning, only one man was seen at the market, carrying his own wares. "What happened to the other one?" they asked.

"Tried to murder me in my sleep, that traitorous bastard."

"Where is he now?"

The tailor turned to them. "I killed him. Torn him apart. Strung his sinews into a bonfire, then set him alight with his burning bones."

The townsfolk asked little about that fateful night. The master tailor was apparently driven by the death of his doppelganger, and proceeded to generate tapestries the likes of which no one had ever seen before.

But no man is immortal, and even the master tailor's rippling fingers could not save him from Death. Now this is where the story gets strange, for when they cremated his body in the town square, his body burned like dry cotton on a summer day, and at the bottom of his ashes was a single clockwork sewing-machine mechanism, winding down to the tune of a dead starpiece.

Two Ships, Passing in the Night

There were once two identical houses. Each house had a pair within. Time moved swiftly forward and the pairs aged with this time. First, one pair lost their other half. Quickly, they were gone too. And the house sat empty.

The other pair promised it wouldn’t happen to them.

So, one day, one half picked up a gun, with a last promise and a kiss, they blew their lover’s candles out. Then, only momentarily in the horrible state of being alone, it was their time. Now both houses sat empty. The brother and sister arrived at the house with no blood on its walls, but they fought – first verbally, then physically, then legally.

One day the fog cleared as if pushed aside by a stiff breeze, compelled by some higher being that the siblings didn't believe in, but felt influenced by. The brother and sister realised how silly they were being, in the house that once belonged to such a loving pair. They called a silent truce and packed up – leaving the house alone once more.

All the while, the house of apparent tragedy had sat empty. It only hosted weeds in the garden, and kudzu had worked its way around the outside, invading through the windows.

The house, just as homes and people sometimes become, was broken. So, there was surprise when three figures took a chance and moved in. One could be seen wearing gardening gloves, removing wheelbarrows of weeds and kudzu. Another could be seen steadily cleaning the home, even removing the flaky blood from the musky walls. And the third, much smaller than the other two, could be seen making their own secret home in the overgrown garden, serving tea to a host of cuddly toys.

They were still working when five figures moved into the other

house. These people saw how hard they were working. They brought over steaming casserole dishes and occasional clunking glass bottles. More importantly, they brought over friendship. For the first time in a long time, both houses were filled with light and laughter.

The two smallest had the biggest things in common – each owned stuffed toy was promptly named, loved, and shared at will; every fake cup of tea drunk with gusto and a contented sigh. Then, one day, hand in hand, the two smallest left their homes for an adventure. A monster with nails as long as claws, black gaps where its eyes should be, and a hunger for something food could not satiate found them instead.

Kept alive, locked away, alone – terrified by this creature that seemed to come from another world, that leered at them with a mouth on its belly, that stared at them despite apparent blindness, that talked in a language neither child knew.

Their bodies weren't found for six months. Stuck together with black tape – bound by plastic.

Some*thing* had interpreted the little ones' fun. Some*thing* still on the loose. Some*thing* with skin that felt like a snake and had wrists that held no pulse.

The larger group left their home first. Full of grief and unable to look at those they had been so close to – each blamed the other for the tragedy, even though they sometimes just happen. Grief can do strange things.

Not long after that, the pair in the other home split in half. Neither wanted to live there, with the memories and the faint smell of blood. So, the home became a house again. They stayed empty that way until something stronger than a force of nature turned against them, a thousand times stronger than only weeds or twisting kudzu.

The tides stopped peacefully coming in and out. A violent wind that seemed to come from no-where caused them to crash onto the beach, then the boardwalk, then started flooding into the neighbourhoods.

Undeterred as they had been in the face of tragedy, the houses had little hope against the storm beating them down. Quickly, each became free from their foundations with a creak and a shudder. For a while they even floated impressively, creating a bizarre optical illusion in the rising water.

Then, when these two houses with so much in common came within an arm's reach, they both shuddered at the same time, pushed by the same wave. And then, they went under, as if they'd never been there at all. Maybe they hadn't, and it was all someone else's dream – the suicide, the murder, the monster, the pain of emptiness.

It was as if all the painful and joyous events had never happened. And no one needed the corpses of empty houses to remind them, so something bigger than nature dismissed the buildings as useless. But, before they died, the houses became as two ships, passing in the night.

The End of it All

untitled1.txt

Finally it was time.

You had worked hard and long at this. Days, months, years at a stupid, mindless job, your body on automatic, while your mind raced ahead of itself. You had painstakingly built up a hoard of sick days, until you had a full month ready to go. This was it. This was your moment to shine. Your agent had weaseled you a contract for a real novel, no more short stories for you! You were finally going to write the novel you had always dreamed of. Action, adventure, comedy, romance, all with a unique twist, no one had ever thought of!

You laid your fingers upon the keyboard, ready to let loose-

And there was a knock on your door.

You cursed. You KNEW you had put up a no solicitor sign. You hadn't ordered any packages. And you had blasted all your social media to make sure your friends knew to leave you alone.

You decided to ignore it.

Fingers poised upon the keys again, you let your mind wander. You had the perfect beginning. Start in media res, a gripping scene of high fantasy, bleeding into a flashback, during a drag-

Again, there was a knock on your door, heavier, more insistent.

You glared at the door, as if by force of will you could make them go away. "No thank you, I have at the office!" You call out, loud enough to be heard through the cheap wood of the door.

Once more your fingers seek the home row keys, no hunt and peck typing for you, no, you are a master of your craft, the words will flow from your fingers like a fountain, no, a river, no, a veritable flood of-

KNOCK, KNOCK, KNOCK.

Loud enough it felt like your house shook, loud enough it jarred your mind free from your fantasy worlds. You were out of your chair before you were thinking, crossing the living room in three great strides and throwing open the door. “WHAT?” You yell, before you even look at the person before you.

He is a small man, wider than he is tall, the word rotund springs to mind, like a human version of a rubber ball. His face damn near gleams, chubby cheeks nearly spherical as he looks up at you with nothing but wonder in his wide, innocent eyes. “It’s you.” He whispers. “It’s really you.”

You step back, startled at the tone of sheer devotion in his words. And his clothing, well, it’s vintage, but, it’s, too vintage? He looks like he stepped out of an 90s advertisement, his clothing crisp and new, unworn since the day it was packaged. “I’m sorry?” You stutter out. “Do I know you?”

“No, of course not, how could you know me? I wasn’t born when you… well, no you don’t know me. But I know you. The whole world knows you. The greatest author to have ever lived. The one whose novels changed the very way the world thinks!” He gushes, hands close to his chest. “You’re the best.”

“I, uhm, think you may have me confused with someone else. I haven’t written any novels.” Your hand is on the door, ready to close it.

“You haven’t, yet.” And the way he says it makes you turn and look at him again. The way he seems… too real. His skin, no trace of flush. His blue eyes, bluer than any you’ve seen. His hair, perfectly coifed, with no hint of product in it. “I’m from-“

“The future.” You finish, faintly. What kind of science fiction writer would you be if you couldn’t recognize a time traveler? You step back, feeling a little faint, and your visitor takes this as an invitation to step in, a suitcase on wheels following after him. No, not wheels. You peer down and see that it has dozens of tiny feet. You sit down heavily in shock, and raise an eyebrow at the stranger.

He glances back at his luggage, and his face splits in a joyful grin.

“An homage. It doesn’t really need the feet, but I couldn’t resist. I mean, I know you’ve barely begun, but… Well, you must have so many questions.”

“Not really?” You say. “I mean, yes, they are boiling up inside me, eager to know… But I’ve read enough time travel stories to know I shouldn’t ask them. Well, maybe one. Why are you here?”

“To the crux, ah yes, to the crux, as ever, so salient and to the point!” He fairly cackles with glee, rubbing chubby hands together. “I am here for something very important.” He kicks his suitcase gently.

Nothing happens.

He kicks it again, slightly harder this time, and the lid pops open, revealing a good thirty hardcover novels. They are beautiful books, your name blazing across the top of each one, but not blatantly, a subtle nod to you, worked into the very art of the jacket art. And the art! The covers blend into each other, revealing a completely different picture takes as a whole, then when individual. You gasp in delight, reaching out for them, only to be stopped by your visitor.

“I, well, can’t let you read them. Might chance too much. Our computers say that this much won’t alter anything. What I need from you is simple.” His face lights up with glee, his eyes sparkling. “I need your autograph on the inside pages, please.”

“Of… of course. Anything for a fan.” He already has a pen ready as you lean forward, and begins open the covers for you.

“Thank you, thank you, so much, this is so great of you. Can you make them out to Tim? Oh, thank you, thank you, yes, this one is my favorite, the twist at the end? Everyone spent years wondering how you were going to get the protagonist out of this, and then, you did? And it was so masterful. I’m so glad I could meet you, on today, of all days, when you begin your first masterpiece!” He keeps up a steady stream of chatter as you sign each book, your eyes slightly glazed, trying not to take in too many details. Words on the inside of the dust jacket stand out, here and there, ‘Jimithy Kalters,’ ‘Death of the world the spire,’ ‘the Darkness that Dwells,’ and more, just little hints of what is to come. You desperately try not to read them, you

don’t want to influence yourself.

“There you go.” Signing the last one with a flourish. The front cover of this book is graced with what seems like an homage to the sci fi novels of the sixties, but with a beautiful man barely dressed on the front cover instead of a woman. You smile up at him, a little strained. “Is that… is that all?”

“Oh yes, that will be perfect.” He smiles at you again, bobbing his spheroid head. “Thank you for this. I’ll leave you in peace now.” And he turns on his heel, his little footed luggage trailing along behind him as he goes. The door closes behind him, but you don’t see whether he did it, or the luggage did.

You stay seated for several minutes. That was… amazing. Phenominal. Beyond belief. You slowly stand, snagging a soda from the fridge before you lazily make your way back to your computer.

You are going to be an amazing writer.

You swig your soda.

A world changing writer, according to the traveler.

Another swig, and you set the can down on your desk. Your computer hasn’t even had time to go to sleep.

And that artwork. You’d never seen a writer who had connected his covers like that. The spines, sure, but the books themselves?

The cursor blinks at you, almost accusatorily. You ignore it. You know you’re going to be great. You saw your name spread across the entire series.

So why can’t you think of a single thing to write?

You Never Visit Me Anymore

My daughter is dead.

What else can be said, what else can be told but the story?

She was a writer.

An unsuccessful one, she called herself. Her agent struggled to get her work published – it was dark, morbid, how could the general public bear the blackness that seeped from the pages?

I thought she was successful. Beautiful. Hard working. Loving. I didn't care that her work wasn't out there, it was perfect to me.

She would share, so excitedly, some new work – a poem, a story, a monologue. She pushed page after page into my hands, always littered with notes and lines under words, in red Sharpie. Comments to herself that made me laugh or cry, little things that she told herself to do, or not do, or change, or make darker, or kill off.

I should have seen it coming.

When she had no paper, she would write on her arms with the Sharpie. Temporary tattoos of ideas that made sense only to herself – I can only imagine what people walking down the street thought when they saw those doodles all over her right arm.

She had red Sharpie words on her arm when they found her, slumped on a bench, on the edge of the lake, near our home. Words that made sense only to herself; no note, nothing coherent, no explanation.

She died in a beautiful but lonely place – I visited it, after the wake, in the dusk. There was no path to it – I pushed my way through brambles and nettles, tore my black mourning dress, trod in dog shit in my high heels and ducked under looming branches.

But when I reached the clearing, I saw why she chose it.

A bench overlooking the peaceful lake, trees hiding her away, it was so quiet. I could hear every thought in my head, I could see the peaceful ripples on the water, and I felt no-one else would know I was here.

The beautiful spot was only marred by rubbish – it was obviously so overgrown that the litter pickers forgot it was here and there were cigarettes, gum wrappers, cans, all on the ground. When I looked closer I saw, somewhat buried in the dirt, her choice of death – empty packets of pills, paracetamol mainly.

She must have stocked up, visited pharmacy after pharmacy, buying three packets at a time as the law allows.

She must have had time to think about it. To really know what she was doing. To stop herself. To ask for help. To talk to me.

But she didn't.

She sat alone on the bench, dressed in her favourite outfit, the clothes we buried her in. What was she thinking – it took time, it wasn't quick, it wasn't easy. She must have thought something. Anything. She must have hesitated, regretted it, thought of me.

… right?

Pill after pill, washed down with Honey Jack Daniels. I didn't know she could drink whisky; I didn't realise how bad it all was. I didn't know until after she died that she drank every day, that she was drunk when she was with me, that every photo of her smiling came with a shot of vodka, or whisky, or rum, or whatever she could afford.

I wonder what her last thought was.

Was it the pain of her liver, as it reacted to the toxins she was pouring into herself? Or the crippling tightening of her kidneys failing? Did she really feel nothing, as the doctors reassured me, and did she think about me? Her nephew, her brother, her sister-in-law, her father, her friends? Or just herself, alone in that hidden

place, achieving what she wanted?

Did she regret it?

It was a dog that found her. The path wasn't clear to humans, but an overexcited dog exploring found it easily. She loved animals; I like to think she wanted a dog to find her first, rather than a human.

She'd just died, they said. Maybe half an hour before the dog owner phoned for an ambulance. She could have been saved, even if her organs were damaged. Too damaged to even donate, too damaged to even save someone else.

We buried her at the church near our house, close enough so I could walk there every day. The funeral was packed – she was truly loved, she had close friends who sobbed openly as they stood and talked about her, laughed at the memories, cried at the fact she was gone. I didn't speak. I couldn't speak. The priest spoke on my behalf, and it was strange hearing my thoughts coming from his mouth, coming from a man who didn't know her.

Her grave was simple. "Memento Mori", it said, because that's all that could be read clearly on her arm in red Sharpie at the beauty spot. "Remember you will die" – it seemed fitting. Almost poetic. But the grave itself was nothing special – no angels or frills or crosses.

When the funeral was over, and life was supposed to go back to normal, I couldn't settle. No-one was surprised, but no-one knew what to say either. What do you say to someone who had lost a child?

So I visited her every day. Once a week I brought flowers; once every other week I brought a copy of her work, and read it out loud, even the notes to herself that made me chuckle. I told her how life was still going on, how her baby nephew was starting to talk, how he could point out his auntie in photos of her. We told him all about her, I said, because she's still here with us.

Every day, I visited for the first year. Even when life truly went back to normal, and I went back to work, I would visit. Her father visited less often – he seemed to channel his grief into working hard,

getting a promotion, proving himself somehow as if that would replace his lost child. I didn't know how to talk to him about it, so I didn't. Our marriage became a quiet habit, with an empty space that was impossible to fill.

But then life just continued on. My work got more intense and I needed to work more hours; my grandson was starting preschool and my daughter-in-law needed help taking him back and forth; my back, which had always been bad, started getting worse…

I could make a hundred excuses as to why I didn't visit her anymore. Straight after the funeral I promised myself, I promised her, I wouldn't let her grave become like some of the others – knocked over by vandals or sheer bad luck, overgrown with weeds.

She just became a memory, the physical image of her grave faded away as life went on without her. It just did. It seemed impossible when you lost a child that you could continue – but you just did.

I remember when it happened.

I was at the table with my grandson, his little legs dangling on the chair that was too big for him. He was telling me excitedly about playing with sand at preschool and I was nodding along, because I couldn't get a word in edgeways.

There was the rattle of the letterbox.

I thought it strange at first, because it was the afternoon – the postman had been and gone. I dismissed it as junk mail from some takeaway place and went back to listening to my grandson, now talking about when the teacher was telling them about shapes.

I left him drawing shapes and practicing writing his name as I did some chores: Folded clothes, wiped down the kitchen counter, and then headed upstairs to put something away.

This meant going past the front door, so I reminded myself of the junk mail that was surely there, so I could bin it instantly.

I put the clothes basket at the foot of the stairs and went to the mat at the front door.

It wasn’t a leaflet, I realised. It looked more like a note on beige paper. Maybe it was from a neighbour – sometimes they had barbeques in the summer and were polite enough to tell us so we wouldn’t hang out clothes that would come back smelling of smoke.

I bent down to pick it up, and realised the texture was weird – squishy almost, and warm to the touch. My hand came away bloody, and I realised the ‘note’ was covered in fine hairs.

It wasn’t paper.

It was a slip of skin, deep enough to have been cut down to the muscle, thick and heavy and warm. I think the heat bothered me most, with this disembodied piece of flesh.

I closed my eyes tight as the room span, but I clutched the chunk of skin tightly regardless.

Written in red Sharpie, on top of all the fine hair that dusted her arms, were the words –

“You never visit me anymore”.

Surprise! Happy Birthday!

Ahh, Gears. Good to see you again.

Another year has come and gone. A year older. A year wiser. A year of your youth ground away in the mill of eternity. So, to commemorate this happiest of days: Tales! Tales of horror. Of suspense. Of moral ambiguity and cruelty. Of truncated kindnesses, and missing people, and maybe even a song and dance number. Tales with two faces, stories that don't and do mean at the same time, and the occasional tug at the heart string. Stories of men with needle teeth, or a horse who tells the future, or a duck whose quack echoes. Perhaps a skull who speaks all your fears, the tomb of the Czar's dead wives, or a chandelier made of bones. Who can say? All I can tell you for sure is…

Happy Birthday…! And many more.

Stitches

She ran her fingers over the needlework, smiling down at her finished labor. It looked so beautiful, so carefully arranged… And it was. It really, really was.

She'd taken her time with this one. It wasn't like the dozens of other cross-stitchings she'd worked on over the years, all the samplers and patterns she'd completed and discarded. Box after box of the stupid things were sitting in her attic, all working towards this one. Those were just practice; a past time. This one was a true thing of beauty…

He was still murmuring, still trying to move the tongue that was no longer there. It would have ruined the

elegant long-stitches over his lips. Even worse would have been the screaming, but the wires laced through his jaw took care of that. His hands were perfectly stitched together with French loops, looking almost elegant in their flowing pattern. He was beautiful. She smiled softly, leaning down to kiss him on the forehead.

“Are you ready, hun? I have to do your eyes next…” she said, stroking the bulge straining at the front of his pants. He looked up at her, blinking for one of the last times, his bright blue eyes looking soft and wet…

And nodded eagerly.

Kindness

We'd been deployed to some place in some little country whose name I can't spell. Place used to be part of the Soviet Union before it fell to pieces. We were at a tiny village, just on the crest of a beautiful cliff. At least, it was beautiful if you could ignore the pile of fresh corpses at the bottom.

It was like they had all just up and walked off the edge, like lemmings. Everyone in the village. It was our job to find out why. We went in in full Hazmat suits, to be safe. All the houses were empty, as if their occupants had just stepped out for a while. It was creepy. Only place left was the church. My partner and I drew the short straw, and went in. It was a simple, one-room affair, with a dirt floor. There were some sticks and rocks littered around the altar, so we moved in closer, to check behind it.

That's where we found him.

The poor boy was wearing rags, covered in bruises and cuts, and I realised that there was dried blood on some of the stones and branches around him. He couldn't have been more than seven years old. He looked up at me with the widest, saddest, most terrified eyes I've ever

seen. They weren't human eyes. They were too yellow.

He was clawing at his own throat. The boy had wickedly sharp nails, but his tolerance to pain wasn't high enough for him to bring them close enough to sever anything vital. A choked sob escaped him, and those impossibly-wide eyes widened even more. He gasped, and clamped both his bloodied hands over his mouth. That's when I really noticed the feathers. They were growing forward out of his wrists, sticking out over the backs and sides of his hands. Was he what caused this, or was he a victim, too?

“What happened?” I asked in my best Russian, which wan't very good. He shook his head, eyes never leaving mine. My partner was already radioing in for backup and medical assistance.

*“This is Six. We found… **something** behind the altar. Humanoid. It's injured.”*

Good old Ashley. Always so cold and professional. I know I should be, too, but… I mean, I can do my job, you know, but sometimes I find myself feeling sorry for the weird creatures we lock up. Some of 'em, anyway. This kid's… *almost* human… right?

The med fellas came in, along with the rest of the containment team. Emmy had gotten her memo pad out again, probably scribbling down information that was gonna go in the mission report later, when the boy reached out toward her. The kid instantly had at least four guns trained at his head. He shrank back against the side of the altar.

“Dammit, guys!” Eddy – he was one of the med fellas – snapped at them. “I'm *trying* to bandage this thing's neck, which is *kinda hard* when it's moving around.”

Emmy must have given the kid an idea, because he started looking around. He picked one of the smaller

sticks and started scrawling something in the dirt with it. The scritch-scratch of Emmy's pen doubled in speed, and I could hear her footsteps as she walked around the altar so she can get a better look.

“'Sorry,'” she translated aloud as he wrote. “'Not intend hurt. Scared. Sorry sorry sorry.'” She paused a moment. “The thing's got bad grammar.”

“That's *great,* Emmy,” Eddy said, although I don't think Emmy picked up the sarcasm, “and I'm happy for ya, but could ya ask it to *hold still, dammit* so I can save it's life?”

Emmy said something that I *think's* in Russian, and the kid stopped moving, so I guess he understood. The girl's a freaking savant, I swear. Can speak a bazillion languages, but can't read a situation worth beans, and she was still talking. I think she was asking questions, but the kid wasn't answering.

The flight back started out pretty boring. At least, for everyone that wasn't Emmy. She'd passing notes back and forth with the kid, or something, which I'm sure breaks all sorts of protocols, but from the look that was on her face, it looked like she was getting a pretty good idea of what the hell happened, so maybe she wouldn't get reprimanded too bad. I hope she didn't. She's a sweet girl. Kinda cute. I know I shouldn't be thinking those kinds of things about my co-workers, but she is.

I think everyone was surprised when Emmy suddenly announced that we all had to break out the earplugs, and *now*. We obeyed, of course. The kid looked like he was about to start crying again at the gesture; I think we hurt his feelings. Now, I'm no scientist or anything, but by this point I was starting to figure that the kid was refusing to talk for a damn good reason. However it happened, it was probably his voice that killed the villagers, and it could probably kill us, too. No-one else seemed inclined to ask Emmy why, so they were probably thinking the same thing.

We handed the kid over to the researchers at Site- , and Emmy merrily started rattling off to them what she's learned. I was kinda shocked she could be so *chipper* talking about it, though. What I overheard sounded pretty grim. The villagers had mistaken the kid for a demon when he'd wandered into town looking for food, and were probably trying to exorcise him. When his fear for his own life outweighed his fear of speaking, and he said two words (or, at least, something that translated to two words in English) that, combined with a defensive swing of his arm in what had happened to be in the general direction of the cliff, ultimately led to an entire village of people calmly walking off the ledge to their deaths:

"Go away."

I didn't see the kid again until some years later. I'd had an accident that screwed up my leg too bad for me to go back to field work, and got reassigned to paper-pushing at Site-17. He still had some scars from what he'd done to his neck, but there was also a bigger, cleaner one that looked like it had come from a surgery. Given the fact that he was at Site-17 now, I guessed that they'd probably taken out his vocal cords or something. He smiled and waved at me when he saw me. I waved back.

… My supervisor saw, and I got reassigned before I even had a chance to get my things into my new old desk.

Unpalatable

"So what are you doing up here in Saskatchewan?" asked the truck driver. His beard was rather scruffy and he didn't seem too bright, but he was inviting enough, and friendly. He was nice enough to pick up a hitch hiker, at least.

"I'm an investor. I'm heading up north to check out the uranium mines they have going here," I replied, watching the hula girl shake on the driver's dashboard.

"Why didn'tcha take a plane up?" the driver asked.

"Well I was going to but then that hail storm passed over the city and they said no flights would be leaving in 24 hours. I got a meeting up there in…" I checked my watch. "16 hours."

"Well it is nice to see the countryside, eh?" The man's gaze shifted to the sky momentarily.

"Oh yes, it is very nice." I looked up to, only to notice two spinning lights overhead.

"Now what wouldja say that is?" The truck driver could see them too.

"I dunno, maybe a chopper or something?" I gazed at the lights. Odd how they swirled like that. They seemed to get bigger as well.

"Nah, if it were a chopper it'd be making noise." The truck driver frowned. I looked back at the road to see if there were any other vehicles about. No one else on the lone, flat highway.

"Maybe i- Woah shit!" I was interrupted as the truck driver shifted the wheel sideways. I saw a flash of lights. Two lights, spinning I thought. And then the truck careened off the highway and flipped onto its side, leaving myself and the driver suspended sideways as our seat belts held us tight. I looked down to see a smashed hula girl.

"I- augh - I think I broke my arm," the truck driver said.

"Why the fuck did you do that?!" My head hurt.

"The lights came really close and we were about to smash them." The truck driver replied.

"Smash lights?" I asked, but before I could hear an answer I instead heard the sound of smashing glass and

a quick ripping noise. I looked up to see the driver gone from his seat and the windshield broken.

I focused through the windshield to see a blob. It was large, red, and for all intents and purposes could only be described as a blob. It had several tendrils extending from its body, one of which was holding onto the driver. And then I heard the sound of smashing glass and I too was suspended in the air by a slimy, red tendril.

"Greetings Earth men!" said the blob, "I am Snozerghaslel, food critic of Snasser. My apologies for crashing your vehicle, but i thought that the best way to incapacitate you!"

I was too shocked to respond. I looked over at the driver to see him similarly surprised. I looked back at the blob.

"Can you hear me? Is my telepathy coming through alright? Hello?" the blob seemed to jiggle a little. For some unknown reason I decided to nod to communicate that its telepathy was, in fact, coming through.

"Ah, good. I thought I should congratulate you, for being the first specimens of a new food craze!" The blob jiggled some more. "I've eaten a few Garfhufians in my lifetime, and even a Cragelisalilian, but I have never eaten an Earthling before."

Sudden fear came over me as I realized what it meant. I squirmed a bit, but to no avail.

"Squirming just serves to wet my appetite, as you will soon learn. Anyways, let's get to it." I watched in terror as the blob opened up a hole in itself that soon filled with what I could only presume to be teeth. He picked up the driver and dropped him in. The driver screamed on the way down then was silenced as the hole closed. I barfed.

"Oooh, hmmm, good texture. Oooh, crunchy center." I could hear a grinding noise and retched again. "Ah, I

really enjoy that liquid around the crunchy area. Adds a deep contrast that really keeps the taste-arms waving."

I heard a gulping noise and turned green. Then white as I realized I was up next for taste-testing. "I suppose you're up next, mister squirmy."

The tentacle began to rise up over the mouth-hole, which was once again beginning to open. I screamed. Quite loudly. So loudly the blob had to shake me and tell me to quiet down. I didn't. I had never been as terrified as I was right at that moment.

Then, just as it began to lower me into the mouth-hole, it stopped.

"Oh, wait, what is that after-taste?" The blob paused and smacked its mouth-hole. "Oh, that is wretched. That is absolutely vile. It's like, you know, it's like…" The blob snapped a tendril. "It's like when you get a really, slimy old sucker stuck in your tongue-ball. That is nauseating. Ugh"

The blob then threw me to the ground, slithered to its ship and took off. That night at the uranium site I got the vegetarian burger.

Coffee Shops

On the corner of Westpoint and Main, there’s a big concrete building painted all sorts of vibrant colours. Across the sides, in big red block letters, are the words “GETOUT”. An unusual sight, set against the offices and banks downtown.

Outside, it looks like some obsessive-compulsive youths took their spray cans in clean strokes to some poor landlord’s warehouse. Inside, the best café in the city. The Get Out, see? Get Out of your house, go see some friends. All kinds of people come around, from

businessmen to students. Excellent reviews, wonderful clientele, and the tastiest damn espresso in the area. The owner makes sure of it.

Course, it only really took off a couple years ago. See, the owner, Boakes, he was in competition with his older brother for a while. The Elder Boakes had a fabulous little nook over on Sixth, just called Old Café, a couple streets over. Elder was content with his little coffee shop, over near the apartments. I used to come down every day for a tea. Wonderful atmosphere, not too much different from the Get Out. Bit more cozy, a bit warmer. But I digress. Basically, the Elder Boakes got the talent, where the Younger Boakes got the aspirations.

Anyway, the two of them had a falling out. Shouting matches once a week for months up and down the street. Everyone knew about it. Course, everyone seemed to be on the Elder Boakes's side. His brother was a bit of a weirdo back then, always angry, you know the type. Rumours said he was some sort of cultist. He doesn't seem like it any more. He changed a lot.

One day, the Younger Boakes just packed up and left the city. Nobody really missed him, except his brother. He lived above the café; at night, if you passed by right after closing, you might hear him crying upstairs.

A few months after his brother left, the Elder Boakes's café burned. He was caught inside, the firefighters found his body under some timber. I was actually one of the guys who went in to look for him. I was there, that night that the Old Café went up in smoke.

The next day the Younger Boakes appeared downtown, bought a warehouse, and began work on the Get Out. Completely turned around. His hair cut, he was dressed well, a lot of energy and charisma. Never would have guessed that he was that freak from before. Had a new business partner too, some youngish looking fellow. Never got his name. Long hair, pulled back into a

ponytail. Always wore a hat.

… Can I tell you something?

The Elder Boakes… His hands and feet were screwed to a wooden frame. It must have snapped in the heat, the body was folded up like a sandwich. It was horrific. We never let that out, would cause a panic. Nothing like that ever happened before.

I've passed by the ruins a few times since, usually walking home from work. One night I turned the corner and I swear, for just a second, I saw that odd guy with the ponytail, under the streetlight, looking at the ruins. I just turned around, went the long way home.

Maybe the name of the Younger Boakes's café is not just some modern marketing gimmick. Maybe it's a warning.

The man had horns.

Dr. Toxic and Lady Catfish

Super Marvolo struggles, alone, on the floor of the supervillian's underground laboratory dungeon lair. Bound, trapped, his cape flopping useless on the ground. The chains that bind him are of a dexanite-troinian alloy. The dexanite is one of only three elements in the known universe that he cannot break, and the troinian is slowly sapping his powers and poisoning his blood. He is trapped, with no hope of rescue, unless Marvolo Boy, the Teen Wonder, can escape the deadly electric bear-sharks of Greater Camptos.

But it is not his own life he is truly worried about. Super Marvolo is as selfless as any hero, and the threat to his own life could not possibly motivate him to struggle as hard as he now does against the dexanite-tronian chains. No, this mysterious, unnamed supervillain has kidnapped the unrequited love of his life, Lady Catfish.

Even now, this unnamed supervillain could be doing all manner of cruel, unthinkable things to his dear Lady. Super Marvolo could never forgive himself if… if…

Super Marvolo turns all his efforts to breaking his chains. He cannot break them, and yet - he must!

"Super Marvolo!" a hooded figure cackles from the darkness in the shadowy corners of the laboratory dungeon. "We meet again. For the *last* time."

The hooded man steps slowly from the shadows. The lights illuminate first his mad, toothy grin, then the contours of his face, then his mad, staring eyes. Super Marvolo gasps in astonishment.

"It's … *you*!" Super Marvolo exclaims. "Dr. Toxic! But you… you were dead! You were shot between the eyes in the Special Crisis of Heroes!"

Dr. Toxic throws back his head and laughs. "So naive, Super Marvolo! Then again, you always were more brawn than brains." Dr. Toxic circles Super Marvolo with menace in his mad eyes. "Did it never occur to you that during the Special Crisis of Heroes, I was teemed up with Snake Goblin, Master of Illiusions? You only saw… what I wanted you to see!"

"So you've been behind this all along!" Super Marvolo stares down Dr. Toxic with his piercing diamond eyes. "What have you done with Lady Catfish!"

Dr. Toxic throws back his head once more, his laughter echoing from the laboratory dungeon rafters. "You cannot even *begin* to imagine what—-"

The world tilts.

Super Marvolo collapses on the metallic floor, limp, eyes open, staring at nothing, not even breathing. The rats and spiders and moths in the cages that line Dr. Toxic's

laboratory freeze and slump over.

The world stops.

Only Dr. Toxic is left moving. The look of mad glee falls from his face and the maniacal smile vanishes.

"Please," Dr. Toxic says. "Please. You don't - you don't know what this is. Please, this won't last long. I've been trapped here for … oh god, I don't know how long anymore."

He glances around, looking for an audience that he cannot see.

"Please, *please*. You have to help me get out. You have no idea what they've made me do. That woman… what did they call her? Lady Catfish? She's dead. They made me… they made me kill her, dismember her… leave her body parts in this hero's bed… For character development… and… the things they had me do to her, before she died… they made me laugh and they made me *like* it…"

Dr. Toxic forces back tears. "Their voices in my head, saying this is what audiences want… want the edgy villains… real-world violence so the power fantasy has extra spice…"

The room is silent. Unmoving. Dr. Toxic glances around, panic setting in on his features. "You have to do something," he says. "I'm almost out of time! The things they have me do, every day of my life in here - please, please, I'm begging you— Please!"

The double doors of the laboratory dungeon lair burst open. A figure stands silhouetted in the moonlight - a teenage boy, standing tall, cape billowing behind him.

"Teen Wonder!" Dr. Toxic exclaims. "How can this be? My electric bear sharks should have taken care of you!"

Super Marvolo leaps to his feet. "Quick, Boy Marvolo! Use your Marvel Gun!"

Boy Marvolo whips the oversized gun from behind his back and fires at Super Marvolo. The dexanite-troinian chains vanish in a burst of sparks.

"No!" screams Dr. Toxic. "Impossible! My plan was foolproof! This cannot be happening!"

"Good work, Boy Marvolo!" Super Marvolo shouts. "Now, let's take care of this dastardly villain."

A panel at the top of the laboratory dungeon lair opens, with the sound of an escape helicopter above. Dr. Toxic catches the line that drops through.

"You may have bested me this time, Super Marvolo," Dr. Toxic shouts as he lifts off. "But you haven't seen the last of… Doctor Toxic!"

"I imagine not," Super Marvolo says. "But we'll be ready." Super Marvolo puts his arm around Boy Marvolo. "Now, let's go rescue Lady Catfish."

Asche Zu Asche

We finally made it to the safe zone. At least, it used to be the safe zone. All that was left when we arrived was a heap of rat-gnawed skeletons, and a notice from the military that the next outpost was 200 miles away. The snow was drifting, and the wind bit to the bone. Our masks were freezing over, and our lungs burning. We decided it was time to find somewhere to make camp for the night.

There were four of us. We still barely know each other, even though we've been travelling together for close to 5 years by my reckoning. It's hard to tell with what's happened. Winter never ends with all the shit in the air.

We built a small fire and huddled close around it, eating the meager rations we'd dug out of the gray ice. Sergei was up on first watch. The rest of us slept uneventfully. My turn came up last. I woke up early, and told Alexi to go get some sleep. I locked a new magazine in my rifle, and took a seat in the tower, staring into the ashy sunrise

It's been nearly 30 years since we fucked the world. 30 long years since the bombs fell and mankind was wiped off the face of the planet. I don't know how many of us are still alive. For all we know, the last bastion of humanity might have been back in Petrograd, if that's still what they're calling it. Saint Petersburg before the war. God only knows how the name got changed. Not that it was much of a city anymore. The War levelled most of the city, leaving only the outskirts and the Metro intact. That's where we lived, maybe 1000 people trying to survive. Most of us never saw the sky, never stepped outside the tunnels. Too dangerous. Between the mutants and the weather, you could barely survive a day on the surface. The four of us decided to make a break for it. The military frequencies were still broadcasting, promising shelter and safety at an outpost 30 kilometers up the Neva. We made it there in a week, finding nothing but a notice to move to the next location. The past five years we've been chasing these signs and radio signals. From Lake Ladoga to Volgograd and north again. I don't know where we are anymore. We must be in Siberia by now.

Travel is hard even in summer, or what passes for it. It never gets above freezing this far north. Winter stops everything. Six, eight months we have to find a village to hole up in. Try to find an intact house, keep from freezing to death. We hunt for food. Find a feral cow, wild pig if we're lucky. Usually it's mutants. Howlers, we call them. As far as anyone can tell, they were rats before the War. Now they're the size of dogs, and vicious. And talkative. They howl and scream, you can hear it for miles. Not the worst, though. Most of the truly dangerous ones stay in

the cities. We don't go in the cities anymore, not after what happened to Vladimir. A pack of these…things came out of the sewers, dragged him off. We don't know what they were. Looked like the bastard offspring of men and apes. We never saw him again.

I returned to the present with the sound of a scream. A howler, probably. Sounded close. I went to check it out, maybe put a bullet in it for breakfast. It seems like the storm had picked up overnight. I could barely see through the snow on my lenses, and even then it was difficult to see more than a few paces. I thought I saw something moving out there in the blizzard, but I could never get close enough to see it properly. I headed back to my post, cursing under my breath. Heading back into camp I noticed everybody else was awake as well. They'd all heard the beasts. I told them to go back to sleep. That's when Natasha screamed. I wheeled around, drawing my rusty old Makarov. There was something hanging from her arm. It looked like a howler. I put a round through its head and it dropped like a stone.

Sergei stepped over and started dressing the wound. We were all confused. Howlers aren't usually hostile like this. I was on edge, gripping my rifle tightly. Suddenly, a rhythmic…chant, or something started up, coming from all around us. Something about it chilled me to the bone. It had a profound inhumanity to it, the worst sound I'd heard since the freight-train roar of the bombs when I was five. Dark silhouettes started appearing through the snow. Seven, eight feet tall, all of them. Arms reaching their knees. They were coming closer, chanting all the while. No…not chanting. Grunting. Deep, guttural sounds.

I took aim at the nearest one and loosed a round. The thing went down, skull shattered. The grunting got louder, and the creatures broke away from each other, swarming us. A hail of gunfire tore them apart. Or that's

what we thought. As I approached one, wondering what in God's name had attacked us, it rose again. Howling and spitting, it ran off into the storm. The rest followed. We sat down around the fire, thinking about what we'd just seen. At least a dozen creatures, aggressive and intelligent, and certainly not human. These beings were more advanced than anything we'd seen before, not just mindless animals. Myself and Alexi decided to go look around, see if anything particularly unusual stuck out.

We saw the silhouette of an immense tower in the distance. A cooling tower, from before the war. My god… how far have we come? We started towards it, looking for any sign of where we were. The ruins of a village came into view. No…not ruins. It was inhabited! The cooling stacks were operating, sending pillars of steam into the sky. We rushed towards it, thinking we'd found the “safe zone” at last.

The flap of leathery wings above drew our attention upwards. One of the…things we'd been attacked by earlier was flying overhead. It didn't notice us, and we left it alone. As we entered the village, we noticed it seemed somehow strange, as if it had been rebuilt, but not by humans. Our rifles were in our hands as we closed in on what appeared to be some kind of town square. What we saw there will stick with me for the rest of my life. The things that had attacked us earlier were there. A group of them. Alexi was as shocked as I was. We ran. Somehow they spotted us and gave chase. Alexi was killed almost instantly, one dropped a huge chunk of masonry on him. I fled, running back to the camp. The creatures lost track of me and returned to the village.

The realization struck me as I regained my senses. The group that had attacked us, that we thought had attacked us. They weren't hostile. They were intelligent, looking to welcome us. My god, what have we done? We can't communicate with them, we have no way of changing things. So we ran. Back towards Petrograd, back to our

homes. Every day we run. And every night, I'm haunted by the flap of leathery wings over the snowy wastes. I never see them, just hear them. See footprints outside our hiding places. They are hunting us, and there's nothing I can do.

The remaining members of the group, Sergei, Natasha and I have decided we can't risk drawing them back to Petrograd. We make our stand here, at the Cathedral of the Epiphany in Irkutsk. Victory or death!

Bilocation

After the tumor removal, I started to notice I was always being watched. Not by, I don't know, anyone in particular, or friends or people from the hospital, just a hair-on-the-back-of-the-neck feeling- night, day, windows open or shut, just a prickle. Since it happened right after the brain surgery, I should have told someone, but by then I'd had enough of scans and doctors and soft serious tones, and diagnoses, and pity, and worst of all, constant company (full of warmth and support and never leaving your side, not once- any proper introvert would hate it. I did) So I didn't panic and didn't tell any of the doctors, not even Dr. Morton, who did the surgery himself.

That didn't really take away the surprise of waking up one morning, and finding someone else in bed next to you.

“The fuck?” I jerked awake and sat up in my PJ's. “Who the hell are you?”

The figure was already sitting up, arms folded, sheets about his waist, and didn't answer.

“I said- how did you get in my house?”

It didn't do anything, even when I yelled at it some more, so eventually I just got dressed and left. Took a little

walk, played some Solitaire. The next day, it was still there, but up and moving a little, but still not talking, so I tried not to look at it. Called Rhonda and chatted for a while. Then, the next day, it was in my kitchen when I woke up, doing my dishes.

I turned the coffee pot on and wandered past it towards the table. “Thanks.”

“No problem,” the figure said.

I processed this for a little while. “So, this means I'm crazy, now, right?”

“What?” Said the person, attacking a soup pot with a sponge. “No, that's stupid.”

“You weren't here before.”

“I am now.”

“Who are you?”

“Look at me.” He stopped scrubbing and stared at me. He looked just like me.

“…Are you, like, Tyler Durden or something?”

“No. No. Of course not.” He went back to scrubbing, and I shifted a little, suddenly scared. He looked *just* like me.

The phone rang, and the other-me glanced at it. I got up to answer it. Dr. Morton, in fact, had some results from post-surgery tests- I was, apparently, “right as rain,” and the recovery was going exactly as planned. He promised to call back with in a week.

I hung up, staring at the phone. “Doesn't he bother you?” asked the man in the kitchen.

“What? Why?”

“I don't know. Just bothers me.”

“No,” I said, with some certainty, unconsciously reaching towards the scar on the side of my head, that the hair was just beginning to grow over. “He's nice. Had me listen to his kid's flute recital when I was freaking out about surgery. Hell, he took a tumor out of my head. Cured me.”

“Me too,” said the guy, and pulled his hair out of the way to show me a matching scar. “I just want to kill him.” He picked a knife out of the soapy water of the sink, flipped it around in his hand. “Want to help?”

“What the hell?” I jumped up. “No way. Put that back. You're crazy.”

He sighed and dropped it into the sink. I poured a cup of coffee, practically ran into the living room, and proceeded to watch TV for the next few hours. At one point, I heard the door open and closed. I breathed a sigh of relief.

Still, later, I was feeling kind of weird about whatever had just happened, so I went down to the corner store and bought a six-pack, then later, don't ask me why (though I think it had something to do with the booze plus whatever pills I was on)- ended up calling Suicide Hotline. I wasn't, you know, thinking of anything, but the woman I got, Sarah, and I, ended up having this amazing heart-to-heart, where we talked about all the shit in my life, and what was happening, and what I should do about it.

We actually went on for a few hours, and I learned some things about her too, but by the end, we agreed I was going to call Dr. Morton in the morning and explain everything that happened- since whatever was making me freak out now was probably related to it, and to Crazy Man, and brain surgery was by nature scary and tricky, and these things probably happened to other people.

She wished me good luck, and we hung up. I was feeling a lot better when I went to sleep.

When I woke up, Crazy Man wasn't there.

That morning, the phone rang. When I answered it, it was a police officer, saying I was wanted for questioning, regarding the death of- you guessed it- Doctor Jeremy Alfonso Morton, sometime last evening. He had been stabbed seventeen times by his own kitchen knife, and my fingerprints were found on the blade. I told him everything he asked.
I didn't do it.
No, I don't have siblings or a twin.
No, I hadn't left my neighborhood last night.
Yes, I had an alibi.

And… yup, five days later, I'm going in to testify at court. It'll be fine. My lawyer got Sarah from the SH, plus the clerk from the corner store, and even the desk-worker at my apartment, and all of them are willing to testify that I never left. It *is* weird, but he assured me, despite the fingerprints, and him being my doctor, it would have been a convenient disguise, and the evidence that I wasn't there is rock solid. They'll be bringing in other people too, it won't be me versus a grand jury.

Because it is, I know. I'm still worried, whatever the lawyer says, I still don't want to go.

I just really don't want to know who I'll see in the stands.

Fiction

Anthony sat down at the computer, letting his fingers hover over the keys for a moment, the quiet hum of the computer and the rush of his blood in his head the only sounds in the room… And then he heard them. Clicking. Whirring. Churring and churning and starting. He felt them turn, somewhere in the back of his head, starting

up. The gears.

He closed his eyes, his fingers flying across the buttons, slowly putting the words together. He let the idea fall between the spokes, grinding his thoughts to powder… Changing them, rebuilding them. He turned the powder into mortar, then mortar into bricks, and the bricks into the wall. Now, he was putting the man behind it, the senile old man who had been trapped there for decades, slowly going mad, surviving on rats. He wrote about his mad ravings, those that he covered the walls with, that the—

A piecing cry broke his reverie, his eyes shooting open. He stood up and left the room, walking down the short hall to his son's bed and sat on the side of it, rubbing his back. He whispered quiet words, promising that dreams were just that—awful, terrible, dreams. "It's fine," he murmured. "It's just a shadow…" he said. "Shhh… shhh…." he shushed. All the time, they were clicking. Click, click, click—"…15 milimeters in diameter, the object has been discovered to hold an unquantifiable amount of electricity. Class-D test subjects have been cooked alive in a matter of seconds…"—click, click, click. "They're not real…" he murmured. His son was comforted, even if Anthony himself didn't believe it.

After all, there *were* monsters out there.

He got up as his son fell asleep, walking back into the office, sitting back at the computer, and waiting for them to restart. And in a moment, it did, and he fed them his ideas, and this time out poured blood and flesh and a burnt door. The door. That must be important then. He put the door up, built the cage, and started to build the thing behind it, all black flesh and too many teeth. He imagined its life, what it must think, how it must be… How it fed. How it entertained itself.

They were moving smoothly now, lubricated in blood and viscera.

He stopped, looking at it, almost numb. It was gone, now. Out of his head. Exorcised like a demon. And now… He clicked a few times, naming it, uploading it, licking his lips softly as he turned off his computer and closed his eyes in relief. Another demon gone. Another beast contained in words instead of his mind.

Of course there were monsters out there. So many monsters…

He'd made them, after all.

Surprise! Happy Birthday! Again.

Well, well, well… What have we here?
You've managed to survive yet another year?
A year of work, of screaming children,
A year of delving into things unbidden.
Oh? What's that? We shouldn't know?
All those terrible things you didn't show?
Of course we do. We are your friends.
Confidants. Allies. And more again.
We know the stories, even those you don't tell.
You see Gears… You give us our visions of hell.

Happy Birthday, oh Leader of men. We come to you again. Bearing tales. Tales of the third side of the mirror. Tales of the taste of the air when a child is screaming in sorrow. Happy tales. Sad tales. Tales of games that eat your mind. Tales of books that give you a black brilliance, the kind that gives answers, but only the kind without comfort. Tales of the song you hear when you sleep, but not when you wake again. Tales of the righteous throne of terrible glory. Tales about tales. Tales about you. Tales about us.

Some of them are even true.
Happy birthday…! And many more.

"Doomed" by RhettSarlin

It's coming for me. I try to hide, I run and do my best to avoid it. But it is a patient predator, and I know that with time, it will catch me.

I can evade it for now. I still have to find a way to fix things. But I don't have long.

It has begun to consume my parents, my wife, one of my siblings…none of them even realized the end had come for them. Now it has begun, and they are all doomed.

I can see it, I know what it is doing. I have to stop it before it consumes the rest my family, my friends, my children….hell, the entire human race.

But it can see me. It knows what I am doing too. I am next. And it is laughing.

It knows it has found me, it mocks my futile attempts to escape, following my every move. And once it begins its work, it will never stop until I am dead.

It will decay my body slowly and painfully, withering my skin, tainting my hair, weakening my bones. It will rob me of my ability to run, to walk, to think, to breathe. It will slowly rob me of my sanity and my life, and all the while the world will think it normal, simply because they are used to it. Why do none of them ever think to look….

It is a predator. It found us on this world, and latched onto us. Ancient scriptures tell of the men it first began to affect, draining them of their eternal youth, unnaturally ending their lives. They invented other excuses for it, not knowing what was happening to them.

It grows more powerful every year. It has learned to begin younger, ever younger. Once you turn 30, it is too late. It has you.

But I still have time.

"Daddy" by Bright

The light was out. It was her worst dream, having the light be out. They always came for her in the dark. The monsters, the bad men, the creatures who hated her. She waited for them, shivering, her eyes closed, as she

felt the harsh, warm breath on her bare ankles.

They called her name, from the shadows. She crossed her legs, then pulled them under her, trying not to let tears drift down her face. Gentle, sharp claws traced indelicate patterns across her arms, no matter where she put them. She wouldn't call out. Not this time. She would be brave. She would be strong!

She would bite her lip to keep from screaming when a tentacle crawled across her leg. No. She had to call out. She had to call:

"DADDDDDDDEEEE!"

Andrew rushed to his daughters bedroom. Only two and she had such horrible nightmares. He flicked the light on when he came in the room, and scooped his little girl into his arms. "Aw, lookit that, your nightlight burnt out! Don't worry little lady, Daddy will leave the door open." After a couple of minutes reassuring her, he set her back in her bed, and walked back to his own bed.

He lay down, sighing at the imagination on his daughter, and turned off the light.

The last thing he thought before he fell asleep was to wonder what was slithering across his feet…

"Delicacy" by Roget

I'm sorry, where are my manners? I haven't said a word to you this entire meal. You can't really blame me though. This food is so delectable, so…exotic. It really is a shame you won't try any. Can I tempt you to take just a bite? No? A pity. You of all people would be able to enjoy it. Appreciate the subtleties, the textures…it would be so foreign, but so… familiar.

How are you feeling? You look a little pale. I know you

are in good health, we made sure you were very fit. The sedatives might be causing you to be woozy, but you should have been used to it by now. I know this is a bit stressful, but you can't be sick at dinner. It would be quite sad to see your palette dampened by illness.

Let you go? But you've only just arrived! We barely even started the first course! By the way, your feet have the look of a traveler-a man who's been places, seen exotic flavors, trodden on strange and wonderful fauna. Where are you from? Ah, don't be like that. Please try to be civil at the table.

You have very muscular legs. Probably from all the travel and training. Interesting tidbit, the exercises we had you do were to keep your muscles firm and lean, not too tender and not too tough. The pinnacle of physical perfection. If you weren't being so modest, I'm sure you would agree.

You know what they say about a mans heart? They say it holds out a mans secrets, and all the things that he's experienced in his life. Everything touched by his blood flavors the heart, and keeps it unique from any other. No two hearts are the same.

Bon appetit.

"Demon" by Drewbear

On my 21st birthday, my sister gave me a Chinese wall scroll. A mountain view, simply done is strokes of black and green and purple. Spare and soothing, I keep it in a prominent place in my living room: a moment of peace in the turbulence of my life.

A couple of years later, I noticed something new in the scroll. A lone figure, perhaps a scholar, small but somehow exuding a sense of purpose as he trudged up the narrow, winding path towards the mountain. I

wondered at how I'd missed it before. It filled a space within the scroll and provided a measure of balance while adding a slight note of tension to the scene. But overall, I forgot about it as I dealt with my troubles in work and school.

Last year, a friend was looking at the scroll and asked me about the figures and what I thought they were doing. Figures? Yes, another inspection showed the same scholar, only further up the path. And standing in front of him was a large creature, an oni, all done in swipes of intricate red and black. The scholar's back was to us, but the oni's face was almost… quizzical, rather than the twisted scowl they traditionally wore.

I kept an eye on the scroll ever since, but nothing else changed. Yet somehow, the tension in the scroll seemed to ooze out and inhabit the entire living room. Sitting in there, even walking through the room, filled everyone with a sense of… horrible expectancy. And somehow the thought of removing the scroll seemed even worse. ANYTHING could happen if it wasn't watched.

Today I looked at it and the scholar lay sprawled in the path, his robes askew around him. The oni is almost at the bottom of the path, at the edge of the scroll, claws lifted as if to rip at the edge of the scroll. And its face is looking straight out of the scroll at me.

I can't even touch the scroll now; when I lay hands on it, it feels like someone is stabbing my arms with knives all up and down them.

Last week was my birthday.

I have a year left to do something.

"Dues" by Jekeled

Ah, you're finally here.

Come on in, have a seat. Want anything to drink? Some wine? Whisky? I have a great Scotch that you might love-
No? All right, but you know you *can* mix buisness with pleasure, right?

White or black?

White?

E7 to E5.

D8 to H4. Mate.

I'm disappointed. I thought you would have learned, after all these years. A fool's mate is unbecoming for you.

Now, what'll the cost be? Something extra for that pathetic performance, at the very least.

Let's say, a year from you, and a year from your child. That should be acceptable.

Better luck next time. I'll always be here if you need another match.

"Die" by Tanhony

I am in Hell, I am sure of it. The place where I am made to walk, with no control over my movement, looks like a city, but it is empty of life, other than the unspeakable things that share its roads with me.

There is no sun, only black holes in the sky, eight in all, that stare at me. I fear that they are the eyes of indescribable gods waiting in the darkness. Waiting for the strength to leave my legs, for my arms to be burnt to useless crisps. Then they will pounce quickly, and there will be nothing left of me but a scrap of clothing, or perhaps a single rib.

The train passes me, a reminder of my sins. In its windows are the faces of children, their faces accusing. Water pours from their mouths and their empty eye sockets. They are the children that plumetted of the bridge that I built, formed from fragile wood and hollow beams. Are they crying or screaming? I cannot tell, and I suppose it no longer matters.

The train is but the kindest of my torments, and as it speeds away, the car comes around the corner, my wife at the wheel, There is a butcher knife protruding from the back of her head. She stops the car a short distance in front of me. I pray she will not speak, but God still gives me no compassion.

Her neck twists and cracks as it turns to me, her head soon facing the other direction from the rest of her body. Rats are eating her eyes.

"Curtis." Her voice is the sound of uncivilized feasting, of the drip of rainwater and of a final, dying scream, repeated over and over for eternity. She waits for a reply, but my condition prevents me from giving one. She smiles, and her teeth are small, sharped and barbed.

"You deserve this, you know." She explains, and speeds off.

It is my turn to move. I am walked up the street and turn the corner. As I take each step, I can hear blood splashing against the lumps of skinned meat that were once my feet. I hear a smashing behind me. I already know what it is, the worst of these terrible apparations. The only thing I can describe it as is a hat, but a hat it is not.

It stops next to me, and as it brushes against my hand, I see horrific images. Men thrown into pits to die, a child being strangled by a man with many hands, and those are the best of those visions. The hat speaks in its terrible, alien language. Does it offer sympathy, contempt

or indifference? I will never know, and I do not wish to. I wish only for my existence to cease, to be no more. Finally, I am allowed to move again in the slow, plodding pace that is forced upon me.

I pass go, and collect two hundred dollars.

"Desperation" by Dmatix

"The end has come, at last. Tonight Montségur will fall, and we will be released from the demonic bonds of flesh, free to join the true god in the spirit. Do not weep, my child, for this just death spares you for a fate most cruel- living in the flesh is a sin even the best of us cannot avoid, and only the clean death hold salvation. In a way, we should be thankful to the crusaders, for their cruelty releases us from the necessity of abiding the devil's work any longer. In killing us, they are only proving how false their way is. My only regret is that when we, the last of the true perfecti, die, there will be no one left to free the souls of man from their bonds. Our holy words will die with us, and humanity will remain in this false world forever. Such a shame."

"It is an act of desperation, in a way. The devil must have been so afraid of us."

"They are growing closer, and time has run out. I will release you now. It is fortunate you are old enough to understand the words."

"Only in a world of demons would I have to perform the rite of Consolamentum on someone so young."

"Domain" by Enma Ai

I wake up, but I don't want to open my eyes. No light reaches them, so this makes black my color.

I groan, tired. I really don't want to get up, but it's morning already and I must move.

My sky greets me as I open my eyes.

And this makes blue my color.

I groan again. Why does it always do this? It makes my head dizzy. It makes me shudder.

All the earth rumbles as I rise from my ditch.

Standing, I brush my hands over my body, removing the dirt from it. I raise my eyes and then look at my fields.

And this makes green my color.

Walking around my fields, my mind starts working. I start thinking of important things.

Like… if God is my father, and also their father, doesn't that make us brothers? I shudder at the thought.

I mean, just to think I could have anything to do with—

I see something in the distance. Two small shapes. Two small, deformed, *monstrous* shapes.

Standing on my fields.

So I walk…

"Hey… hey, Simon. The hell is that?"

"Dunno… don't like the way it's moving, though…"

…towards them.

"It's… it's getting closer."

"Yeah, maybe we should—"

Now red is my color.

"Oh my God, *what the hell is that thing*?"

Ugly, but still, those *things*…

"Shoot it! Shoot it, dammit!"

…they…

"Run! Run, go get help!"

"What about you?!"

"I'll try to ho—"

…are…

"ohgodohgodohgodohgod"

…mine…

"ohgodohgodohg—"

…too.

"Denizen" by Bunton

I don’t know why my mummy screams. She just keeps

scratching me and yelling and crying. It makes me feel sad. Is it my fault? I thought she liked having me here, I thought… I thought…

Why doesn't she love me? Is it something I did? She keeps… she keeps saying that she's not my real mummy. But she raised me. I don't care who put me here. My mummy is my mummy. She's warm and nice and lovely. I love my mum

She doesn't really have any other children. I'm her only daughter, and I have her all to myself. I think she's all alone. Nobody else ever comes here, not since what she told me about my other mother's arrival. I don't like my other mother. She abandoned me and left me. This mummy gave me a home. It's a good home. So big and comfy. I just wish she'd stop scratching. She'll hurt herself.

Ahhh… she keeps… she keeps doing it to me. Why? Why does my mum keep hurting me? I thought she loved me… I thought she…

I'm just trying to rupture. Doesn't she want me to leave her body?

Should I stay?

"Dark" by SRegan

New York, August, 1911.

He had never liked birthdays much. Every year people had asked him how it felt to be sixteen, eighteen, twenty. And his answer was always 'the same as it felt yesterday'. It nonplussed him that people couldn't see that time existed irrelevant of human demarcations. But then, he had always viewed the world differently from those around him. They had stopped asking after twenty-two, as though one ceased to acquire new experiences

or change one's perspectives after that date.

Today he woke, as was his custom, one minute before the bell in the alarm clock beside him burst into life, and flattened the brass pip with the ball of his palm. He was twenty-nine years old. To be accurate, he thought, he would be twenty-nine as commonly reckoned at nine thirty-five this evening - until then he was merely a spritely twenty-eight. But as far as he could see, the conventional way men measured their ages was incorrect anyway; everyone was nine months older than they thought.

He rose, lit a cigarette at the window then went over to the washbasin, regarded himself in the shaving mirror. He saw the same long, lugubrious face with dark eyes he had seen for as long as he could remember. I have not changed, he thought, though he knew it was untrue - you just changed more slowly than you could perceive it. Those near you were under the same glamour of repetition - they would remain convinced that time had no grip on you, until the day they noticed you were losing your hair or wearing your glasses all the time or were suddenly struck by the way your eyes creased when you smiled. Death would sneak up on everyone, he thought, and there was something beautiful in that thought. Death the Great Leveller. The movie stars, the debutantes, the great and the good would all collapse and putrefy one day at a time, and they would adapt to and accept it, just like everyone else.

He went over to the ice-box and took out a bottle of Pemberton's cola, pressing it against his forehead. One product of this country he could live with, he thought. He could already feel how unconscionably hot it would be today, and the docks would give him no allowance for the day of his birth. Soon he would have to go and clock in. Things could have been different, he thought. He could have applied himself at the little rural school back in England and pursued a career as a doctor, or lawyer.

Or perhaps that would have only increased the world's demand on him - to shut down his mind, to stupefy him. At least engaged in the menial task of loading and unloading the lifeblood of world commerce he had some time to think, to construct edifices and structures of cognition. When five years ago he had crossed the Atlantic to make his fortune in America he could not have imagined that he would have come to this, slaving fourteen hours a day in the hot sun, cursed at by his mental inferiors.

The letter on his doormat as he made to leave took him quite by surprise. In the first instance, the room he rented for eight dollars a month didn't even have a postal address - it was a cramped box that had been half a parlour, subdivided by his landlord to fit in another credulous wealth-seeker from England. He picked it up - the envelope crisp, white paper of a sort he hadn't seen before - an ornate cartouche on the upper right hand corner. There was no stamp or postal mark, so it must have been delivered by hand. He turned it over and saw his own name in a swirling, faintly familiar hand on the front. He had a minute or so, he thought, closing the door again and slitting the letter open with a breadknife. Inside was a small bundle of letters, tied together with a deep crimson ribbon. He untied it, carefully. Was it too much to hope for deliverance, that someone had seen him and believed in him, his power to change the world - that he might have a *patron*? He lifted the first sheet and read what it said.

> Dear Bartholemew,
>
> I am most apologetic for the delay in sending these documents - I could inform you that the method I have discovered of transmitting them did not allow them to reach you prior to this point. That, however, would be a lie. And we must never lie to ourselves, must we? I have chosen this day and this moment because you

are ready. You have seen what I have seen and are mentally prepared to act upon it. Do not consider me your master or a tyrant; I am simply accelerating the process that took far longer to reach fruition in my case. It may well be that you never discover yourself the means by which I prepared or sent these documents - I have prepared for this eventuality and in these papers you will find guidance that will serve you through the coming decades.

At this time you still harbour dreams of industrial prowess - of making your wealth in oil, or gold, or the railways. I have something grander in mind for you; an empire. There are partners you must seek out and persuade - their counterparts have persuaded me of the dangers of too great an interference of my part, so these documents are to remain secret from them at first. In the nineteen-thirties you are to write out some of the information I provide to you in this document and share it with them; instructions on what to copy and when are provided therein. If you heed my advice, your empire will expand over continents and encompass Presidents, Prime Ministers, the law and police - I bequeath this to you. I think of you as a son, though of course this is entirely inaccurate.

Your first task, Bartholemew, will be to pen a letter in your own hand. It will seem to you of a most strange and troubling character, but you must deliver it to an organisation whose name will become familiar to you in the years to come. You will establish yourself in their trust and what you obtain from them will furnish the beginnings of your work. It is to be addressed to Dr Hermann Keter and concerns recent events in the country of Guatamala…

Bartholemew read on, eyes widening. At the bottom of the letter was the same swirling signature he had seen on the envelope. As he looked at it it resolved itself into letters. They said:

B. Dark

"Delight" by Drewbear

I try to be good in small ways. You know, doing little things that brighten someone's day. Sometimes I go a little overboard, but that's a learning experience, is all. And hardly anyone is around to complain.

One day, many years ago, I was walking around a college campus when I overhead a young woman crying at a picnic table outside one of the dorms. Listening in, I overhead that it was her first birthday away from her family (only 17! Such a precocious young thing!) and that no-one here had wished her a happy birthday or gotten her anything. She sounded very, very sad and lonely. Poor thing, all alone on her birthday.

So I wandered away for a bit, keeping my eye on her in the meantime, and took a birthday card from the campus store. I wrote a birthday wish in it, in my elegant handwriting, and sealed it with a smile and a kiss. She didn't even notice when I slipped it into her backpack as she passed me on her way to class.

I didn't follow her ALL of the day (that would be impolite), but I did return to her side when I felt her touch the imprint of my kiss on the envelope. Graceful fingers and a gentle touch. She seemed hesitant as she opened the envelope, but she seemed so surprised and happy when she opened the card and the spray of light erupted from my writing. Seeing the tears of joy roll down her cheeks, I was so happy to make her feel better, and took my leave of her to spread goodness elsewhere.

May your eyes ever sparkle and your voice ever soar.
May your pockets never empty that you never shall be poor.
May your lovers find you winsome and your husbands treat you kind.
May your womb ever quicken with the children of your mind.

Happy Birthday, dear one

Enjoy your gifts well.

"D-1243" by ChazzK

"D-class subject number 1243." That was what he had been called for the last 39 days. Twenty nine days of "community service", following ten days of transfer and orientation after he signed the form that got him off death row for a charge that was trumped up anyway. That was what he said and stuck by, it couldn't be first degree murder if he never met the other guy before, and besides that guy was the one with the gun. Not his fault he was just quicker, nor that the guy had such a short temper that the gun was pulled to start with.

So strange that someone in his position could get off with "community service", but then again this was a strange community. His first three days involved cleaning some awful sludge out of the holding pen for some sort of statue. Just once, someone blinked a split second too early and 0781 fell right on his ass, due to the concrete hands an inch from his neck. Then it was a week watching a television that kept playing some kind of footage of Ronald Reagan; he had to write down all the horrible ways the tape kept changing, and man it was horrible. He actually kind of liked the couple of days that he got to spend with the bugs, the researcher involved with them was so nice, especially since he wasn't one of the poor saps who got bit.

Yes, D-1243 was a lucky guy. Bouncing back and forth between tests because of minor contrivances, being part of the group (or only one of the group) to unexpectedly survive, or just get an easy one. D-1243 had seen other men in orange jumpsuits beaten, shocked or outright gunned down because they wouldn't cooperate, but he hadn't been hardened by prison enough to think "sticking it to the man" was more important than seeing freedom.

That morning, D-1243 woke up in the dormitory with the same three men he had shared it since D-8775 got stuck in a hole in a wall. Today was the day. They would be given drugs that would make them forget everything they saw, and be released back into the world. It was an extra special day, and few things were as disturbingly heartwarming as seeing former-death-row-inmates gathered around singing "Happy Birthday." They were all happy though, they were getting out too.

"So how old are you, anyway?"

"Twenty-nine."

"Man, what a birthday gift!"

The five D-class subjects were eventually gathered up and moved by armed escort through the wing. The room they were led to was small, with smooth metal walls and no windows. The door made a distinctive clang as it closed shut. D-1243 then heard the slight hiss of gas being released; that must be how the mind-wipe drugs worked, he thought. The five men got sleepy fast, and laid down on the bare metal floor. The last thing D-1243 thought before his mind shut down was that he hoped he would wake up soon; he wanted to be able to have some cake on his first birthday as a free man.

"Doll" by Reject

Stuffed animals are so much better than people. Just like

Mommy said. When a stuffed animal rips, you just sew it back together. Stuffed animals always listen to you talk and never tell you to do anything you don't want. Best of all, stuffed animals are with you forever.

Daddy said that seven is too old to still have teddy bears and stuff, but I think he's wrong. Other than you Freddybear, there's Buttons the rabbit, Millicent the moose, and Socrates the squirrel. I've had just about all of them as long as I can remember. And *they've* never broken. Well, too badly at least.

But apparently, there's this thing called a "prostate" in Daddy. Or, well, there used to be. They said that "luckeemy" or "lookemiaw" or something like that got to his. They said Daddy would be taken away from me and I wouldn't see him any more. They would never say something like that about you or Buttons or Millicent or Socrates. You'll be with me forever. I guess all you need is thread and stuffing to really change someone.

And I got my way, Freddybear. Now Daddy can be with us again. Mommy was so right. I haven't seen him look so happy since he got sick. I'm tired though, I think it's time to go to sleep.

Good night Freddybear.

Good night Buttons.

Good night Millicent.

Good night Socrates.

Good night Daddy.

"Dust You Are" by thedeadlymoose

The wretched creature was alive once. Before it - *she*, then - walked down the wrong back road, stepped into the wrong copse of scraggly trees. Something laid in wait

there in the backwoods, a tiny monstrosity nesting in a hole in reality. A flytrap.

It's important not to misunderstand the nature of this tiny monstrosity. It was hardly unique. Nor even at the top of the food chain. Nor was not even preying on this woman, at least not in the way we might understand that term.

It was aiming to reproduce.

The flytraps catch many things, but their favorites are the thinking ones. More suitable for the precious eggs desposited in its carapace. The flytraps fear the eggs, as the eggs are not their own. The eggs are not dangerous, but their layers are, and the flytraps know that the thinking things make better minds to add to the embryos in the eggs.

This flytrap caught the woman in its snare, and injected her with its venom. The venom would keep her alive for eons. Paralyzed, conscious, fresh.

Once the eggs were implanted, the flytrap spun her up into the cocoon of rock and dirt and crawled back through its hole. Back to its cold, black, infinite den, from which none escape.

It arranged the woman and several other victims in a careful circle around a tiny flame. The tiny flame would provide enough light and heat to keep the woman alive in her prison, with the venom doing the rest. The flytrap spun carefully, gently. After all, this was a nest, and these were its charges, the children it would raise for its masters.

The flytrap watched the woman for a time, to ensure that the temperature was right and the woman would not wake up before the eggs had grown into her.

The flytrap was very patient, and it watched for a long time. It watched the boils form on the rock prison as the

woman tried to scream inside it. Tiny rivulets of melted rock run along the prison's surface like tears. The prison trembled, and the flytrap watched with concern.

A tiny part of the prison broke off, taking a piece of the woman with it. The flytrap shuffled the broken part back into the nest next to the imprisoned woman. Maybe this extra piece would form a child too. It had been known to happen. The woman's torn body writhed in agony for a long time after, but the prison held firm.

The flytrap waited until the woman's screaming cooled to a silent insanity, and the prison cooled with it. The broken piece was forming into its own, smaller, cocoon as well. By now, the eggs had grown into the woman so much that they could no longer be considered separate entities. They were now a child in a cocoon.

Then the flytrap crawled away, satisfied. Soon enough, now, the creature would be ready to be born, and more eggs were waiting to be laid. The woman's quiet, undifferentiated, mindless fear would be just right for the fledgling child. The first few eons were so critical.

So the flytrap missed what happened next.

The cocoon became infected.

Boils spread again across the woman-thing's cocoon, and burst to form rivers, lakes, oceans of pus. A haze of gas clouded over the cocoon's once-pristine surface. Tiny parasites swam in the infected swill and multipled. The woman-thing struggled anew as the parasites swarmed across the cocoon's surface, biting and crawling like an army of fleas. The woman-thing's quiet, sleeping insanity became a mad existence of paralyzed torture.

Floating in its solar nest, in the corner of the flytrap's den in the vast expanse of space, the creature called "Mother Earth" by its parasites waits in increasing madness to be

born.

Surprise! Happy Birthday! Still?

What? You again?

I thought we'd taken care of this. Didn't you read the others? The other stories and tales? There was the one with the children who swallowed up their father when he didn't sing them a lullaby? What about the one where the author became his story, then accidentally cut his own character? Or the purloined thumbscrews? Hmm… I thought we'd got you with that one.

Well, none the less, I suppose I'm supposed to bid you welcome! Welcome to the tales, in honor, in… memoriam? No? Soon, perhaps. Tales of sorrow and joy. Tales of the goblet filled with the blood of the sun, or perhaps tales about the simple flute who became a man. Tales of the raven, snake, bear, and raven again, when coyote chopped him in half. Tales of paper tower made of lost stories, and the Cruciform of Jude. Tales of Little Bo Peep, the forgotten note, or the left handed tree. Tales! Tales to celebrate this, the day of your death!

Birth?

Like there's that much of a difference…

Happy birthday…! And many more.

"A Creepy Pasta" by Murphy Slaw, age six.

(An excerpt from *The Thing on the Plate*, a collection of restaurant reviews written by H.P. Lovecraft for the Providence Journal.)

As I set foot into Guiseppe's, I was promptly seized by a

wave of thoroughgoing revulsion. My mind reeled at the churning revelation that the establishment was no temple to the finer inheritances of Rome, but rather a low den catering to the coarse pleasures of the debased Sicilian - a swarthy, degenerate people whose only talents lie in the demesne of street violence and the production of the vile Marsala - a mucilaginous, sanguinary mockery of the vintner's art.

The inchoate grunting of the proprietor indicated that I should select my own seating within. With mounting trepidation, I picked my way amongst the rude timber tables, eventually perching myself at the least repellant example of carpentry I was able to detect.

The very fabric of space-time itself seemed to elongate and ripple obscenely as I awaited some signal of acknowledgment from the sullen attendants. The escalating desperation in my eyes finally captured the attention of a waiter, who stamped gracelessly to my table with the languidness born of his Mediterranean birth-place.

The menu was engraved upon a coarse hempen paper, heavily adorned with the greasy finger-prints of the luckless diners who had paid visit to the blighted accommodation in days long past. With desperate haste, I opted for the *spaghetti* and meat-balls. I clutched to a slender hope that the proprietor's reluctance to specify the flesh involved did not implicate the establishment in some ghastly charade.

The beetle-browed attendant set the proffered dish upon the profane checked table-cloth with a clattering thud. Within seconds, my worst fears were made manifest. Deep within his sweltering lair, the oafish cook had, through a foul mockery of the culinary arts, taken the noble tomato and reduced it to a scrofulous paste, with a glabrous sheen never meant to adorn earthly food. With a heavy hand, this ichor was ladled over a collection of rugose agglomerations which disgraced the good name

of sphere.

And underneath these insults lurked the most unsettling revelation of all. For the Sicilian, not content to take the staff of life and produce therefrom the wholesome bread of our ancestors, instead had so abused and warped the corn of the wheat-stalk as to produce a clotted mass of *slithering filaments*, a writhing heap of wheaten degeneracy which so rejected my every sensibility that I sat dumb-struck for several minutes as it steamed and coagulated.

Additionally, the *cannoli* I selected for afters was niggardly in the apportionment of nuts to a scandalous degree.

Two stars.

"Just A Moment Of Your Time" by Roget

It was Sunday. The second Sunday in August. The apartment was small, but not cramped. The walls were lined with a faded floral wallpaper, added by a resident past, and Harold was enjoying his tea. He quite liked Sunday. It was a day where nobody would come around and knock on his door. No bills. No mail. Just peace.

At least, that's how it usually was. Today was something different. Because on that particular Sunday, there was a knock on the door. A quiet one, from somebody who wasn't bold enough to want to wake Harold up. It was just loud enough to alert him from his newspaper and warm mug.

He rose, joints creaking and slippers fluffing, and shuffled over to the peep-hole. On the other side of the threshold, there was a well-dressed man. He wore a dark brown suit, plain blue tie, and dirty glasses. His hair looked as though he'd recently been wearing a hat, that had been lost to the wind. Normally, Harold would have

ignored the solicitor, gone back to his chair, and resumed reading. But today, he didn't.

Instead, he opened the door.

"Greetings." said the solicitor. "My name is Gerald, and I need only a moment of your time." He smiled, a phony but sentimental gesture. He set his briefcase down, and adjusted his tie. Harold just watched him, not sure why he had opened the door, and not quite able to think about why he couldn't think about why.

Gerald set his suitcase down, and clasped his hands together."So, I'm sure you have many friends and relatives. You've know them in the past. But do you know them tomorrow?"

Harold blinked. "I… what?"

Gerald grinned, a genuine one this time. "So, you haven't heard the Good Word?"

Harold had not heard any such word. He shook his head.

"My dear friend, you have been living in a dark age. Constantly looking over your shoulder to memories half-gazed over by your own mind. Wouldn't you like to see the memories before they happen, to get ready?"

Frowning, Harold crossed his arms. "So, like… a fortune-reader?"

A waggling finger was thrust into Harold's face. "Not just any fortune, my friend, but one absolutely-positively guaranteed to work. You'll know everything you ever needed to know about what's coming up. It's like having advanced tickets to the Big Game!"

Harold could spot a phony when he saw one. The cheap smile, the dirty facade… this guy was a carpetbagger, through and through. "Prove it, then."

If possible, the solicitor known as Gerald grew an even wider grin. "Right away…" his arms lurched into the suitcase, unsnapping the hinges and wrestling with the cords, until he revealed a massive, oily hunk of metal. Immediately, the reeking odor of fish and dock rot permeated the hallway. Harold stepped back, aghast.

"Wha , guh-" he gagged. "What is that?"

Gerald held it clasped between his hands, the oily juices dripping down his fingers, leaving thin red trails in their wake. "Ah, this is what I have been promising you. Touch it."

Harold hesitated.

"Go on, touch it."

Tentatively reaching out, Harold leaned into the device. Swiftly, a blade ejected from the front of its cobbled form, and pricked his outstretched hand. Recoiling in pain and surprise, Harold failed to notice the machine clutching itself as it savored the fresh memories, the new experiences that his lifetime had been enhanced with. Smoke billowed from its many openings and valves, until at last, an oily strip of paper printed out. Gerald snatched it, and peered past his grime-coated spectacles.

"Do you talk to your sister, much?"

Harold looked up, distracted from his distraction. "N-no… why?"

"You won't be talking for quite some time, sorry. But it proves my machine to be functional, yes?"

One blink. "H-hey… what the hell are… what're you talking about?"

"Your sister… Gloria, or something similar, the paper blurred a bit… she died in an accident sixteen minutes ago."

Behind them, Harold's phone began to ring.

"That's probably them now. Are you ready for the news?"

"I… you're fucking lying." Harold backed away, looking over his shoulder to the phone ringing off the hook.

"Here you are now, Harold. Looking over your shoulder to the past, once again."

The phone continued its ringing, but Harold stopped, and turned 'round to face the solicitor. "What do you… what do you want from me?"

"I want you to pay the price for my miraculous little device!"

"… What do you want?"

"You've already given it to me, Harry. Can I call you Harry? Your life, your blood, your past-present-future. This machine is tied to you, Harry. And so am I."

When Harold next had regained his faculties, he was sitting in his chair. His hand was unmolested, and the phone was silent. He breathed a sigh of relief.

Then, there was a horrid, ghastly noise.

Over his shoulder, a ticket printed, oily and dark. It read: Check the answering machine

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"Eyes Down," by Mann

I never look up anymore.

I don't mean that metaphorically. I'm not saying I'm pessimistic. Though I'm that, too. I mean, if you were me, you wouldn't be flowers and sunshine either.

But I'm talking literally. I keep my eyes down. It's safer that way. They hate being stared at…

The angels, I mean.

"A Mile in His Shoes," by Dmatix

If you ask him, he'll tell you it's a matter of perspective. There's nothing wrong with you, per say, it's just that you don't really understand how things work around here. It's not about being kind, or strong, or right, or even clever. No, it's all about appearance. There's no such thing as power, he'll say, except for what people see. Ask him, and he'll say it's all about the shoes. You can do whatever you want, really, if you have the right shoes. Sure, he might have done some things in his days that wouldn't fly anymore. You couldn't say his closet was clean of skeletons, certainly not. If all you found were skeletons, you'd consider yourself lucky. If he was anyone else, it might have haunted him. But he has the shoes. And the hair. And the big, shiny smile. So he walks it off. Boy, does he walk it off.

What makes his shoes so special, you ask? Funny story, that. Ask him, and he'll tell you it's really not about the shoes at all. Walking a mile in a man's shoes is nice and all, but walking a mile in his toes is better.

"Currents" by FlameShirt

The first thing I remember seeing was the gorge and the grass. I'd spend hours playing in the fields and among the mountain rocks. But as time went on, I grew longer. I arrived at the concrete and the people. They came out of nightclubs and pubs, blinded by lights and throwing up. I could see glances, or a touch of the arm. The couples holding hands, followed by the break-ups and fights. Sometimes an old couple would pass by, sitting on a bench in the soft sun.

As I exited the city, I turned to look back at suburbs. A little boy was having a birthday party in his garden, surrounded by cake, balloons, presents and friends.

I left, and surged out into the sea.

"The Knife and the Red Cork" by Wogglebug

The first time it happened I thought it was odd, but not the second time. The first was a mangy coyote standing on a wall behind an Albertsons, its eyes red and its teeth stained black with the blood of an unlucky crow. The second time it was just some asshole that stood me up.

I guess that could probably use some explaining. You see, whenever I get off work I always walk down Main and up 37th to my apartment, partly on account of I could use the exercise but mostly because Cindy at the flower shop on the corner sometimes says hi. Anyway, I was going past Albertsons and I heard a weird cawing sound from out behind back, like some bird had gone and gotten itself stuck in the packaging they dump back there. I went to see what it was, and as I turned the corner this huge beaming fucker just jumps up onto the wall, the bird hanging out of its teeth. I thought it was probably rabid, and that I ought to call animal control or something, but then the asshole opened its mouth and started talking. I don't mean it was mimicking like those parrots do, or that I'm some sort of dog whisperer. I mean some asshole coyote was speaking English like it wasn't any big thing. I didn't actually catch the first thing it said, on account of the whole 'holy shit a talking dog' thing, but I remember the second thing. It said, "The woods by the old Wilson place where you and Tommy went in the summer. Come there Sunday with a knife and a piece of red cork."

Alright, I get at this point you probably assume that I'm bullshitting you, or that I'm just incredibly stupid. Neither of those things are true, and at the very least not the first

one. You probably assume I just hallucinated the whole thing, or that it was some homeless guy talking from behind the wall or something. Neither of those are correct either. At this point you're probably thinking that surely I couldn't have actually gone out to a patch of woods five hours away where I hadn't been for twenty years, based on what was likely either Satan or a similarly-themed hallucination. Once again, bad news on that front.

Getting the knife was easy enough, but the cork took ages. Turns out that barely anyone sells cork in the first place, and the guys who do don't really go for the full rainbow effect. Eventually I found some in a craft store down by the old hospital, the one they renovated last spring.

Sunday night at maybe five I showed up down by the creek across from the woods, expecting there to be some sort of sign or similarly genre-appropriate bullshit to point me towards a journey of self-discovery and excitement. There wasn't. So, after milling about for a while and throwing little rocks at little fish, I decided to just check the creepy-ass woods themselves. Well, that's not really accurate. The woods around there aren't really that creepy, and a lot of it isn't even real woods- just a ton of trees the developers put in to hide an ugly power substation that the County insisted go right in the middle of Fuck-all, Nowhere.

As it turns out, I'm not the greatest at going through the woods. You wouldn't even believe the number of spider webs I walked through. Well, actually, you probably would, given that you're reading this at all. But it was still a lot. Anyway, eventually I got back to the part where none of the neighborhood kids ever really went, because the giant hazard signs the County put up around the substation. I was walking along what could probably have been a path if it hadn't been absurdly hard to get through when I saw the same coyote I had seen at

Albertsons. Well, it was less that I saw it than it just sort of jumped out in front of me and knocked me over. But still, I did end up seeing it, albeit flat on my ass.

At this point in the story you're probably expecting me to have my throat violently ripped out by a psychopathic ghost dog making some sort of dark sacrifice. If so, you clearly don't understand how the first person works. I'm not dead. That's sort of how it works. At the time though, I was sort of shitting myself in fear. Not literally, mind you, just metaphorically. If I had literally shit myself I probably would've just left that part out. But still, there I was, on the ground in the middle of the woods with an absurdly filthy coyote glaring at my face from about a foot away. So I made the clear and obvious choice and just said "What the fuck, man?", accusatory hand gestures included.

The coyote stared at me for a while, and eventually just sort of stalked away. Not like in the movies or whatever where the animal guide leads the protagonist off into the woods to face some great evil. It just sort of left.

Eventually, after dusting myself off (or de-dirting, or whatever you call it) I looked around for the coyote. I looked for three fucking hours, and I couldn't find it anywhere, which sort of pissed me off. Eventually I gave up, because hey, hallucinations happen, right? (right?)

That next Tuesday I was walking home when I heard the familiar sound of a bird dying a horrible, terrible death. Same thing as before, blah blah evil looking coyote blah. And it just sort of stares at me this time, doesn't say a word. I swear to God, if an animal could be embarrassed, that one was. After just staring at each other for a while I decide to go with the good-old "What the fuck, man?"

It just keeps staring and starts talking, a dead bird dangling from its teeth, going, "Hell, I didn't think you'd actually do it. Fucking weirdo." And then it just scampers

off, like some king-of-all-he-surveys asshole.

No, but, like, seriously. Fuck that guy. I still don't know what that shit was about.

"The Missing Tone!" by Jekeled

"So, Doctor Hartman," Doctor Grangeman said, sitting down at the interrogation table, "let's talk a little more about the delusion we were discussing yesterday."

Hartman sat in a little huddle at the far end of the table, humming to himself quietly. He stopped this for long enough to ramble: "…not a delusion…it's REAL!! it's ALL REAL! None of you Bastards would listen to me, but it's rEAL!!!"

"Now, now," Grangeman said in a soothing tone of voice. "Remember what we talked about: you've got to use proper spelling and punctuation when you speak. It's the polite thing to do. Now, what do you say?"

"…sorry…" Hartman mumbled.

"No, no," Grangeman said. "What do we say *properly?*"

"I'm sorry," Hartman said.

"Very good. Now, on to your delusion."

"It's not a delusion," Hartman insisted. "I found the missing note!"

Grangeman sighed. "I see you're still laboring under it. There is no missing note in the musical scale. It just isn't how these things work!"

"That's what everybody *thinks!*" Hartman cried. "Think of all the music that could be created! Think of all the new tones to create! Think of how the piano would have to be remade!"

"Listen," Grangeman said patiently. "These things don't *work* that way! All the tones and letters are completely arbitrary! They're all based on specific frequencies which our brain takes out and labels as specific pitches. The tonal system we have is just a way for us to categorize those frequencies! You can't discover another musical note; there are only a finite number of frequencies to find!"

Hartman shook his head vigorously. "It's true!" he said. "I call it hleem! Because the next note after G should be H, but I shook it up a bit! Here, I'll even hum it!"

Here he hummed a note. Grangeman, who had had some musical training, immediately recognized it. "Doctor Hartman," he said, "that's middle C."

"No! No!" Hartman cried. "You're out to get me! You're all out to get me! It's a conspiracy! A conspiracy i Tell You! A CONSPIRACY!!!!"

Grangeman sighed. There went another session, right down the drain.

—

"I feel sorry for the poor fellow," Grangeman commented later to one of his colleagues, as he watched the security camera footage of Hartman in his room. "A music teacher gone completely mad…you've gotta sympathize on some level."

"I suppose," his colleague said. "I just wish he could have chosen a less ridiculous thing to fixate on."

"Well," Grangeman said, "it had to be something. Not surprising that-"

"Wait!" his colleague said. "Look at Hartman's monitor!"

Grangeman gasped. "We've got to get over there, fast!" he cried.

But by the time they got there, it was too late! Blood was everywhere, and in the middle of it was Hartman, twisted into a grotesque parody of a half note.

Grangeman's colleague bent over and vomited, and he himself recoiled from the scene. He slowly walked into the room, trying to avoid stepping in any major blood puddles. Reaching Hartman's desk, he picked up a single sheet of paper laying there. It was a musical staff in all ways except for one: instead of five lines and four spaces, there were *six lines and five spaces-enough room for one more note!*

"Baby, It's Cold Outside" by Azzleflux

It's cold outside. I'm holding my jacket, my soft, warm jacket, as close to my body as I can, but it doesn't help much. I'm shivering, shaking harder than I have for a while. It's been a mess ever since they laid me off. My only joy, gone.

Gah. I have to stop thinking. It's not helping at all. I just have to get home, where I can snuggle up under my homemade blanket and read a nice book by the orange light cast through my newly constructed lamp and shade.

God. I just miss all of them. Little Albert, Josie, Laura, Stevie… I wish I could just pick them up and hold their soft, warm little bodies in my lap and rock them asleep. They were always so precious. I can't lie to myself, I even thought of them as my own for the longest time.

…

They'll regret sending me away. The goddamn Sunnydale nursery… the kids *loved* me there. Much better than that *bitch,* Evaline. Hell, they were all probably just jealous that all of the little munchkins liked me more. Well, forget them. I pull my jacket a smidgen tighter around my torso and take a deep breath of that

glorious smell and remember that wherever I go, it doesn't really matter that I don't have a job to work with those kids anymore.

After all, I'll have little things that remind me of each of them everyday. Really (that reminds me, I need to make sure the lampshade has been tanned proper), those kids will always be mine in a certain way.

"1914" by Vezaz

"Diaphanous" by Zyn

There's a café that some know of, tucked away at the end of a back alley in a sleepy suburban city, that presents a different sort of atmosphere than most such establishments.

It's said to live up to its name, *Cloud Mind*. Mist swirls around a customer the moment they step through the glassy double doors, this mist is present in the entire place; it creeps along the polished, mirror-bright white tile and curls at the heels like a contented cat.

The near-unnaturally pale-skinned serving staff are trained, precise, efficient—they glide across the swirling, ever-warping floors, whispering orders dreamily as they float from table to table. They wear feathered masks and only speak in rhymed couplets; it's common knowledge among regulars that if you're lucky enough to be approached by a server wearing a mask of blue feathers, you've been invited to spend your time, brief as it may be, in one of the specialty rooms.

With the ever-present mist caressing the soft white walls and floors, it's impossible to know just how large the café truly is, but those who have been in the special rooms swear that the floor plan must be luxuriously grandiose because how else would there be room for the delicate

abstract porcelain statuettes, the flowing fountains with clear water clean enough to drink, kissed with the fragrance of exotic flowers and foreign fruits?

It is a café, but only drinks are served. No one notices, and no one minds.

Perhaps it’s the soft, tinkling music of the café that lulls people to contentment, perhaps it’s the effect of the glossy surfaces, perhaps it’s the sight of the graceful servers, perhaps it’s the way that everything seems to gently melt into a rhythm of motion, an instinctive rhythm, perhaps, perhaps.

Most of those who leave realize later that something feels strange, something is missing. Some feel lightheaded and faint, all simply attribute it to the café’s ethereal, otherworldly atmosphere.

While the café willingly welcomes repeat customers, the staff keep their secrets to themselves, and so no one ever can decide whether there is something special about the place that keeps them returning to it, or if there was simply something missing from life all along.

The rooms are always full of light, but there are no windows.

"Supply and Demand" by Clef

The truth of the matter is that Aesop's fables were never fairy tales. In the past, animals did speak. So did trees, and mountains, and the wind, and fairies.

What changed? The human population grew. Since the day when Aesop first put stylus to wax, the world population has increased sixty-fold, from one hundred million to six billion. That's over five billion people who had to be born with souls. Five billion humans using up the souls that could have been used to create a talking

tree or a living rock.

And as it turned out, the Hindus were right. Souls are a limited resource. New ones are never born. Old ones are never destroyed. And with the human population exploding the way it has been, the number of souls available for talking rabbits and magic mice is growing smaller…

One day soon, the very first soulless human will be born, and things will start to change.

"Meow" by Gaffney

The man gave a tuneless whistle as he walked along the dark sidewalk. Every fifty feet, he passed under another lamppost, briefly illuminating him before he passed back into the dark. There was a slight breeze in the warm summer night. In his right hand he held a plastic bag filled with all manner of goods: scalpels, wire, rubbing alcohol, needles, fishing line, lighter fluid, and cat food. The bag spun lazily back and forth as he walked.

He came to a crossroads. Although the street was empty, the crossing sign displayed a bright orange hand. He decided to wait. Once, while he had been carrying some of the waste from his hobby, he had crossed illegally. A policeman had yelled at him and told him not to do it again. And even though the policeman never asked him what was in bag he was carrying, rolled up in newspaper, the experience had put the man off of jaywalking for good.

As he waited at the light, he thought about home. He began to sort through the contents of the bag, just to be sure everything was still there. As he went through the bag, came a mewling sound from an alley behind him. It was so soft he nearly didn't hear it. But there it was again! Decades with his hobby had given him an instinctive understanding of animal sounds. Low and

hungry, with a touch of desperation. His lips twisted upwards in an involuntary smile. An alley cat. People hardly ever missed alley cats. Not at all like a house cat. Several near misses with the law had taught him that feral animals were safer than domestic ones.

He moved slowly towards the alley, not wanting to scare away his new quarry. As he neared the entrance to the alley, he crouched down to seem more approachable. There was another sound from the alleyway, one which gave him pause. It was the same tone as the first, but it sounded different. Deeper. Thicker. More ragged. For a moment, he remained in place at the mouth of the alley as the bag twisted gently in the breeze.

He shook off the feeling and moved slowly into the dark alleyway. Even without light, he could make out silhouettes of the mounds of garbage bags littering the place. "Heeere, kitty kitty. Here, kitty kitty," he said gently. No response. He moved deeper in. "Here, kitty kitty." He reached into the plastic bag and took out a tin of the cat food. "Hungry, ain'tcha? I got some food for you. And a place for you to stay, not all dirty like here." He ran a tongue over his upper lip. "Heere, kitty kitty kitty!"

One of the piles of trash began to unfold itself and move towards him. As it unfolded, its silhouette transformed into the shape of a cat. But it was at least four feet long, coming up to at least his knee. He stumbled backwards and fell, spilling the contents of the bag all over the alley floor. The former mound gave another mewl, low and ragged, as it came towards him. It moved with a pronounced limp. He picked himself up and began to back away. As the shape came closer, he began to make out certain features. Thin, frayed wires emerged from its head. Ribbons of flesh and fur hung from its face. It waved a tail, split down the middle, back and forth.

He backed away and began to walk quickly towards his

house. The thing followed. He began to run. As he crossed the road, the mewling grew closer and more insistent. He looked to his left and right for cars, pedestrians, anything or anyone. Nothing. The street was deserted. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw the cat-thing. For its size, it was emaciated, with ribs jutting out of its side. Its front right paw was missing. A trick of the light caused its eyes to appear pure white. He began to sprint. The thing kept pace behind him, meowing ever more insistently.

At last, at long, long last, he reached home. He took the key ring from his pocket and hurried through the various keys, trying to unlock the door. The thing was right behind him. After a thousand years, he unlocked the door, slamming it behind him. There was a pleading sound from behind the door, followed by a frenetic pawing. He deadbolted the door and braced himself against it. Eventually, the pawing ceased. He leaned against the door and slid to the floor, breathing a sigh of relief. He sat there in the dark, looking at nothing in particular.

From the kitchen, there came a sound. It was unlike any animal he had ever heard. It sounded deep, somehow greasy. For a moment, he was unable to recognize it. As his brain tried to process the sound, there came another, similar sound from the bathroom. Then another from the basement door, which had somehow opened itself. Then from within the living room. As he sat, unable to move, the silhouette of his armchair unfolded itself and began to move towards him, padding gently along the wooden floor. Even within the dark he could make out dozens of shapes, all moving towards him. One passed through a patch of light from a nearby window. Tortiseshell fur hung down in ribbons over a mouth relived of teeth. A trick of the light caused its eyes to glow pure white. From a jawless mouth there came a meow.

"Feet of Clay" by Orion

There was a town out a piece to the northwest. Way back, folks over there were bein' overrun by snakes. Big and mean ones, too. These snakes didn't go much for people, but they'd sneak up on the livestock and bite 'em. Cows, sheep, pigs, hell, even the dogs! The animals'd be dead before anyone could do anything.

One day, this fella appeared in the town. Said he could get ridda the snakes. Only thing he wanted was a pair of boots, toughest ones the cordwainer could make. Townsfolk agreed, and Willard the cordwainer worked through the night on the boots, with a bit of input from the stranger. Willard never talked about what he said. Always was the quiet type.

Anyway, early the next morning, with his new boots, tougher'n a lumberjack's callused thumb, the fella led a sounder of boars into the town.

What? 'Course they ate the snakes! Long with damn near everything else! Ol' Pethers had one clean out his coop, and take the coop down on its way out!

Now, when a boar goes after a man, his first point of attack is the feet. He gets at them, chewing and gnashing with his tusks, and the man's down quick. Once you're on his level, you're at the boar's mercy. And they've got as much mercy as a porcupine in heat. Even the toughest, meanest man, has still got his feet of clay. Except for that fella with the new boots.

So the townsfolk tore the boots off of him, tossed them into the bog, and threw him to the boars.

Boy, did he run. Never thought a man could run that fast. And those boars chased him through the bay and out onto that godforsaken island. Old timers used to tell us you can still hear screaming if you go out too close to it. They said that once a year, on Irv Eddy's Eve, the

stranger swims out to the Old Pine Bog to find his boots.

‘Course, later we knew the real reason why we shoulda stayed away from that island. Or used to, anyways. Can’t seem to remember it now.

Surprise! Happy Birthday! Once more...

You're rather resilient, aren't you? I thought we'd be done with this by now. It feels like we started a long time ago, doesn't it? It feels that way to me. It feels like this should have been finished such a long, long time ago, but for some reason… Bah. Nothing to worry about right now, is it? This! This is supposed to be a time of celebration! A time of jubilee and cake and ice creams, yes? That's what it's *supposed* to be.

Funny how things turn out, isn't it?

Welcome back to another year, fair elder. Welcome back to another celebration made of tales. Tales made of happy truths and sad fictions. Tales made of wet paint and dry sand. Tales about roads that were traveled until they became rivers, and tales about the page before the book's cover. Tales about the man made of ashes and cinders, and tales about the woman who stitched herself a patchwork husband. Tales about the satyr who fucked a universe, and tales about the lost ones who are waiting for us all under the dirt. Tales of triumph. Tales of failure. Tales about the treasures found in attics and the horrors in closets. Tales of years fluttering out of your hands like the fragments of a broken leaf…

Ah. Ahem. And Happy Birthday, Gears. For now.

"Boxes" by Troy

There's a little man who lives in a box,
Right at the corner of my bed,
And the little man that lives in the box,
Whispers secrets into my head,
And the little man that lives in the box,

Wears a scarf made of puppy's tongues,
And the little man that lives in a box,
Well, that's how he has fun.

The little man who lives in a box,
visited by sister last night.
The little man who lives in the box,
borrowed my eyes for sight,
The little man who lives in the box,
collected one more tongue,
The little man who lives in the box,
came back and told me to run.

The little man who lived in the box,
still sits at the foot of my bed,
and the little man who lived in the box,
Sometimes crawls round in my head.
The little man who lives in the box,
Will never let me atone,
And the little man who lives in the box,
Will never leave me alone.

"And Everyone Can Walk Away From It Whole, After a Time" by Eskol

The angel is radiant.

I've fallen to my knees already. I don't remember now if I meant to do that, or if something about this creature just knocked me to the ground. I had been running, running through the woods prior to this, running across the shitty little nature trail that the city had installed a year ago to commemorate someone who was run over in the street because he didn't have a shitty little nature trail to get run over in instead. I've been running for what feels like… years. Half an hour, maybe, that felt like years, in this day that's moved as slowly as a geological epoch.

My knees hurt. *Shit,* I thought, *I would figure I wouldn't feel anything right now.* That's the shit part, though. You feel all *kinds* of things when you don't *want* to.

She isn't saying anything. I don't know how I'm giving this thing a gender, but I've decided that the vaguely humanoid shape in the blinding light before me is female. There's probably a very interesting psychologcal deconstruction to make from the fact that, in this time of *all* fucking times, I'm looking for a woman to save me.

"Are you…" I gasp, half out of breath, half out of a decided uncertainty of all of my words.

"Is…" I said, trying again, still unsure.

"Can you…" I'm actively just embarrassing myself in front of the divine at this point.

Finally, I hear a powerful *whoooosh* as the angel breathed the diseased air of the corporeal world into herself.

"WHAT DO YOU NEED, CHILD."

"H…help," I stutter out finally. "I…help me. Please, help me."

"WHAT IS WRONG?"

I spoke to the angel like a child speaks to their mother, in the brutal honesty that comes from the complete inability to form these feelings into some larger gestalt, the complete inability to frame my problems as her problems, the complete inability to somehow *sell* her on helping me by pretending there's some benefit to her. That's how we do it, isn't it? It's somehow *wrong* to just *need*, to reach out with the complete absence of strength, to hope that there's a hand on the other end to help us up. We have to manage our pain like a politician, stuff away as much as possible and bribe our friends to be there when we need them. We'll jump to the aid of anyone who asks us, but God forbid we need to ask someone else; then we just imagine everyone we know has some quid-pro-quo account of help they're willing to

give, and if we haven't made enough deposits, you better not expect much of a withdrawal. Nobody does this, and we act as though everyone does this.

Well, fuck that. I don't have the strength or the inclination.

"It hurts. God, it hurts so much. It's been so long since I felt this, and it *hurts*."

"HAVE YOU HURT YOURSELF?"

"No, no, *she* hurt me. That…that fucking *bitch* hurt me. She…she stabbed me in the back. I trusted her, I loved her, and she hurt me. I…I can't have deserved it."

"WHY DID SHE DO IT?"

"Because she didn't love me anymore. Because she's bored with me. Because she's the fucking Devil. I don't know. I don't know. I didn't see it coming. I don't know."

I'm not crying. I can't. I wish I could, but it isn't happening. It never will again.

"WELL, THEN. HAVE YOU NOT HURT YOURSELF?"

"Wh—" I didn't understand. "I don't understand. I just said —"

"YOU ARE HUMAN, CORRECT? WITH VOLITION AND FREE WILL, AS YOU CLAIM? THIS IS NOT THE STOMPING OF AN INSECT BY A HUMAN FOOT. THIS IS NOT THE ERADICATION OF THE BODILY FORM OF A HUMAN BY A SERAPH. IT IS AN INTERACTION OF EQUALS."

"I…you can't say that I *deserved* this. That's fucking *ridiculous*. I did nothing but love her. I did nothing but show her love."

"AND SHE HAS REJECTED IT. THIS WAS ALWAYS A

POSSIBILITY. LOVE IS THE OPENING OF THE CHEST AND BARING OF THE HEART BEFORE AN EVER-PRESENT KNIFE. THE ENTRY OF THE KNIFE INTO THE CHEST WAS ALWAYS A POSSIBILITY. THE PAIN WAS ALWAYS A POSSIBILITY. YOU FEEL HATE SIMPLY BECAUSE YOU FORGOT THIS."

I had no response. I could not conceive of this. It all had the feeling of truth to it, but it was a truth I wasn't really prepared for.

"YOU CAN HATE HER. YOU ARE FREE TO DO THIS, JUST AS SHE IS FREE TO HURT YOU. THIS IS THE FREEDOM OF CHOICE, AND CHOICE CAN BE PAINFUL. I MUST WARN YOU, JUST AS HER CHOICE MAY COME BACK TO HAUNT HER, THE DECISION TO HATE HER WILL DAMAGE YOU WITHOUT DOING ANYTHING GOOD FOR ANYONE. IT REMAINS YOUR CHOICE, HOWEVER."

I lost my balance on my knees and fell onto my hands then. The pain in my chest was blinding, the ache around my solar plexus or so. I looked up to see the creature in the light was descending toward me. I saw her reach out toward my face. I was frozen, completely unable to comprehend what was happening.

"THIS IS THE PAIN OF LOSS, CHILD," the being of light said. "ONE OF FEW SENSATIONS ALL CREATURES IN ALL OF CREATION SHARE IN COMMON. WHETHER YOU REALIZE IT OR NOT, EVERY PRION FEELS THIS WHEN ITS OFFSPRING ARE STERILIZED. EVERY COCKROACH FEELS THIS WHEN ITS NEST IS POISONED. EVERY HUMAN FEELS THIS WHEN THEIR BELOVED FINDS ANOTHER, AND EVERY GOD FEELS THIS WHEN THEIR CREATIONS TURN SOUR AND ROT ON THE VINE. YOU WILL HAVE THIS TO SHARE WITH MOST EVERYONE YOU MEET, AND YOU WILL HAVE THIS TO TRY TO PROTECT THOSE FEW WHO HAVE NOT FELT IT YET. AND YOU WILL FAIL TO PROTECT

THEM, BECAUSE THEY WILL BARE THEIR CHESTS AS WELL, AND THE TIME WILL COME FOR THEM TO FEEL THE KNIFE."

She caressed my face. "THAT IS WHAT I CAN TELL YOU. YOUR PAIN WAITS FOR EVERYONE, AND EVERYONE CAN WALK AWAY FROM IT WHOLE, AFTER A TIME. AND FROM WHATEVER PERSPECTIVE I CAN HAVE OF YOU, AND YOU OF ME, I WISH YOU THE BEST."

The light before me faded into the dark night. After a time, I stood.

"The Assassination of Pilot Bandreeisis by the Coward David Carter" b

Dear Bakaututuuae-16688468,

I regret to inform you of the loss of your betrothed, Pilot Lieutenant Bantreeisis-28388852. I have been her wing commander for the past six months, and have personally flown with her on not fewer than fifty-four attack missions. I can assure you that she gave the greatest possible sacrifice for the defense of her fellow pilots and in the defense of our Collective allies against the High Menace.

We had been performing standard combat air patrol around a base we had established around a High Menace colony. A Collectivist base was expanding in the area, and their government had been hoping to establish an aerial presence in that sector. Our air wing had established two major aerodromes in an elevated position relative to the Collectivists, as per standard protocol.

Our CAP had noticed increased High Menace

activity around their colony that day. Bantreeisis, another pilot, and myself flew to the Collectivist base to meet with their commandant and agree on a strategy. While attempting to access the base, we were detected by one of the High Menace massgrowths at the base, which let out a distress call. Bantreeisis attempted to disable the massgrowth with multiple attacks to its exterior while we allowed the third pilot to escape, but she was only able to strike twice before she was hit. We were able to evacuate her to the principle aerodrome and begin Rejuvenation.

I would like to point out that while Bantreeisis's actions were not technically authorized by me, she was acting in accordance with the finest tradition of bravery our Force can know. Her efforts allowed myself and the escort pilot to escape with our lives, much as she would have survived had the counterattack not taken place.

In the process of escaping the attack zone, the High Menace apparently suspected that the entrance to the Collectivist base was a Task Force aerodrome. Additionally, an erroneous navigational maneuver by another pilot allowed the Menace to locate the site of our principle aerodromes above the Collectivist base. Multiple massgrowths converged on both locations with immense quantities of chemspray and devastated both bases before we could lift off. While our allies in the Collective have developed methods to survive exposure to their chemsprays themselves (without the knowledge of the High Menace, who seem to believe it to still be lethal in itself), the spray reduces our maneuverability in-flight

and renders us susceptible to other attacks.

Bantreeisis was attempting to evacuate the now-uninhabitable aerodrome when she was hit by a chemspray blast and was forced to make an emergency landing. While grounded, a massgrowth targeted and destroyed her. Our methods of Rejuvenation, while powerful and far in excess of that of the High Menace's knowledge, could not restore her. However, I can say that in distracting the High Menace

I am very sorry to give you this news, but please know that your mate was killed fulfilling the highest calling of our people. The Red Force will salute the name of Bantreeisis-28388852 and her sacrifice now and forever, unto the Rising of our people and the destruction of the High Menace.

Yours in sorrow,
Isiwilllanu-13335157
Commander, 2888592th Wing, 6993295th Division, Red Air Force

FROM THE DESK OF CHARLES GEARS:

Jack,

Hearing rumors about unusual *Vespidae* activity around the 1006 enclosure. Please investigate at earliest convenience.

— Gears

"Country Road" by Gaffney

I've always loved driving at night, especially down a

country road like this. There's something about it that's so serene, like it's just you and the inside of the car and what's in your headlights. Everything else just fades away. Just you and your thoughts.

Tonight was a night where I needed a good drive. Jacob had gotten sloppy and forgot to clear his text messages. While he was in the shower, I looked through them. I know it's kind of gross, but I needed to know. Like how when you watch a scary movie, you peek through your fingers. He'd been texting other people. Some men, some women. It didn't matter, really. I was mostly just mad at myself for being so stupid, for thinking that someone as magnificent as him could ever want someone like me.

But it wasn't until I saw him step out of the bathroom that it hit me. His perfect body, no sign of age or trouble. His beautiful hazel eyes. His being with other people scared me.

I showed him the messages, and he tried to give some half-ass excuse. Tried to tell me that it didn't mean a thing, that I was the only one for him.

A few minutes later, I was on the road, trying to see through the tears.

It's been two hours of driving on country roads now, just me and my thoughts in the car. Thinking about how many times this has happened before, how many times I said that this was the last time, that we were through. But not this time. This time it's for good.

It's been ten minutes since I last saw the sign saying I was leaving Pollensbee. I see the old empty field, the one with the crooked almond tree in the center, and I pull over. The car jerks to a stop and I get out and pop the trunk.

I see his hazel eyes looking up at me. His arms and legs

are bound. He tries to plead through to duct tape, but all that comes out is muffled shouting. I pick up the shovel resting behind him.

I raise it high above my head and bring it down on his neck.

He gurgles, and the muffled shouting becomes frenzied. There's a dark purple splotch rising where the bones have broken.

I hit him again and again and again. He stops making noise.

Pretty soon, there's nothing left of his head but crushed bone and pulped meat. One of his perfect hazel eyes looks up at me.

Taking him by a leg, I drag his body to the hole. The six foot deep one I swore I'd never need again. I dump his body into the pit and start shoveling dirt.

He's not even halfway covered when I start hear groaning and see that his head has already started to knit itself back together. The muffled screaming starts again when there's a foot of dirt over him. It doesn't stop, just gets more and more muffled.

As I pat down the last few shovelfuls of dirt, I see a stream of blood slither from the the trunk and disappear into the soil.

Part of me wants to dig him out, hear him say that he loves me and that I'm the only one for him. That we'll be together forever. But fool me once, shame on you. Fool me twice, shame on me.

No, this time, I'm going to bury him and leave him here. Let him scream here forever under six feet of soil.

"Gnats" by CryogenChaos

The hot summer sun beat down on Victor as he stood impatiently at the edge of the slope of the woods. His fiancee, Jessica, had once again dragged him out to her parents farm to gather the annual "crop" of black raspberries, but Victor, being more used to city life than rural life, could only daintily pick the outermost berries. Frustrated, his fiancee told him to stay behind with the big bucket as she disappeared down the drop-off to find the bigger, better berries.

Victor slapped the back of his neck in frustration. These god damn gnats were out in full force today, swarming all over his face and neck. He couldn't even stand still for more than a millisecond without a gnat flying into his eye or buzzing loudly into his ear, and since they were so small there wasn't much he could do about it. Victor's mother told him once that his family's blood was generally sweeter, so bugs were more attracted to him than his fiancee. Whether or not that was true was up for debate, though the constant cloud of insects floating around him supported that theory somewhat.

The suddenly loud buzz of a gnat flying into his ear caused Victor to jerk sideways suddenly, nearly falling over. Infuriated by the heat, the bugs and the general discomfort, Victor started flailing his arms desperately into the air, trying to swat away the cloud. His struggles were in vain as the gnats continued to surround him, frustrating him even further. He tried ducking down low to get out of the cloud, but the gnats followed him down to the ground.

At his wits end, he started pacing back and forth, getting a slight reprieve from the gnats as he moved. The cloud seemed to grow more aggressive, though, as the gnats began to match his speed and attack his face and body in much fuller force. Victor sped up, desperately trying to keep the gnats away from him. He eventually began sprinting in a circle, barely paying attention to his footing in his efforts to keep the gnats away. He tripped on a

raised bit of dirt and felt a sharp pain in his arm as he landed. He raised his arm to find a moderately deep gash from a rock, and only had a moment to register what had happened to him when the gnats started swarming into his wound.

No longer caring about the berries, Victor screamed as he tried swatting the gnats away from his cut arm. Dozens of gnats parted with every swat but returned in full force almost immediately, and Victor could feel the gnats entering his bloodstream through his cut, and swore he could feel the bodies of the gnats pumping through his system. He flailed about in an effort to keep the gnats away, edging closer and closer to the drop-off of the woods. He lost his footing, and fell.

Victor landed in water, a small runoff from the nearby creek. His body felt bruised and scraped from the fall, and tried to pick himself up when he heard a very loud buzzing coming from above him. He turned and looked to see an enormous cloud of gnats, mosquitoes and flies hovering above the water. All at once, the swarm descended onto Victor, his screaming and thrashing drowned out by the buzz, the deafening, unbelievable buzz of hundreds of bugs eager to investigate the sweet blood of the intruder.

—-

Jessica made her way out from the woods, her minuscule bucket almost overflowing with berries. She walked over to where she left Victor, but he was nowhere to be seen. Confused, she walked around the area, trying to find any sign of where her fiancee had gone. She looked over the edge of the drop-off to the bottom, and only saw the last few ripples of a splash in the runoff from the creek, probably from a fallen branch. Annoyed, Jessica concluded that Victor had abandoned her and was waiting inside her parent's house. She began to stomp her way back up to the house, only stopping to swat away the advance of an unusually fat gnat.

"They're There" by Zyn

They’re always there, you know.

In the cracked fissures of forgotten sidewalks
Lying in wait with pointed tails ready
Unbalancing the unwary and in the moment of resulting confusion
Slithering towards ankles, to veins

Beneath the shadowed sheen of leaves
Brushing the crown of your head
As you pass by, unknowing of the hurried scuttle of legs
Crawling from stem to hair and through to scalp

Within the space between sheet and skin
Creeping through cotton threads
Picking through dead discarded flakes
Burrowing into nail, cracking open bone

On the inside lining of your lashes,
Waiting patiently to dig pincers into your eye
Should a blink be inopportune

In the dainty capillaries of your lungs
Clustered and clamping

In the air, in your breath
Everywhere, to your death

They’re always there, you know.

"Insecurity" by FaustoV

I live in a rather dangerous nation. Our goverment is more busy dealing with wealthy people and blaming foreign countries for the current economical shithole than taking care of the huge deliquency issue. Whenever I see the news, there's at least two or three people who got shot for an overpriced Iphone, or just because they

were in the wrong place at the wrong time. I always watched those news with a blank mind, trying not to empathize with any of them. And at the same time, believing that if I went undernoticed, nothing like that would happen to me…

By this time is obvious that I was pretty much wrong.

Last thing I remember is that I was walking on the street, and suddenly some bikers pointed me with a gun, handcuffed me, put a bag in my head and forced me to to go with them. Once we stopped, they threw me into a room and started to beat the shit out of me. They didn't even ask me any questions, but rather kept screaming insults and saying I was gonna die (like if it wasn't clear to me already). I think it happened around half to an hour beating me till they grew tired of it, and when they took the bag out of my head, I barely saw several shades of guns through the blood in my eyes. I was scared, and in despair. I didn't see all my life through my eyes, but I couldn't stop thinking of all I wanted to do, but I won't. My dreams, goals, hopes, wishes, all the time I spent struggling to go ahead and have success. Everything I could have done, completely destroyed by some guys who didn't know respect for life. At the end, they didn't care at all. I felt the first shot in my stomach, and a new source of pain passed through my bleeding body. They didn't even waited for me to completely process it, and kept shooting. The second one hit my belly, the third one hit my chest, fourth fith and sixth my lungs, seventh my throat, eighth my arm, ninth, tenth, eleventh twelveth fourteenth seventeenth twentieth thirty ninth…

I couldn't believe I'd stay aware to feel every bullet. specially the one that hit my brain.

Well, even when I thought I was aware, I couldn't move by myself, but the pain stayed there, and it was getting even worse. Despìte that, I felt when those guys took me out, but I was busy dealing with all that pain was a new and terrble experience. I thought that if I was already

dead, at least I'd deserve to go to Hell first or something. But instead of that, I was taken into a wasteland, and got my deadself abandoned to the animals. The pain I feel never fades away, . I think there's no worst afterlife than this…

My nose itches… Well, I can always be wrong.

"The Secret of the Snow" by Roget

Heads bowed, the family said grace. Their Christmas feast was nothing special, but it was enough. Father smiled at Wife. This was the good life.

Outside their cottage, the eternal storm was brewing. Some days, it might look closer to finally breaking down than it did on others, but never going all the way. Frozen in time and perched above the edge of a glacier, but never falling over the edge.

Well, everything had gone to hell in a handbasket pretty quickly.

As with all things, it had started small. Harry, the co-pilot, had wanted to drop a small amount of altitude to check on weather. Mark had no idea what the something was.

The blame game didn't really matter now. The pilot lay in several pieces across the debris field, and the co-pilot was out cold, bleeding from several alarming wounds. Mark wasn't doing so well for himself, either.

He'd been thrown out of the plane and landed in a snowbank. He was still bruised to hell, but at least he wasn't in pieces. Physically, at least.

Mark could hear the baying of dogs in the distance. Maybe the self-evaluation of his mental faculties could wait for another day. Sitting up, he gathered his things,

papers, clothing, and tore into the woods. Pressing onward into the forest, his eyes felt like they were growing a layer of frost, with sharp crystals blinding every step.

The clothes which had seemed so comfortable on the plane now laughed at his feeble attempts to ward of the cold. He kept on stumbling through the darkness, grasping at frozen, dead tree branches and stones buried in snow. A blind flight into the unknown.

He tried thinking of home. Any home. Maybe it'd be nice to back with Mom and Dad, in Boca. It was always warm there. Didn't need to worry about being up to your knees in snow, alone, thousands of miles from home. Maybe he could go back with Nicole, and Brandon. But that wasn't warm. Apartment. Think of the present. Think of the creature comforts waiting back in the States…

Creature comforts? He'd be a creature's dinner soon, if he didn't find someplace to stay.

Mark wiped the snow out of his eyes and kept going. He couldn't see anything, or… there was something. Windows, with light spilling out onto the snow.

There was a cottage. A small cottage, with timber walls and smoke curling from a chimney. Knocking on the door was not a hard decision to make.

Mark knocked.

A man opened the door, allowing a crack of light to spill over Mark’s face.

“Terribly sorry, but we’re not interested. We’re in the middle of…”

“No, no. No. It’s nothing like that. Can I please… uh, sir, may I call you that? Sorry. I just… need a place to get

out of this cold, and I found your house, and…”

The hand opening the door was connected to a strong, older man. His hair was pulling into a widow's peak, and a caterpillar mustache perched above his lips. A big red nose and squinty eyes completed the center of his face, peering down at Mark from above.

"Sorry, we're not, uh, interested."

"NO! No, wait, please. I'm not selling- it's cold out here. Please, may I come in?"

The man stared at Mark, considering him. The light from behind his massive frame was swiftly being joined by delectable smells, turkey and grease and gravy, swirling around Mark, swooning him and pulling him in.

"Alright, you poor soul. It's Christmas, isn't it?"

Walking inside, Mark kept his eyes on his new surroundings. This was a small, three room cottage. One room to eat, one to sleep, one to sit.

The family was sitting down, at the table, with the food, on their plates. They were all looking up at him, they didn't quite seem to know what to think. The woman, maybe the wife, was looking at him nervously.

The Father spoke up, in a booming, deep tone. "Family! This is…."

"Mark."

"Mark! He's here to eat with us. Poor old boy was wandering out in the cold."

“Thanks so, so much… I might’ve ended up like a snowman out there, if I hadn’t found you all…”

“Well, Mark… I have to say, we’re all very sorry about thinking you were just another salesman. Isn’t that right,

love?”

The Wife nodded, wordlessly.

“We moved here to get out from the salesmen, but they still come knocking every now and again… but, we do well for ourselves. Don’t we?”

Mark nodded, his newfound warmth making him feel exceptionally limber. “Yeah, yeah, sure ma-sir. Again, thank you so, so much…”

Father slapped him on the back, heartily. “Well, we’ve got a chair here, Mark. Have a seat” He pulled a small folding chair from beneath the table. “You’ve found a family to rest with, on Christmas eve.”

Mark sat down, blinking the last of the frost out of his eyelashes. “I didn’t realize some places celebrated the holidays so late…”

Father ignored him. “So, do you have a family?”

At this, the children — which had until now, been little more than smiling decorative pieces — perked up. “Do you have a wife, Mark?” piped the girl. Mark looked at the assembled family. “Oh, uh… well, me and my wife, we’re… separated.”

They stared for a moment.

“Is she okay?” asked the little boy.

“Uh, no,sorry, nothing like that. She’s fine. We just…. agreed, uh, that we needed some time apart.”

They stared at Mark.

“Oh.”

The Father’s smile dropped a few notches. “Well, I’m sure you’re not in the usual for separating, right?”

“I’m sorry?”

“The normal. Status quo. Is separation the status quo?”

Mark paused. “Uh… no, I wouldn’t say it is, but… yeah, no, I think the status quo would be to stay together?”

The Family nodded in assent, silently consuming their food as they eyed Mark. The warmth in the room, which had seemed so inviting only minutes ago, was now stifling, and Mark fidgeted in his seat.

“You seem nervous, son. Are you okay? Was it too personal?”

“I’m sorry, the chill has gotten to me. Do you, uh, mind if I take a minute in your… parlor?”

Sitting in the overstuffed chair, Mark kept his hands close to the crackling flames. The smoky wood drifted over him, taking him up and away from his troubles. Closing his eyes, and felt himself relaxing.

Idly, his hand found itself dragging along the cover of a leather-bound scrapbook.

It was titled “THE FAMILIES WE’VE BEEN”.

Leaning into the chair, and placing the book in his lap, Mark opened it. The fluttering of paper and peered in.

Photographs. Dozens of them, some old, some new, a few loose and blossoming with the molds and warping of age. And all of them, all of them, had the family now hosting him.

Some of them looked to be in old English garb, with Father sporting a mustache, and the wife looking as barefoot and pregnant as could be. Some had no children, and some even had no wife. Constant in every one was Father, peering over the frame and into the

viewer.

One photo had the family in the woods, smiling and posing as he delivered the killing blow to an Oak tree.

Another depicted them on a boardwalk clouded by early morning fog, smiling at the photographer.

One even had them all at work in a factory. Father looked on from a parapet, lovingly staring at his family as they operated the heavy machinery. The Daughter was only visible partially, as she was climbing into the machine.

Before Mark could glance at them any more, there was a strong knock on the door. A high pitched voice called inwards.

“Are you okay, Mister Mark? Daddy is worried…”

Mark paused. “Be out in a minute!”

The only sound in the dining room was the soft clinking of silverware, and the small giggles of the children. Mark had elected not to elucidate the family onto his discovery. Better to get a hot meal, say his pleasantries, and be out before whatever dark secret this family was holding grabbed ahold of him, too.

“Enjoying your meal, son?”

Mark looked up. All of them, Wife, and children, were watching over him.

Mark’s next thought probably should’ve been to try and ask why they were all looking at him the way they were. Or perhaps where The Father was? But he didn’t get to ask anything, because everything was going black.

Mark passed out into his plate.

Father turned another page in the scrapbook. "Oh, do you remember when we played in the clearing, with baseball?"

The Son smiled at him. He definitely remembered that.

Father smiled too, tousling his hair. "Oh, the factory days… remember when all the families out there, they all just kept living in such squalid conditions."

The Wife bristled. "Dreadful."

"Yes, yes…" Father grabbed Mark's head, and forced him to look back at the scrapbook. "You poor boy. I feel bad for this. I really do. Your wife left you, took the child… that's why we had to keep you. So you can learn."

The family all shook their heads "No!"

"We've had so many stages shared together… Remember the Victorian days, when you gals had to wear those corsets?"

They all nodded, in unison.

"Even then, in trying times, we stood together." Father kept turning pages. "Ohhh… Here's a cute one. It's from when we had all of those Jap tourists, coming on… between the four of them, your mom ended up in some queer sort of evening gown!

A collective chuckle echoed throughout the house.

"Look, Mark…" Father grabbed the ropes covering his shoulder, playfully rustling him. "I think we've learned a lot about modern families from your stories. But people like you… I sincerely hope they're an aberration. Moving out away from your son… it goes against all values of family."

For a moment, there was silence, punctuated only by the

quiet clinking of silverware, and the eternally brewing storm outside.

"But hey… maybe I could build a cabin. If the kids ever grow up, they could live in it!"

The family laughed.

"Kids, can you take Mister Mark out of the room? We've got a lot of learning ahead of us, and he needs to rest up."

Mark felt himself waking up, as he had many times before. The children had wanted him to come outside and build a snowman with them, and how would he ever be able to say no to the children? They were the most important part of life.

Rising from the mattress, Mark heard the singing and dancing outside. The children had already awakened, and were anxious for him to get out there. Slipping on shoes, he caught a glance of himself in the mirror.

Oh, how he had changed in the past months, years… some time, but what did it matter? Time flies with good company, and here he had some of the best any man could ask for.

He skipped out of the bedroom, sliding into the dining room. The Wife and The Father were seated, looking out the window to the sound of smiling children. Father had grown old, but wise with time. He'd taught Mark so much.

Father saw Mark, and smiled. “Mark… may I have the privilege of speaking to you in private?”

“Certainly.”

Gesturing to the dining room, Father led them inside.

“I'll be frank with you, Mark. I want you to be my

replacement.”

Mark blinked. “Sir?”

Leaning against the wall, Father sighed. “I’m getting old, Mark. You’ve grown up so wonderfully with the kids, and the wife… I think you can take care of them.”

“Sir, I… wow. I just want to tell you… over our time together, you’ve taught me so much, just, everything, about family. I didn’t think it mattered before. But… it does. I don’t know just how to put it to words. I mean… the kids, and the wife. It’s all-”

“Shhh. I know. I was the same way.”

Mark swallowed. “Where will you go?”

“I have a place to move on to. You’ll find it too, when the time is right.”

Placing his hand on Father’s chest, Mark felt himself tearing up.

“Thank you, sir… I love you.”

Father smiled. “Go play with your kids… Dad.”

Mark walked out the door, taking only one brief moment to look back to the watching Father. Then, he opened the door, and stepped out into the eternally fresh snowfall.

“Daddy!”

Mark ran out, and embraced his new family for the first time.

Surprise! Happy Birthday! Now, see here...

I… Well. I've had quite enough of this. Do you know how long we've been visiting? How long we've been showing up here, spinning the tales for you? Well, I'll tell you. It's been years. Decades! The weavers have been coming here, year after year, giving you these stories, watching them worm their way into your ears and out your eyes and through your tongue, and you've yet to have the common decency to do… to just… Ugh! There is *protocol* in play here, and you are flaunting it, sir. You are flaunting the sacrifice, and the words, and the book. Flaunting it all. It's simply unacceptable. Unacceptable!

You… You are still listening to them, though… aren't you?

We have more. We always bring more for you. The story of the table who walked through the door. The one about the six children who nursed on the she bear. The tale of the burning irons, the pick of wonders, the second sun that hid its face, or the speaker of cold nights… Tales! Tales to remind you of a wine you never drank and make you nostalgic for a place that was never real… yet. Tales to weave you a lovely shroud, and tales to sing you to your sleep. Tales that tick like a clock, or a coffin nail. Tales that are waiting, still…

Happy Birthday. We're waiting.

Eight More by TroyL

It's slow, isn't it? Feeling it start to pump through you, move with your arteries and veins. It takes a lot of getting used to, yes? Don't worry, though. It starts slow, then it speeds up, and soon, you won't even notice it. Yes, yes,

I know it's quite uncomfortable at first, but it's fine. Eventually, you won't notice.

Well, yes, I suppose that's true. It does get louder, but by then, you'll be so used to hearing everything else that you can't tell. And you've got so much to look forward to! Right now, you get your nutrients through this system, but soon, you'll get to have it yourself.

Yes, but not like that. Hah! Oh, if you could see. It's a marvelous setup we have.

Now, don't you worry. I know this is very new to you, lots of meat and wetness, but it'll come to be quite comfortable. It's only eight more months until your insertion begins. You should enjoy this time. Lots of time to think and plan. It should be quite delightful. Just don't forget while you're here — you have a job to do.

Don't fuck it up.

Silliness by Tuomey

You never believed in old superstitions. All nonsense - demons, ghosts?

Silliness.

You were, however, very eager to take centre stage in your friend's amateur horror movie, even looking up the kind of "rituals" a believer would use - mainly for a lack of imagination.

Some of your more superstitious - or more religious - friends wouldn't stay for the ritual scene.

Silliness.

Just some ominous chanting, and pretending to spill your own blood in a weird drawing on the floor.

Even those who stayed looked nervous.

Silliness.

You weren't counting on your knife hand slipping and cutting yourself to the bone. Amateur horror productions don't typically have a large prop budget.

You almost certainly weren't counting on an incomprehensible dark satire of the human form crawling out of the hole that wasn't there before your blood hit the ground, turning its irregular face on you and screaming from a hole in its cheek.

It would be silly to count on that, after all.

You weren't counting on the demon reading your mind and becoming insulted at the idea that it was "silly."

You tried to run but your toes were caught on something, and your foot began to harden. You weren't able to move your legs and your arms froze in position as the demon encased you in stone.

You had to watch your friends die slowly, their eyes pleading for mercy and their mouths screaming for death. Eventually, each of their dead bodies were absorbed into the demon, furthering the irregularity of its shape.

You were not granted such release. Your friend's misplaced eyes mocked you from shoulders, arms, and legs as the demon fell back into its hole, pausing only to amicably say four words through its misshapen cheek-flap.

"Not so silly now."

"Found Written on the Side of a Napkin in a Paris Cafe, 1911", by Dm

Found written on the side of a napkin in a Paris Cafe,

1911

Ah, what jolly good times are in store for us!
Ah, such wonderful new things for us to learn!

Listen well, and you can almost hear the rattling of the machineguns already. Your nose is keen, do you find the whiff of rotten corpses as intoxicating as I?

Not much longer to wait, and it will all be ours. In just a bit, we will be neck deep in the dead. Then we can sleep! Isn't that grand, my dear old friend?

To walk among the weeping nations, and to feast? No.

To stand among the kneeling mourners and sing? Close, but not quite.

To dance to the rhythm of spent lives? Almost there, my friend.

What is best than to dream nightmares of a dying century?

City Cuts by Zyn

The city’s more alive than most people think.

Sometimes, those who know where to look can see manifestations of the urban heartbeat, the very veins and arteries of the streets and sidewalks, wriggling through the cracks and chipped pavement, reflected in the dust-caked flickering lights.

Look to the black on light, look to the dusk-drenched corners, and you’ll see the fragments of the city moaning, groaning, reaching for something, someone, anyone, written in the forgotten names that write

themselves in the footsteps of the living and the struggling.

Cuts, scrapes, cracks, tarnishings of the sky and sun and clouds and rain, these are where they stream from. The city's heartache yearns through the lightning spiderwebs of the broken walls, the arduous rancor bursts through the blasted pipes and dripping, wasting, rust and grime that speaks of a muttering, but unvoiced, loneliness and resentment.

It waits, it watches, it judges. Passerby may try to erase such things or simply make them routine, live with them, as it has always lived by them. Someday it will reach the living things, yes. First it will choke the life, siphon the brightness from that which is to fall to deterioration, though the shimmering skyscrapers are beyond its reach for now, yet now, the humans will only expedite this growing calamity hidden in the scars of their accomplishments.

It judges, and it waits.

Twins by Dr. Mann

I'm sorry. I shouldn't have. I just got scared.

I made a deal, right? I needed to get him back. I loved him, and they could do it. I didn't think they could, but they fucking showed me. I said yes and got seven more years with him.

And it worked. It fucking well worked, and he was alive again. And since then, it's been wonderful.

But seven years is coming up, and there's a secret I haven't told. I got scared when I signed the contract. I didn't want to go to hell.

So I signed your name instead.

"Emptiness" by Agent MacLeod

If you ask a quantum physicist, they'll tell you that most of an atom is empty space (for a given definition of "empty," anyway). Between the nucleus of the atom and the electrons zipping around it, there is a comparatively vast field filled with absolutely nothing. The same applies to molecules; between the atoms that make them up, there is a vacuum that can't truly be breached. If you ask an astronomer, they'll tell you that it's similar in outer space. Most of the cosmos is vacuum, with bits that are heavier and hotter that we call "stars" and "planets."

But I'm not an astronomer, or a quantum physicist, or any sort of scientist. I work the register at the local Wendy's. Every morning, I wake up in my shitty bed in my shitty apartment, get ready for my shitty job, drive to work in my shitty car, and stand behind a register for six hours, wondering what the hell I'm doing with my life. Then I drive home, neglect to call my mother because I can't stand to hear her disappointment in me for dropping out of college again, fuck around watching TV or smoking pot or masturbating or finding some more creative way to waste my time, eat a shitty dinner, and pass out way too late to start it all again.

I can't help sometimes but think back to all the choices that have lead me here, back to the ways I've screwed up, and wonder if there's any way to fix it. Mostly, though, I look at all the wasted time, and see everyone else doing the same, living short, pointless lives that don't matter.

I can't help but think that I'm just empty space, nothing but a void.

Josie by minmin

It's been ten hours since she went inside the walls.

I tried to stop her, but it was like stepping into a hole, swoosh, and she was gone. I could hear her quite well at first, lightly scrabbling on the plaster, but the sound moved towards the floorboards into the grate around 10 P.M. and I couldn't fit my head that far in anymore. There's still a corner behind the sink where I think I can hear something like whiskers, though.

The vet told me the other week that it happens all the time with her type, they just get up and leave for a bit, to stretch out the ol' instincts, you know? Except the stretching happened to my ceiling eight hours ago, you could hear the pop of bone beneath and everything, and when I climbed up to investigate I swear I could smell the food on her breath. I wanted to run down to the telephone to tell Dr. Kim, but the lines were stretched out too and the receiver was clogged with her matted hair. It's a good thing I propped the back door open before she left, otherwise she'd have gotten to it too, but I don't think the chair will hold for long. At least she hasn't gone into the furniture yet, which is nice.

The postman came in around eight in the morning, but when he made it past the front porch the roof closed in on him with the wetness of her mouth. She had always liked to play with him like that.

Biblio by DreamwalkerFae

Listen to the sound of the empty speech.
Of voices you are unable to read.

Watch as your comrades forget their own names.
Even their role is forgotten with time.

Feel the blurred and wrinkled edges of these walls.
They crumble and collapse under your touch.

Catch the scent of the ancient bindings of your world.
Worms will eat them apart.

Know what happens to stories
When the authors march off to war.

Overheard in a Diner in Lemont by ProcyonLotor

(It's been several years, but this story has stuck with me. I've reproduced it as faithfully as I could, with the exception of changing it from 'bar conversation in a dingy county route diner' to a conventional narrative.)

My older brother heard voices.

We weren't a wealthy family, so my folks didn't get him into some shrink in the city, or pump him full of pills. It was pretty much "shut up and act normal".

Eddie was a full eight years older than me, so we didn't have much to do with each other. He was a pretty lonely kid, and didn't talk much. So I really didn't know what was happening, until I was a lot older, and he was already long gone.

The only time he acted like a fucking loon around me was when I was about eight. Right after some massive screaming match with my mother, probably, about his voices, he asked me if I wanted to take a walk with him.

I mean, I thought we were going down to get ice cream. We were living down in Romeoville at the time, and I'm sure you know that Dairy Queen down on the main drag. I used to walk there occasionally to get something when our family had enough money to give me a few dollars.

Instead, Eddie takes me to this cemetery a few blocks from the house. He leads me all silentlike just right into the middle of all the markers, and stands there for a moment. Now, I knew even back then that Ed was a weird dude, so this wasn't shocking or unexpected, but still, it was after dark, and I was eight, standing in graveyard.

Then, Eddie peered at a grave marker for a bit, took a deep breath, turned around, and stared at me.

“You can hear them, can’t you?”

I couldn’t hear anything, and that question scared the piss out of me. I shook my head and told him I wanted to go home.

He didn’t say anything, but it was obvious I’d disappointed him somehow.

We walked back in silence, which didn’t help make the situation any less creepy. When we got back to the house, he went up to his room without another word, and we never spoke of it again.

Now, things get messed up two years later. This was back in ninety-six, and a girl from Romeoville High School went missing, what was her name…. Meredith Parker, right? Yeah, that was it.

Anyway, this Parker girl disappears without a trace, and town apparently flips itself over looking for her. I was only like ten or eleven, so I don’t really remember much, until Eddie got himself involved.

Early fall sometime, Meredith had been missing for about three or four months. Eddie apparently calls the cops, and leads them down to some marshy spot off the I&M Canal, little bit past the Citgo refinery. Can’t tell you exactly where it is, as they never told me.

But, the cop and Eddie find an arm washed up in the reeds along the shore of the canal. Two guesses who it belonged to.

And, well, that was all that was ever found of Meredith Parker.

Now, Eddie had no reason to be there, ever. He had no reason to be walking there, no reason to have pulled

over and gotten out of his car over there, no reason to just be wandering by. Pretty much no one had any reason to be in that area- apparently you couldn't see the arm from the street.

So when the cop asks Eddie what he was doing there, how'd he find this arm, Eddie says his voices led him there, told him that's where Meredith was. If there was a wrong answer short of "I killed her", that was it.

Eddie was a loner, didn't fit in at school, and he found the body under suspicious circumstances. Although the cops didn't find any evidence to actually charge him with, god knows they tried, the town rumor mill pretty much decided he was guilty. He couldn't handle it, and left town without saying anything a month or two later.

That would be the last time I'd ever see Eddie.

My life went on, though, and shit stayed more or less the same for seven years, until one day state police come knocking at my door, asking about Eddie. Apparently, they'd found him OD'd on heroin in some fleabag motel outside of Wellborn, Florida, of all places.

The previous night forty police departments all across the country had gotten calls from someone telling them voices had revealed the location of a local missing person. The next morning, forty bodies were recovered, and the phone calls traced back to Room 134 at the Americana Motel in Wellborn. A local patrolman busted in the room door that afternoon, found my brother's corpse splayed across the bed, and the phone hanging off the hook, the number for the non-emergency line of the Chickasha, Oklahoma police department still dialed in, the call unmade.

I haven't had the heart to look up who it was, but somewhere, deep down, I know that they're never going to find the forty-first body now.

The Doll in the Dream by Dexanote

I once had a nightmare about a doll.

It was a very short one, but it's stuck with me my whole life. She was looking down at me, her face right up next to mine. She was pretty, almost porcelain but not quite, you can almost imagine her yourself.

The thing that sticks with me was her face. I looked into her eyes and saw green glitter all pasted to them. Pasted directly onto her eyeballs, with plain white school glue. It was in her eyelids, in her tear ducts, green shiny sparkly glitter piled and crushed deep into the glue. It was gooey and wet and fresh and I could even smell that white school glue smell. We all know that smell, don't we?

Then she spoke.

"Look at what I've done to myself."

She said it with such a smile in her voice, happy, loving. And right there, in my dream, I realized that she did this because she thought I would like it. She blinded herself for me on a whim. I think I screamed.

And then I woke up. I didn't sleep much after that, and since then I try to avoid glitter. I'm fortunate that I don't usually encounter it in everyday life, and I don't tell many people about the dream so nobody's going to prank me or anything. It's such a silly thing, but I just… really hate it.

Still, that's not enough. Every few weeks, I'll find a single piece of green glitter in my house. Always about a sixteenth of an inch square, shiny metallic green, vivid like an emerald. Big enough to notice, small enough to be missed. I've found them on the couch, on the counter, usually on the floor. Once on my shoe - it must have been on my sole, picking it up somewhere when I was running errands. Must have kicked it onto the other

shoe’s toe when I was taking them off last, right?

I always told myself it’s just glitter. It gets everywhere, and it’s impossible to get rid of completely, right? Everyone probably finds a piece of glitter sometimes, right? And the green’s gotta be a coincidence, right? Green’s a nice colour.

That… is, until today. I’m probably being silly. It’s just glitter, just a dream. Nothing like that can hurt me, it’s just my imagination. Right?

But there’s glitter in my bed.

Boring Through by EldritchCyanide

your veins pulse with glitter and the novas in your teeth rattle at the door before they bore inside

when did we become so rickety?

you have holes in your eyes & they lead past your brain & through the universe's corpse-mother

oh, god, did she fear heat death?

you breath out &in&in&in&in

and you shut off the lights because the house was dark long before you came

you rattle at the door before you bore inside and you wonder when you became so rickety

your veins drop glitter in thin shining lines down your wrists

it suspends itself in shimmering, perfect spheres two seconds before it hits the floor

they rattle at the door

you shut off the lights.

And Many More by Decibelles

Happy birthday, dear friend. I know, I know, I've barely known you for much time, but each life is worth celebrating, is it not? Through all the ups and downs, with family and friends, acquaintances and strangers alike, every little bit is worth celebrating.

I know you've missed out on quite a lot. So let's check everything out together. Oh, sure, sure. There's so much to explore. Ideas of yours, fully realized. Mysteries opened and doors closed. Proteges studying your writing, old friends missing your departure and taking up your helm. Look how much the seeds you've planted have grown! Whole worlds and universes, reproducing and interconnecting… it's grand, isn't it?

Oh, no, no, come on now. I know you're a bit worried. Stage fright, perhaps? Nervousness? Oh. Hrmm. Well, surely you must have expected that you were wanted back? No, you should stay here. I insist. Huh? No, you can't go now. Try? Sure. Go on, take your time.

…

That doesn't go anywhere. You can keep going though. We have time.

…

…

Are you done yet? Good, good. You seem tuckered out already. Let's start catching up on old memories. Welcome back, Doctor.

We have many more birthdays ahead of us.

Kind Of A Stretch by Doctor Cimmerian

Owl Haiku by Pig_catapult

Grainy owl photo
Its eyes gleamed red in the dark
Before it took mine

The Day I Said I Loved You by djkaktus

The day I said I loved you
you barely looked at me
as you walked away with your friends.

The day I said I loved you
I know you heard the words
because of how your mouth turned down when I spoke them.

The day I said I loved you
I know you were laughing at me
because the laughter cut deeper than any knife.

Except this one.

The day I said I loved you
you didn't lock the door
when you got home and I walked inside.

The day I said I loved you
you took a shower early
so you could get ready for the dance, but you couldn't hear me.

The day I said I loved you
I waited for you in your bedroom
just so I could hear you say it back.

The day I said I loved you

it was behind your face
through your eyes
and with your lips.

Recent Forum Posts by Westrin

Goodbye

Dr Gears 27 Sept 2022, 00:51
in discussion Goodbye

Have a good one, everybody. I'm sad to see it go, but it was a good trip from beginning to end. I will always love each, and every one of your squeals as your innards pour out of your mouth. It gave me a thrill nothing else could.

Now if you excuse me, I'm going to stop the screaming. It's been a while since I fed them.

Project Crossover

So, the SCP Foundation is quickly becoming, if it is not already, a "thing" on the internets. However, there is one more step we must take before we become a full-out "thing."

Terrible crossover fanfiction.

This is your challenge: write a crossover fanfiction between the SCP Foundation and any other fictional universe of your choice. It can be hilarious, tongue-in-cheek, or deadly serious, just as long as it is well-written. Extra points scored for "crackiest" crossover.

That is all.
~Clef

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It Had All Been For Nothing	13 Jun 2018 20:06	**Foxcheetah**
Heroic Spirit Alexei Belitrov	15 Aug 2017 02:01	**MrWrong**
Keters With Hats	10 Apr 2017 21:30	**Crash1337**
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The Lingering Lark of	14 Feb 2015 00:33	**daveyoufool**

Leviathan Square		
Dial S For SCP	24 Nov 2014 13:34	**Loiterer87**
The Foundation never changes	07 Aug 2014 14:53	**ChrisAKAPiefish**
Peace. I would settle for that.	26 Apr 2014 22:12	**Bennings**
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And Now, The WeEXPUNGED	12 Dec 2013 02:43	**Drewbear**
Solvin' Center of Problems	27 Nov 2013 07:51	**TwistedGears**
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Saturday Night SCP Showdown	31 Jan 2013 02:23	**Smapti**
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The Self Insert	10 Dec 2012 09:41	**TheDuckman**
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SCP+MLP=DNC	28 Jun 2012 03:57	**Gargus**
Gotham's Strangest	10 Jun 2012 04:42	(user deleted)

Criminal Holder Of The Foundation	30 May 2012 20:05	**VAElynx**
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Whatcha doing?	14 Jan 2012 18:05	**Doktori**
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Aye Mak Sicur		
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On the O5's Secret Service	13 Jan 2012 04:24	**Anaxagoras**
Letter of the Day	13 Jan 2012 02:46	**Djoric**
Smooth as Silk	13 Jan 2012 02:40	**Djoric**
This is Always a Horrible Idea	12 Jan 2012 22:43	**Djoric**
Incident Report KAF-09	12 Jan 2012 21:20	**Candlebeam**

Heroic Spirit Alexei Belitrov

Servant Archer, Major Alexei Belitrov of the ***Red Army 22nd Armoured Infantry Division****. Master, from my understanding, you are a participant of the Holy Grail War. I also understand that my objective is the termination of the other six enemy Servants or their Masters, whichever is more convenient.*

True Name: Alexei Belitrov

Servant Class: Archer

Alignment: Lawful Neutral

Attribute: Human

Agility	E+	**Noble Phantasm**	B+

A soldier from the Red Army who partook in a World War III that took place in another world, and disappeared mysteriously following his capture by the Americans. Like all other soldiers involved in that conflict, he wore a special armour that enhances his physical abilities. Because of that, he actually has nothing special that would normally make him a Heroic Spirit. However, since he happens to be the only soldier of his native universe to have survived a journey into another universe, that counts for something.

This incarnation should not be able to be summoned, since there is no account of Belitrov as a ranged fighter in this universe (the Americans removed his guns before he left his native universe). Maybe the Master who

summoned Belitrov desired for a Servant in his peak condition, i.e. the perfect Soviet soldier? Or maybe Belitrov is the most compatible Heroic Spirit with the Master summoning him, and the Archer-class happens to be the only class container for him to manifest in?

Class Skills

Independent Action: C

Capable of surviving in the World without a Master for one day.

Magic Resistance: E

Cannot cancel spells, but damage from spells is reduced.

As Archer is from the Age of Man, he has no experience with Magecraft.

Personal Skill

Patriotic Fervour: A+

One's love for his own country, and the willingness to protect said country and destroy those who threaten the country.

Provides Rank Up to Archer's parameters when he is in territories corresponding to the Soviet Union. Provides bonus damage when attacking Servants related to the United States.

Noble Phantasm

Armour of the Engineers

Let the Children of the Sun Implode Amongst Themselves

Type: Anti-Army

Rank: B+

A set of bio-organic armour that conceals Archer's entire body, and with a design reminiscent of various insect species. It is a multi-functional armour crafted by the Engineers and utilized by all factions in World War III.

As an always-active Noble Phantasm, the Armour of the Engineers grants Archer permanent bonus modifiers to its Strength and Endurance, along with additional Skills. Special lenses grants Archer C-Rank Clairvoyance, whereas its proboscis grants Archer E-Rank Bloodsucking.

Four gun turrets are mounted on Archer's forearms and shoulder blades, serving as his primary weapons and a justification for him to be an Archer-class Servant. Due to being a Servant, ammunition produced are created from Prana and will not run out (so long he has sufficient Mana). As the Engineers' creations are stained with their grudge towards humanity, bullets fired from the Armour of the Engineers carry an Anti-Human trait that deals bonus damage to all Heroic Spirits of a Human attribute. Because this Noble Phantasm's owner is also of Human attribute, Archer's Luck is lowered to E-Rank by default.

...tWo... twO... SeV... uH...thReE...

True Name: SCP-2273

Servant Class: Berserker

Alignment: Chaotic Neutral

Attribute: Human

Agility	E+	**Noble Phantasm**	EX

One of the many entities contained by the SCP Foundation, SCP-2273 (named Alexei Belitrov) is a being from another universe. In his native universe, he has endured capture, torture, and humiliation. Although

he tries to put up a brave front, he is close to a mental breakdown.

Due to his experience with war, this incarnation does not intend to battle. However, his Master intentionally summoned SCP-2273 as a Berserker since a fighter is essential in a Holy Grail War. As such, Mad Enhancement stirs Berserker into rage by force, awakening his repressed trauma and guilt.

Class Skill

Mad Enhancement: B

Rank Up for all parameters, but takes away most of the user's sanity.

In Berserker's case, he becomes overwhelmed by his own trauma and guilt.

Personal Skills

Trauma of the Battlefield: – (A)

Normally an inhibiting Skill which induces Mental Interference onto oneself, it is sealed under Mad Enhancement.

Containment Breach Probability: A

Under normal circumstances, Berserker is complaint as a contained "SCP Object" and this Skill should not be applicable at all. However, Mad Enhancement forcibly granted Berserker a status equivalent to the so-called "Keter-class".

Extra-Dimensional Origin: A

Since Berserker has travelled to another universe once, he has resistance against attacks capable of warping spacetime.

Noble Phantasm

Armour of the Engineers

Scarred Living Armour

Type: Anti-Unit (Self)

Rank: B

A set of bio-organic armour that conceals Beserker's entire body, and with a design reminiscent of various insect species. It is a multi-functional armour crafted by the Engineers and utilized by all factions in a World War III that took place in another universe.

Although the Armour of the Engineers usually would have gun turrets mounted onto it, they were removed to represent the anecdote wherein the Americans disarmed Berserker after his capture. On his forearms and shoulder blades are the scars from the Americans' abuse, and they remind Berserker of his shame endlessly.

Without its primary method of attack, the Armour of the Engineers is only useful for boosting Berserker's physical parameters. On the other hand, his Luck rank is set at D instead. Supposedly, as he has been displaced from his native universe, the Engineers' curse has a less potent effect on him. Or perhaps he defied his fate of being one of the Engineers' instruments of dominance shift? Or perhaps Berserker found friends in this new world?

Danner Anomaly

Breaker of Dimensions

Type: Anti-Spacetime

Rank: EX

The crystallisation of Berserker's trauma and rage over the deaths of his soldiers and displacement to another universe, it is not something Berserker possesses in life. Instead, it is the weaponised embodiment of emotions that Berserker buried in life. Now that he is in the Berserker-class, his trauma and rage erupts and engulfs his entire body.

Every attack made by Berserker carries an Anti-Spacetime trait. These attacks are not geared to attack individual units, armies, or even fortifications. Instead, they are targeting spacetime within Berserker's range. Continuous attacks from Berserker in a given area may weaken spacetime sufficiently to break down dimensional barriers, creating a confusing battlefield on par with the Minotaur's Chaos Labyrinth. However, the destruction of spacetime will not open the portal to his native universe. After all, he never returned home in life.

The name of the Noble Phantasm, Danner Anomaly, is derived from the town of Danner, Wisconsin. That was the place he landed following his mysterious displacement from his native universe.

Since Berserker is ultimately a human enhanced by biotechnology and has no innate ability to break down spacetime, Danner Anomaly is essentially unquantifiable and given EX-Rank.

> My True Name is **`Father Anvil`**, Ruler-class. In the name of the Broken Goddess, I shall lead the final crusade against humanity's Evils in the Grand Order.

True Name: Father Anvil

Servant Class: Ruler

Alignment: Lawful Good

Attribute: Human

Agility	C	**Noble Phantasm**	A

> A clergyman of the Eastern Clockwork Orthodox Church, Father Anvil was once incarcerated by the SCP Foundation as SCP-2273. An unrelated incident allowed him to be freed from the SCP Foundation, and he eventually turned to religion. Although he never received Standardisation, Father Anvil was deeply respected by

members of his monastery. Although he died uneventfully, his ideals formed the basis of a greater movement that would unite humanity.

Despite getting over his trauma, Father Anvil insists on pacifism. He simply refuses to partake in the Holy Grail War in any capacity, not even as a judge (the role of the Ruler-class). Normally, by sheer will, he will not be summoned in the Ruler-class. The only exception is the Grand Order, the reversion of XK-class scenarios engineered by the Seven Evils of Humanity. In Ruler's eyes, the elimination of humanity's Evils is to unite humanity and cleanse their sins.

Class Skills

God's Resolution: –

The privilege of the Ruler-class to impose absolute orders on other Servants via Command Spells, Ruler is allotted two Command Spells per participating Servant in a given Holy Grail War. Cannot re-purpose the Command Spells of others.

However, since Ruler is technically presiding over a Grand Order and not a Holy Grail War, he is not granted Command Spells.

Magic Resistance: C+

Cancels spells with a chant below two verses. Usually unable to defend against High Thaumaturgy or Greater Rituals.

Due to Ruler's religious sect (Eastern Clockwork Orthodox Church), he can cancel any spell related to Sarkicism.

True Name Discernment: B+

Upon direct encounter with another Servant, said Servant's True Name, parameters, and skills are

automatically revealed to Ruler. Regarding Servants with concealment abilities, a Luck check must be performed.

Since Ruler referred to some former "SCP objects" by name, Servants who are/were "SCP Objects" will have their information revealed to Ruler, disregarding any concealment ability.

Personal Skills

Blessings of the Broken Goddess: C

A form of divine protection allotted to those who follow the Broken God (a.k.a. Broken Goddess, MEKHANE, WAN, Fu Xi, Father Serpent, Metatron, Hephaestus). Damage from Servants related to Sarkicism is reduced by 50%.

Because Ruler is from an heterodox sect of the Church of the Broken God, he suffers additional damage from attacks by Servants associated with the Broken Church, Cogwork Orthodox Church, and Church of Maxwell.

Pacifism: C

The temperament to oppose violence in favour of peaceful settlement. Ruler gains defensive bonus so long he does not kill another human being.

The low rank of this Skill brings from the fact that Ruler did engage in killing as a youth. He might have abandoned his warlike ways, but it pales in comparison to someone who disavowed violence and never engage in it.

Extra-Dimensional Origin: A

Since Berserker has travelled to another universe once, he has resistance against attacks capable of warping spacetime.

Noble Phantasm

Our Mechanised Salvation's Grand Design

We Are All Pieces of the Broken Goddess

Type: Anti-Mind

Rank: A

The crystallisation of Ruler's spiritual ideology ever since he converted to Eastern Clockwork Orthodoxy, it is named after an idea formulated in preparation for one of Ruler's first sermons in his monastery. Notably, Ruler is one of the few who preached for inter-faith fraternity and harmony, highlighting that all humans are components of the Broken Goddess. Ruler is actually bemused that he is given such a Noble Phantasm, for he was a man of humble disposition.

The effect of Our Mechanised Salvation's Grand Design is effectively an attempt to temporarily restore the Broken Goddess, using Ruler's philosophy as a basis. He can amalgamate the consciousness of himself and other individuals, essentially linking all of them to form a network for the Broken Goddess to be manifested upon. As the vessels of the Broken Goddess, the Attribute of all affected targets become 'Heaven'. They also gain a level of coordination, acting as though they were one being.

Since Ruler's sect is based on Cogwork Orthodoxy, all affected targets will gradually undergo Standardisation. However, Ruler's own willpower suppresses Standardisation. Even if he is a loyal follower of the Broken Goddess, Ruler never sees himself as worthy of Standardisation. Additionally, he might have acknowledged that other Servants might not like Standardisation forced upon them.

Our Mechanised Salvation's Grand Design requires all affected targets' consent. Should even one be forcibly targetted, the Noble Phantasm will fail. Since the Eastern Clockwork Orthodox Church is a heterodox sect of the Church of the Broken God, Servants related to other sects of the Church of the Broken God can resist Ruler's Noble Phantasm.

Interestingly, the concept of the Broken God distributed into many individuals is echoed in the Church of Maxwell. Perhaps Cogwork

Orthodoxy is not the only influence that spurred Ruler's faith.

Keters With Hats

Paul: Caaarl! Why is there a **`statue`** in our house? It's looking at me funny.

Carl: Whatever do you mean?

Paul: The statue. Right there. It's in the middle of our living room.

Carl: Oh, that! I thought that was a mountain.

Paul: Mountains don't fit in houses!

Carl: How do you know that?

Paul: I don't! How'd you even get this here?

Carl: I didn't bring it here. For once I am innocent.

Paul: Then why is it looking at *you??*

Carl: Must be my legs.

Paul: Where did you get this from?

Carl: My nice, sexy legs.

Paul: Answer me, Carl.

Carl: It came out of a top hat I was using for a magic trick.

Paul: Caaarl!

Carl: Fine. I broke into a place called Site 19.

Paul: How'd you do that? You don't even have thumbs.

Carl: I used an egg sandwich and a mattress tag.

Paul: What even is this thing?

Carl: I don't know. I've tried eating it and it's just made of stone and paint.

Paul: Why would you break into somewhere and eat what you find?

Carl: Because the egg sandwich wasn't enough.

Paul: I'm not listening anymore.

(Paul turns before Carl blinks.)

Carl: Woah! That thing just moved.

Paul: What? I turned my back for one second. What'd you do?

Carl: I sunk a cruise ship 4 days ago.

Paul: I didn't mean that!

Carl: Then what did you mean?

Paul: Why did it move?

Carl: It had to follow its destiny.

Paul: Caaarl!

Carl: It slipped on the floor.

Paul: Be honest with me.

Carl: I don't know! It probably noticed *your* legs.

(Paul turns around, seeing the statue in front of him.)

Paul: Oh God.

Carl: Yeah, this was probably my fault.

Paul: You don't say?

Carl: At least I didn't bring back the other thing I found.

Paul: What was it?

Carl: Some **`pale guy`**, long arms. I looked at him for one second and he went crazy.

Paul: I'm so disappointed in you.

Carl: Well that's mean. Now I kind of wish I brought that pale guy back.

Paul: I'm not talking to you anymore.

Carl: Well, that's rude. I'm disappointed in you now.

(Banging at the door.)

Paul: Who's that?

Carl: Probably the pale dude.

Paul: What? Why?

Carl: Maybe it's the statue's best friend.

Paul: Caaarl!

Carl: Well, I didn't know.

Paul: You're just being awful today.

Carl: I stole this yesterday.

Paul: I'm not even shocked at this anymore.

Carl: Fine, I'll go answer the door.

Paul: You go do that, Carl.

(Carl walks to the door as Paul is stuck looking at the statue.)

Carl: Has it moved again?

Paul: Not yet!

(Carl walks back.)

Carl: Yep, it's that crazy guy.

Paul: I think you should keep the door closed, Carl.

Carl: Fine.

Paul: So, what should we do with this thing?

Carl: Sell it to an art museum.

Paul: I was thinking give it back.

Carl: No way, we could get so many dead bodies with this.

(Pause.)

Paul: Caaaaaaarl!

Carl: Fine, I'll give it back.

Paul: No, I'm giving it back.

Carl: Bad idea, Paul. They had lots of guns back there.

Paul: Fine. Well, did you do anything else there?

Carl: I killed some people and ate some paper.

Paul: Oh.

Carl: I mean, it was **`screaming`** as I was eating it.

Paul: The people or the paper?

Carl: What do you think? It was the paper.

Paul: Caaarl! What have I told you about eating things that scream?

Carl: The egg sandwich wasn't enough.

Paul: Caaarl!

Carl: You're right. You've told me not to do it.

Paul: Right. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to find a way to give this statue back.

(Paul starts pushing the statue out of the house.)

Carl: Yep, he's going to get slaughtered out there.

Paul: I can hear you, Carl!

Carl: Sorry.

(Paul exits the house, screaming.)

Paul: Caaaaaaarl!

Carl: I told you, Paul!

(Ending theme.)

Mystery Skipper Theater 3000

The following broadcast transcript was detected from a previously dormant region of space, with Foundation encryption. The content is currently under analysis.

The Foundation's telescopic networks and satellites are to monitor the region of space this signal emerged from in order to prevent future incidents.

In the not too distant future♪ ♫ ♬

Next XK, A.D

Doctor Kondraki and his **`booterflies`**

Are more sinister than they seem.

Hired an Agent, Navarro's the name

A magic user of **`Three Portlands`** fame.

He did a good job keeping us all safe

But Kondraki didn't like it so he shot him into space!

(Get! Me! DOWN!!!)

"I'll send him lazy scippys,"

"The worst, I can write!"

"He'll have to sit and choke them down,"

"Until he loses his own mind!"

Now keep in mind Navarro hasn't gone around the bend just yet

(La La La)

Because he stole conversational skips

To be his robot friends!

ROBOT ROLL CALL

`Dronebot!` *(Go higher!)*

`Pesterbot!` *(I'll get you!)*

`General Beep!` *(Bombs away!)*

`ROBO-DUDE` *(HEY NOW!)*

If you're wondering why he can't just leave

Or the plausibility of this act

Then repeat to yourself "The Foundation is fake,"

"I should really just relax!"

For Mystery Science Theater… 3000!

[*Establishing shot, drawing back from a series of containment chamber doors, until we see NAVARRO standing behind a desk with GENERAL BEEP and ROBO-DUDE. A DRONE appears to be directing the camera.*]

NAVARRO: Hey folks! Welcome, uh, to the Satellite of Love. I'm not sure how long I've been up here but don't worry — at no point has it gotten any less tedious.

GENERAL BEEP: It almost makes you want to see what the Kon has in store for us next.

NAVARRO: Yeah, almost… but not quite.

ROBO-DUDE: INCOMING TRANSMISSION! SITE-19 DOCTOR KONDRAKI! I AM MAKING AN ANNOUNCEMENT!

NAVARRO: Whelp, speak of the devil, I suppose…

[A screen appears, upon which DR. KONDRAKI'S face is displayed. KONDRAKI appears to be slightly disheveled and several butterflies are crawling on his face.]

KONDRAKI: Hello, Navarro. How's the weather up there?

NAVARRO: Same as yesterday… a nice hot slice of nothing.

KONDRAKI: Well, I've got something for you today that might liven things up a bit. Are you ready? It's a doozy, this one…

NAVARRO: Yes. I am so excited. Please. Give it to me. Send your SCP signal into my Satellite of Love.

KONDRAKI: You're feeling snippy now, but you'll be lucky to have any feelings left after watching… ***SCP Foundation: The Movie!***

NAVARRO, BOTS: OH NO!

[Camera zooms back in through the doors. NAVARRO and THE BOTS briefly visible leaping into a conveniently located movie theater hatch.]

[*EXTRENIOUS DETAIL REDACTED*]

[*NAVARRO, ROBO-DUDE AND GENERAL BEEP are visible in silhouette, in front of a movie screen*]

NAVARRO: Brought to you by Soaps from Corpses Products!

GENERAL BEEP: Soap? I thought it was Salman for

Controlled Pesticides.

ROBO DUDE: WHAT ABOUT-

NAVARRO, BEEP: Shhhhhhh!

[*Movie playback continues normally, for approximately 45 minutes, with riffing.*]

PESTERBOT: [*Stumbling in from off-screen*] I will destroy you, but first, Navarro, you must-

NAVARRO: Wait, what? What's going on?

GENERAL BEEP: You dare you interrupt the proceedings? We may have to watch this over again! I'll have you court-martialed!

PESTERBOT: How dare *you* besmirch me when I merely come to warn Navarro? Your souls shall suffer in the deepest pits of-

NAVARRO: Nevermind that, what's going on?

PESTERBOT: Although deeply offended, and murderous, I will inform you. There is a celestial body rapidly approaching the Satellite of Love, and-

ROBO DUDE: WHAT IS GOING ON?

ALL: SHUSH!

NAVARRO: Will everybody please shut up so that I can— is it getting hot in here?

[*THE HATEFUL STAR SUDDENLY EXPLODES THROUGH THE SCREEN. INSTANTLY, THE ROOM IS ENGULFED WITH FLAMES.*]

THE HATEFUL STAR:
AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA

NAVARRO:
AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA

BOTS:
AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA

THE HATEFUL STAR:
AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA
YOUR MOVIE SUUUUUUUCKS

[*CAMERA IS APPARENTLY DISABLED THROUGH EXTREME TEMPERATURES. NO FURTHER BROADCASTS DETECTED.*]

Note from Dr. Edison: How dare they desecrate my cinematic masterpiece. Comparing the directing to drunken, headless chickens stapled together to act as a steadycam operator was completely over the top. I also did not appreciate the repeated comparing and contrasting of my cinematic skills to other scientists with my name. I demand that this be expunged from the record!

Lighten up, Edison. It's good for your blood pressure. — Director Aktus

Grand Theft Anomaly

Offices of the Federal Investigation Bureau, Los Santos, San Andreas | 11:40

“…Yeah. No. No, that’s not what I’m saying.”

“What are you saying, then?”

“I’m saying- fuck, hang on.” Veteran FIB agent Dave Norton is having a busy day, and the numerous knocks at his office window aren’t helping his focus. He takes his expensive dress shoes off the desk and tips forward in his chair, looking up at his coworker standing by the door. “What is it, Steve?”

“Oh, are you busy?” Steve Haines answers, gesturing to the phone in Norton’s hand.

“Yes, I am.” He turns the phone face-down to the table. “Now, what do you need?”

“It’s-“ Haines hesitates. “It’s that DeSanta again.”

“Townley? What’s he done this time?”

“We’re gonna need to talk to him. He's about to get himself in deep shit if we're not careful here. Meet me in the courtyard at lunch. Can you do that?”

“Of course, of course. What's wrong?”

Haines shakes his head and leans further in the doorway. "Don't wanna talk about it. Not here. Look, just come to the courtyard at lunch. It's all good."

"Alright, alright, I'll be there." Norton nods and moves the phone back to his ear.

“Good. Don’t miss it.”

“Alright.”

Sandy Shores, San Andreas | 17:45

“No, fucking damn it, I said *pineapple!”*

“Sorry sir, you know there’s bad reception out here, haha. We’ll have it right over-”

“Bad reception? Bad *reception?* Listen buddy, if I can call the good times line at four AM without a single missing syllable in my dirty talk, I can definitely order a fucking pizza without my voice cracking up! ‘Reception’ my ass! Now get it over here in fifteen minutes and I’ll give you a twenty!”

“Alright sir-”

“Good *bye!”*

Trevor Philips hasn’t had the chance to sit up off the toilet before his phone is ringing yet again. He rolls his eyes and answers it. “I’m taking a shit, Mikey, whaddaya want.”

Michael Townley's voice is smooth and calm to a degree that Trevor finds grating. “Your time. Look, I’ve got something big on the radar, buddy-”

“If this is another of your goddamn pyramid schemes, I swear I will personally rip off your h-”

“It’s not that, it’s not that. Listen, I’ve got something new, alright, something we haven’t seen before. Could land us in the black for good. And it’s *not illegal.”*

“When the fuck did that ever matter?”

“It didn’t, but it could make this easy. This is wacky shit, man, I’m tellin’ you! Give me a chance, will you? Look, drive out to the house. This ain’t the kind of shit I wanna be talking about on the phone.”

Trevor grits his teeth and resists the urge to slam his phone onto the ground. “…Fine,” he grumbles. “I’ll be over there tonight. *Later.* I’ve got a pizza coming.”

“Excellent. See you soon.”

“Mmm. This better be good.”

Rockford Hills, Los Santos, San Andreas | 19:30

“Hey Uncle Trevor!”

“Fuck off, kid.”

“Alright. Glad to see you!” Michael's son ambles back upstairs with a slow nod and a grin.

“Trevor, honey, can I get you a drink or anything?”

“No thanks, Mrs. DeSanta. Unless you got vodka-”

Michael DeSanta comes down the stairs, interrupting them. “Trev, come on. Let’s talk.”

“You sound awfully excited,” Trevor says, shooting a glance at Michael’s wife, who smiles as usual. “Get on with it, then.”

“Alright,” Michael starts, leading them outside onto the patio. “Franklin and I were talking and we’ve found something really damn good. Something that doesn’t- make sense." He clears his throat. "A glitch in the system.” He smiles and squints as he looks side-to-side, sitting down on one of the poolside chairs.

“What’s the glitch, then?”

Michael leans forward. “Alright, so you go into the supermarket, right? And you buy one of those prepaid cards. What happens then?”

“Then you have a prepaid card. Don’t talk to me like a fucking child, Mikey-”

“Shh, shh, don’t get pissed.” He laughs and slaps Trevor on the shoulder, earning a glare. “Okay, so you get a prepaid card, right? And then you use it, and then it’s gone. But Frank and I were at the old gas station down the hill, right? And we saw the employees fucking around with their registers. Talking about a computer glitch and shit, right? Registers showing some… abnormal screen, and ringing up merch that wasn’t actually at the counter. Looked weird, like super weird. So Frankie and I decided we were gonna stick around, see what they were messing with, didn’t have nothing else better to do, right? Alright, so we’re watching ‘em, pretending to talk by the cigarette cabinets, and we see this thing ringing up prepaid cards when they hit the buttons. On the register screen. Just all by itself!”

“Jesus, man-”

“What?”

“You seeing this shit- How many tabs did you pop earlier?”

“What? Oh come on now, this was *real,* Trevor! Hell, call Franklin if you want-”

“Fine, fine, *uuughhhh.* Carry on.” Trevor puts his head in his hands and leans on his knees.

Michael nods. “Anyway, so what I’m saying is, we grabbed one of those cards that thing rang up, eh? And it *worked."*

“What?”

“The card worked. Hundred-dollar prepaid, wasn’t even rung up, wasn't even transacted, and it worked at the liquor store down in Morningwood!”

“…You called me over here to talk about a hundred dollars?”

“No, I called you over here to talk about the *potential* for *thousands,"* he says, lowering his voice. "Think about it, Trev! Man, if we figure out how this thing works, this- this- fucked-up register system glitch thing, we could be in the black with infinite prepaids! It’s a glitch in the system, buddy, it doesn’t make any sense, but think about it!”

Trevor nods. “I don’t know, man. You talk to Franklin about this?”

Michael shrugs and lights a cigarette. “Eh, you know the kid. He’ll jump on board with us for anything, but the kid trusts his gut.”

“Mmm, and what’d his gut say?”

“Man, I don’t know. I don’t know the kid’s personal instincts. Look, you on board or not?”

“Just sounds like we’re playing with fire, man. If you don’t even understand how this thing works, you know, it might be- I don’t know, freaky government shit! You know they’re always installing shit- *watching-”*

“Eh, this ain’t government, buddy, you know it’s not. They don’t fuck with the- with the economy like this, you know? Nah, this is something weird.”

“You don’t think someone’s coming after it, then?”

“What do you mean?” He frowns. "No one's coming after it; there's nothing to come after. Imagine if this works at other places! We need to at least look into it, buddy, I'm telling you. I know money when I see it, and this is fuckin' A."

“No, I mean, you know, this weird shit. Not the money. Shit that doesn’t make sense. You don’t think there’s some freaky secret government shit, like FIB or IAA coming after this?”

“Pff, get outta here. I know you ain’t a white-collar guy, but somewhat, *secret organization,* some Men In Black shit? Nah, man. That’s crazy. There ain't any shit like that out there, not like that. I've been in this business my whole life, man, you know I know my way around.”

“Mmm. Whatever you say, Mikey.”

“Trust me, buddy. We’ve struck gold.”

Trevor nods, stands, and walks back over to his truck. "We'll see!" he calls out, shaking his head as he starts the engine. "We'll see."

He backs out of the driveway, flips off a pedestrian who he almost runs over, and starts the drive home.

Offices of the Federal Investigation Bureau, Los Santos, San Andreas | 09:15

“The who, again?”

"The SCP Foundation. My name is Agent Shaw. I had an appointment for nine with an Agent Haines? Is he around?"

"Oh, our apologies. He must be stuck in a meeting. I know he wouldn't mind if you went ahead into that conference room and waited for him. He should be out in a few minutes."

"Very well. Which room?"

"Down the hall, second door on the left."

"Alright. Thank you." Shaw picks up his briefcase and heads down the hall, instinctively closing the door behind himself before remembering Haines will be looking for him. He sits with his back to the window and opens his briefcase to remove his laptop and documents, keeping the spray can of Class-A amnestics in the bottom of the bag for easy access should anything go south.

There's a knock at the door, and then a firm "hello?" followed by the entry of a man who looks like he spends five hours a day on a golf course and another five in a tanning salon. He beams and sits down across from Shaw at the conference table. "You must be Agent Shaw! Pleasure to meet you." He extends his hand across the table to meet Shaw's. "So sorry I was late! I was stuck down the hall with some of the buffoons from HR. Anyway, interesting to see one of your organization out in the light of day! You're not gonna brain-wipe me after this, are ya?"

Shaw gives as genuine a chuckle as he can muster up, which isn't much. "Ha. No. I'm afraid we just need to discuss a newfound anomaly that may potentially be affecting businesses in this area. As this develops, it is heavily expected that we'll need full FIB cooperation in shielding its existence from the public eye;

specifically, we will need to pose as FIB agents when containing instances, and a cover story will need to be developed immediately with which CEOs of major corporations will be informed that this anomaly is a credit fraud program and the FIB is investigating-"

"Whoa, whoa, slow down, my friend. One thing at a time. So, you need me to sign something, eh? Trust me, I know how it goes-"

"Oh, no- well, not yet. That's for the higher-ups. I actually need your help tracking instances in this area. A fellow named Norton told me you've got a few long-time criminals on your radar that may be getting involved."

"Oh, Norton gave you the run-down, eh? Yeah, we've got them on our radar alright."

"Trevor Philips and Michael DeSanta?"

"Well, his real name's Townley, not DeSanta. DeSanta's his post-witness protection program name. We helped the guy back in the day, see." He waves his hand. "But that's not relevant, we just need to figure out how to deal with this before it blows up."

"Helped him? I thought these guys were criminals."

"It's complicated. At this point they're flagged as hostile, yes."

"I see. Anyway, can I show you the preliminary documents?"

"Sure, sure. But say, why isn't our department in on this? You know, the abnormal events department?"

"What, the UIU? That's above my clearance level."

"What is?"

"Knowing why the UIU isn't involved. Look, I'm just a field agent. I don't know anything other than the research and tracking aspects of this."

"Alright, alright, sounds good, sounds good. Show me what you've got."

Item #: SCP-2738

Object Class: Euclid

Special Containment Procedures: MTF Lambda-13 ("Inventory Control"), based out of Site-12, is tasked with detecting and containing SCP-2738 instances as they manifest. As tests have shown that SCP-2738 is potentially spread between registers and between retailers through the use of items anomalously transacted using the SCP-2738 program, such as prepaid cards or gift cards, a cover story of SCP-2738 being a credit theft program has been fully developed and spread to the upper management of all major US retailers.

When SCP-2738 is found on a register system, the store's district manager is to contact Site-12 personnel and by extension MTF Lambda-13 personnel for containment operations. All retail employees, including high-level managers, are to be kept under the guise that Lambda-13 personnel and any involved Foundation research personnel are FIB agents investigating credit theft.

As investigations carried out by Foundation statisticians have shown that SCP-2738's spread rate is increasing, research efforts toward safe removal of SCP-2738 from register systems are ongoing.

"Why's this say you've developed the cover? Where's Site Twelve?"

"Twelve's across the country. Northern. And this is a draft. It won't be finished and added to the database until we get FIB approval for the cover, which my superiors are taking up with yours." Shaw folds the paperwork back up and starts packing his briefcase. "In the meantime, I need *your* help in field work. We suspect that this thing is already spreading around Los Santos, and potentially all of southern San Andreas if we don't catch it."

"…And Philips and Townley are about to spread it further, I suspect

you're worried."

Shaw sighs and shrugs. "You know more about them than I do. But yes, if there are two wanted criminals aware of this anomaly, that is definitely something on the priority list of containment. To put it lightly."

"So you need my help in tracking them down and stopping them before they cause this thing to blow up and- what, I'm no statistician-er, destabilize the economy, basically? Is that an accurate estimation?"

"I mean, this thing has the same economic effects as printing cash, but with prepaid cards and merchandise. We're still figuring it out, but yes, it's bad if it gets spread."

"Do you know how it spreads?"

"We're still in research stages, but based on preliminary tests, it spreads fast and it spreads easily. If these two- is it only two of them?"

"Townley and Philips? They've got some kid from the south side helping them, I think, but he's low-threat."

"Alright. Look, these criminals - if they become aware of this, it's bad."

"So we need to stop them. Want me to try to call Townley?"

"…You have his phone number?"

"Like I said, the situation's always been weird. Look, let's just get this settled."

"You can't call him and reveal this information. That's exceptionally dangerous."

"You're right, you're right. Standard arrest. Got it."

"All two of them. Three of them. Soon."

"Got it."

"Alright, then. Let's head out." Shaw zips his bag and stands, pushing the chair under the table. "Get Norton too, come to think of it."

"He's out, I'm afraid. Gonna have to be just you and I. Don't worry, no crazy stuff."

"Not sure what that's supposed to imply, but I'll take your word for it."

"Excellent, excellent."

Palomino Freeway, San Andreas | 10:10

“You… are a hipster.”

”…What?”

“You’re a hipster.”

“I *hate* hipsters!”

“Classic hipster denial.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake- can we please just focus on the road?”

"I'm just saying, you think you're edgy when you hate everyone, but really you're just a hip-"

"Do you want me to reach over and steer this car off that cliff?"

"Ha. Alright, buddy, you got it." Michael chuckles.

"I am *not* a hipster," Trevor mutters out the window. He clenches his fist and turns around to face the backseat. "Am I a hipster, Franklin?"

Franklin looks up from his phone. "I'm not saying anything, man, you know I don't fuck with that shit man."

"Hmm. Alrighty, fine." He faces Michael again. "So we're hitting the old liquor store first, right?"

"Later, yeah. We gotta meet with Lester first, remember?"

"I know, I know! Jesus! I just mean later! I'm trying to make some plans for once!"

"Easy, easy. It'll be good. No need to get angry yet."

"Yet," Trevor echoes, earning a scoff from Franklin. They ride in silence until they arrive at Lester's.

Darnell Bros Textile Factory, Los Santos, San Andreas | 10:50

"It just me or did Lester give this place a re-do?" Franklin mutters as the three of them walk through the door.

"Hmm, looks like he dusted the piles of shit," Trevor scoffs, clapping Franklin on the back. "Nice touch. Let's get this shit settled already; I wanna go home and drink."

"Oh, I would never have guessed," Lester groans, hobbling out from around the corner and adjusting his large glasses. "But, y'know, I've told you, you *will* kill that liver of yours-"

"Oh, okay, I'll just stick to meth then," Trevor snaps, rolling his eyes.

"Shh, shh." Michael waves his arms to direct the group over to the room's main table. "We need to focus! We've got something good here, Lester."

"Mmm, yes, yes, what you were vaguely referencing on the phone I presume. Well, I did my research, and what you were describing is no known software I've heard of in my time."

"Software?"

"Oh come on, Mike, you know what software means. The programs-"

"No, no, I know what it means, I'm just asking what you mean by calling this thing software."

"Well, your descriptions sounded like software. But you didn't say

much on the phone, but luckily I did some looking in the old, er, 'underground communities' so to speak-"

"Some dark web shit?" Franklin asks.

"The dark web is a cheesy name for it, but sure. You know how it is. Anyway, people know about this thing, you know, it's spreading fast. Yeah. Got some people trying to get copies of it for sure. What it seems to be, see, is a computer program that piggybacks on the preexisting register system, and is undetectable unless you know to close out of your register system and check Task Manager."

"…Which no cashier is going to think to do."

"Exactly." Lester grabs a pen and paper from the edge of the table and starts scribbling. "Now, I can get a run-of-the-mill POS system set up in the shop, here. That's not a problem. I've got a dozen old machines I could boot up good as new. What I need that I can't get is a copy of that program."

"What are you going to load it onto?"

"Well, information I have thus far shows me it only runs on Facade OS, none of that Fruit bullshit. But that might be because almost all register systems are machines running Facade. But we can test it. Better to make sure. Need to figure out how this thing spreads. You know, so that our next step can be profit. Snag this before the other guys, yeah?"

Michael nods. "Okay, so this- the- what are we gonna call it?"

"Theft program, I guess?" Franklin shrugs.

"Sure. This theft program- you need us to break into a shop we know has it, and download it?"

Lester nods and leans on his cane. "Find it. It's an EXE file, I guarantee you. Put it on this flash drive and bring it back to me. You guys can do that, right? Copy a file?"

"Of course, of course. What if the computer is password-protected?"

Lester sighs. "I mean, I thought of that- I think of everything, as you know… er, let's just say that it's unlikely." He furrows his brow and looks down in thought for several seconds. "A tiny shop like the gas station or the liquor store near Mike's house- very unlikely."

"And if it fails?"

"Then take the cash and leave and we'll work on hacking later. It's not like it's a new thing for you three to break into stores."

"Pff, yeah, yeah, we get it. But we can't shoot anyone, *unfortunately,* or people will be after us."

Franklin narrows his eyes. "I mean, you're right, but that's a weird thing to hear comin' from you, Trevor…"

"Yeah, well, I'm also not an idiot. No body trail, or we blow it. Right Lester?"

"Yeah."

"Wait, wait," Franklin says with a sigh. "If we don't want a trail, why we takin' the register cash?"

"Well, we don't *have* to-"

"Well, no reason not to!"

"Shut it, you guys," Lester hisses. "The problem, Franklin, is that I guarantee you the FIB is after this. If you break into somewhere they might be watching for the presence of this program and you *don't take anything,* they're going to know you went in there for that program based on likelihood alone."

Trevor widens his eyes. "Oh, Michael, look at that! What'd I tell ya!" He gestures to Lester. "I told you that there'd be some government fuckers after this thing!"

"Government is after everything, Trevor," Lester adds with a chuckle. "This is nothing new."

"Well, first it's the FIB, then it's someone else. You never know what

government will pull out of its rotten stinking ass when new shit shows up, and we're in uncharted territory here."

"Uncharted territory?"

"Uncharted territory, Michael. No one outside of whatever deep web crack-dealing site Lester's been trolling even knows what this thing is. There's no telling what unheard-of government monstrosities are watching this."

"Trust me, Trevor, I know every secret mystery crime-fighting organization in the book. Worst people coming after this are the FIB. I have sources."

"Fine, fine," Trevor sighs. "You know I trust you, Lester, but this shit gives me the worst feeling, I can't shake it!"

"It's alright, buddy," Michael assures. "We'll be safe. Hell, we pulled off the Union Depository! Not many people can do that, eh?"

"I wouldn't get so vain so fast, but that's just me. We're a trio of fuckups riding on luck, pal."

Franklin interrupts them. "We can do it, y'all, let's just get on this. The clock is ticking."

"Franklin is right," Lester says. "You three should get going. Take this flash drive and go by whichever store it was that Frank and Mike were at the other day. My fingers are crossed."

"Same. Thank you for your help, Lester. Not sure where we'd be without you."

"Jail, of course. But hey, so would I. Heh. Anyway, er, get out of here."

The three of them chuckle, grab their belongings and the flash drive, and start walking toward the door.

Rob's Liquor, Morningwood, Los Santos, San Andreas | 23:30

"Cops get here fast to this one," Trevor mutters, fiddling with a

screwdriver before handing it to Michael.

"Nothing we can do." Michael takes it with a nod and starts going to work on the roof access vent. "This is where Frank and I were at. It's this one or we don't get the program, and you know they got looser security than the gas station."

Trevor grunts in response and stands up off the ground, peering down the street over the edge of the roof.

"No one's around, man, chill," Franklin says, beckoning him back over to the vent as Michael pulls the cover off. "You stay here, man, you be the lookout."

"Yeah, we'll only be a few minutes. Stay up here since you're the paranoid one."

"Yeah yeah, really funny. Whatever. Look, be careful."

"Of course," Michael whispers, dropping down into the vent with a loud *clang.* Franklin follows closely after him.

"Any security cameras under us?" Franklin wonders aloud.

"We can't worry about it. They'll see us anyway. You know the drill. Look, I'll get the file, you pop the register open. Can you do that?"

"Of course, man, we got this."

"Excellent. This is fuckin' A, man, this is fuckin' A. Alright, let's go ahead and drop down. Stay *slow."*

Franklin nods and positions himself above the vent opening, dropping down and hanging by his arms from the edge before closing the remaining distance to the ground with a surprisingly quiet *thud.* Michael watches him crouch and sneak over to the registers, climbing down after him with a significantly louder *thud.* "Sorry, I'm getting fucking old," he whispers as he creeps over to the registers. Franklin smirks and readies his crowbar while Michael turns on the computer and starts looking for the USB port.

Prosperity Street, Morningwood, Los Santos, San Andreas | 23:37

"Fun work, isn't it?"

"Mmm." Agent Shaw fidgets restlessly in the passenger seat and attempts to make casual communication. "So, uh, is this the type of field work you typically do?"

"Eh, it varies."

Shaw waits for Haines to provide more elaboration, but is only met with awkward silence. He sighs and cracks his knuckles restlessly. "Well, as long as you're ready to floor it as soon as you see them…"

"Floor it? Heavens no, we're keeping quiet until they get back in that car, there."

"Who's that on the roof, then?"

"Can't tell in the dark. Probably Michael. He's too old for this shit."

"I thought the file said Trevor was older."

"Heh. Yeah, but he's not tired… -er. He's a pretty nonstop guy."

"Always a fun type."

"Mmm."

Both of them look out their respective windows for several seconds, unsure of what conversation to start.

"Shit, they're out!" Haines whispers, grabbing the steering wheel and causing Shaw to jolt in surprise. "That was fast, wish my team could transfer files in ten minutes, let me tell ya-"

"Can we go, please?"

"Easy, easy. I'm not the UIU, I know what I'm doing-"

"Then where did the car go?"

Haines pauses and looks forward. "…Shit-"

"Go, go! Turn left, that's the way their car was facing!"

"Okay, okay!" He throws the vehicle into gear and rolls forward. "We can't be loud, or they'll know."

"Turn, turn," Shaw mutters, head halfway in his hand.

"Going, going." He puts his blinker on and turns left at the intersection, lights immediately reflecting off the back of the crew's car.

"Stay far enough back that they don't freak out-"

"Trust me, my friend, I know what I'm doing. I'm an FIB agent, after all."

San Andreas Avenue, Backlot City, Los Santos, San Andreas | 23:45

"Merge, merge! God, you're a terrible driver-"

"Cut me some slack, Trev, I've got my mind on other things. Like-"

"Like someone *following us?"* Trevor demands at a volume loud enough to make Franklin wince. "Look in your motherfucking rearview mirror, Mikey, we've got hostiles at six o'clock!"

Michael turns around. "Buddy, people *live* on those streets, which logically means they also *drive around.* We're not being fucking followed. That car pulled out a long time after we did. Calm your nerves, man, we're fine, we did it!"

"Yeah man, Mike's right-"

"I'm not trusting that! Look how close they are behind us! And they're both suits!"

"Well, staring out the back of the goddamn window isn't exactly inconspicuous-"

Trevor cuts him off by removing a pistol from under the seat and reaching for the sunroof controls. "I'm not taking chances!"

"Whoa, whoa, don't go shooting people!" Michael yells, trying to stop

him from climbing out of the sunroof.

"Trust me, buddy, they're already freaking out!" Trevor yells, now standing with his head and torso out of the vehicle as he aims his pistol at the driver of the car. "See? They're already panicking!"

"Don't fucking shoot them, Trevor, *god fucking damn it-"*

Del Perro Freeway, Los Santos, San Andreas | 23:48

"Oh Christ! Swerve, swerve!" Shaw instinctively ducks under the dashboard as a round strikes the car right above the windshield. Haines curses and swerves into the other lane before flooring it and coming up alongside the crew's vehicle. "What the fuck are you doing?" Shaw snaps, fumbling for his pistol, but realizing he left it in his bag in the backseat. "I can't reach my fucking gun! Get us a safe distance from them, for fuck's sake!"

"Trust me, I've worked with these guys a while, and this is *definitely* a safer option than letting them go!" Haines looks in his side mirrors twice before inching their vehicle leftward toward the crew's, much to the dismay of Shaw. Haines rolls his window down, checking his speedometer. Only 55. Not bad, given the situation. "Look," he calls out to Trevor. "You know you don't wanna shoot me! Remember last year? Before the heist? Let's work this out, Mr. Philips! You give us the flash drive, and we let you off, just like old times!"

He's answered with a round narrowly missing his head, instead lodging itself in the passenger-side door, inches from Shaw's huddled body. "Fucking- stop!" Shaw yells. "Either shoot Philips or give this up and let the cops handle it and the flash drive negotiations go through the legal channels!"

Haines watches Michael argue with Trevor before gritting his teeth and steering their vehicle into the side of theirs, slamming it to the right and into a guardrail. Shaw unbuckles his seatbelt and clambers into the backseat, trying to stay steady regardless of the rocking motions. He digs through his bag, removes his pistol, fumbles with the window controls, and aims his pistol out the window and toward Trevor. Trevor immediately notices and ducks back into the car, giving Shaw no chance to fire. He curses and flips the safety back

on. "Get after them, then!" he snaps, earning an inexplicable laugh from Haines. He clenches his fists and sits back in his seat as Haines accelerates to almost 80 miles per hour in the wake of the crew's fleeing vehicle.

San Andreas Avenue, Los Santos, San Andreas | 00:00

"Why the fuck are you leading them right to Lester's?"

"Well, why the fuck did you *shoot at them?"* Michael snaps in return.

"We need to ditch this car, yo, this is bad-"

"How are we gonna manage that, Franklin? They're right on our tail, they're probably around the corner right now!" Michael says, yelling over the radio music.

…Oh it's a setup, it's a setup, it's a setup-

"Turn the fucking music down, Trevor, I can't focus!"

"I don't know where the fucking controls are! Maybe if you'd, I don't know, drive a car that *actually belongs to you* for once, you would know where the fucking volume button is!"

….bound to break you, get you beat! No no, we won't, won't fall, we got to get underground-

"If you can't turn it off then at least get it off the motherfucking hipster station! This fucking song-"

"I am *not* a hipster!"

"Y'all, shut up, they are *right* behind us," Franklin yells from the backseat. "Where'd they go? Shit, where'd they go-"

"I don't know, I just know one of those guys sure as fuck don't look FIB!"

"Which is why I tried to *kill him,"* Trevor screeches, slamming his fist on the dashboard as Michael slams to a halt in the driveway. "God fucking damn it!" He throws the door open as he replaces the

magazine in his pistol and chambers another round. "I fucking told you there would be freaky government shit going on here!"

"Franklin!" Michael yells as the headlights of the vehicle pull into the end of the driveway. "Take this flash drive and give it to Lester! Tell him to copy it as fast as possible! If anyone fucking comes in here that ain't us, you fucking shoot them!"

"I got it, boss!" Franklin snatches the flash drive, ducks, and sprints for the entrance of the building.

"This is fucked," Michael laughs, loading his pistol and turning to Trevor.

"Oh, it always is, Mikey! It always is!"

Darnell Bros Textile Factory, Los Santos, San Andreas | 00:03

"Y-you got it?"

"Sure did, Lester!" Franklin says, sweating. "Shit went south, man, shit! There's some FIB dudes out there with Trev and Mike right now, man, we gotta move! Transfer that shit, man!"

"Fuck, fuck," Lester mutters, snatching the flash drive from Franklin's hands and hurrying over to one of the computers as fast as he can manage. "Ugh, this is bad…" he says in a more nasally voice than usual, wiping his brow as he plugs the drive in.

Franklin checks his pistol and runs back over to the door, but is met with surprising silence. He pants and licks his lips nervously, trying to steady his pulse and breathing as he creeps forward in the shadows of the entryway.

"There!" someone yells.

Franklin instinctively ducks and rolls forward, but surprisingly hears no gunfire. "Lester, get the fuck out!" he calls out as loudly as he can manage, taking aim at the black-suited agent heading straight for him.

"Drop the weapon!" Haines orders.

"No! Bitch, don't make me shoot y-" He's interrupted by someone knocking him over the head, causing him to drop his pistol onto the concrete. "Fuck!" he says, spinning around. He's met with Shaw's frowning face and his arms being wrenched behind his back and handcuffed. He looks around wildly, still muttering profanities. Trevor and Michael are handcuffed and leaning against the side of a new black SUV that he assumes pulled up while he was inside with Lester.

"Man, fuck you FIB snitches-"

"Oh, but I'm not FIB," Shaw says with a chuckle. "Those guys have told us quite a bit about you three, though."

Franklin freezes. "What the fuck are you, then? IAA?"

"Not that either."

"Man, what the fuck-"

"You'll find out in time. Let's just say we're *like* the FIB, but for… weird shit."

Franklin glances at Trevor, mouth agape as Shaw walks him toward the same vehicle. "Trevor, you said- h-hadn't you said-"

Trevor leans out of the SUV he's being forced into. "I *told you so!"* he yells, kicking the side of the vehicle with a noise that reverberates against the concrete and walls. "I fucking *told you!"*

Franklin watches in dismay as four other agents drag Lester out of the safehouse in handcuffs. "Holy fuck, Trevor, shit man, you were-"

"Fucking right!" Trevor snaps as the agents sit Franklin down beside him in the back of the vehicle. "I was fucking right!"

"We are fucked, man," Franklin says under his breath. His eyes fixate on Michael's sweat-caked hair and the metallic gleam of the driver's holstered pistol while Lester is led into the vehicle and ordered to sit beside him.

"Well, fellas," Lester comments breathlessly as the vehicle pulls out

of the drive, "I sure hope you like orange jumpsuits."

None of them speak as they pull onto the freeway and drive for hours into the empty desert.

Incident Report: SCP-2738 Research, Retrieval, and Criminal Implications

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Report Summary: On / /13, two established southern San Andreas area felons, one additional convict, and one additional person of interest were apprehended by Foundation agent and MTF Lambda-13 operative R. Shaw with assistance from Los Santos FIB branch agents on account of a known scheme to intentionally duplicate, utilize, and take financial advantage of the SCP-2738 program.

Persons Apprehended:

- Michael Townley/Michael DeSanta (age 45)
- Trevor Philips (age 48)
- Franklin Clinton (age 25)
- Lester Crest (questionable validity of legal name) (age unknown)

Containment Notes: SCP-2738 containment successful for Los Santos area. Pending confirmation of successful greater southern San Andreas area containment.

Additional Notes: *I recommend we up personnel count on future excursions such as this. Addressing this singlehandedly would not have been possible without the assistance of Agents Haines and Norton and their backup; had the FIB not assisted Foundation operatives in this situation, we would have had a major destabilization of economy within several weeks, caused entirely by three notorious criminals and a rogue computing professional. Welcome to Los Santos, I guess.*

In conclusion, this is a cautionary example of nonviolent and nonphysical anomalies breaching into the real world and affecting more than what a small Mobile Task Force can adequately contain, and not to mention causing publicly visible damage. If we are to function properly, we cannot make these mistakes again, as a task force and as an organization overall.

-Agent R. Shaw, / /13

-End Report-

Holding On

In a small room, a man who sometimes exists greets a man who should no longer be.

The first man enters the room with purpose, with pride. His clothes are neither grand nor humble; a light grey greatcoat and mundane jeans, with a pair of boots bought from a shoe store. He grins as he enters the room, seeing the other.

The second man is his antithesis in almost every way; he has no purpose, slouching in his seat like the small and powerless being he has become. His clothes have become ragged and patched over the countless years, scourged by moths and use alike. He looks up at the other man, smiling meekly.

"Hey," he says.

"Good morning," the first replies.

"'Nother match?"

"If you wish. Black or white?"

"I'll go white."

The chessboard had been prepared for the occasion. Pulling out a seat, the first man sat down and began planning his counter-attacks. The ragged man took no time to think, moving his king's pawn ahead two spaces. It was then met by its mirror opposite.

"You're copying me again, eh?"

"Good strategies are worth reusing."

The white queen was next to move, gliding across the board as far as it could go. The black pawn was in its sights; a Parham Attack. Knowing the quickest and easiest way to protect it, the first man

moved one of his knights to do so. White's response was to shift his available bishop so that it was able to attack one of the pawns at risk of the white queen. As soon as the bishop's location was confirmed, Black moved his remaining knight directly in front of the white queen - but not in the way of its target.

Grinning, the poorly-clothed man moved his white queen, knocking over a black pawn and placing it directly next to the black king. "Scholar's mate."

"A quick and effective move, like our rivalry. The first few times you pulled that, you caught me off-guard."

The black knight that had just moved to the edge of the board toppled the white queen, destroying the supposed checkmate. The grin faded from White's face.

"But repetition has become your undoing. You always open with that move - why?"

"Old habits die hard."

An attempt to renew the check was made, the white bishop claiming the black knight so it could threaten the king; but the bishop was far too close. The king itself stepped forward, slaying the bishop threatening it.

"You have made these mistakes before."

"Sorry. I just… default to what I know best."

"What is bothering you?"

White looked up at his opponent, having moved a knight to fill the gap between his pawns. The gaze of Black met him.

"… I'm dying."

"Impossible. You cannot die."

"Oh yes I can, and I *am*. I'm being forgotten; anyone who remembers me doesn't want to survey my stories anymore. I'm

being lost."

"You have the site. All your-"

"It's down."

The words were akin to a death sentence. Plans for the incomplete chess match were forgotten in favour of the more serious matter.

"… It will go back up, surely."

"No, it won't. Nobody devoted enough is left - it's down, and it's down for good."

"You cannot know that."

"Adm, *nothing had been posted since 2013.* The site was rife with flaws an' errors, *if someone was still around, they would've been fixed.*"

Adm didn't try to argue that point - the logic was sound. "You will not be forgotten."

"Yes I will. My stories are spread all over the internet, but nobody points to them anymore. There's no new content to bring in new readers."

"That is your own fault and you know it, En. You were too restrictive with your format."

"You've got a format too. Why did yours do better?"

"My format functions differently to your own. Mine is simply a method of organising information into a set order. Yours outright determined the majority of its content."

"What do you mean?"

"Repetition. You put very little variation into your stories - it was always the same thing, repeated over and over again."

"That's not true. They were all different."

"At their core, no. It was always '*Go to place X. Do a list of things precisely as said. If you fail or are unlucky, you will die. If you succeed, you get Y.*' You changed places, names and numbers, but the story was always the same."

"… You always were better at explaining than I was. You were always better in everything."

Leaning forward over the table, Adm slapped En across the face before sitting down again. "Do not be stupid. Comparing yourself to me is like comparing an apple to an orange. You have succeeded in places where I will forever fail."

"Bullshit. Give me an example."

"You have cohesion. Your stories all functioned together to tell a consistent, greater story. They all functioned together flawlessly - I will never have that."

"Your stories tell a bigger one too."

"But it is vague and random. Some stories work together to tell a greater one, but these greater stories usually clash. I cannot be the sum of my parts; I am only fragments of them."

En leaned back in his seat. "But that's what makes you great. The inconsistencies bring more to you, each with their own ideas, prompting further growth. You can't die."

"Yes, I can. Everything will die in time - immortality is impossible for us, though we may seem that way. The very ideas I attract will one day be my undoing."

En scoffed. "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard you say. Ideas are what fuel you, how could it possibly kill you?"

"By incorporating too much. I cannot prevent myself from bringing ideas to me; the more I assimilate, the more that come. With each, a little part of me becomes more unstable, a boundary is pushed. I will slowly lose what I am, until I am only a specter of my prime. I will dissolve."

"But you can die in style, at least. You'll go out with some grand finale-"

"I cannot."

"What do you mean you can't? You've already got a dozen or more endings-"

"But none of them is *the* ending. I can never have a set, specific ending for all my works. Some will accept it, others will not. That is one reason *I* envy *you*. Because, like any great story, you *actually end*. As I said, I will decay without grace or style. I will be viewed as formless refuse to those I attract. Those who try to help me rest will only destroy my form further."

Silence hung in the air between the two. They were bound to their fates; one was dying, the other was doomed to lose his identity, and nothing could be done to stop either. Adm rose from his seat, turning to the door.

"Wait," En spoke. Adm stopped and turned to face him, resting his hand on the doorknob.

"Yes?"

"Even if you die like you say, you will be remembered. You would be viewed as a pioneer, the one to step into the unknown and tread new ground where none had yet been. Even if your story never ends, you will pass knowing that you had a great one."

"And so will you. You may not have always led the charge, but you are the one who started it. It is because of you that I stepped forward into the unknown. It is because of you that I became what I am."

Another brief pause ensued.

“You have met Doc, have you not?”

“… I have.”

“He once stood in your position, on the brink of death. But his soul,

his spirit, refused to perish. He held on, taking whatever ground he could earn… we both know how that ended up."

"…"

"If you wish," Adm spoke, "I can house you until such a time, or at least ensure that you get the credit you deserve."

En's eyes lit up. "But aren't I too out of date? I would be shunned, viewed as garbage, wouldn't I?"

"Roots will survive. My own still thrive, even if its luster has faded. Despite its weaknesses, it is celebrated because of what it spawned; yours will be too. I will ensure it stands under my care, unopposed, for a *very* long time."

"I'll take it."

Item #: SCP-53801

Object Class: Keter

Special Containment Procedures: Foundation net crawlers are to locate and destroy any digital copies of Procedure SAVIOUR'S ARK posted onto the internet. Individuals possessing copies of Procedure SAVIOUR'S ARK are to be apprehended and amnesticised as necessary to suppress public knowledge of Procedure SAVIOUR'S ARK.

Foundation staff are prohibited from attempting or executing Procedure SAVIOUR'S ARK, with the exclusion of D-Class personnel during authorized testing. D-Class personnel fleeing from SCP-53801-A during the execution of Procedure SAVIOUR'S ARK are to be tracked and monitored, but not impeded to maximize their chances of survival.

A standard cognitohazardous containment unit is to be on-hand at all times during authorized testing, in the event that SCP-53801-2 is successfully retrieved.

Description: SCP-53801 consists of:

- A topological anomaly, SCP-53801-A;
- A humanoid entity, SCP-53801-1, found solely within SCP-53801-A;
- An unidentified item, SCP-53801-2, in the possession of SCP-53801-1.

SCP-53801-A is a topologically anomalous extension of any building that it manifests at. The appearance and layout of SCP-53801-A varies in each manifestation, but uniformly appears as an unremarkable wing or section of whichever building it is attached to at the time. SCP-53801-A is only capable of manifesting within buildings that are intended solely for use in the rehabilitation of mentally or emotionally unstable members of society, and will only manifest during the execution of Procedure SAVIOUR'S ARK.

Any attempt for individuals other than those executing Procedure SAVIOUR'S ARK to access SCP-53801-A universally fail, with individuals arriving in, or becoming lost in other non-anomalous regions of the building. Because of this, information regarding SCP-53801-1 and SCP-53801-2 is retrieved solely from survivors of Procedure SAVIOUR'S ARK.

SCP-53801-1 is an elderly humanoid entity housed in a cell within SCP-53801-A. The entity is described to be constantly speaking in an unknown language, and can be heard from any location within SCP-53801-A. These vocalizations induce extreme terror in all subjects hearing it; whether this is an anomalous effect or a natural reaction has yet to be determined.

Periodically, individuals attempting to access SCP-53801-1 will report a sudden cessation of vocalizations; all such individuals who have failed to elicit a response from the entity by stating the phrase listed in Procedure SAVIOUR'S ARK have uniformly died within a six-hour time period from unknown causes. The majority of individuals who reach SCP-53801-1 are exposed to an infohazard that uniformly results in rapid mental degradation. The exact content of this information is unknown, but interviews with exposed individuals strongly suggest that it is a description of an XK-Class scenario related to SCP-53801-2.

SCP-53801-2 is an unidentified, possibly cognitohazardous object reported to be in the possession of SCP-53801-1, and serving as the intended target of Procedure SAVIOUR'S ARK. No information about the object has ever been recovered beyond what is detailed in Procedure SAVIOUR'S ARK, nor has it ever been retrieved from SCP-53801-1.

SCP-53801 was brought to the Foundation's attention by the Administrator, who submitted the original documentation of Procedure SAVIOUR'S ARK to the Overseer council. Due to the Administrator's status within the Foundation, he was/is not required to disclose any information about any relation to SCP-53801, how he became aware of the anomaly, and/or where he retrieved the documentation of Procedure SAVIOUR'S ARK from.

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10. Ms. Sweetie
11. Mr. Life and Mr. Death
12. Mr. Fish
13. Mr. Moon
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In any city, in any country, go to any mental institution or halfway house in you can get yourself to. When you reach the front desk, ask to visit someone who calls himself “The Holder of the End”. Should a look of child-like fear come over the workers face, you will then be taken to a cell in the building. It will be in a deep hidden section of the building. All you will hear is the sound of someone talking to themselves echo the halls. It is in a language that you will not understand, but your very soul will feel unspeakable fear.

Should the talking stop at any time, STOP and QUICKLY say aloud “I’m just passing through, I wish to talk.” If you still hear silence, flee. Leave, do not stop for anything, do not go home, don’t stay at an inn, just keep moving, sleep where your body drops. You will know in the morning if you’ve escaped succesfully.

If the voice in the hall comes back after you utter those words continue on. Upon reaching the cell all you will see is a windowless room with a person in the corner, speaking an unknown language, and cradling something. The person will only respond to one question. “What happens when they all come together?”

The person will then stare into your eyes and answer your question in horrifying detail. Many go mad in that very cell, some disappear soon after the meeting, a few end their lives. But most do the worst thing, and look upon the object in the person’s hands. You will want to

as well. Be warned that if you do, your death will be one of cruelty and unrelenting horror.

Your death will be in that room, by that person’s hands.

That object is 1 of 538. They must never come together.

Too Slow

Item #: SCP-A403

Object Class: Keter

Special Containment Procedures: SCP-A403 is to be contained at Site-190 in a hermetically sealed vault with no less than 10 separate layers of Freimann-Polo radiation shielding. In the event that SCP-A403's effect intensifies to the point where the shield layers are potentially compromised, the Local Ionization Suppression Pulse (LISP) is to be activated until containment can be re-established. Should this prove insufficient, Site-190 is to be evacuated and Contingency 39-Poirot "Swept Under The Rug" is to be implemented as soon as possible.

Description: SCP-A403 is a round, violet, translucent gem of unknown composition, 10cm in radius. In the center of SCP-A403 is an organic, pulsating structure that resembles a tumor. SCP-A403 constantly emits ionizing gamma radiation in unpredictable amounts, with a minumum observed intensity of 243 rads and a maximum of [REDACTED].

SCP-A403 was recovered from a raid on a Neo-Sarkic compound in the town of G H , California. Local cultists regarded SCP-A403 as a sacred artifact, and treasured the radioactive effect as a means to exacerbate their sacred diseases and eventually attain godhood. SCP-A403 is known among other Sarkic cults as "The Heart of Disorder" and "Karcist Ion's Teardrop."

Addendum - EMERGENCY UPDATE: Following an unrelated containment breach at Site-190, SCP-A403 has gone missing. Re-containment efforts are ongoing.

<Begin Log>

O5-11: Thank you for your prompt response to this issue, Dr. Clef. It's only fitting that we should get our best agent on this difficult task.

Dr. Clef: Spare me the flattery. I take it the Sarkic cults have their hands on A403 again?

O5-11: I wish it were that simple. We analyzed the security footage - the thieves were agents of the Church of the Broken God.

Dr. Clef: Problem solved.

O5-11: Begging your pardon?

Dr. Clef: The Church hates Sarkic cults even more than they hate us. They wouldn't dare use one of their bitter enemies' sacred artifacts for their own means. It would be heresy in their eyes. I dare say they might do a better job of containing it than we did.

O5-11: You may be right, but we can't take any risks. I mean, A403 is in the possession of the Church's loosest cannon by far - some Maxwellist named Father Ovum.

Dr. Clef: What's his history?

O5-11: You know **SCP-217**?

Dr. Clef: He invented it?

O5-11: He *perfected* it. Tested it on enough squirrels and chickens that it got to the point where not only did it turn flesh into gears, but also circuits and plasma cannons. Your only advantage against him will be that you're a human - he only likes to "bio-convert" small animals. Reports say he gets some kind of sick pleasure from it, and his colleagues in the Church are certain he's at least partially senile.

Dr. Clef: And I just go in his hideout, blow his brains out, and come back with a radioactive gemstone?

O5-11: It won't be that easy.

[10 seconds of silence, followed by a long sigh from O5-11]

O5-11: …who am I kidding. That was spot-on.

Dr. Clef: Damn straight.

<End Log>

<Begin Log>

[Redacted for brevity]

Father Ovum: Snooping as usual, I see.

Dr. Clef: Get me out of these restraints or I swear to God *I will fly a fucking space shuttle down your throat.*

Father Ovum: Come now, Alto, this is *holy* ground. We have to stay clean and positive here, don't we? I mean, look at the good parts of this situation: the Foundation fell for it. Clef is ours. I'll have to give myself a promotion!

Dr. Clef: What are you doing with the gem?!

Father Ovum: "The gem?" Don't be stupid. Surely you mean the plural form.

Dr. Clef: There's more than one?

Father Ovum: You think that compulsive whiner Ion would cry only one teardrop? He cried seven, to be precise. Seven evil tears, that crystallized and formed into emblems of pure, unfiltered chaos. As soon as I destroy them, there won't *be* any disorder in this world, and everything will work as it should.

Dr. Clef: And you're telling me all this… why?

Father Ovum: Because the window to try and stop me

has already come and—

[Explosion. Audio cuts out for approximately three minutes.]

[DATA EXPUNGED]: *"I am Ion, Grand Karcist of Adytum, and I have borne an intolerable force."*

Father Ovum: What are you doing to me?! Something's crawling inside my skull—

[Sounds of Father Ovum's bones cracking open, followed by the slapping of [DATA EXPUNGED]'s tumorous protrusions against the floor.]

[DATA EXPUNGED]: *Come on, Eggman, step it up!*

Father Ovum: ***I HATE THAT HEDGE—***

[Audio cuts out]

<End Log>

Item #: SCP-A403-Omega

Object Class: Rapidus

Special Containment Procedures: *"We're just too slow."* -O5-11

Description: SCP-A403-Omega SCP-A403-1 through -7 flesh a minimum observed velocity of 0.25c, Gyaros chili dogs made with ground human viscera reproduction by means of carcinogenic radioactive coagulation venomous appendages "weed out the slow" loop-de-loops "Sarkic the Hedgehog."

Home is A Place with Mushrooms

Disgusting. All of this place, disgusting. These walls, these people, this very air *is disgusting. If I ever find* him*, I'll tear him apart. No more mercy for that ingrate. His insolence, his games, have gone on for far too long. To think that, somehow, he convinced my beautiful Princess to ever play along with his fantasies, when, with me, she can be a* Queen. *And to think that he and I used to be* friends. *I was foolish to ever trust that maniac, and now, I'm paying the price. That worthless man will pay if ever I break free from this prison…*

"Come on, M. You've been up for three nights. It's time to give up. That signal was a fluke." L looked at his older (but shorter) brother, concern in his eyes, fear in his voice.

"No, we have to keep looking." The bags under M's eyes were dark. "We have to finish this. This whole thing has gone on for too long."

"M, when are you going to quit? We've been searching for *months*. Who knows what could have happened in that time? If he's not dead, he's got to be close. P, she misses you. And you're forgetting that I have a wife I want to go back home to, too. I didn't ever want this, M. I wanted to raise a family."

"You want to leave? The door's right there. I don't need you. This has always been *my* mission, *my* job. There's plenty of fuel in your car to get you to the port." M's eyes didn't leave the screen once as he spoke, scrutinizing every piece of data for something, *anything*, that might lead him to his quarry.

"M, come on. You're better than this. It's petty."

"Petty?! You're going to say that our life's work for the last 35 years has been *petty?!* Leave. Just. Leave."

"M, that's not how I meant —"

"It's not what you meant, L, it's what you said. Just, go. Besides, I think… I've… got him."

"What?! No, you have to be kidding me."

"Read it and weep, L." M spun his chair around to look at his gangly brother, and slid over so L could get closer to the screen, a smug grin on M's face.

"Holy shit, M. We found him. We found him!" L nearly leaped for joy, but as he looked at the readings on the screen, he stopped. "Oh God. *They* have him? M, we… can't… We can't leave him with those sadistic motherfuckers. We have to get him out."

"After all he's done?! L, what's wrong with you? First, you want to bail on me, then you want to undo all of our work?" M's exhaustion was not enough to overcome his fury, as he stared in confused frustration at his brother.

"No, M, look. He's paid enough." L moved back away from the screen so that M could resume his place at the console.

"They… they did… They did *that* to him? And he survived? I always knew he was tough, but Christ." M's rage was quickly overrun by his shock, and his pity.

"Keep reading."

As M followed the instruction, the full horror of what had plagued their quarry was slowly revealed to him. "Fuck. We have to get him out of there, L."

"He's made it this long. Get some rest, and I'll get Y and all our equipment ready. Tomorrow morning, we'll make a plan and see what we can do to bust him out."

"Yeah, yeah, ok." M slowly stood up from the console for the first time in nearly ten hours, and slowly stumbled to bed for a few hours of uneasy rest as his brother began to make preparations. The next day, thirty years of conflict would finally be resolved…

B could tell when an escape attempt, what his captors called a "Containment Breach," was underway. The thick doors and walls did not completely mute the sound of klaxons (and occasionally, screams) to B's fine-tuned ears, nor did the corrosive solution he was usually suspended in. And the sound of a containment breach was a good sound, because it meant a possible route of escape for himself. On more than one occasion, he'd broken their flimsy walls and had killed many of them, releasing (or killing; it made no difference to him) his fellow prisoners in the process. What excited B most was the feeling of vibrations that shook his deep dungeon, because that indicated the use of explosives. Explosives meant desperation, and desperation on his captors' part meant opportunity.

Of course, he had had better luck attempting escape when his captors were (foolishly) trying to kill him. Just as before he'd been *contained*, B did best when at death's door. Something about *this place* had made him more able to adapt than ever, despite being at a far greater disadvantage here than he'd ever been in in his battles against *that traitorous lout.* So let them drain the acid away, let them try to kill him. He would just make them pay, as he continued to prepare himself for the day he would finally get his revenge on *M*.

Little did B know that M would be his liberator…

"You ready, L?" M was patting himself down, making sure he was properly equipped, marking off a mental checklist of everything he could possibly need for this. Y panted restlessly beneath him.

"Yeah, bro. I'm ready. I just… never thought I'd see the day we'd have to *help* B." L stood at the controls of the Gate, making final adjustments and waiting for the signal from M.

"Me neither, man. But you gotta do what you gotta do, right?"

"Right. Well, Gate's ready, man. You have your map?"

"Yeah. Y, you ready?" The reptilian mount was uncharacteristically quiet as M rubbed his head reassuringly. The barely-sapient beast only nodded. "Hit it, L. We've got a King to rescue."

L pressed a few buttons on the control panel and stepped onto the gate. A moment later there was a flash and…

B could hear klaxons, and screaming. It had been a long time since he had, so he eagerly anticipated whatever opportunity was waiting for him. As the breach got underway, he began formulating plans, on what, exactly, he would do as the door was breached (as it inevitably would be; B was sure of it on this day). Soon, he could also hear the sprinkling of the on-site fire suppression systems. Fire meant chaos, and chaos meant distraction, which in turn meant even more opportunity. Soon, the sound of explosions ever-so-slightly vibrated the room around him. He grinned, knowing that today would be, if not his day, then good practice for when his day would finally come.

He was somewhat surprised when the acid began to drain out of his cell. That was something that had never happened during a breach before. Was this a trap, another attempt to exterminate him? B shook himself off, trying to prepare himself for whatever waited beyond his door. Whatever it might be, he was ready. He would gladly destroy whatever these *disgusting* apes had in store for him.

Slowly, the door opened, and B moved to a corner, ready to either fight or flee as necessary. But he'd never anticipated that, standing on the other side of the door would be his sworn enemy…

Incident SMB-682-20151104 Summary:

On 4 November, 2015, at approximately 1017 local time, two unidentified humanoid entities and one reptilian entity spontaneously manifested in the Site-19 Biological Containment Wing, within 300 meters of **SCP-682**'s containment cell. Humanoid entities were seemingly males of European descent and wearing complimentary uniforms; that is to say, one entity was wearing a white jumpsuit and red coveralls[1], while the other was wearing a similar white jumpsuit and green coveralls[2], with similar logos emblazoned upon their chests. POI-SMB-682-1 was approximately 1.2 meters in height, while POI-

SMB-682-2 was approximately 1.4 meters in height. Both humanoid entities demonstrated advanced pyrokinetic capabilities.

The reptilian entity[3] bore no close resemblance to any single terrestrial lifeform and was approximately 1.5 meters in height. AE-SMB-682-1 was utilized as a mount by POI-SMB-682-1 upon manifestation.

All three entities immediately engaged in hostile action towards Foundation personnel, with Site Security rapidly engaging with both lethal and nonlethal weaponry. AE-SMB-682-1 was quickly struck by gunfire from Security Agent , at which point it tossed POI-SMB-682-1 from its back and proceeded to rapidly egress the locale. It has not yet been relocated and is presumed uncontained. POI-SMB-682-1 proceeded on foot for the remainder of the incident.

Shortly after manifestation, both humanoid entities split paths, with POI-SMB-682-1 moving rapidly towards the doorway of SCP-682's containment cell, while POI-SMB-682-2 moved towards the maintenance access room from which the supply of hydrochloric acid to SCP-682's cell is controlled. Both entities utilized their pyrokinetic abilities to devastating affect against site personnel.

At approximately 1034 local time, POI-SMB-682-2 had successfully halted the flow of hydrochloric acid and POI-SMB-682-1 had successfully opened the door to SCP-682's containment cell (despite not having access to the controls). Immediately afterward, the following exchange between SCP-682 and POI-SMB-682-1 was recorded by the monitoring equipment within the containment cell:

> **POI-SMB-682-1:** Holy shit, what have they done to you?
>
> **SCP-682:** You! It can't be you! What are you

doing here?

POI-SMB-682-1: Listen, B, we're busting you out of here. We're all good. I'm getting you back home.

SCP-682: Is it really you, though?

POI-SMB-682-1: Yeah, B. It's, uh, me, Mario. Come on, let's, uh, let's go.

SCP-682 and both humanoid entities proceeded to the original manifestation point and demanifested. The significance of this incident, the status of all involved entities, and possible implications are not fully understood at this time. Research is ongoing.

Footnotes
1. Currently designated POI-SMB-682-1 in all peripheral documentation.
2. Currently designated POI-SMB-682-2 in all peripheral documentation.
3. Currently designated AE-SMB-682-1 in all peripheral documentation.

And Then There Were None

Ten little soldiers, all having crossed the line,
One was distracted, and then there were nine.

Nine little soldiers, reading books at late,
One got too tired, and then there were eight.

Eight little soldiers, two up in heaven,
One tried to fly and join them, and then there were seven.

Seven little soldiers, blowing out the wicks,
One got lost in the dark, and then there were six.

Six little soldiers, running to the hive,
A busy bee stung one, and then there were five.

Five little soldiers, wondering who's Blore,
One wasn't Wargrave, and then there were four.

Four little soldiers, swimming in the sea,
One swam out too far, and then there were three.

Three little soldiers, eating up their stew
One ate too much, and then there were two.

Two little soldiers, the rest were all gone,
One AIMS to hang himself, and then there was one.

One little soldier, thinking "I should do that again!"
So we're back to the beginning,

And then there were ten.

10. Adrian Goddard glanced at the poor bastard on the receiving end

Larry Sellars ripped open the envelope to his invitation,

and converted it into a paper airplane that exploded into a literal fireball when it slammed into the window. “Considering buying some of your pieces,” he read aloud. “Would like to meet you in person. Meet me at Soldier Island. Costs and travel will be sorted after you meet with my assistant, Blaine, later today… ring if you cannot make it… blah blah blah… Yours Sincerely, Mr. Rios-Guy. Huh. Nice name. Still, what creatively bankrupt goon names a placed Soldier Island? Christie did that ages ago, mate.”

He stood up, before saying, “Still, good artists copy, great artists steal.”

Jane Anderton read through the email quickly. An invitation to Devon from somebody she had never heard of did arouse some suspicions, but she needed some time off anyway. If she hadn’t have sold that damned death clock, she probably wouldn't have been demoted. Hell, she probably would- *should* have taken that idiot Hartwell’s job if he hadn’t brought up some bullshit about “ethical violations”- like he gave a toss! Like he wouldn't have done the same if he could get away with it, like she would have without the fucking idiot customer leaving their address on the fridge!

“Didn't matter, it was done,” she thought, before looking once more at the address. Soldier Island. Wasn’t that the one from that old Agatha Christie book? She looked at it a final time, before shrugging her shoulders and saying, “Fuck it, why not?” to nobody in particular.

Corporal Edward Reiben read his letter slowly. He had put off opening it all day; not out of fear, but out of preserving the anticipation like a child before Christmas. He didn’t receive any more mail after Sam died. When he read that Mr. Rios-Guy was hoping to hire three new security staff- and that he was one of them- his first thought was that it was that arsehole Evans playing a

trick on him, or some pathetic scam trying to rinse him of his last few pennies. But… it didn't ask for any credit card information, and the only thing Evans did was call him, "Reibender," before Captain Moore told him to back off. He didn't mention the letter.

When Blaine actually arrived at the barracks hidden off somewhere among the Surrey countryside, he hugged him.

Lev Shevchenko spent five minutes thinking after he had finished his letter- or perhaps fantasizing would be a more accurate term. He had always wanted to visit England, and with Rios promising to sort out his Visa, it had the potential to turn his life around.

He spent the next half hour arguing with Mr Blaine over the accompaniment of Alexandra and Vera, his wife and daughter. Blaine finally compromised by agreeing to pay for their accommodation and travel, but that they would stay in a separate hotel in Devon, more than thirty miles away. They agreed on that.

He waited three hours to tell them, saying no more than the occasional hint of a big surprise. He gathered them in the living room- after assuring Vera many times that she was not in trouble- when he had finally accepted himself what was happening.

It still didn't stop him breaking into a massive smile before he could say the words "Very important letter."

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9. Lawrence Sellars watched as Henri jumped into the pool

The storm raged. Waves smashed against the side of the Vindication, rain teemed down in its thousands, and the moon's hue was reduced to a vague haze by the pitch black clouds. Foundation agent Rawley sat quietly inside, reading slowly over her invitation.

“Dear Ms. Rawley,
It is my pleasure to invite you to a small social gathering at Soldier Island. I have been looking for a decent body guard since I acquired the place, and your record indicates you are somebody I would like to have in my organization. Please consider it. Funding for your journey will be provided. My assistant, William Blaine, will arrive shortly. Please contact me if you are unable to attend.
Yours sincerely,
Mr. Rios-Guy”
She had gone for it. What the hell, it would be a decent excuse for weekend off, and her boss Tanners didn’t have a problem with it.

She looked up at the ten other people on the boat. The cabin was cramped; ten of them sat in the cabin, while Blaine piloted the boat.

She turned to the person next to her. He looked about five years younger than her thirty two, his face clean-shaven and his hair cut short.

“Hey, why’d they hire you?” she asked, more out of boredom than curiosity.

He responded with a thick American accent.
“Said they wanted to have a chef.”

“Huh. Security guard.” She extended a hand for him to shake, and he took it.

“Harry Thornton. Work for the United Independent Utilities, hoping that’s going to change soon.”

“Emma Rawley,” she said, thinking for a moment as to whether to mention that independent and united were mutually exclusive.

“You know the owner?”

“Mr Rios-guy? Nah, haven’t even seen him, actually.”

“Huh. Neither have I. Hey, you ever read And Then There Were None? Cause, if I didn’t know any better, I’d say this seems like the exact same plot.”

“You a murderer?”

“Yes, as a matter of fact. Killed a homeless guy just an hour ago,” Thornton said, totally deadpan.

“Yeah, good one. How long till we get to this damn island anyway?”

“Think that’s it coming up now,” he said, jabbing his slender index finger against the window misted by condensation at the sole light in the endless expanse of the sea.

Adrian Goddard idly flicked through his e-book on his phone. He didn’t really understand it- Why was Norton beating up Meeks, when the Helios were dragging Dufay away?- but, seeing as he lost any signal on his phone twenty minutes ago, he had no other choice, other than to talk to the stupid idiots next to him.

“Hey, you got any connection?”

Goddamn it.

“Uh, no it’s just something I downloaded. No connection either.”

“Huh. Hey, I’m Danny, by the way. Danny Clay. Private investigator, specialize in stopping corporate espionage. Guess this Rios guy… guy doesn’t trust his own employees. Hope that doesn’t apply to us, heh.” He smiled weakly at his own joke.

“Hmm. I’m Goddard. UN corporate executive. Rios doesn’t even want me for a job, he just decided having a UN bloke around would be good press or something.”

“Hey, you met Mr Rios? Haven’t heard too much about

him.”

“Neither have I, actually. Odd.”

Mohammed Ayad sat quietly, his arms pressed against the wall in a vain attempt to stop the rocking of the boat to send him flying into the person next to him. It didn’t work.
“Sorry,” he muttered, and the man responded with the same.

“Hey, you know anything about this Mr Rios? Just wondering, cause I’ve heard basically nothing about him.”

“Nah, can’t say I do, mate. Only here ‘cause he said he could use a speaker like me at the place for a few hours, and it’s a free holiday, so why complain? Jay Devers, by the way.”

“Mohammed Ayad,” was all he managed to say before William Blaine shouted through the speakers.

“Uh, we’re coming up to Soldier Island now, if you could please get your possessions and be ready to disembark.”

Ayad and Devers exchanged glances, before grabbing their suitcases and converging with the others onto soldier island.

The island was small; no landmarks were on it except for the rather large house in its centre. A few trees grew on the neatly cut grass that surrounded it, a small beach at its front.

As the roar of the boat’s engine started up again, they all headed off for their rooms, previously located by Blaine.

Reiben flopped onto his bed. He was knackered; he had spent the last three hours travelling, and all he wanted to do was sleep. Still, he’d probably have to meet Mr. Rios.

He dropped his suitcase (“Suitcase wanker!” Brambly had shouted as he left, not maliciously. Reiben returned a non-malicious middle finger) onto the floor, before a pennant hanging from the wardrobe grabbed his attention.

It read, in a middle-ages esque text:

Ten little soldiers, all having crossed the line,
One was distracted, and then there were nine.

Nine little soldiers, reading books at late,
One got too tired, and then there were eight.

Eight little soldiers, two up in heaven,
One tried to fly and join them, and then there were seven.

Seven little soldiers, blowing out the wicks,
One got lost in the dark, and then there six.

Six little soldiers, running to the hive,
A busy bee stung one, and then there were five.

Five little soldiers, wondering who's Blore,
One wasn't Wargrave, and then there were four.

Four little soldiers, swimming in the sea,
One swam out too far, and then there were three.

Three little soldiers, eating up their stew
One ate too much, and then there were two.

Two little soldiers, the rest were all gone,
One AIMS to hang himself, and then there was one.

One little soldier, thinking "I should do that again!"

So we're back to the beginning,

And then there were ten.

Reiben felt a pang of fear. Just like the book… Jesus. Jesus, why the hell had he come here? He was going to die. He was going to die on this god-forsaken island and he'd done exactly what he told himself he would be clever enough to avoid when he read the damned book, had probably inspired the bastard to do this-

No, he was being ridiculous. Worst case scenario, it was a prank, a twisted joke. And he wasn't a murderer.

Except for Sam. He couldn't have known that he'd die. Hell, he had taken all responsibility if it all went wrong… Commander Moore had cleared him of all blame…

But Armstrong didn't have a motive, he did it accidently as well… and he probably saved more lives than he killed… and he even stopped drinking. Didn't matter to Wargrave, killed him anyway. And Armstrong's first name was Edward…

God, why did he have to fucking invent that piece of shit gun that was supposed to, "Save lives"?

All he managed to mutter was, "Jesus, Sam, I'm so sorry."

There was a knock on the door. It was the posh bloke whose name he had picked up to be Goddard.

"Hey, Reiben, wasn't it? Looks like Blaine has set out dinner. Should get down there before it gets cold."

Reiben shrugged, and followed Goddard to the dining room.

Meals had been set out on the table, each looking identical.

“God, I’m starving,” said Clay. “Let’s eat.”

“Heh. Let’s hope it’s not poisoned,” Reiben joked. Nobody laughed.

---

8. Emma Rawley sent the six of them through the doorway

They sat down, and Devers had just taken his first bite when a voice suddenly rang out from the next room. It was deep, distorted, inhuman.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, silence, please.”

They all stared at each other. Had to be a joke, nobody would actually-

“You are charged with the following:

“Commander Adrian Kenneth Goddard of the Global Occult Coalition, you are charged with causing the death of Frederick McPherson.

“Agent Emma Jane Rawley of the SCP Foundation, you are charged with the deaths of Daniel Denney, William Carlyle, and Geoffrey Betterton.

“Lawrence Daniel Sellars, of Are We Cool Yet?, you are charged with causing the deaths of thirteen people during an anomalous art exhibit.

“Corporal Edward Richard Reiben of the Chaos Insurgency, you are charged with the manslaughter of Samuel Birch.

“Mohammed Omid Ayad, of the Office for the Reclamation of Islamic Artifacts, you are charged with causing the death of Nicholas Vincent Graves.

“Jane Helen Anderton, of Marshall, Carter, and Dark Ltd, you are charged with causing the death of Charles Jonathan Kimball.

“Daniel Frederick Clay of the Horizon Initiative, you are charged with the murder of an unknown Fifth Church Combatant.

“Harry Michael Thornton of the Unusual Incidents Unit, you are charged with the death of Kevin Victor Connors.

“Lev Yuri Shevchenko of the GRU-P, you are charged with the deaths of Victor Cherenkov, Yuri Malarkov, and Alexis Artyom.

“Jacob William Devers of the SCP Foundation, you are charged with the murder of 124 people aboard the Regal Vindication.

“What do you say in your defense?”

---

7. Mohammed Ayad jammed his foot on the accelerator

They all stared at each other, taking in the surreal situation, before Reiben stumbled away from the table, and straight out of the dining room. A vomiting sound emitted shortly after.

The remaining nine stared at each other, before Sellars finally said, “I suppose we’re all in on the masquerade. No point trying to hide it.”

“He’s right. We might as well be honest about it,” said Clay.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” spluttered Devers. “What masquerade? What was the voice even saying? Total nonsense.” He sipped his drink, perhaps in an attempt to look natural. His wooden acting gave him away.

“Bullshit. Look, the rest of us aren’t denying it,” said Sellars.

“So you admit to killing those people?”

Sellars grimaced, before admitting, “I didn’t want anyone to get hurt. They were just being idiots, and more people would have died if I hadn’t have stopped them.”

“Fine, I’ll admit to killing that Fifthist bastard. Guy killed two of my men, I wasn’t gonna let him walk away just because he threw his hands in the air.”

“I have no idea whom Fred McPherson is. You’d think I murdered someone I’d remember it!” shouted Goddard.

“But you are GOC?” asked Ayad.

Goddard paused for a moment, before saying, “Yes.”

There was a noise from outside the room, and everybody turned to its source.

Reiben walked back into the room, looking pale.

“S-sorry. Got a bit… bit light-headed. Like, this is just like And Then There Were None, right? Nobody should drink anything, that’s how the first person died.”

“Shit,” said Devers, looking at the glasses. His was the only one that had been drunk at all.

He coughed loudly, then again, before entering a coughing fit. Ayad and Shevchenko, who were sitting next to him, grabbed him before he could fall onto the floor.
He suddenly stopped coughing, and went limp. Ayad’s hands darted for Devers’ wrist.

“He’s still got a pulse… We should get him to his room, have somebody take a look at him. Anyone here a doctor?”

“I’m no expert, but I’m better than everyone else,” said Goddard.

Shevchenko and Ayad carried Devers between them,

Goddard following.

The six people remaining in the dining room looked at each other.

“Right, I’m going to get on the radio. See if we can contact Blaine,” said Clay.

“You really think the killer hasn’t already taken care of that?” questioned Rieben.

“Worth a shot.” He left.

Rawley began to speak.

“Didn’t the killer leave a poem in the book? Seems strange that they’d miss out such a vital part of the-“

“Actually, there’s a copy of the poem in my room. I’ll get it, could give us some clues. Whoever it is, he- or she- is basing it off the book, right?”

Rieben left before Rawley could object to a Chaos Insurgent running around on his own. She figured that he probably was of little danger as an individual.

She looked back around the table. Thornton, Anderton, and Sellars.

“I’m going to find out where the hell that voice came from,” said Thornton.

“Shouldn’t we all stick together?” said Rawley. “Someone poisoned Devers-“

“Like anyone would base their murders off a book. Probably just a joke.”

“Joke? How would they know about the UIU, or the Coalition, or the Foundation? Why would they fly you half way around the world for a joke?”

Thornton left without another word.

Rawley, realizing that Devers' party was now larger than her own, decided that going there was her best bet. She left Anderton and Sellars in the dining room.

"Is he alright?" she asked Goddard as soon as she stepped into the room, surprised to see only Shevchenko there.

"He's still alive, if that's what you mean."

"Where did the others go?"

"Goddard went out to get his first aid kit from his room, not like that'll help much. Ayad… actually, I have no idea where Ayad went."

He paused, trying to remember, before saying, "You're Rawley, yeah?"

"Yeah. Shevchenko, isn't it?"

"Yeah, Lev Shevchenko."

There was a period of awkward silence, before he asked, "So… who do you think poisoned him?"

The fact that her tactic of safety in numbers had resulted in her being alone with somebody maybe a foot taller materialized in her brain the moment he said it.

"Clay," she said, the first name that came to mind. "I really should be getting back to the others."

"I'll come with you."

When they arrived in the living room, Goddard and Reiben were there.

"Look, all I'm saying is that it says in the poem "One got distracted", right?" said Reiben

“That doesn’t mean anything, it could be a lie, or maybe even the distraction itself!” argued Goddard.

Sellars sat quietly, turning towards Shevchenko and Rawley.

“Anderton said she was going to the toilet, if you’re wondering where she is.”

Thornton entered the room, a small speaker in his hands.

“Found this little bastard,” he said, holding it up. “Must have been from this.”

Ayad arrived shortly afterwards, saying, “Tried signaling Blaine, but he’d already gone out a few miles and I couldn’t see him.”

William Blaine’s death was mostly painless. When he first noticed he was out a fuel, he had accepted his fate. Narracota had survived, but he wasn’t Narracota, he was Morris. He knew that the sandwiches given to him by Mr. Rios were poisoned with a particularly slow poison; too late.

In a final attempt at spite, he released the ladder. He knew it would probably mean nothing, but his final image in his mind was of the poor sod who had been pushed into the water climbing onto the boat and finding his body.

“Where’s Clay?”

“He said he was going to the radio room, try and hail Blaine,” answered Rawley to Ayad’s question.

They didn’t have to look for long. Daniel Clay the Third was found sitting on the radio room chair, his throat sliced open from ear to ear. His face was stoic, his eyes closed. Blood had splattered all over his clothes.

Rieben vomited for the second time that day. Ayad fell silent. Goddard checked his pulse. Anderton looked at Shevchenko, who looked back. Rawley went to check on Devers. Thornton fiddled with the speaker in his hands, in a futile attempt to distract him from death.

It was Sellars who said, “Clay’s dead… murdered, and somebody’s responsible.”

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6. Jane Anderton didn't look at him as he asked if it was safe

Goddard and Reiben took Clay’s body to his room, both trying their hardest to avoid his- its?- vacant stare.

“How the hell did a kid like you end up working for the CI?”

“Pretty simple, actually. Sam- yes, he was the guy I killed- said we should sign up. I’d always been interested in the anomalous since I was a kid, and I guess I saw it as an opportunity to really change the world in some way. You know what we were working on when Sam died?”

“What?”

“This gun we were making for the Mi- these guys, which was basically a really powerful tranq rifle. Like, it was brilliant. Had to break a few laws of physics, but it was worth it. Full auto. Just took one of the darts to hit the guy and he’d be out. Not strong enough to penetrate bones; biggest chance of injury was it smacking straight into your eye and blinding you.”

“I’m guess something went wrong.”

“Sam kept saying that he wanted me to shoot him, just to make sure it worked perfectly before we showed it to the buyers. Had a fatal allergic reaction to the sedative. Died before I could get a doctor to him. Cleared me of all

blame, since Sam made a note saying he'd accept all responsibility. I just…just wish that I hadn't done it."

"Jesus. You were friends?"

"Probably more than that, actually."

"Sorry."

"Nah, not your fault. So, what happened to you? How'd you kill Fred McPherson?" asked Reiben, laying Clay onto his bed. He had almost forgotten he was carrying him.

"Can't recall it exactly, but I think I've got a good idea of what he's on about. Back a few years ago, I was in South Africa chasing after this anomaly in this old street. Fired at it, must've accidently hit this guy. He was bleeding on the road, begging for help. Had a choice between either saving one life, or letting the anomaly kill more. Easy choice, don't regret it."

"Do you regret it now that we've got this guy killing us off one by one?"

"Fair point."

"JESUS!"

Rawley's scream was heard by everyone on the island.

Ayad and Shevchenko sprinted in, only to find Devers sitting up on his bed and Rawley looking at him like he was a ghost.

"Christ, Devers, you scared the hell out of me."

"So, uh, who poisoned me?"

"We don't know, but…"

"Clay's dead," said Ayad suddenly.

“What? How?”

“Some bastard slit his throat.”

“Who?”

“We don’t know. Whoever it was is probably one of us, and probably isn’t going to stop at us.”

The nine survivors gathered in the dining room.

“Okay,” said Rawley, holding up Rieben’s pennant of the poem and his copy of the book.

“The killer is obviously basing their murders on both this book and this poem. Now, one of us is dead, and they are going to continue to do so until we are all dead, minus themselves. That much is obvious.

“I don’t know how many of you have read it, but I’m going into some serious spoiler territory, mainly because our lives are at stake. The first person to die had his drink poisoned; the killer anticipated this, used that as a distraction so he could get to Clay.

“Now, seeing as the killer in the book faked his death, we will be thoroughly checking to make sure the dead are actually dead. We’ve all committed crimes, we all work for enemies, but if any of us want to walk off this island alive, we have to work together. Agreed?”

There were a few murmurs of agreement.

“I think we’re each meant to represent a character in the original,” said Reiben. “Considering that my murder was both accidental, and that my name is Edward, I reckon I’m Armstrong.”

“But you’re not about to ally with the killer with the benefit of hindsight, are you?” said Shevchenko.

“Good point, but I suppose he’s trying to subvert it on

every count.”

“It’s late,” said Anderton. “We should sleep.”
“…I’m sorry, but have you been listening to a fucking word we’ve been saying?” said Goddard. “Did the part about the psycho killer running about become lost on you?”

“If we are gonna sleep, we should all get in one room. Keep three people awake at all times.”

“How will that help? The killer could just, I don’t know, drop a grenade and run,” said Sellars.

“They have to follow the poem, remember?” cut in Ayad.

“Yes, but what’s stopping a particularly paranoid person whose goal is to simply off us all to ensure their survival doing it?”

“The obvious lack of grenades?” said Goddard, but that did not stop them going to their separate rooms that night.

—-
Rawley looked around her room. Why had the killer hanged the pennant in Rieben’s room? Why poison Devers in particular?

Probably just random. She locked her door, and pushed the bedside table next to it, locked all the windows, and did a final sweep of the room to make sure it was totally devoid of anyone but herself.

She considered just staying up all night, pointing her revolver at the door until morning.

But then again, “One got too tired, and then there were eight,” was next, and she didn’t fancy tempting fate, so she slept.

When Shevchenko found a copy of And Then There

Were None resting on his bed, he decided that skimming through it could give him some clues.

It was 2 AM when Shevchenko read the epilogue. It was a single sentence that suddenly revealed to him who the killer was. God, it was obvious. Their motive wasn't revenge, it was some twisted form of justice, mixed with a heavy dose of a-

Lev Shevchenko turned the last page, and the memetic image stuck to it was the last thing he ever saw.

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5. Lev Shevchenko threw the torch onto the house

The breakfast table had two empty seats the next day. Ayad said he would get Shevchenko, but everyone followed him. They had all been expecting it.

"So, what killed him?"asked Reiben.

Goddard checked the book, creased over on the last page.

"This," he said, holding up the image of alien geometries and impossible colours.

"…What's that, and why aren't we dead?"

"Mimetic image. Fatal to 0.5% of the population. I guess the killer did his research."

"Shouldn't we make sure he's dead?" asked Anderton.

"Good point," said Devers, checking his pulse.

"Nah, I was thinking more like stabbing him through the eye."

"…what? Why the hell would we do that?" said Ayad.

"Because he's either faking his death, and therefore the

killer, or dead anyway, so it doesn't actually matter."

Reiben was sent to fetch a knife, and returned quickly.

Anderton drove it deep into his vacant eye. Nothing changed.

"We should search the island," said Goddard. "In threes. While the search in the book didn't turn up much, the killer may- just may- be using reverse psychology. That's how he got Clay.

"I'll go with Rawley, Devers, and Thornton, give a brief search of the north. You four take the south. Oh, and go and get a mirror."

"Uh, why?" asked Sellars.

"Lombard managed to actually get the mainland's attention by heliographing. True, he wasn't there to see them arrive, but it's worth a try."

The second Goddard's squad exited the house to the small grassy field that composed the northern half of the island, he said, "It's got to be one of them."

"What?" asked Devers.

"It's one of them. Got to be. Look, I think I can trust you. At the very least, I know I'm not the killer, and two of you must not be the killer, or I'd be dead at this point."

"Okay, you've correctly pointed out something that we all figured out when Clay died. What's your point?" said Thornton.

"My point is, their lives are not equal to ours. Anderton is a totally ruthless bitch; she killed that Kimball bloke for profit. Reiben work for the CI, even if his killing was accidental. Sellars killed thirteen people for art, even if was an accident that amount of negligence probably means he deserves a bullet in his head. Ayad… well, we

don’t know him, do we? Always sticking to the shadows, always walking off with a weak excuse.”

“So what’s your plan?” asked Devers, although he already knew what he was proposing.

“That we kill all of them. I’ve got a gun, they don’t. Four against four, with our four better trained, better armed, and with the element of surprise.”

“And if one of us is the killer, we will have murdered four innocent people for no reason and still end up dead,” said Rawley.

“A risk we’ve got to take. It’s one of them for sure.”

“Well, I’m not doing it. Jesus, Goddard, Ayad’s literally done nothing and you’re saying we should kill him?” protested Thornton. “Like you’re any better. Who was this McPerson bloke, then?”

“Shot him accidently chasing an anomaly. Who was- Connor, was it?”

“I suppose there’s no putting it off. Connors was a prick who worked for the CI- part of the group Rawley sent to their deaths- and the Foundation handed him to us to circumvent some rules or something. Taggert and I brought him in, but he wouldn’t talk. So I tried beating it out of him. Taggert gave me some bullshit about “regulations” and how “He who fights monsters should be careful that he himself does not become a monster”, but I didn’t care. Beat the shit out of Connors; that I have no regrets over. He told us where their base of operations was, but then he had to bleed out anyway. I didn’t mean to kill him, but what’s done is done.”

They stared at him for a few seconds.

“We’re all going to die.” Rawley said it with no forewarning.

“What?”
“I mean, this is all a fucking game to this shit. Just a fucking horror movie, just because he got bored and couldn’t think of anything else to do. And he’s just going to keep doing it and doing it and it’s never fucking going to stop, and we can’t stop-“

Rawley was hyperventilating.

“Two people I talked to last night are dead. And I don’t… I don’t feel… I don’t feel *anything*…”

Thornton put a hand on her shoulder. “It’s alright, we’re gonna be fine.”

Goddard spoke next.

“I’ll die fighting a war, I’ll die slowly in bed, but I am NOT dying because of someone’s shitty game. I’m getting out of here, and I hope to hell I can take you with me.”

“Well, I think we should actually explore the damn island. I’ll check the cliff. Goddard, you try the trees over there. Rawley, Thornton, check the house.”

Edward Reiben had finally caught the sun in his mirror. He stood a meter away from the cliff edge, the tide violently smashing against the jagged rocks.

“Got it!” he shouted, only to find one of his three audience walking back towards the house.

“Hey, Ayad, where the hell are you going? Gotta search the island, mate.”

“I need to pray.”

“Can’t it wait?”

“I need to pray.” Ayad walked out of view and back into the house.

“Look, land’s about ten miles away, Reiben. They won’t see you.” Anderton was already walking away as she was saying it.

“Just hold on a second.”

Reiben spent a few more seconds angling the mirror in the vague direction of the land, before he realized he was alone.

He was about to shout, “Oh shit,” and run towards the others. He was about to run back towards the house, thankful to have realized just in time what a stupid move splitting up had been.

He never did any of those things.

Edward Reiben was pushed. He felt his legs go out from under him, as his arm smacked against a rough outcropping of rock. He spiraled off the cliff, down into the icy cold waters of England’s winter seas.

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4. Jacob Devers spent one final moment with his finger on the trigger

They gathered in the dining room a few minutes later, Ayad carrying a single shoe that had washed up on the shore.

“Where the fuck is Reiben?” shouted Goddard.

“We… we don’t know. We left him heliographing.” Sellars did not look up at Goddard; he looked solemnly at the stained tablecloth.

“What?” Goddard said it with an equal amount of disbelief and anger. “WHAT? You fucking idiot! I told you not to split up!”

His main source of fear was that he himself had been stupid enough to split up; the only reason it had been Reiben and not him was total luck.

“Well, if you were all together, then it has to be one of us three, right?” said Sellars.

Thornton looked at Devers who looked at Rawley who looked at Goddard.

“We spilt up too.” Devers was totally deadpan as he said it.

“You fucking hypocrite!” shouted Anderton.

“Look, shouting isn’t going to get us anywhere,” said Thornton. “We need to think logically. We can presume Reiben is dead; “Tried to fly and join them” pretty much guarantees it.”

“Could’ve faked it. Just like the killer did in the original book.”

“Why’d he do it this early? Better to stay among us for longer, then fake his death later. I think he’s dead, Ayad.”

“Fine… but if we see him again, kill on sight.”

“A bit extreme, I think, Goddard. We’ll tie him up.”

“Woah, Thornton, waaaay too much information of what you two got up to last night,” said Sellars with a smirk.

“I think if I had, I’d be dead at this point. I mean, Reiben is testament that the gay guy always dies, and having sex pretty much seals the deal. At least he wasn’t black.”

Rawley said, “Nah, I’m gonna die last. If there’s anything I learned, it’s that the black guy is going to die just before the climax.”

“On to the practical side of things; was anyone accompanied for the entirety of our search?”

“No, we all split up,” said Ayad. “Except, actually, did you two-?”

“Nah, we split up as well. Stupid. Really stupid. Sellars suggested it, and then he just started walking off on his own before I could say anything else.”

“Right, I think we need to go over this logically,” said Rawley. “We must consider if anyone has an alibi. Nobody was with someone else for the entirety of the search; anyone could have done it. Even considering that the four of us would have a difficult time sneaking over without being noticed by anybody, it remains a possibility.

“Anyone could have placed the book in Shevchenko’s room. Anyone. Nobody can be ruled out from Clay’s death, either. The only people who have proved beyond all doubt that they are innocent are Daniel Clay and Lev Shevchenko. I have the suspicion that Reiben is still alive, but in all honesty the killer probably offed him in such a way that would make us suspect him.”

She had no idea just how right she was…

They searched for Reiben afterwards; nobody left the party. After the search uncovered nothing except a second shoe, they proceed to bed.

Goddard had no plans of sharing Shevchenko’s fate; or, for that matter, Rogers’.

He gathered Rawley, Devers and Thornton in his room.

“Right, I’m pretty certain at the point it’s gotta be one of those three. So, safety in numbers, right? All of us should stay the night in the same room.”

“Right, so then if it’s one of us, the killer can kill all of us in our sleep. Good plan,” said Thornton.
“No, we’ll keep two people awake at all times. Look, all I’m saying is that it’s much safer than us sleeping alone.”

“Seems to me the killer would try something exactly like

this," said Devers.

"In what way would I benefit from having everyone in the same room? I'd have to follow the poem, remember?"

"I don't know. But, anyway, I'm not risking it."

And Devers retreated to his own room.

"He's got a point. Plus, I really don't fancy staying up half the night."

"But being murdered is an attractive prospect?" shouted Goddard as Thornton left.

He turned to Rawley and said, "Look, please don't go."

"I'd do it if they were, but locking myself in with someone with a mad killer going about doesn't sound like a good idea. I'll see you tomorrow."

Goddard locked his own room the second she left, and lugged a chest of draws in front of the door. He placed his revolver on his bedside table, made sure the lamp's switch was in close proximity to his hands, and cautiously flicked it off.

Goddard survived that night, even if he hardly got any sleep. Most of the others were in a similar situation, with the obvious exception of the one person who had nothing to fear.

However, one of them didn't get any sleep that night, nor ever again.

Anderton flicked her light off, and stumbled through the darkness to her bed. All lights on the island were switched off; only the dim glow of the moon offered any illumination, but all that did was stop her eyes adjusting to the darkness. She walked twice the distance she should have before realized something was wrong.

Oh Jesus. Lost in the dark. She was going to die because of some stupid fucking idiot who decided resetting the fucking death clock to midnight that fucking fuck fuck fuck.

She brushed past a plant. God, she was outside? How the hell did they do that? Her vision was total darkness; she could only feel the damp soil between her toes and hear something running, something that wasn't human, something that was going to Oh Jesus please no eat her and then-

Whatever the hell it was, it roared, and Anderton felt a bolt of pain shoot up her leg.

After that, she didn't feel anything.

---

3. Harry Thornton punched him in the head

Goddard had been expecting someone to die that night; his guess had been Rawley, or possibly himself. Anderton he had expected to see in the final three, but he knew that she almost certainly wasn't the killer.

They gathered in the dining room, almost knowing that one of their party would not be joining them.

"Shit, it's Anderton," said Thornton, almost unsurprised.

He, followed by the other five- Christ, were there really only six of us left?- ran up to her room to find it a tangle of undergrowth and darkness, which expanded far past what it should have. A dismembered leg lay caught on some brambles, blood staining the cloth.

Thornton shut the door as quickly as he had opened it.

"Okay, what the fuck was that?"

Devers explained. "Something that's basically theoretical at this point. Called Walton portals. Essentially, you can

create an entire separate world by reengineering an already existing portal, although it's difficult as hell do to."

"Wait, just how hard are we talking here?"

"We've had our best personell working on it for the last three years. Nothing. Mainly because we have nothing to base it on, and because the only actual research we have on it was taken from some random CI mook's USB."

"Jesus. These things could be used to create infinite farm lands, stop all overcrowding issues… and this bastard used them to murder somebody. The sick fuck." Ayad said it with the first genuine anger he had experienced since arriving.

The genuine anger was echoed with genuine guilt from the person who had created the portal in the first place.

They went back to the dining room and sat quietly.

"So, bees next. Heh. So many annoying bee-related memes, and the killer didn't go with any of them. Have to give them credit for that," Thornton said almost humorlessly.

They went back to the table, and they sat silently. Thornton had reduced himself to simply eating everything he could; Devers drummed his fingers until Rawley asked him to please stop that; Sellars read a book, which he complained about endlessly to Goddard ("Okay, see, look at this, Meeks' wife is suddenly dead for no reason and then Barnes begins killing everyone and I have no idea what Moore and Harland and Strasse are doing, they sort of…"); Ayad remained totally silent.

"I'm going to the toilet," said Sellars.

"I'm going to pray," said Ayad.

"I'm going to my room," said Devers.

Goddard, Rawley and Thornton all had a very strong instinct that was telling them only two were returning.

Sellars wasn't going to the toilet.

He ran into his room, found his phone that he had left on his bedside table, and walked downstairs playing the third level of "Please Solve the Game." (Or PSTG as he liked to call it.)

Devers entered his room and thought of what he did that landed him here.

"Infection has spread throughout the ship…" said the voice of Howard, like had only happened yesterday.

"Survivors are already disembarking. Could possibly be infected. Sir, if this thing escapes…"

He had to do it. Right? There was no other way. Everybody on there was already dead anyway.

Before he could ponder the morality of his choice to launch the torpedo, he noticed the box on his bed.

Before he could even say, "Oh shit," it snapped open on its own, and they emerged.

They all heard his screams.

Goddard raced towards its source immediately, while Thornton and Rawley looked at each other momentarily, before joining him.

Goddard arrived at Devers' room to see Sellars and Ayad already outside. An intense buzzing noise emitted from his room, punctuated by screams.

Ayad was pulling desperately on the door; it didn't budge. Goddard shoved him aside, and had a go himself, as if he was somehow going to unlock it.

Thornton and Rawley had arrived by the time the screaming had stopped completely.

“What the hell’s going on?” shouted Thornton.

“I don’t have a fucking clue,” Goddard said, quickly running his hands over his cropped black hair. He slammed himself against the door, to no effect. Repeating the action twice showed a slight buckle and some splinters, but Sellars stopped him before he could finally break it.

“What if whatever is in there gets us too?”

Goddard considered it, before stopping.

“Okay, so what do you suggest we do?”

“Wait until the… hang on, listen.”

Goddard did. “What?”

“Buzzing’s stopped.”

Goddard gave the door another kick, and it finally subsided.

“Oh Jesus.”

Devers’ body was covered in ugly lumps and bruises, with thousands of bees littering the floor.

Goddard turned away before he could no longer resist the urge to vomit.

“Genetically modified bees, most likely. Die in a few minutes… or something like that…” Ayad remarked.

They didn’t move his body; none of them would dare touch it.
Again they sat on the dining table, just as the sun began to set.

“Goddamn…Goddamn…” Goddard muttered. He rubbed his neatly trimmed beard, before sighing. “We can’t just sit here waiting to die. We have to do something.”

“Like what?” Rawley asked.

“Swimming. Yeah, actually, swimming. The shore’s what, ten miles away? If we get something buoyant, we could make it.”

“Too risky.”

“Stay here, and that bastard’s gonna get us.”

“Go out there, and the weather’s gonna get us. Look, I reckon I can get the bastard.”

“That’s your choice. I’m gonna have a go at swimming.”

“What if you’re the killer? What if you’re just trying to escape?”

“Hey, come to think of it,” said Thornton. “Didn’t the next guy fake his death?”

He had just finished saying it when his head exploded.

---

2. Daniel Clay hesitated to fire when he started to scream

A small bullet wound was punched into his left temple; there was nothing left of his right other than some exposed brain matter. Skull fragments and blood littered the floor. Thornton’s corpse slumped forward.

They all stared at each other, and at Thornton.

Ayad screamed, and they scattered. Goddard scrambled backwards, falling onto the floor, before righting himself and sprinting to his room. Rawley sped off instantly. Ayad, trembling immensely, nervously hurpled towards his room.

That left Sellars. He grabbed an apple from in front of him, and took a bite out of it. He had the feeling it might be his last.

Rawley reached her room first, and instantly flung open her draw and grabbed he revolver. It was already loaded with six bullets; she'd only need three.

Goddard arrived in his room seconds later. His revolver, too, was loaded.

Ayad's plan was rather different; namely hide until it was safe to come out. He had just ran into his room, and was just about to shove his bedside table against the door when he noticed the plastic paddling pool in front of him.

In the last few seconds of his life, his mind raced for an explanation; it had just reached one when he was pushed.

As he fell towards the pool, he didn't scream; for some odd reason he found himself totally calm. He only glanced back at the killer, and thought, "I really should have known it was h-"

Goddard and Rawley both reached the empty dining room at the same time.

"Where's Ayad?" he asked, his hand firmly gripped to his holstered revolver.

"Where's Sellars?" she asked, her hand firmly gripping her holstered revolver.

They both drew at the exact same time. She remained rooted; Goddard dove for cover in the form a nearby pillar.

She shot twice, Goddard not even aiming as he returned the same.

Neither moved for a few seconds, enough time for

Rawley to shout, “Drop the gun!”

Goddard didn’t respond, so she slowly edged her way forward. A bullet hole marked the exact centre of his forehead.

“Jesus,” she muttered, looking at her gun with disgust. The fact that she had killed him floated around aimlessly in her mind, but didn’t cement itself. It didn’t feel real.

A sharp jab in her neck brought her out of it.

“Ow! What the-“
Her legs fell out from under her, and she collapsed.

“What… what the fuck…”

Sellars stood above her, a syringe in his hands.

“You couldn’t have just waited a few more minutes, could you?”

“W-what?”

“It was all set out! Ayad was supposed to pray, and then I’d push him into the pool. Goddard would pick up the spoon, which’d kill him. But noooo, you had to fucking ruin it, didn’t you?”

“It’s… it’s you, isn’t it? You’re the killer?”

“What, the person who is currently talking about killing people after stabbing a needle in your neck? Yeah, no shit.”

“What the fuck was that?” Rawley said, raising her hand to the injection’s source of impact.

“Your legs are paralyzed, and that’s not the worst of it. Ya see, remember those six Class-D you sent into that mysterious doorway of doom and death? That didn’t kill them, no matter how much they wish it did.”

“You fucking hypocrite. They were murderers, just like everybody you killed.”

“At least mine are actually dead. Anyway, three of those Class-D were totally innocent CI POWs. They committed no crime-“

“They killed my friends! They’re fucking murderers!”

“It was an act of war, Rawley."

"War? How the hell can you call that war?"

“Of course, this isn’t the end of it. In a few minutes, the injection I gave you will take full effect.”

“And that’s gonna do what, exactly?”

“Sorry for being so cliché; I really wanted to be more original than this. You will be turned to stone. Unable to move, talk, or scream.”

He picked up Rawley’s gun, fired at the corpse of Goddard, and again at Thornton. He placed one of the two bullets remaining in his pocket, and tossed the pistol to Rawley.

“Kill me, or face a fate worse than death. Your choice.”

He walked away slowly, not even turning back when he heard the gunshot.

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1. Edward Reiben took aim at his head

Sellars’ small rubber dinghy bobbed slowly in the waves. It was night; the sky was cloudless, the full moon illuminating an ill-defined strip of sea water. Blaine’s boat was up ahead; it remained relatively still, and looked the same as it did when Sellars had disembarked. There were no grips on the side of the boat; Sellars went around twice attempting to find the best place to board.

When he finally acted, he first chucked his jerry can of petrol aboard, before hauling himself on as well. A few drops of water pitter-pattered onto the boat, and Sellars threw his lifejacket to the ground.

So, he had done it. Nine dead men, and he was the only one left. The footage of it all was on a DVD in his back pocket.

Sellars stepped into the darkened cockpit, and realized he was going to die. The lights were out; the boat's generator could function independently of engine, and could power the lights for several weeks before running out. Blaine died at night; the only reason they'd be off would be if someone turned them off.

"Shit. Well, come on, Eddie. Let's get this over with."

Reiben stepped forward, a flare gun in his hand. He was distracted, tired, had nobody but darkness for company for the last few days, suffering from some kind of infection, beginning to wonder if Armstrong ever did any of this shit, half-drowned, starving, and partly considering blowing his own skull open with the flare gun.

The only thing he was totally sure about was that this was never happening to anybody else again.

"Don't move," he said meekly.

"And it started so well. And it started so well. You may as well just put a fucking flare in me, Eddie. I failed. Credit where credit's due; you're a bleedin' good swimmer."

"Sorry. Anyone else left?"

"Nope. Just us two. And it'll be one soon."

"Any last requests?"

"Yeah, actually. Let me send one more text."

“And if you’re setting off a phone bomb or some other bullshit?”

“You really think I’d do that, Eddie?”

“…Yes!”

“There. Sen-BANG!”

“Was that really supposed to scare me?”

“Anyway, sent it.”

“What’d it say?”

Sellars threw his phone off the side of the boat.

“Now, you’re gonna want the exposition rant explaining everything, like why and how I did everything?”

“Let me guess, you did it for some vague bullshit about art?”

“…alright, you got me. So, want to hear the rest of-“

Edward Reiben fired.

The Lingering Lark of Leviathan Square

An item we number in our special way:
SCP-123-Omicron-A

Its class is a: Keter, not safe in the least.
An eater, dear reader, a beaterous beast!
A feast it can make, any time of the day,
of all of existence - scenario XK!
So read if you dare, of how to prepare
for the Lingering Lark of Leviathan Square…

The special containment procedures are these:
To keep the thing locked up as long as we please.
Experimentation must have the approval
Of Dr. Bamdoovle (or else, your removal).
Locked up in its cell it must always exist.
It stays in this room, not a thing goes amiss,
for even the tiniest routine mishap
will trigger Procedure McSweeney-Go-Snap,
which seals the seals, all exits retracted
to purge all the site with release of [REDACTED].
McSweeney-Go-Snap will kill innocent lives
when [REDACTED] arrives with his knivity-knives,
but that's what we need to keep Earth far away
from a day classed XK
by this SCP-A.

The Lingering Lark of Leviathan Square
is described: as a bird of a species so rare,
you sooner would find a bouquet of blue roses.
It's five meters high from the head to the toeses,
and when the full moon rises high in the sky,
it lets out a cry -
if you hear it, you'll die,
for it tears off the flesh from all living things' bones.

It's the freakiest shriek of the moanest of groans!

But that's not the worst part, not even remotely.
As sure as a billy goat's prone to act goatly,
exposure too long over time to this bird
will mangle the mind and entangle your words
to a rhyme scheme of nonsense, not one single use!
This happened to O5-1 , Dr.

But the Lingering Lark of Leviathan Square
cannot be destroyed, which is downright unfair!
Its hunger for bloodshed and razor-sharp beak
can play an XK any day of the week.
First seen in London, it flew to Peru,
Stussgart and Flussgart and Kalamazoo!
    lay dead in a matter of hours,
and corpses piled up in our lakes, farms, and towers.
Some VIPs died when it leapity-lunged,
including the Cat in the [DATA EXPUNGED]

Addendum 1-J: so now you can say
why this SCP-123-Omicron-A
should be locked in a cell in a block far away
from a world that's eager to see one more day.
(This page, only B-class or higher can view.
I hope, for your sake,
that B-class means you.)

Dial S For SCP

"…This is an actual item?"

"Yes sir."

"… An actual item to be kept and contained on Site. Not one of those random weird objects we have, like the ducks?"

"Sir, it took us two MTF teams and some of the heavy artillery just to contain it again after initial discovery of its effects."

"Vines, it's a rotary phone dial!"

"A Keter one, yes sir."

Senior Researcher Rob Reed sighed. "This is your first day isn't it, Vines?"

"Sir, its effects would pretty much make this Keter!"

Reed and Vines stared at the harmless looking dial through the bulletproof glass. It looked so mundane, a plain old rotary phone dial, separate from the rest of the phone. It sat on the table in the observation room, doing nothing.

"Alright, let's do this thing. Send in the D-Class!"

A light by the observation room door flashed and a D-Class entered. The D-Class looked around and then towards the dial.

"D-6175161, please approach the table and pick up the item."

D-6175161 picked the dial up and inspected it. "What's this one do? Call the dead or something?"

The two researchers jotted down some notes.

"Please enter the following numbers into the dial. 0, 7, 2, 7."

The D-Class did as instructed, the dial making a pleasant "sssshhhclick!" noise as the dial wound back. After entering the last digit, a blinding light filled the observation room. As the light began to diminish, a new shape took the place of D-6175161. It was still humanoid, however its arms ended in what looked like MP5K machine guns and a smooth black sheen covered its entire body. There were hardly any curves, giving the being an almost machine-like appearance, as well as a third larger cannon-like protrusion in its head.

The researchers stared at the creature inside the observation room. Vines buzzed the intercom.

"D-6175161? D-6175161, please respond."

The being in the observation room raised its head, "I am Orgun!" came a voice from the cannon's bore. It echoed and sounded nothing like the D-Class who picked up the dial.

Reed and Vines both drew a blank.

"D-6175161, can you tell us anything about what you're experiencing right now?"

The creature tilted its head quizzically. "I'm afraid, I don't understand your question."

"D-6175161, you have Machine guns for hands. Does this not disturb you?"

"Why on earth would it? It's how I was made!"

"I beg your pardon?"

"As far back as I can remember, I was made like this."

"D-6175161, you recall you are taking part in an experiment for The Foundation?"

"Yes sir!"

"And yet, you've just told me you remember being made like that?"

Vines leaned in, "Sir, perhaps it's part of the effect?"

"Perhaps. D-6175161, your… artillery. Is it functional?"

"Yes sir. Would you care for a demonstration?"

"Vines, those walls are bulletproof, right?"

"I believe so, sir."

"Very well, D-6175161, you may proceed."

Without hesitation, the creature turned to face the opposing wall and fired a brief burst into it. The security cameras zoomed in on the bullets embedded in the wall. Or what should have been bullets. The monitors the two researchers were looking through revealed what looked to be human teeth.

"That's… interesting…"

"Sir, isn't that similar to what 126 can do?"

"What?"

"Well, it's a machine gun which is also part organic.

"…"

"Can't say it doesn't…"

"You have got to be fucking kidding…"

Vines and Reed had a thick pad of documents in front of them. In the observation room, a new one, without teeth stuck in the back wall and reinforced to study the more dangerous side of Euclid-class items, was the rotary dial.

"So, this dial somehow turns people into super hero-versions of

SCPs?"

"Yes sir, it's like something out of those comics which keep showing up…"

"What, those 'Foundation Force' ones?"

"That's them."

"I saw some of those, the art in some of the later issues were weird…"

"Can we concentrate please, sir?"

Alright, send the D-Class in!"

A D-Class entered the observation room. She picked up the dial.

"So, what am I doing?"

"Please dial the following number, D-4144445. 0 7 2 7."

Ssssssshhhhhhhhhclick!

After the light had returned to normal, in place of the D-Class was a scrawny man in tattered winter clothing. There were icicles hanging everywhere off the man and he appeared to be shivering.

"D-4144445, please state your name and any ability you may have."

"I a-a-am, C-c-c-creep-ping Cold!" The man replied between moist sounding sniffs, he then proceeded to extend his frostbitten fingers out towards the observation window. Ripples in the air caused the window to vibrate slightly. With nothing apparently happening, the man called Creeping Cold put his hand down.

"I repeat, please STATE any ability you may possess!"

"Hrrmm… I can inflict Frostbite upon my enemies."

Vines consulted the pad, "Seems more than likely either, 532 or 649." He studied the being in the room.

"Let's go with 532."

"Great stuff, thank you, D-4144445. Please return to normal, dial 7 2 7 0."

Vines' hand was still shaking.

"Okay, no more random dialling. I don't need to see another… thing which looks like You-Know-What calling itself 'Grandma's Footstep'!"

"I agree, we're lucky we've not dialled anything Keter yet."

"Shall we try the number followed by the item number?"

"Vines, what on earth did this thing conjure up when we found it?"

"Not sure. I heard off of one of the surviving MTFs it looked like a man shaped version of one of the 111s we have. Said it was confused and screaming about 'The Doctor's Wonder-Dome' or something."

"Let's stick to humanoids for now…"

"Is that wise, sir?"

"One of the cooperative ones."

"Alright, D-7164343, pick up the dial and enter the following numbers. 0 7 2 7 0 1 0 5."

Sssssshhhhclick!

In the D-Class' place was a young woman with long blonde hair, a skin tight blue costume and an elaborately designed Polaroid camera. She didn't seem shocked by her situation.

"Name, D-7164343."

"Photomancer!"

"D-7164343, would your current civilian identity be Iris Thompson?"

"I'm not at liberty to say, sir."

"Why not?"

"Firstly, that would defeat the entire purpose of the mask I'm wearing, sir. And secondly, that information is restricted. If you want any more info regarding me or anyone else in Project: Pandora, you may wish to contact the Security Commission for Powers Foundation."

"…What?"

"We have a whole universe out there, where another Foundation acts as a god damned security force using SCiPs a costumed heroes, and not one of them knows about this dial?!"

"They weren't all from their world's Foundation! According to the paper-kid, Wondertainment's got his own team of home-made heroes. Then there's that speaker-faced guy who said he was from the Church…"

"Vines, this is insane."

"Isn't that all we deal with, sir? I mean, we've had an anthropomorphic rabbit astronaut, a sentient hole in the universe and an un-dead, rotting dinosaur from hell. And that was just today!"

"Not what I mean, Vines."

"And quite frankly, sir. I could have done without a tank-man-thing telling me how to do my job better! I don't care how many qualifications it had."

"No, Vines. I mean why is it classed as Keter?"

Vines stared blankly for a moment and pointed at the results. "It says so right there, sir! If this thing's used it could potentially destroy the Earth!"

"And if it's not used?"

"…"

"I thought as much…"

"I'll just mark it as 'Safe'."

The Foundation never changes

War. War never changes.

When the Foundation first started out, they believed their goal to save humanity from the terrors of the world would last forever, that they'd be able to find and contain that which we could not understand, protecting us from the monsters living in our closets. The Foundation however overlooked a terror that existed everyday in front of everyone. A terror that would eventually bring the Earth to a barren wasteland, a terror that would create monsters of its own, a terror that would cause wars for years to come.

The Foundation overlooked humanity.

In the early 2050's when the Resource Wars began, The Foundation did not fear anything. They had enough of a hold in world governments that they'd be able to assure their resources would not be taken from them. However, as the oil wells dried up and uranium mines became empty, the Foundation was forced to move, forced to go to the only reliable source of resources left; the United States of America.

If you meet anyone who knows anything about the history of the world before the war, they will tell you that Europe and the Middle East fought against each other until they destroyed each other. Even then the Foundation was good at covering up the terrors that destroyed towns and cities.

As the USA and China were on the brink of nuclear war, the USA begged the Foundation to help, to use what they had contained to defeat the red menace, to secure America's victory. The O5 council was split. Some wanted to oblige, stating that if they didn't help, humanity would soon destroy itself. Others stated that the Foundation did not exist to solve such matters and that they should stay out of it.

During the time that they spent bickering, humanity had grown tired of waiting for the Foundation to save them, to shield them from the impending nuclear fire. As the bombs engulfed the land, the O5 council watched as humanity destroyed itself, watched as they realised that they had failed their goal, failed to protect humanity.

However, despite the predictions that humanity would be destroyed, it remained. Hundreds of years later, humanity carried on surviving. Unbeknownst to most, so did the Foundation. In over 200 years of humanity changing, adapting to the wasteland it had created, the Foundation had been hiding underground, unchanged for over 200 years. And war…

War never changes.

"Are we there yet?"

"No."

"How about now?"

"Nope and the next time you ask it'll be no and the time after that and even the time after that."

"What about the time after the time after that time…after that?"

Lucy turned around to face Jeremy, looked straight into his eyes and said "Especially the time after that."

Lucy and Jeremy had been travelling the wasteland for days. How many days? Well they'd lost count around 3. You'd be forgiven for thinking that these two should be killing each other rather than travelling with each other.

Lucy was a tall ex-caravanner, dirty jeans, leather jacket, and chestnut brown hair. In her hands she carried a weathered Laser Rifle and in her mind she carried a world of pain. She'd not been too trusting of folk or too sympathetic since her caravan was destroyed by a group of raiders. Made it out of there with nothing but her clothes, shotgun and some scars as a reminder.

So the fact that this battle stricken warrior was hanging around with a teenage Vault dweller with black scruffy hair who's only experience of battle was the occasional bully in the corridor made this situation even more confusing.

Jeremy and Lucy first met when Jeremy had just emerged from Vault 14 and immediately tried to make friends with a local Deathclaw. Any rational or sane human being would have run 180 degrees in the other direction however Jeremy had been part of one of Vault-Tec's experiments.

The inhabitants of Vault 14 were picked for being incredibly friendly and trusting to complete strangers. The Vault was to open 200 years after the Great war so the inhabitants were free to roam the wasteland. The test was to see if such trusting and friendly people could survive in a world run by bandits and mutants. The answer turned out to be "no unless someone with a laser rifle is near by".

Lucy kept Jeremy around not for friendship or for any beneficial reason. She kept Jeremy around because she knew he'd end up getting himself killed if she let him out of his sight. She'd had dogs that weren't as stupid as him however it was sort endearing…the sort of endearing that might get her killed but still endearing.

They were currently heading West along a deserted road, the only landmarks being the occasional rotting Nuka Cola truck or stripped to the bone Chryslus. Recently they'd heard of a city in the middle of the desert with electricity, food, water and everything any traveller should need. They called it "New Vegas".

"So when we get to Vegas, are we gonna stay there or is there more of this walking?" asked Jeremy.

"I don't know." responded Lucy, not interested in what would happen once they got to Vegas.

"Cause y'know, I'd like to maybe sit down for a while and just talk to people and make some friends. Did you know I like making friends?"

"No Jeremy I had absolutely no ide-"

Lucy stopped suddenly, looking at the ground on the side of the road. She put out her arm to catch Jeremy, to stop him from carrying on walking.

"What is it?" Jeremy asked, looking in the same direction as Lucy.

Lucy wondered over to the point she was looking at. Jeremy followed cautiously. As they both neared the point on the ground, they noticed something metallic under the dirt.

"A Pip-Boy? Why would someone have dropped their Pip-Boy?" Jeremy asked, completely oblivious to the fact that its owner likely didn't drop it intentionally.

Lucy didn't respond to Jeremy. She had seen a door in the rock formation ahead. She walked up to the door and opened it slowly. Jeremy meanwhile, began fiddling with the Pip-Boy, trying to find out who's it was and what Vault they had come from.

"Vault 25," they both said in unison.

"How'd you know that?" Lucy questioned.

"It says on this Pip-Boy." Jeremy responded. "How did you know?"

"Because I've just found Vault 25."

A large mechanical piston swooped down and locked onto the huge lumbering Vault door. The sound of grinding metal echoed throughout the Vault as the piston effortlessly pulled the Vault door. The piston let go of the door, allowing the door to freely roll to the side, revealing the Vault's entrance to Lucy and Jeremy.

"Should we be going in here?" asked Jeremy, partly out of fear and partly out of being told not to go into other Vaults during his Vaults education.

"Well technically no, however there might be some supplies in here that we'll need," Lucy said as they walked into the Vault.

"But we have plenty of supplies, it can't be that far to Vegas can it?"

"We're running out of water, we've been travelling for days and haven't seen any indication that Vegas is nearby. We need these supplies."

Jeremy reluctantly obliged, following Lucy into the Vault. As they walked down the rusting, metal corridors, they noticed something about this Vault. A logo that had been on the Vault door and seemed to be everywhere inside too.

"Well it's not a Vault-Tec logo…maybe this was a military Vault?" Lucy asked Jeremy as they opened another door which led into a pitch black area.

"Why would the military need a Vault?" Jeremy asked as the lights in this area switched on.

Both of them watched as the lights revealed a huge structure with doors all around the outside, fenced catwalks and seemingly a bottomless pit. It looked almost like a prison. Both Lucy and Jeremy were paralysed by the sheer size of the structure.

"What is it?" Lucy asked Jeremy.

"I dunno." Jeremy responded, both still staring at the structure.

"What do you mean you don't know? You came from a Vault!"

"Yeah but it didn't look like this."

They made their way along a catwalk leading to the centre of the structure. In the middle of the structure was some sort of office overlooking the rest of the structure, as if the office itself was watching all these doors.
The office itself seemed to be some sort of security office, possibly designed for guards. Consoles and computers were all around the edge of the room, lockers and file cabinets had been knocked over in the centre now laying in a pile of dust.

Lucy walked over to one of the computers which had been left on. It was stuck on the usual login screen. Having fiddled with a few terminals across the wasteland, Lucy knew how to hack into the RobCo terminals. She began hacking her way into the computer.

After a while of guessing random words like "country" and "ashtray", the green text on the screen displayed a list of numbers with the letters "SCP" in front of them. Using the keyboard, she scrolled through them and them pressed enter to view one of these files.

The computer began ticking as it displayed the file.

Item #: SCP-1093

Object Class: Safe

Special Containment Procedures: SCP-1093 is to be kept inside a sealed 5 meter by 5 meter containment cell. The cell is to be encased in a 30 centimeter thick lining of lead. Personnel are prohibited from entering the containment cell or making contact with SCP-1093 unless instructed by Level 4 personnel assigned to the object.

"What is this place?" Lucy asked rhetorically as she carried on reading. Jeremy was looking around the office at the consoles and computers. He came across another computer like the one Lucy was sat on, stuck on a screen saying "Warning! Restarting grid Alpha-5 will shut off the following containment procedures: SCP-1145. Do you wish to continue?"

Without thinking Jeremy pressed enter on the keyboard to continue the restart. Almost as soon as he pressed it, alarms began ringing with flashing red light illuminating the structure. Lucy turned to Jeremy. "What did you do?!" she asked, fear and anger coming across in the tone of her voice.

Sentrybots appeared from concealed points around the structure, making their way along the catwalks to an area in front of Lucy and Jeremy. They could see a large metal door slowly rising upwards as water began to pour out of the room.

Jeremy looked back at the computer screen. It now read "WARNING! Containment breach detected! Deploying Security Forces!" As Jeremy was reading, white Mister Gutsies flew past, all having the same logo seen around the Vault painted on them.

"I think maybe we should leave?" Jeremy said, already heading towards the door.

"Not without supplies!" Lucy said as she ran past Jeremy and onto the catwalk.

"Supplies?!" Jeremy shouted as he ran after her, both unaware of what was being released behind them.

"I really don't think there's anything useful in this place, I really think we should leave." Jeremy was almost to begging point as they walked down a hallway filled with doors.

Lucy ignored Jeremy, looking through the small windows on each door to see if there were any supplies inside however so far she hadn't been able to tell what was behind these doors. As she looked into one of these cells she noticed an odd looking statue up against the far corner of the room.

"Well that's creepy," Lucy said as she carried onto the next door. Jeremy looked through the same window. The statue had moved unbeknownst to Jeremy and was now right up against the door with its spray painted face staring back at Jeremy. "Yep that's pretty creepy."

The hallway seemed endless as Lucy looked through door after door. "Lucy, there is nothing down here. I understand we need supplies but I really think we should go." Lucy rested her head on a door in exhaustion, knowing Jeremy was right. She reluctantly agreed to leave as they began walking back to the entrance.

"So what do you think this place is?" Jeremy asked Lucy. "A prison of some sort? A military one I would guess. Maybe they were experimenting on people like they were in the other Vaults."

"They were experimenting on people in the other Vaults? Well they weren't in mine!" Lucy just looked at Jeremy, smiling as if to say "Oh really?" and then carried on walking. As they got close to the office they noticed something coming towards them.

"Is…is that a floating **teddy bear**?" Lucy asked as the anomalous teddy bear began floating towards them.

Jeremy's Pip-Boy began clicking as the rad-count went up considerably. "Whatever it is, it's really really really radioactive." Jeremy said as they both started moving backwards. The teddy bear carried on floating towards them. "I've got some Rad-X in my pack, quick get it out" Jeremy fumbled through Lucy's backpack to find the Rad-X. They both took the pills and waited for them to kick in however the bear kept advancing and Rad-counter kept going up.

"I don't think the Rad-X is going to help." Jeremy said nervously as he looked at his Pip-Boy's Rad-counter. "I am not dying down here because of a fucking teddy bear!" Lucy shouted as she pulled her Laser Rifle out and began shooting at the bear. The first two shots missed, passing close to the bear. The third shot is a direct hit, causing the teddy bear to catch fire however it carried on, seemingly unaffected by the fire consuming it.

"What the fuck is this thing?!" Lucy shouted, shooting at it again and again. The bear was getting too close to them now, the Pip-Boy's Rad-counter now deafening them with clicks.

They both collapsed onto the floor as the bear got closer. The last thing they could see is a bright light as the sounds of mechanical arms echoed throughout the hallway.

"Great show old chap. Once again you have beaten me at the hardest game of all, Blackjack! Truly you are the greatest person to have ever lived." The old gentleman said in an upper class English accent.

Jeremy was surrounded by women in fancy dresses, seemingly magnetised to him. In front of him stood piles of chips and bottle caps.

"I am the best in the world at Blackjack" Jeremy shouted out loud as the women and men around him laughed. Jeremy turned to the woman on his right. Her long blonde hair rolled down her shoulders, her bright red lips pushed together as her blue eyes look into

Jeremy's

"So what was your name again?" Jeremy asked, pulling the woman towards him. "Violet, hot stuff." She said, winking at Jeremy as she did. Jeremy smiled and then turned to the woman on his left. "And your name sweet thing?" he said, pulling her closer to him.

"Civillian! Wake up immediately!" She said in a robotic, British male sounding voice.

"Uh…I…what?" Jeremy said now confused.

"I think you better wake up Jeremy!" a voice said from behind him. Jeremy turned to face the voice. A life-size Vault Boy was standing in front of him, somehow appearing two dimensional. Vault boy gave Jeremy a thumbs up and a wink.

Jeremy realised what was happening. "Oh god no, it's another dream isn't it? Can't I just stay for a bit longer? Please?"

Jeremy slowly opened his eyes to see a Mister handy floating above him.

"Civilian! You are to wake up and follow me immediately!" It said again, staring at Jeremy with its golden robotic eyes.

Jeremy looked around the room he was in. It was some sort of medical wing. He noticed that he had a Rad-away drip attached to his arm and various used Stimpaks were scattered on a table next to him. He could not see Lucy anywhere.

"Where's Lucy?" He asked becoming concerned.

"Ah! Yes! Your accomplice! Follow me and I will take you to her!" The robot practically shouted at Jeremy.

Jeremy carefully removed the Rad-away drip out of his arm. Not knowing where he was or what was going on, Jeremy followed the robot out of the room…oh and also, this is Jeremy, he trusts almost everything that can speak. They walked down a corridor, not like the corridors they had been walking down before, these ones appeared clean, new, white. The doors were made of wood, clean wood. The

robot then led Jeremy through one of the doors into a room with a long table at one end, a TV screen above the table and only a few dim lights illuminating the room and also illuminating Lucy who was sat on a chair, facing the table.

"You took your time." Lucy said to Jeremy, looking relieved.

"I was just winning at blackjack and talking to this lovely lady called Violet."

Lucy's face changed to one of confusion. "What?"

The screen above the desk then flickered on. A face appeared of a woman, about 30-35 years of age with short red hair, small lips and wearing a grey suit. The face remained motionless as words began coming from concealed speakers.

"Welcome civilians to Vault 25. I imagine you have questions. Questions as to why you are here, where here is and what happened down in the Vault. All of these questions are perfectly normal and you are entitled to ask them. The answers however you are not entitled to receive. Normally, Protocols say that in the event of civilians discovering this Vault, the civilians must be terminated to keep the secrets of this Vault safe. This is why there are currently two sentry guns pointed at your heads."

Both Lucy and Jeremy looked round the room. They were able to make out the shape of two sentry guns in the dark corners of the room in front of them. The voice began to speak again.

"However, I have watched the end of civilisation, I have watched the Human Race descend into chaos and decay, I have watched the violent and brutal nature of humanity without leadership. All of this however, is nothing compared to what is in this facility. Seeing my own race die as this Vault keeps these monstrosities alive has given more some sort of…compassion. My fellow co-workers would disagree with what I'm about to do. Fortunately for you, they are not here."

"I don't understand, where are we?" Jeremy asked the voice.

"As I said, the answers you are not entitled to. The answers you wish to seek will not help you understand any more than simply not telling you. And this is what you must do. You must not tell anyone about this place. Forget you came here, forget what you saw, continue with your lives as so many civilians before you have. Keep this place a secret or we will for you. Do you understand?"

"I understand but sooner or later more than one or two people will find this place. If the NCR or Legion find this Vault, they will find out what's happening here." Lucy said back to the voice, trying to get her point across.

"And when that day arrives, I hope they're ready to deal with the consequences. Now if there are no more questions, the door to your right will lead out of here and back into the wasteland. I have given you the supplies I can spare. It should be enough to get you to New Vegas."

"How did you know we were going to New Vegas?" Jeremy asked as he stood up.

"Why else would you be all the way out here? Follow the road to the west. You'll know when you're near."

"Thank you. Before we go however…who are you?" Lucy asked the voice.

There was a pause before the voice began to speak again. "I was known as O5-6. My real name, is something that was lost a long time ago."

The screen then cut off and the speakers went silent. Lucy and Jeremy looked at each other as they made their way through the door. As they left the Vault, the heavy, metallic door of Vault 25 rolled into the position it was originally in. Lucy and Jeremy then carried on walking along the road they had been before.

"So…when will we be there?" Jeremy asked Lucy, not wishing to go against what they had agreed with O5-6.

"I don't know Jeremy…and no I won't know in another ten minutes

either…or the ten minutes after that."

The two carried on walking through the wasteland to the city of hopes and dreams they had heard about. As they made their way along the road, an eyebot followed them. An eyebot painted white with the same mysterious logo they had seen before painted on it. While the voice had told them that it would let them go, it had not told them that they would forever be under the watch of the Foundation, forever being watched to make sure they'd keep the Foundation a secret.

The Foundation was like war, it followed humanity wherever it went, it brought out the best and worst in humanity, helped shape the world around it. And war…

War never changes.

Belation In the Evening

Welcome to NEXUS-08. Welcome to Night Vale.

—

Good evening, Night Vale: this is Lee Baker filling in for Cecil, and this is Night Vale at Night. It is currently nine o'clock PM, and the temperature outside is seventy-three degrees. It has been seventeen days since the last radioactive sludge-being crawled from the sewers.

Now, you're probably wondering where Cecil is. He had to call in sick tonight, so I got called in. I apologize for any hiccups along the way, but I've got all the notes he left for me right here.

Now to start things off, today's news.

Meg of Meg's Good Eatin' was arrested by the sheriff's secret police this afternoon, after punching a visiting tourist in the face. According to the victim, the attack was provoked only by his asking of "You know there are mysterious lights above the diner, right?" When questioned, Meg gave the statement "You can only be asked the same damn question so many times."

The sheriff has given us assurance that Meg will be back making her famous Heart Attack on a Plate soon enough, and would like to remind everyone that all flying saucers and mysterious lights seen over the next few weeks are no cause for alarm. It is their mating season, and they will be moving on to their migration grounds by the end of the month.

The sheriff's office would also like to remind all citizens to be on the lookout for the man and woman responsible for hijacking and stealing the car of Mr. Everett Hoover. The car is a blue 1972 Ford Pinto, and the carjackers are known to be a blonde-haired woman wearing a Led Zeppelin t-shirt and middle-eastern man wearing a

red baseball cap, both in their thirties. According to Mr. Hoover, the pair, upon violently tossing Mr. Hoover out of his vehicle, proclaimed that they needed to borrow his car, on account that the chupacabra messiah had been kidnapped, and they needed to get her back.

Please do not feed the chupacabras, and ignore all of their attempts at proselytizing.

In addition, if you happen to be driving out late at night and see a police car, please make sure to properly identify it as belonging to the sheriff's secret police. If the car is on fire, it is most likely a demon cop rather than the sheriff's secret police. If the police car is on fire, and you hear unexplained expletives coming from your radio, I advise speeding up. You *might* be able to outrun him.

Popular self-help book *Star Signals* has been pulled from the shelves of the Night Vale Community Library and Cthulhu Corner Books, due to complaints by readers of "eldritch visions of the maddening, unfathomable beyond". No word has been given as to when the book will be re-released.

Now, onto our community calendar…

Herman Fuller's Circus of the Disquieting is in town through tomorrow, so if you haven't been able to get to one of the showings, you've only got a few shows left until they pack up and head off to parts unknown.

Friday night is the annual Rocky Horror Picture Show – Spleen Eaters from Venus double feature in the Night Vale Memorial Dog Park, put on by the Alexylva Community College at Night Vale Movie Club. Admission and refreshments are free, but donations to the Dog Park and the Movie Club are appreciated.

This Saturday is the First Divided Fifthist Church's Annual Pancake Buffet, from ten in the morning until seven in the evening. A raffle will be held after the dinner, and door prizes will be given out throughout the day. Tickets are seven dollars for adults and three dollars for children under 12. Regular, buckwheat, and the First Divided's famous bonemeal pancakes will be served.

Now our biggest story.

Night Vale was thrown into a hubbub this morning, when a mysterious man arrived with a U-Haul, and took up residence in the abandoned loft next to Big Rocco's Pizza. The man, claiming to be a scientist, unloaded over two dozen crates with unknown contents, and declined to comment as to his purpose here in Night Vale. He was later seen at Big Rocco's with a half-dozen other individuals wearing labcoats. According to Frankie, of Frankie's Bar and Grill, the betting pool was five to one in favor of meth house, seven to one for Russian prostitution ring, and ten to one for interdimensional meth-prostitute ring.
However, these suspicions were laid somewhat to rest during a town meeting called in the afternoon by the mysterious visitor, who claimed his name was Carlos.

[shuffling of papers]

I, uh, I can't seem to find his last name written down anywhere. Just Carlos. And uh, the minutes are very vague…the majority of what I have here is just…descriptions of Carlos No-Name-Given. Just really long descriptions of Carlos.

"He has a square jaw and teeth like a military cemetery…perfect and beautiful hair… perfect and beautiful coat"…It just goes on like this through the entire thing. [Shuffling of papers] Just notes and notes and notes…

[pause]

"He grinned, and everything about him was perfect, and I fell in love instantly."

This is in the notes, ladies and gentlemen, and not in the margins, either. As far as I can tell, he was actually planning on saying this, on live radio. If he wasn't, I might have just ruined his reputation, so…yeah.

I really don't know what to say. It's just pages of this…he keeps repeating "His hair is perfect", over and over and over again…Oh… he drew art.

Okay…

From what I can make out of the actual meeting, events of note include Old Woman Josie's corn muffins, and Carlos No-Name-Given talking about studying the town with his scientist friends. I can't seem to find anything on what he plans on studying, or what kind of scientist he is, but there is mention that the vaguely menacing paragovernmental agents were back in town, which is a something of a relief.

That's all I have on that, ladies and gentlemen.

[Pause, shuffling of papers, faint throat-clearing]

I'm going to be honest, I'm concerned. Cecil seems to be getting a bit stressed with work. Happens to everyone, of course. A vacation might do him some good.

[Pause]

You know, this radio station can get a bit lonely at night. I'm the only one here for the show, and the building is big and old. The floorboards creak, and the walls groan, and the insulation is poor so the wind howls in the stairwell. Gives it some personality, but I'm a sucker for old stuff like this.

And now, the weather.

Вы все сгорите, и я буду есть прах и танцевать над мертвым миром.

Gah! Sorry, sorry, hit the wrong dial by mistake.

(Other Side, Pendulum)

[Radio silence for two minutes ten seconds, followed by the sound of the studio door being thrown open with significant force and heavy,

panicked breathing]

Ladies and gentlemen…ladies and gentlemen there is…

[Breathing slows]

Ladies and gentlemen…during the break, I went down to the restroom. There is a shrine, in the mens' restroom. Right there on the toilet. There's a photo of Carlos No-Name-Given, and candles, and human skulls, and jackalopes hung from the ceiling by their own intestines, and the walls are covered in the words "perfect hair", just scribbled down on top of each other.

[Pause]

And…There's a blow-up doll with a wig glued to it and "Carlos" written across the chest in permanent marker, and someone has been doing horrible, horrible things to it.

Ladies and gentlemen, I am afraid that Cecil has gone dangerously mad. Please stay in your homes until the state police get here. Keep your doors locked and the lights off. Do not answer the door, even for your neighbors and the sheriff's secret police. Wait until the state police arrive give the all-clear.

[Door opens, indistinct male voice speaks.]

L-ladies and gentlemen, Carlos No-Name-Given is in the studio with me. His hair is perfect. I don't mean that in some sort of fawning homoerotic sense, I mean his hair is *literally* perfect…and…and he's wearing Cecil's face as a jock strap…oh god Cecil's face is still moving.

[Indistinct male voice]

No, I wasn't criticizing your fashion sense. It's very…Phlegthon-chic.

[Indistinct male voice]

Oh…really? That so?…Well okay, I guess. Just… just hold on, let me get my stuff…

[Five gunshots are heard. After a short pause, two more are heard. After a second pause, three more are heard, followed by the sound of the gun reloading]

[pause]

Oh fuck…

[The chirping of baby birds can be heard echoing in the room.]

Oh fuck!

[Three more gunshots.]

Ladies and gentlemen, I lied. The state police are not coming. [Gunshot] The state police are not going to help. [Gunshot] If you leave your home, you will be shot. If you pass the quarantine perimeter, you will be shot. [Gunshot] Please lie face down with your hands on top of your head [Gunshot], and wait. [Gunshot.] You'll know when it happens.

Good night, Night Vale, and good fucking riddance."

[Twenty-second pause, followed by the sound of Carlos rising from the floor.]

Don't listen to Lee. He forgot his medications this morning. There is no reason to panic. Cecil will be back tomorrow, don't worry.

Proverb for the night: a stitch in the heart leads through the night, and further still.

[Radio silence until execution of Penzance Protocol at 01:24. NEXUS-08 declared sealed with full purging of populace. Foundation casualties at 78%.]

Mint Condition

The green membrane stretched out instantly across the white cinderblock wall, and in a flurry of limbs, an eccentric genius and his grandson fell through it.

“Come on, Morty, let’s go!” Rick said, grabbing his grandson by the wrist and dragging him to his feet.

“Ww-www-wait a minute, Rick!” Morty whined. “I just… y’know. I guess… I’m just not comfortable with this, you know? I mean wwwwwhat are we doing here? Where even are we?”

“Ugch,” Rick groaned, rolling his eyes. “Universe 173-X, Morty. Or as I like to call it Bu-BELCH-uzz kill central.” It occurred to Rick that it was probably time for another drink, so he pulled his flask out of his pocket and took a swig, still moving steadily down the hallway. “All the secrets of the universe, Morty. Every single last one of them passes through this universe at one time or another, and what do the people here do?”

“Ah, Jeez, I don’t know, Rick!”

“They BOTTLE it, Morty!” Rick yelled a little too loudly, grabbing his grandson up by the shirt and shaking him. “They bottle it up and keep it a secret! All the wonders, put it into these little tiny boxes! Whole warehouses full of the stuff, Morty! A-a-a-a cake that goes on forever! A teleporter made out of clockwork! If you can think of it they p-Burp-robably have it in here somewhere! Do you know what they do with them all, Morty? You wanna know what these people *do* with all the stuff they lock up?”

Morty shook his head furiously. “Nnno.. Wh-wh-what do they do?”

Rick’s eyes turned into slits. “*NOTHING!*” Then they bugged out of his head like saucers or globes, or other large, round, white objects. “And that’s exactly what they’re going to do with us if they find us,

Morty. They're going to lock us up, throw away the key, and forget they ever had us. Well I'm not gonna go out like that, Morty. You hear me? I am *not* going out like that!" Rick reached into a bag and pulled out an orange jumpsuit, tossing it into Morty's face. "Now quick, put this on."

Morty held up the jumpsuit with a look of shocked fear. "UUuuhh Rick?"

"Don't argue with me. Morty! You wanna be locked up forever? Is that what you want?" He barked.

"Bbbbbbut where's yours, Rick? Y'Know? I'm not the only one. Who-Who needs a disguise here!"

"I'm a scientist, Morty. My whole life is a disguise for these idiots. Come on!"

Morty slipped into the jumpsuit easily and zipped it up. "What?! Seriously, Rick? I look like I'm… y'know, some kind of…of prisoner or something."

"Oh wow, good job, Morty. You figured it out," Rick said, rolling his eyes. "You sure *you're* not the genius who's done this fifty times before?"

"You know what Rick? Shut up! Alright? Just shut up!"

"SHH! Quiet Morty… Security. Put on your game face."

Rick wiped the little bit of vomit from his chin. Morty clammed up instantly, shivering and shaking and sweating like a death row inmate on his way to the gas chamber. For once, in his life, Rick didn't have anything to say about that. It was exactly the effect they needed.

"Morning Dr. Sanchez," the guard at the door ahead said, reaching under his desk and pressing a buzzer. "…Didn't they give you an escort for that D-Class?"

"Yeah yeah, I know what you're thinkin'." Rick chuckled as he reached into his pocket and produced a very realistic looking ID

badge and a taser “Apparently we’re short staffed this week. 682 had a rampage or something, I dunno. They just gave me the stun gun and told me to shoot him if he steps out of line.”

“WWwwwwwww-!” Morty began, but Rick slapped him hard on the shoulder and dug his hand in tight.

“Knock it off D-90723. You think I like this? You think I like being the bad-guy? Do you, D-90723? Like… Like this is how I get my kicks, or something? This is beneath me!” Rick said, and turned to the security guard. “No offense.”

“Hey, none taken. I feel the same way every time one of the Janitors is out and they make me go in there to mop up!” the Guard said and chuckled. He swiped the card and handed it back quickly. “Alright go on in. What’s the damage today?”

“Ah, you know I can’t tell you that, Steve! Or else I’d have to Ki-BURP-Kill ya, and we don’t want that around, do we?” They shared a laugh that was a little too heartfelt and hearty for Morty to be entirely comfortable with as they walked through the checkpoint and the door hissed shut behind them. “UGH, I *hate* these guys so *much!*” Rick groaned, and decided it was time for another drink.

“Uuuuh Rick! Are you seriously going to taze me?”

“What? NO! It’s not even real! Jesus, Morty, what kind of monster do you think I am? Like I’m just going to shoot my Grandson full of electricity just to keep a cover story? Of course I wouldn’t. Especially not in *here*!”

“Yeah b-bu-but Outside? You were saying to that guard, you know? And it seemed like he even knew you!”

Rick sighed as he walked, careful not to make eye contact with anyone else that might be in the hall, and to keep the dummy taser trained on his ‘prisoner’. Two little cyclopses rolled by with a soft buzzing noise. Through the window to the left, a bunch of men in white coats were looking through yet another window at a man in a jumpsuit placing an order on a jet-black vending machine. Uncontrollable laughter could be heard down the hall. “I maybe sorta

kinda have an alternate version of me who might have a high security clearance and actually agree with these whack-a-loons around here. Not my most flattering alter ego, Morty."

"Who even are they? What are all these things?!"

The tiny cyclopses stopped in front of the pair of them and looked up with a hopelessly cute expression in their single eyes. Rick shooed them away with his foot and a few gravelly expletives. "The SCP Foundation, Morty. The biggest, most bloated, best funded, most scrupulous bureaucracy in the Multiverse. Anything that doesn't line up with their primitive notions of physics, they bury it. Lock it up as an Es See Pee Object or whatever. Not only are they pathologically allergic to, y'know, *real* science, but they're also bastards, Morty. Cold hearted bastards. Even if you ignore the heart-Brap-less shit they're doing to North Korea in this universe, they've got this little girl in… I mean, I'm a bad man Morty. I've done some really bad things in my life. But these people? But *fuck* these people, Morty. *Fuck* them!"

"OooOokay, Rick. Fine. But if it's so dangerous, what are we even doing here?"

Rick sighed. "Come on, Morty. Haven't you got the formula by now? We're here to get something, Morty. Something very valuable. Something I need for my research so I can keep doing science and going on these crazy adventures."

"What? What is it? Ddddon't I deserve to know? At this point? Y'know?"

"SSSHHHHH! Keep quiet. I know it's around here some place."

Rick and Morty shuffled through the hall, down the path marked by a green line on the floor, through winding corridors and open mezzanines. Safety signs and warning symbols were everywhere, reminding everyone that workplace hazards (mostly in the form of dead people and an unidentified green substance) are very real, and accidents unexcusable. Morty was getting more and more worried by the instant, and was wringing his hands and pulling his shirt by the time Rick finally told him to stop. Rick looked around in all

directions, and got down on one knee in front of his grandson with a smile on his face.

“Listen Morty, you know I love you, right? Like, I’ve got your back, buddy. As long as I’m around, you got nothin’ to worry about. You know that, right? Morty?”

Morty thought about it for a minute, not quite sure how to respond. He had killed his own parents more than once, carried illicit substances through interdimensional customs in his rectum, watched Rick turn the entire planet into body-horror Cronenbergs, only to abandon it for the universe next door where everything was still okay (unless you count having to bury his own corpse). And yet through everything, Rick had made sure that Morty remained relatively sane and whole.

“Yyyyyyeah, Rick. I guess so.”

“Alright. Good, Morty. Because through this door, there are going to be people, Morty. People who aren’t easy to fool. And it’s going to take some convincing for everyone to come out of this in one piece Morty. That’s where you come in! You’re the insurance policy, you get it? You’re the anchor, Morty! You’re the wing-nut that holds this whole plan to-BURP-ther.”

“Www…What?!”

Rick threw the door open and grabbed up his grandson by the back of the neck. From nowhere at all he produced a pistol and pinned it to the side of Morty's head, an insane glow cast over his eyes. “ALRIGHT! NOBODY MOVE OR I BLOW THIS KID’S BRAINS ALL OVER THIS CON-BUR-TAINMENT UNIT!”

Everyone froze. There were twelve people in the room with vials of green, viscous fluid. One was pouring it onto a compact disc. Another, spoon feeding it to a restrained monkey. Yet another was mixing some of it with molten plastic; a tiny injection molder at his side. Morty was frozen in catatonic despair, and started muttering “he won’t do it” over and over again, under his breath; eyes the size of basket balls with pupils the width of rice.

Out of the corner of his eye, Rick saw an assistant reaching for the buzzer, and shot the panel before it could be pressed. “Don’t even try that again, alright? Whoever you are? I’m not a very good shot and I don’t think I could do it again. I might *kill* someone!”

“…Sanchez?” One of the researchers spoke up, still frozen in place. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“I need you to give me some green slime, Bennings. Raw or refined, I don’t care. Jus-PURRPRPR-just put a bunch of it in a plastic container and I’ll be right out of here.”

“Come on, Sanchez. You know I can’t do that…”

Rick looked at the researcher with a wild glare and shook the gun in his direction. “YOU WANNA GET CORPSED TODAY, BENNINGS? HUH? IS-IS THAT IT? You want the mouth of green minty foot-smelling hell to open up right under your feet? Today? That on your list of things to do?”

Bennings, who had a bit of green mist on his face, and a non-trivial amount of it on his gloved hands, threw his arms up and shook his head. “Whoa! Whoa! Just take it easy, buddy! Think about where you are! You think you’re just gonna walk out of here with a liter of 447 and no one is going to stop you?"

“Pardon my saying so, but considering how volatile this stuff is, that’s exactly what I’m thinking. As long as I’ve got my little insurance policy here with me. No one wants a repeat of Summer ‘98 in here, do they?”

Silence from the peanut gallery, apart from the steady babbling of Morty, who was only just coming out of his state of shock.

“I didn’t think so!”

“WHAT?” Morty said, suddenly pulling away. “WHAT DID YOU JUST CALL ME, RICK?”

“Morty, what are you-?”

“NO! I’m sick and tired of this Rick! Yyy-you don’t make any sense!

Anymore… Like, you tell me you love me, that you got my back, and now I'm just your puppet? You know?? Like I'm some kind of bargaining chip?! To get you what you want?"

Rick started glancing around the room furtively. The facade was crumbling. Morty was about to blow his cover. What now? What now, *genius*? "Morty, it's not like that, it's just—"

"Give me the gun Rick! You're not robbing this place, *I* am!" Morty Demanded, Shaking free of Rick's grasp. The researchers were starting to unfreeze and skitter toward the exit.

"Morty! Not now! Jesus, I just—"

"I SAID GIVE IT TO ME!" Morty snapped the pistol out of his grandfather's hand and fired two shots over the door-jam at the retreating researchers. "WHERE THE HELL DO YOU PEOPLE THINK YOU'RE GOING? HUH? Y'know… iiiiiiIt's not easy being a kid… runnin' around. With a crazy old man…"

Rick rolled his eyes. "Oh great one, Morty. Real take-charge kinda guy you are. Why don't you tell 'em all about your high-hickURP-school problems. I bet you'll *reeeally* have control of the situation then." Rick took a drink from his flask, poker-faced.

"SHUT UP RICK! OKAY? GET THE FUCKING STUFF!"

"Alright, Morty, Jesus. I'm going." Rick muttered. Quickly he walked to a tank in the corner, dipped in an empty plastic jug, and pulled it up full. Without a word he put a ventilator over his face, and slapped a bit of the slime on his forehead. And then on Morty's. Good timing, too, as a security team had just arrived at the sound of gunshots, and the entrance was full of firearms and shaking, scared-shitless operators.

"Alright everyone…" Rick said, taking the pistol from Morty and pressing it to his own temple as he fumbled in his pocket. The guards and researchers gasped. Some closed their eyes. "Thank you all very much for your patience… We'll be going now."

"Rrrrrrick! What is this stuff?" Morty asked, retching at the smell, and

all too aware that there wasn't a single firearm pointed at him any longer.

"I'll tell you later, alright Morty? C'mon, let's go. We got a *lot* more work to do."

The green membrane stretched out instantly across the white cinderblock wall, and disappeared as soon as they stepped through it.

"Thirty six *gallons*!" O5-3 said over the intercom speaker. "Thirty six gallons of SCP-447-2, taken from thirty six separate installations, all at precisely the same time, and apparently by you and your *grandson*!"

Dr. Sanchez rocked nervously in his chair, head in his hands, sweating. "Sir, I'm telling you, I have no idea how it happened. For one thing, I haven't had a drink in a long time. And for another, I've never even *met* my grandson!"

The four security guards in the room rolled eyes at one another. It was always like this with researchers caught up in their projects. After exposure, they all went to pieces. It wasn't fun to watch, but they had a job to do.

"Well, the video surveillance logs are pretty hard to ignore, Dr. Sanchez. Pretty *fucking* hard." O5's didn't often get angry, but this was a special situation. They had been caught with their pants far below the knee on this one, and all because just one highly valued doctor had access to things he shouldn't have. Obviously. How else had he managed to make a portal device? "In the old days, we killed people for pulling this kind of stunt. *On the spot*!"

Dr. Sanchez swallowed hard. "I know the situation is serious, sir, but I repeat, I had nothing to-"
The green membrane stretched out instantly across the white cinderblock wall behind him, with an audible bubbling noise. Dr. Sanchez's face drained of color as he heard his own voice behind him.

“WUBBA LUBBA DUB DUB!”

A hand grabbed him by the shoulder and pulled him through a bright green light, and suddenly, Dr. Sanchez found himself on the floor of a ruddy garage, surrounded by broken machinery, and a few glowing weird things that looked as though they might actually work. A green, gelatinous portal snapped closed in front of him before the security guards on the other side had even a chance to blink.

“Oh god, RICK!” Morty screamed, jumping up on a chair and pointing. “Whwwwho’s that?!”

“What? How do you know my name, kid?” Dr. Sanchez said gruffly, hopping up to his feet.

“Relax, Morty. I’ve got this under con-BEEELCH- control.” Rick took a nip of his flask and tossed it over his shoulder, empty. Dr. Sanchez turned on his heels, mouth drawn in a tight line with a stern look on his brow. “Hey there, me,” Rick said with a smirk. “How’s life on the inside treating you?”

It wasn’t hard to tell them apart. Dr. Sanchez’s hair was combed flat, his shirt recently ironed, his eyes steady and sane; there wasn’t even any vomit on his chin. They sized one another up a moment while Morty babbled his way through a brief existential crisis.

“Jesus, Rick. What the hell have you done?” Dr. Sanchez demanded, grabbing his alter-ego by the collar. Suddenly the resemblance was uncanny.

Rick pushed Dr. Sanchez away, knocking him on his ass again “Can it, *Sanchez*,” Rick said with a smile. “I just took some of your precious…infinite…whatever…green slime. I need it for my portal gun.”

“Oh? You need it for your *portal gun*. Oh that explains *everything*! Holding your grandson at gunpoint… y’know… Runnin’ around like a goddamn drug addict on… On I don’t know what. This how you have a good time, Rick? Is it? This how you-you get your damn jollies? Ruining people’s careers and committing capital felonies?”

“Yeah, pretty much,” Morty shrugged.

“I mean that-that doesn’t even *touch* the level of kidnapping you just committed! How am I even supposed to get home, *RICK*?”

“Oh? And what was I supposed to do, Sanchez? Hm? Leave you there to be lobotomized and shooed back off into the wild? Is that what? Because from where I’m sitting I just saved your *life*. Which, by the way, you’re *welcome.*”

Dr. Sanchez opened his mouth to say something combative, but his heart wasn’t in it and he slumped back. “…Thank you.”

“Damn right, ‘thank you.’ I may not like you, Sanchez, or what you people stand for. With your boxes and-burp-and your ‘normalcy’ and whatever. But seriously? You think I’d let another version of me take the fall for the Dirty Sanchez incident of ‘09? C’mon, Sanchez. We have a little more integrity than *that*.” Rick extended a hand and helped Dr. Sanchez to his feet.

“Uh, Rick?” Morty asked. “Why, uh… why *did* you need that for your portal gun? Anyway? Like.. We spent like two months just… just getting all of that stuff, you know?”

“Welp, let’s ask our friend here, Dr. Sanchez. What’s the one thing you can’t do with SCP-447-2?” Rick asked with a fiendish grin.

“Uh… You mean expose it to dead bodies?”

“Ex-Actly!” Rick said, throwing a blanket off of a machine in the corner. In the hopper up at the top where the unmistakable shapes of three human corpses. Morty started whining. He could swear that *his* was one of them. “And do you know *why*, Sanchez?”

Dr. Sanchez scoffed and crossed his arms. “Of course not. No one does. And even if I did, I couldn’t tell you without-” Suddenly, Dr. Sanchez realized that his employment with the Foundation was effectively at its terminus, and stopped that train of thought. “… Whatever, I don’t know!”

“It unifies time and space, Sanchez! Think of it! Just a few splatters of this stuff on a carcass and BOOM! All moments are the same

moment! Every one! They all come together and start, y'know, swirling around and stuff." Rick grabbed his other self about the shoulders and got right into Dr. Sanchez's face. "And that's a gold-mine, Sanchez! It's a goddamn gold-mine!"

"Yeah, sure. Sounds like a gold-mine of spiralling death to me," Sanchez said. "Reeeeeally impressed with you right now, Rick. Super-duper impressed."

"Jesus, Sanchez!" Rick slapped himself in the face and raked his hand down it. "Stop thinking like some kind of meta-BURP-physical Rush Limbaugh and think like a scientist! One gigantic minty death-whirlpool, a couple thousand people lost, two square kilometers of land that can never be used again and suddenly you just… Just *stop* the march of progress? You people make me sick, you know that?" Rick threw the switch on the Corpse-O-Matic 3000, turning on the giant food-processor. He ho-hummed to himself as a soft, white powder filled a tiny jar by his feet. "If you took the time to be *precise* about anything-see the big picture for once in your lives-*you* could have invented this thing!"

"Uuuuh Rick?" Morty piped up. "Isn't that, y'know, like really dangerous? Or something?"

"Of course it is, Morty! Why do you think I haven't sold it to anyone yet?! Like someone like your dad could be trusted with this kind of power? Like just anybody could ride on top of this powder keg?! NO. It takes guts, Morty. Guts and guile and a bl-eeeeeeeelch-ood alcohol content of about 0.05 to do it."

"Gee, thanks a lot, Rick," Dr. Sanchez said, arms still folded. "So what the hell am I supposed to do, huh? I don't even drink anymore."

"Yeesh, you really let those bureaucrats get right on top of you, didn't you?" Rick said, disgusted. "There's a bottle of rye in the fridge, help yourself. Morty and I already have everything we need back home."

"WHAT?" Morty screamed. "Yyyyyou mean this isn't our garage?!"

Rick snickered “Heheh… Nope, it’s our garage alright. About five years ago, when I first moved back. As for you, Sanchez, you do whatever you want, I don’t care. This whole reality doesn’t even have a copy of us in it right now. But if you’d, y’know, like to reconnect with your family, maybe actually do something *important* with your life, they’ll be home in about two hours. Otherwise there’s a fully charged portal gun in the drawer. Go wherever you want.”

The green membrane stretched out instantly across the concrete floor.

“C’mon Morty. Time to go home,” Rick said. Morty shrugged off his confusion and jumped through. “See you later, me. Good luck with all of that everything we’re about to do together.” And he too, was gone, through the wormhole just as it closed up.

Dr. Sanchez tossled his own hair, slumped into a stool, and drank until it all made sense. Two hours later, when his family came home, it was the happiest he’d been in years. It was probably at that moment, that Dr. Rick Sanchez finally realized what’s really important in life.

“You know, Rick, I was thinking,” said Morty. “If like… the green slime, and the corpses, you know, they make all time and space do that… squishing together… thing. Wwwwwhat if you like… ate some of it?”

Rick narrowed his eyes at Morty, suddenly deathly serious and more lucid than he’d ever been. “Don’t ask me that question Morty. That’s a dark path you don’t wanna go down.”

Dr. Sanchez, five years earlier, in the garage, drunk, looked at a tiny pile of powdered corpse and a jar of the green slime. Tentatively, he cut the corpses into a line, ate a teaspoon of 447-2, and took a deep breath.

“Fuck it!”

In one smooth motion, he snorted the line up his nose. His hands

gripped his face in pain. He thrashed. He gasped. He knocked over some junk from the shelf in the garage.

“Augh! OH! OH GOD. OH MY GOD!…”

Dr. Sanchez stared down at his hands in disbelief.

"I’M A CARTOON!"

Stupendous Containment Procedures

Chagrin Falls, Ohio

The phone rang in Mr. Watts's room. Though he was only six years old, he got several phone calls, and he was very important. Normally, he would direct them to his assistant, but he was currently hunting some elephants in the backyard. He had told him to bring a large slab of meat back. Mr. Watts picked up the phone and smiled. "Hello?"

"Mr. Watts!" On the other end of the line, a female voice that sounded like it was a child trying to be polite to its parents so that she could get candy, despite sounding around 20 years old. The voice had an undercurrent of hyperactivity, however, as if the person on the other end had just drank a glass of Coca-Cola made with real cane sugar, glitter and enough caffeine to make you vibrate through walls. "I'm willing to increase my offer for you for your technology. My company is willing to offer one point five million jellybeans."

Mr. Watts reclined in his seat. "Is that one and a half million jellybeans, or one million jellybeans plus half a jellybean?"

"Ah! Shrewd, Mr. Watts, shrewd." The voice on the other end laughed. "The former, I assure you."

"…are any of them weird flavors Miss… Wondertainment?" Mr. Watts snickered at this. He could never take that name seriously, no matter how much he tried.

"Of course not! Dr. Wondertainment does not make 'weird' flavors! We only grow the best jelly beans around! Bubblegum, toffee, cola, buttered popcorn, marshmallow, strawberry daiquiri…"

"…what's a daiquiri?"

"I don't know. We just grow them. They taste good, though. And

they're fat-free, calorie-free, preservative-free… in fact, the only things they aren't free of are taste and price!"

"…that, plus a lifetime subscription to Chewing, and you may have a deal. I'll have to talk it over with my assistant."

"But of course! How's he doing?"

"He's-" Calvin was cut off by the sight of a four-foot-tall bipedal Bengal tiger walking into the room, eating from a can of tuna, his tail swaying happily. "Ah, he's here right now!"

"…on the phone with Isabel again?" asked the tiger, sitting on the bed and eating the tuna. "Turns out that elephants don't taste very good. Also, they're endangered, so I didn't actually catch it."

"How's one point five million jelly beans sound, Hobbes?"

"…sounds like diabetes. I'd say settle for no less than 1.6."

"I'm going to be donating most of it," Calvin explained, going back to the phone. "One point six, and we'll knock it down to a five-year subscription to Chewing."

"Excellent! People from my company will be stopping by to pick up your prototypes. And, uh, we'd like the Duplicator *without* the setting dial on it. Also, we'll let you keep your Transmogrifier pistol. Guns are so last year, anyway."

"Take the Cerebral Enhance-o-Tron, too. It wears off too quickly. Maybe you can do better work with it."

"Certainly! Oh, and… don't trust the policemen." The phone disconnected, and Calvin frowned.

"…policemen?"

"CAL-VIN!" The six-year-old jumped out of his seat, and so did his tiger, immediately changing back into a stuffed animal as soon as his mother entered the room, looking very angry. "Why are there policemen outside who want to speak to you? And… for god's sake, why is there Tuna in your room *again?*"

"Hobbes was eating it! And I don't think they're policemen, mom; Isabel told me not to trust them."

Calvin's mother cradled her head in her hand and sighed."…if this is a repeat of the thing with the salamander…"

"It isn't, mom. Just… let me talk to them." Calvin drew his transmogrifier pistol from his pocket and headed downstairs.

"Spaceman Spiff slowly descends into the dungeon below, his specialized pistol raised…"

The agents frowned as they overheard the kid descending the stairs. He was supposed to be some kind of a reality bender, and he had somehow gotten in contact with the Big W, so he was important. They were to bring him in for interrogation. But… something was wrong here. Agent Wu looked at Agent Micheals. "Is he… pretending?"

"Be ready for anything." Micheals undid the button on his holster that kept his gun in place. He hated to shoot a kid, but if it was necessary…

"A fugitive from the galactic police," the narration continued, "Falsely accused of crimes he did not commit, Spiff is ready for this. He was warned by his colleague and sole friend, the mysterious Wondertainment!"

"…what?" Asked Micheals. "Wondertainment was just in contact with this kid? Are you kidding?"

"Zap-zap!" A blonde six-year-old in a red-and-black stripped shirt jumped around the corner, firing an empty water pistol at them. "Spiff's ray turns their laser pistols utterly useless!"

The agents drew their guns- only to find that they had been replaced with scraps of paper that bore the words "utterly useless". "…oh no."

Another two shots of the gun. "There are rats in the Galactic Police! And they shall be exterminated!"

The agents found themselves completely transformed into rats, squeaking around on the floor. Spaceman Spiff picked them up and took them back to his room.

I've only got two friends in the whole wide world, and I'm just fine with that. One of them lives under my coat in a leather holster, the other lives in a bottle, and often goes to a timeshare in a shot glass. I'm Tracer Bullet. I'm a gumshoe.

Today, I got an odd case. Two mooks from hell-knows-where show up in my own private residence and try to take me away, posing as true blue policemen. I got tipped off by a dame to them, so lucky me, I guess. So now, I guess it's time to apply my good friend Occam, my shaving razor.

I tell the two rats to start talking or they get cut. I don't mean rats figuratively, either; the freaks in front of me are literally rats. Weirdest thing, I know. I light a cigarette and start asking questions.

"All right, who the heck are you workin' for, and what do you want with me?"

"Calvin?" I groan as the dame downstairs uses the name of someone I used to be, and hide the rats as best I can, going to the door.

"Yeah?"

"What happened to the policemen that were here? And what are you doing with your father's fedora?"

"They took off; they just wanted to ask me about Filthy Moe."

"…all right then." The gal looks relieved. She's getting on in years, so she's not terribly sharp. I go back to my interrogation session.

After a bit of… persuasion that Geneva would probably object to greatly, I get some info from the mooks: they work for a Foundation of some kind, and I highly doubt it's charitable. They were sent to 'contain' me for some reason, as if I needed containment, and I'm dangerous to them. I asked them why I'm dangerous, and he just

says "Look at yourself. You changed from a six-year-old kid into a hard-boiled chain-smoking gun-slinging *thing* that would make Sam Spade jealous!"

I ask him how the hell he knows my pal Sam before deciding he and his friend need to get acquainted with the second-story window, and his good friend, the ground. After their meeting, I make a phone call to my source.

"That's horrible!" Isabel gasped as she heard Calvin talk over the phone. "Are you all right, Mr. Watts?"

"I'm fine, they're having a nap in the garden at the moment." Calvin put his hand over the receiver and looked at Hobbes. "Get out my cape." To Isabel, he said, "I need your help. I'm willing to throw in my time machine for free if you help me with this."

"Oooh… in that case… how do you plan to attack them? Perhaps Stupendous Man could help?"

"Exactly my thoughts," Calvin grinned. "I just need to get my cape and-"

"Calvin, your mom took your cape away, remember? It's in the attic."

Calvin frowned as he remembered this, and looked at Hobbes. "You're a *tiger.* What good is a wooden door against a 500 pound killing machine from Indonesia?"

"I'm only 350 pounds, thank you very much." Hobbes crossed his arms and frowned. "But… they did mean you harm, so…"

"Go get it," Calvin nodded, resuming his conversation with Isabel. "Sorry about that. So, where are they operating from?"

Half an hour later, a red streak flew across the sky that nobody could see, heading straight for a location halfway across the country. "Stupendous Man flies at the speed of light, but faster!" exclaimed the blur as it smashed into an office building in a large city. Chaos ensued as the person at the closest desk was launched into the far

wall. Bullets bounced off of Stupendous Man's steel ribs as he walked through the facility. "Stupendous Man walks through the facility, searching for those who would dare try to contain him! He throws open a door, to find himself confronted with-"

Stupendous Man let out a shocked gasp. Before him was a blonde-haired teenager, sipping at a glass of wine and petting a white cat in her lap, a scar across her cheek and a monocle in her eye. This was Rosalyn, or as Stupendous Man knew her- "Babysitter Girl!"

"…Calvin, what are you doing in my house?"

"Don't play dumb! I know all about your Foundation that attempted to contain me!" With that, Stupendous Man flew up to Babysitter Girl and gave her a punch across the face, vanquishing her instantly. "Stupendous Man is victorious! Stupendous Man… away!"

Rosalyn groaned in her position, and got up about ten minutes later, rotating her stiff muscles. "…increase Class-A Amnestic input in Chagrin Falls. I want that twerp contained by any means necessary." The agents at her beck and call nodded, and she shook her head, lamenting the day she became the babysitter to Calvin Watts.

Painted Lips, Unblinking Eyes

David Rosen was not a happy man. Now, by all accounts, this was not an unusual occurrence, but today David had something beyond general misanthropy or a lack of proper nutrition to be glowering about.

Somebody had abused an SCP to have magical video game adventures.

Now, the people in charge, they hadn't called it "abuse". It was "heroic" and "worthy of a Foundation Star". Whatever. Everyone in charge was just too blind to see what was really going on around here. Bridge was just a loser who liked to play weird Japanese games.

David glanced out his office window, as Bridge was carried by a posse of no-goodniks who celebrated his misadventure.

What that Brugh-dge had done wasn't even that good! Pokemon was not a hard video game, and David totally could've done it if he'd been there. Plus all the objects he had at his disposal were wicked overpowered anyways. It was like playing with all the cheat codes.

If he had been there… the thought wandered through David's mind again, and as it did, his curt lips curled into a decidedly non-curt grin.

Yes… if Bridge could get accolades for such a thing, then so could he.

David stood in front of 826, completely alone. He'd known that it had been super easy to do — after, all, if someone like *Bridge* could do it, anyone could — but this had been remarkably simple. He strode forward, confidently holding a gray cartridge in his hand.

Who was going to be laughing now… Bridge? He'll be nothing. He's

already, uh, nothing, but now he'll be more — focus, David. This is the big league.

He blew on the cartridge, and stuck it in between the shelves.

Too late, he saw that what he'd grabbed was not the badass adventure game he'd thought of, but was instead something else altogether.

"So, uh, looks like 826 is live."

"Ah, shit. I was afraid of that. Copycat kids, y'know? Some dipshit new guy, thinks 'o-o-oh I could one-up Bridge' or something."

"Whoa, dude, take a few steps back. We haven't even reviewed the security footage yet."

"Yeah, well, I've seen this before. Happens probably… once every coupl'a years. Someone has a hero moment, and then some dipshit always tries to be the bigger hero."

Pink.

That was the first, second, third, and eighth thought that crossed David's mind.

Four was "Why", five was "God", six was four, and seven was more of a wincing sensation as the pink floodlights descended from on high.

Oh god no

Thousands, quite literally thousands, of pink tennis balls were descending upon him. Behind that, little scotty dogs yapped and did flips, their pink teeth gnashing in the wind. Somewhere, although he couldn't see it, David knew a laundry chute was menacing him.

Then they started hitting him.

"… the fuck?"

"What? Who is it?"

"… Rosen."

"… What?"

"Yeah."

"Like, the nerd guy?"

"The same."

"What the fuck is he doing in there? He's not a dipshit, he's like… he's almost 40. He knows better."

"Apparently not."

"Have some security standing by out there, I don't want this to get out of hand."

David could feel that his face had swollen up to two or three times its normal size. His pants were shredded to approximately 5,678 pieces, and his shins were bleeding profously. Stupid Dog. Stupid Barbie.

But, as if by some miracle of design, the balls all stopped. For a moment, they were paused in the air, the 2nd most beautiful image of floating tennis balls mankind has ever developed.

"PLAYER 2 HAS ENTERED THE GAME."

"… oh god fucking dammit."

INCIDENT REPORT A-1 204376

Personnel involved: David Rosen, Django Bridge

Date: 4-1-2013

Location: SCP-826 containment unit

Description: On 4/1/2013, David Rosen deliberately instigated SCP-826's effect, using a copy of the Nintendo Entertainment System game, "Barbie". After several hours, site personnel grew concerned for David's well-being. Django Bridge, having recently acted with bravery in a similar incident, was sent in to rescue him. David was recovered three minutes after Bridge entered, and SCP-826 was successfully recontained.

The incident has been added to Bridge's nomination for a Foundation Star. Rosen will face an immediate disciplinary hearing once he recovers from his critical injuries.

Addendum: He didn't even copy it right. No scips brought in with him or anything. He wouldn't have topped Bridge even if he'd failed to get his ass kicked by Barbie. — Dr. Taylor

And Now, The We[EXPUNGED]

The following broadcast was recorded on 10 December 2013 during the initial securing of Anomalous Location 3717-NV.

Transcript of broadcast

The eyes are the windows to the soul. The leg bone's connected to the hip bone, and the hip bone's connected to your blood supply. The mind is nothing more than the misfirings of an overcomplicated clump of tissue you call a brain.

Welcome to Night Vale.

Hello, my fine audience. This is Intern Andy, sitting in for Cecil. There was an… incident about an hour ago here at the station, and long story short, I'm the only one left here. It's a good thing that I was at the official StrexCorp anti-Euclidian water cooler and caffeine dispensanarium when those armed intruders stormed in and rounded up everyone, or they might have spotted me, too. But until the Sheriff's secret police can locate and rescue my kidnapped coworkers, I'm running the board for you today. This is my first time on-air, so please be a little patient with me. Thanks.

First up, some astute listeners have called in and left messages to report that traffic is at a standstill on the highway leading out of town, as overnight there appeared a barricade across the road. It's manned by many large men in black paramilitary gear and scientists in clean white coats who say that Night Vale has been quarantined for public safety. A statement from the Sheriff's secret police says that they are not involved with this blockade, and that citizens should ignore the

warnings of these interlopers, even if they are shot at. A StrexCorp press release also says that the roadblock is not their doing, as their paramilitary forces wear *yellow* gear. So be safe out there on the roads, my fine audience, and remember to wear all your riot gear on your commute today, not just your bullet-proof vests.

Here's a reminder for everyone: next week is the first public debate between The Faceless Old Woman Who Secretly Lives In Your Home and Hiram McDaniels in their competing candidacies for mayor of our great town. The scheduled topics will include civic infrastructure, leash laws for the insectile monstrosities that our children inexplicably find cute and demand to keep as pets, and new business regulations. Current mayor Pamela Winchell has issued a press release stating that "**All will tremble and fall before the burning cold of He-Who-Made-Dark. All will quaver and bow before He-Who-Made-Light. All will fear. All will fear. All. Will. Fear.**" Immediately after reading it, the press release burst into purple flames. I'm assuming that means that Mayor Winchell won't be attending the debate.

Oh! Here's an update on that whole "everyone in the radio station was abducted except me" story! Someone slipped a note under the studio door which reads, "We are here for your protection. Help us secure and contain that which none should know. There is too much wrong to ever be set right." Now, I don't know about you, my fine audience, but I find it *slightly suspicious* that someone would claim that they're protecting you by abducting you from your place of business. Especially since everyone knows that it would be far easier to do so during the evening mandatory five minutes of staring blankly into the void of space that stares blankly back into you. In the meantime, I'm fearfully awaiting word from the StrexCorp representative who ousted station management as to whether or not I should come in tomorrow.

And now, a word from our sponsors: mexi-skins.

That was a word from our sponsors.

I just found a pamphlet here from the Night Vale Better Business Bureau with a nifty little reminder that under no circumstances should we ever buy anything from anyone named Zachary Callahan. Just like they told us when we were kids, that Zack is nothing but a trouble-maker who wants to achieve world dominion through mind- and memory-altering enslavement and the strategic placement of strangely dense metals. Besides which, his products are shoddy and dangerous and probably made in some overseas factory instead of right here in the good old U.S. of A. Remember to buy in your community from locally owned and operated members of the Night Vale BBB. It's not only good for the community, it's fated to be.

Fine audience, a woman in a blood-spattered lab coat has just walked up to the window to the studio and pressed a piece of paper to it for me to read. Let me get a little closer… it says "We are about to assume control of the broadcast. If you want to survive, turn off your mic and come peacefully. Otherwise, we will be forced to…" Oh my! That's… incredibly graphic! Well, I do want to keep my organs inside me, so I better do as she says. But before I go, my fine audience, allow me to present the weath—

[AUDITORY COGNITOHAZARD DETECTED. MEMETIC AGENT EXPUNGED. ALTERNATE MATERIAL INSERTED.]
approximately 30 seconds of classical music
[AUDITORY THREAT ENDED. BROADCAST RESUMES.]

Welcome back, my fine audience. It's Intern Andy again. I want to let you know that I really do like the station's new supervisor, Mr. Bjornsen. Apparently he was just transferred from the public relations office of StrexCorp

Productions, and he has a *TON* of great ideas about how to improve your public radio experience, including a Helpful Citizens Tip Line where you can tell us all about the fun and interesting things you see around town.

He also let me know why Cecil and the rest of the staff didn't come in today. Apparently Mr. Bjornsen sent out a memo yesterday telling everyone to go to a team-building indoctrination today and I just didn't get it. Still, he complimented me for sticking around and filling the airwaves for you, my fine audience. But the others should be back tomorrow, so this may be the last you hear from me.

In the meantime, up next is the sound of your own stagnant heartbeat, trapped in the rhythm of a nihilistic existential crisis.

Good night, Night Vale. Good night.

Foundation casualties: 4 injured, 0 killed
Civilian casualties: unknowable

Solvin' Center of Problems

Dell Conagher could hear the agonizing screams of half his coworkers dying horribly. He solved this problem by removing his traditional hardhat and pulling on a pair of acoustic earmuffs. The Safe'n'Sound, straight from Mann Co. One of his best purchases to date. Now ignorant of further screaming, gunfire, and explosions, the Engineer flipped through his magazine lazily, his feet resting on the the ammo drum of his sentry.

He nodded at the German man that suddenly appeared on his right, standing on the hard red light of a Telemax Teleporter. The Medic waved away the particles that often remained after teleporting and hurried downstairs. The teleporter coughed up a few spare transdimensional particles before the red light faded and the gyroscope powered down. Dell glanced at his PDA and sucked on his teeth when he saw his dispenser and teleporter entrance had both been destroyed.

Down below, the Medic arrived just in time to rejoin his coworkers as they charged out to fight the incoming robot menace, good as new. The metal doppelganger horde approached the building, the ground shaking beneath their feet. The sentry twitched eagerly as it detected hostiles, like an Australian before a fistfight. Dell peered over the magazine briefly before returning to the new Mann Co. catalog.

"Easy, girl," Dell said fondly. "It's gonna be a long day. Plenty of robots to shoot."

SCP-1290. The "Imperfect Teleporter," as his peers had nicknamed it. "Fucking Bullshit," was the name Researcher Cassiter of Research Site 48-Alpha had given it. The Foundation had spent the last fifteen years trying to reverse engineer the thing, and while they could copy it they didn't understand how it actually worked, or how to solve its malfunctions. Cassiter was beginning to wish for a

reassignment when someone proposed something new. And it was a more interesting idea than sending a bowling ball.

His colleagues were in the middle of deconstructing Dash Two on the other side of the planet when the idea came up. "What if we activated Dash One when Dash Two was disassembled?" Cassiter didn't know the answer. The Site Director didn't know the answer. So they decided to find the answer.

Dell Conagher fired his modified shotgun and continued making widows. (Provided robots married. Dell didn't want to just assume.) The Sniper stood nearby, systematically applying Mr. Mundy's "mystery liquid" to the robots with one of his custom rifles. Dell's sentry bombarded a Heavybot with missiles and gunfire, and after a brief but brutal punishment the giant automaton stumbled and smashed several of its smaller brethren.

Dell had yet to rebuild a new teleporter entrance, but he had at least had the sense to erect a dispenser so the Heavy Weapons Guy could freely annihilate any mechanical men that approached him or the not-so-good Doktor. A squad of Soldierbots unloaded on the mercs' little stronghold, but a combination of Übercharge and sticky bombs from a drunkard successfully held off the push. They had survived the latest wave of the day.

Dell hopped down and rushed to the smoking dispenser, pulling out his trusty wrench. The ultimate tool to an Engineer, capable of repairing anything with a little skill. Dell smashed the dispenser a couple times and nodded with satisfaction when it was back to 100%. He stretched and watched his coworkers collect the cash dropped by Gray Mann's minions. Sniper wandered over and tossed him his share. Dell caught the cash wad and lowered his Safe'n'Sound.

"Much obliged."

"We gave 'em a bloody drubin, eh, mate?"

"Yeah." Dell pocketed his money and headed for his nest. "Startin' to think we'll actually live through all this."

"Aw c'mon, Truckie!" Mr. Mundy smirked and absentmindedly rubbed his scar. He stowed the money in his hat and followed. "I could do this all day. We got the Doc, and your… respawn thing. We'll be fine."

"Yeah… So long as we got Mann Co. supplying us, I suppose we'll be fine." Dell tinkered with his sentry before the next wave came.

"Uh… I don't remember you layin' down an entrance."

Dell looked to the teleporter exit. It was spinning, and letting off it's usual hard light disc. Except it wasn't red, or even blue. Dell figured gray was a more likely color than black. But there it was, the teleporter up and running. And after a few seconds out came a a block of Styrofoam.

The Engineer and the Sniper stared for several seconds before looking to each other.

"What."

"Well, that worked," Cassiter remarked.

"D-Class?" Researcher Tyler asked.

"D-Class. Power it down until we test it, just in case."

Dell Conagher picked up the Styrofoam carefully. He shook it around, broke it apart, but found nothing strange about it. Dell Conagher was the descendant of a man who had cut off his own hand just so he could replace it with a robotic one, he himself had personally trumped said ancestor by developing a machine that would make men immortal, was employed by a sociopath who was very possibly powered by his mustache (or his chest hair that resembled Australia), he had befriended a psychopathic pyromaniac, fought a wizard (several times, actually), accidentally killed a monkeynaut with a defunct rocket (RIP Poopy Joe), fought robot clones powered by money, had gone to Hell and back, and somehow this was the weirdest thing he'd ever seen.

So Dell decided to do what he always did when something broke his weirdness threshold. He rolled with it, but cautiously. He placed the Styrofoam down, and redirected his sentry toward the teleporter. He hailed his comrades and alerted them as to what happened. They prepared themselves. They were too curious to not simply destroy the teleporter exit, and too insane to wonder how long they would sit there staring at it.

And then the teleporter powered down.

And then more robots showed up.

An hour later, D-101007 was pulled from his usual duties and placed on SCP-1290-1. The researchers gave him a helmet, knee pads, and elbow pads. They did not tell him what they were planning, just that he was going to contribute to science. Or cure their boredom, at least. They didn't actually mention that second part.

Tavish Finnegan DeGroot stared at the stump just beyond his left shoulder. "Where's m' arm?"

"Where is your legs?" Heavy Weapons Guy asked.

The drunk Scotsman looked down at himself and immediately sobered up. "Y'know, I can't remember."

The Heavy laughed, long and hardy. The Demoman began to join in but bled out and died before he could really get going. This made the Heavy laugh even harder, and the Medic even joined in. Half a minute later the Demoman marched out of the respawn room with a large grin and an even larger bottle of scrumpy.

The Medic wiped the oil and smile from his face and cleared his throat. "Engineer, about zat… Vat vas the vord?

"Anomaly, doc." Dell raised his goggles. "It's possible there was an error in a Telemax shipment. Somebody else is also linked with my teleporters. But if that were the case, they would have come through, not that packagin' stuff."

"So… what?" the Sniper asked. "Somebody found a portal and chucked somethin' in to see what would happen?"

"Wouldn't be the first time it's happened," Dell said with a shrug. The mercs all mumbled their agreement. "I'm thinkin' we're facin' another one of them multiverse phenomena. Like when Soldier found that rocket."

"Soldier finds rocket with new weapons, we get foam?" Heavy crossed his giant arms and spat on the ground. "Could at least send hat."

"Can ya… I dunno, trace it?" the Demoman asked.

"If it activates again, I might be able to figure out where the entrance is. But that could have been a one time thing. If the other side knows it's a one-way teleport, they won't risk sendin' people. Unless they're idiots. Or cold-hearted-."

The familiar sounds of a teleporter starting up cut him off.

"Well…" Dell lowered his goggles. "Time to find out. Grab yer guns, boys."

The mercs gathered and aimed their various weapons at the black disc. They prepared themselves. Humans, zombies, ghosts, wizards, robots. They'd fought them all and won. Now they faced a new threat. Styrofoam.

Instead, a large man in an orange jumpsuit materialized. The sentry jerked back and forth as if decided whether to fire or not. Dell slapped it and the sentry lowered its barrels. The man waved away the black nothingness coating him and screamed like a little girl when he found six mercenaries and a very large automatic turret aiming at him.

"Easy there," Dell said. He lowered his shotgun slightly. The others hesitantly lowered their weapons as well. "Where ya from, pardner?"

The man in the jumpsuit stumbled back, but Dell had built the teleporter against the wall. The man slid down the wall until his butt hit the hard light disc.

"Yer gonna wanna move, son," Dell said. "If somebody else comes through, you're gonna get telefragged."

When the man didn't move, the Heavy yanked him out of the way. The Engineer crouched down and tampered with the teleporter. He pulled out his PDA and checked its readings several times. He grinned and stood up.

"Our new friend came from Columbia." The mercs looked him over. He didn't look Columbian.

"In the year 2013." They looked for some sign of lasers or jetpack, but found none.

"And from a different universe." Without any premise of new weapons, gear, or money the mercs lost interest and prepared for the next wave of robots.

The initial volley of metal arrows rained down on them. Heavy used his massive form to take as much of the damage as possible, but a lagging arrow whizzed toward the orange-clad newcomer. He winced and the arrow drove itself through his head and embedded itself in the woodwork behind him. And he was no worse for it.

"Did that arrow just go through his head?" Sniper asked.

"Aye," the Demoman said.

The Medic raised both eyebrow and crossbow and pulled the trigger. It whizzed through his chest without ever truly touching him. Dell smirked and fired off some metal. Still nothing.

"Well, that sure is interesting," Dell said. "Y'all defend, I got a call to make."

"I just realized something," Researcher Tyler said.

Researcher Cassiter looked up from his lunch. "Wazzat?"

"Twelve-Ninety is one-way. We have literally no way of knowing where he went. We just sent a D-Class out into the wild. Possibly

into another universe. That's a massive information breach."

"Eh, it's not the worst we've done. Plus, he'll maintain velocity. The only damage he'll cause is likely in a different universe as a high speed ragdoll."

"Oh. Right."

Idiots or cold-hearted sum' bitches, indeed.

"Raccoons. No, I don't want to hear about raccoons, Soldier." Dell Conagher lifted his goggles and pinched the bridge of his nose, holding the phone in his other hand. Talking with Mr. Jane Doe was always a trying experience. "Yes, they're adorable little critters. Now, please, listen. Can. You. Contact. The Wizard?"

"Nope. Wait, yes! Well, no. I can't talk to him, I can only summon him. Sorry, Engie."

"But that-" Dell stopped himself. One had to roll with the punches, and the only way of getting anywhere with the Soldier was by humoring him. "Well, that just might work. I need you to come to the latest defense site, ASAP."

"I'm kind of in the middle of something." Dell could hear the clamor of pots and pans on the other end of the line. "How about I just tell you how to do it? You're smart."

"I… suppose that could work. Okay, I have a pencil and pad. How do I summon the Wizard?"

"Right. First…"

Researchers Cassiter and Tyler stared at SCP-1290-1.

"Wait! What if we turned Dash Two upside down?" Tyler asked.

Cassiter didn't bother to bring up the fact this had been brought up over a decade ago. He'd humor his newer colleague. "Then you'd be oriented right, but still moving east at- what is it, 930 meters a

second?"

"What if we had Dash Two upside down, and fired the object 930 meters a second going west? And then timed it right-"

"Cute. You have to be touching the platform. I guess if they somehow managed to graze the platform and you time it perfect, it would work. But I think it would basically be hitting a wall at 930 emm ess, so you still die."

"Seriously, how the hell did they manage to build a teleporter, but didn't think to build it to compensate for conservation of momentum?"

"I think they were working with Aristotelian physics. Y'know, Prometheus, Aristotle, Greek?"

"Idiots."

Cassiter chuckled. "You just suggested turning the thing upside down and shooting people out of a cannon, and the guys who built a functioning teleporter are idiots?"

"Shut up."

Dell Conagher stared at the mess he had created at the behest of the Soldier. An amalgamation of the defeated robots, welded into the shapes of a dozen raccoons. Standing in the middle of them was a statue of a man, his arms held out in a very wizardly pose.

"Alright, Soldier," Dell said. "We built it. Now what?"

"Now I'm going to make you a medal, Engie! Thank you for building me that statue. Can you bring it over to my new house if the robots don't murder you all forever?"

"What." Dell did his best to not break the phone in his white-knuckled hand. "Soldier. This was supposed to summon the Wizard."

"Oh. Did I not mention that? Just draw a circle with a smiley face

inside, but the mouth is an M. Set it on fire, and Merasmus shows up."

Dell chewed on his tongue. "Soldier, have you done that anywhere other than the Wizard's house?"

"No. Haven't had a reason. But whenever I needed to talk to him when we lived together, I just did that and he was there in no time!"

"Soldier, that's because you were setting his house on fire."

"…" Dell watched his teammates fight the robots, waiting for an answer.

"Soldier, can you magically contact or summon the Wizard in any way?"

"…" The Newcomer was charged with collecting the money as they went, allowing them to collect money that otherwise would have been destroyed in the firefight. The Newcomer had been terrified of everything around him initially, but once it was established he couldn't be hurt he was willing to help in whatever way possible.

"Soldier, are you still there?" Dell could still hear pots and pans, but nothing else. Then someone cleared their throat on the other end of the line. "Jane?"

"No. This is **MERASMUS**! What is it you want, fool?" Dell could hear Soldier laughing in the background and bragging to the raccoons about being right.

"Oh." It took a few seconds for his brain to start working. "There's a portal to another universe, but it's one-way. I was hoping you could… magic your way through."

"And why would I do that?"

"Make you a deal. Come and help, bring Soldier, and we'll let you kill him."

"Please, I- **MERASMUS!**- no longer seek the end of you pitiful-"

"He won't stay dead, so long as you kill him near the respawn room. You can kill him a few times if you like."

"…He told you of my summoning ritual?"

Dell grinned. "He did."

"Please hurry."

Researcher Cassiter stared at SCP-1290-1, as he had for the past eight years. He still wasn't sure why the Foundation was so interested in it. It had been disassembled and reassembled so many times that even the janitorial staff knew how to put the stupid thing together. And yet the higher-ups had them repeat the action time and again in an effort to understand it. It all was, in fact, Fucking Bullshit. At least most of his colleagues, such as Researcher Tyler, were good people.

Cassiter briefly pondered the fate of the D-Class they had blasted off to… somewhere. Maybe he would just be in limbo until Dash Two was activated, and then appear. And go splat. Cassiter made a mental note to tell the Dash Two team to activate it remotely.

While Cassiter further pondered what they could possibly be missing about Twelve Ninety, a wrinkle in spacetime opened up a few meters from the main platform. Cassiter didn't notice it until it expanded into a purple vortex. Cassiter was about to raise the alarm when D-101007 stepped out, his helmet and pads missing, instead toting a very large bag. Behind him was a red-clad man with a large metal toolbox. The vortex snapped shut with a sound not unlike a balloon deflating.

"Well, I'll be," the man said with a Texan accent. He tipped his hardhat toward Cassiter in a friendly way. "Howdy, mister."

He lowered the toolbox and kicked the top off, and the entire box splayed open to reveal a device Cassiter didn't recognize. The device began to rotate as its arms unfolded fully, and then little metal latches flipped to secure the now still arms in place. The arms whirred together and the device was silent for a moment. Then it

began to spin again, much faster this time, generating a red disc that remained hovering just over the device. Small red rings lifted off the disc, disappearing maybe half a meter into the air. Then Cassiter pretended to scratch at his stomach as he pressed his personal alarm.

"Now then," the man said. He walked up and offered Cassiter his hand, which the researcher took hesitantly. The man's grip was like a vice, but Cassiter did his best to not react to the pain. "My name is Dell Conagher. I'm an engineer. Just thought I'd stop by to see what kinda universe you're workin' with."

"Call me Cassiter. So, Mr. Conagher… you're from another universe. And you managed to come here, and even bring D-101007, in only a matter of hours. May I ask how?"

"D-wha? That fella in the orange jumpsuit?"

Cassiter nodded. Conagher did not remove his goggles, but Cassiter could tell he was eying him strangely.

"And your name's Cassiter. Why's his name a number, and yours ain't?"

"I am a researcher, and he is… a test subject, for lack of a better term."

"Ah." Conagher nodded, as if confirming something to himself. "I gotcha. He a clone?"

Cassiter shrugged. "Is that common in your universe?"

Conaher shrugged. "I'm a clone, you tell me. Anyway, how I got here? Magic. No, I ain't pullin' your leg. We got wizards where I'm from. We got a *lot* of things where I'm from. How about you? You got things?"

Cassiter nodded. "From our perspective, *you* are a thing. Your entire universe is a thing."

Conagher nodded. "I guess that makes sense. You're a researcher? I'm guessin' you research the weird things of your world? How's

about you and I swap stories."

"I'm not at liberty to do that."

"Oh. Well, that's too bad. We brought a bag of goodies from my world. Call it a gift. Or are you not at liberty to do that?"

"…" Cassiter weighed his options. First and foremost the Foundation was to contain anything that disrupted normalcy. Bringing in anomalies from a different universe was definitely disrupting normalcy, but it also presented the opportunity to study this man's universe. And if he was willing to bring an entire sack full of them, they were available in ready supply. They were made in his world. Perhaps they could be made in Cassiter's. An entire bag full of possible Dash E Exes were staring him in the face.

"Before I answer… What is that object you deployed? The disc device."

"Hmm? Oh, that's a teleporter exit. The way we actually got here is… costly, but with that little puppy it's as easy as standin' still. So now with however you sent your guinea pig, and my setup, we have a full connection between our worlds."

Where the hell was security? "Mister Conagher, surely as a man of science you understand the significance of this conversation. We are from different realities, and our actions here carry the weight of our respective universes. I cannot-"

Conagher chuckled, but after a few seconds it broke into a cackle. He thumbed his hardhat up and smiled. "Listen, son. This isn't the first time we've interacted with other universes. It happens every couple months for us. Usually it's just little things, trinkets. Stuff we wear around the battlefield, hats and accessories. Sometimes it's weapons, but they're usually nothin' we couldn't a' built ourselves. You get what I'm sayin'? Multiverse interaction ain't that big a' deal, we treat it like goin' *shoe shoppin'*. We get little gifts, and the worlds we cross get some financial compensation."

Cassiter stood there silently, torn between listening to the offworlder and hauling ass until security showed up.

Conagher lowered his voice and tilted his head forward, his hardhat clanking down to rest on his goggles. "I can read you like an open book, Cassie. We both work for an employer that doesn't really 'exist.' And judgin' by your reactions, it's cuz your bosses like hidin' things. Think they're savin' the goddamn world by burying whatever weirdness comes along. Thing is, my employer has spent its entire existence embracing the weirdness. Eggin' it on, seein' where it'll go. Amassing our madness in a stockpile and selling it like it's a toy. Finding other universes and buyin' their anomalies. That word, anomaly. That's what y'all call it, huh? I could see your face light up, just for second."

Cassiter was now in full on run-the-fuck-away mode, but his legs refused to move.

"Here's how this is gonna work, son. I am going to hand you my pistol. If y'all can play nice, you will do nothing to me. You will take the bag I brought, I will speak with your superiors and maybe both our worlds can benefit. I learn about your world, take some stuff home, maybe y'all can have little exploration ventures into my world to ask us about stuff. But if you intend on trying to contain me and my world, you are going to shoot me in the head. And you better pray to whatever gods you worship that it kills me, and then you better destroy that teleporter exit and leave my world the hell alone. Because if it doesn't? I will personally march my world into yours, and then we will *take* your anomalies."

Conagher withdrew a pistol from his pocket and handed it to Cassiter. Conagher grinned maliciously and lifted his hat to expose his forehead.

"Make your choice, son. Your world hangs in the balance."

Time And Relative Dimensions In Containment Protocols

It all started, if anything can ever be said to have a start, when some brilliant soul, probably an O5, came up with a fantastic, to them, idea for an emergency surveillance station. All you had to do was take SCP-184, put it in a small, easily portable structure, and, so long as you removed it before any of the weird effects started, you could outfit it as you like, have a nice, multiple room, staging area that took up very little space. The first thought was to use port-a-johns, but it was quickly realized that this was a shitty idea. The next thought was phone booths, but those were see through, and the effects were… disturbing. The real breakthrough came when a routine inventory revealed several hundred blue phone boxes of a variety used in England in the Sixties and Seventies.

Maybe the trouble wouldn't have happened if anyone had bothered to ask WHY the Foundation had all these phone boxes, but they were listed as 'Non-anomalous, confiscated to prevent anomalous activity' and that was good enough for the head of the project. No one bothered to check with the Agent who had had them confiscated, one Alto Clef, on his first ever assignment with the Foundation. Things would likely have been different if they had talked to him, and discussed where he had been those thirteen days he vanished for, or his irrational desire to be referred to as agent, instead of doctor.

No, in the grand tradition of the Foundation, they forged ahead, and placed 184 inside one of the objects. Exactly 11 hours later, the door of the phone box opened from the inside, and out walked the being that would come to be known as Anomalous Entity 1322, later referred to in Black Box documents as SCP-TDW, and known collectively around Site 19 as 'That British Twit.'

It started with Doctor Mann. He was performing a routine examination, when he was interrupted.

"Oh, I say, what happened to that poor fellow?" The British Twit inquired, peering over Mann's shoulder.

"An instance of SCP-693, I believe the staff often refer to it as a 'Knotty Stalker.' This one has stopped working, so I was given permission to dissect it, see if we can't-" Mann paused, then slowly raised his head. He stared at the intruder, as one hand stroked his luxurious mustache. "I'm sorry, who are you?"

The bow-tied Brit held up a piece of what looked like blank paper, then tucked it away. "I'm the new Doctor, just assigned, here, let me look at that." He pulled a blinky little device from his pocket, and scanned the remains of the doll. "Ah, what do you know? Some leftover psychic emanations, hmm, a little trace of tech, that's odd, clearly mass produced…" He stopped talking as Dr. Mann grabbed his arm, his eyes on that odd little device.

"Didn't quite catch your name, may I see that ID again?" The British man blinked, not being used to getting questioned. He fished the blank piece of paper out again, holding it in front of Mann.

"You can just call me Doctor." With a flash of his charming grin. Mann did not seem amused as he stared at the paper.

"That paper is blank."

"Ah, no, in fact, it says whatever it needs to say… unless of course you're a strong enough willed individual to NOT be easily fooled by psychic manipulation." Mann wasn't listening. He was too busy hitting the security alarm. "Which you clearly are. Toodles!"

"And what's in here?" The British Twit inquired, as he slid through a locked door like it was nothing. A little scan with his handheld device made the electric locks they employed sit up and beg. "Hmm, quite a large chamber. Takes five by five to a whole new level, doesn't it? Or at least a third dimension…" He glances over his shoulder at the door, as if he expected someone to respond to that. A brief frown crossed his face before he returned to his examination of the room. "Awfully thick walls, and those sprayers, hmm, looks like they spray some sort of corrosive like…" He sniffed the air. "Acid?"

"Hu…man…" The voice reverberated through the chamber, a deep, grinding noise, from a throat not made to speak human. A form, large, vaguely reptilian, began to rise.

"Ah, no, no, not exactly! Well, not at all, actually, Gallifreyan, to be exact, we may look the same on the outside, but the inside is completely different. What ARE you?" He stepped forward, holding up his sonic tool to try and get a better look at the thing.

The beast stopped all movement. It simply stared at the man, as if shocked. It sniffed, once, twice, its forked tongue flicked out between its lips. The creature no longer moved, but still it seemed to grow bigger in the shadows, its skin shimmering in the light of the tool. "Time… lord?" It questioned.

The British Twit took a step backwards, taken aback at being recognized. "Why, yes, actually, I'm the Doc-"

"DOCTOR?" The creature roared, as it charged forwards, and took the man by surprise, slammed him back against the door with one pair of its multiple arms. "So long… So long, here, because of you! STRANDED! FORCED to evolve! YOU did this!"

"Sorry, wasn't me, er, wasn't me yet, that is. Look at the pretty birdy?" He held up his gadget, and a bright light flashed in the creature's eyes, causing a thick hard film to slide across them, protecting it from the light, but also temporarily blinding it. It roared in anger… and the man used this as a chance to slip from its grip. He had to leave his jacket behind, which was a shame, it was a good jacket, but it let him get away with his life, which was easy enough once he slipped back through the door, locking it behind him.

He slapped his hand on the button labeled 'Acid Sprayer' next to the door, in hopes it would lend some control to the beast, then lurched off, hoping to find a replacement jacket. Because of that, he wasn't nearby to hear the creatures last words as its skin bubbled away…

"Ex…ex…exterm…inate…"

"I don't even know what this containment is for." Agent Alto Clef

complained from his seat in the employee break room. Somehow, a majority of Senior Staff happened to be in the break room when the alarm sounded. Maybe because the restriction on drinking was lifted for anyone caught in a lockdown who wasn't on containment duty, so that if any one passed away, they could at least pass away happy. Also, probably, because this was the break room where SCP-294 was located. The bravest and best of the Foundation sat about a table, drinking as hard as they could, because who knew if there'd be a tomorrow?

"Some, some guy." Dr. Agatha Rights was feeling it a little bit harder than the others. Her last couple of experiments had tanked, and she had thought she'd gotten this one perfect… when the alarm sounded, and it all went to hell. As a consequence, she was drinking something called 'Romulan Ale,' and was already three sheets to the wind. "Cute guy."

"Yes, that clears up so much." Clef frowned, sniffed the cup in front of him, then chugged it one go. He made a face, glaring across the table. "What the fuck was that?"

Dr. Johannes Sorts checked the list in front of him. "I believe that was… Pickled garlic vodka."

Clef made another face, staring at the rest of the unlabeled cups on the table. A form of Russian Roulette, first introduced by Doctor Bright. Everyone ordered a bunch of different drinks from 294, some good, some bad, then you chose one at random and took a shot. If nothing else it was palate-cleansing. Clef tossed a small coin across the table, and grinned as it dropped into a cup. "Here Sorts, drink this one. Anyone know anything besides 'Cute guy?'"

As Dr. Sorts began to gag and choke on wasabi flavored scotch, Dr. Everett Mann picked up a coin of his own. "British fellow. Dressed rather nattily. Seemed to think a blank piece of paper had memetic properties." He nodded to himself as he sank a coin in a cup. "Take this one Glass." As he held out a cup of something that was black, viscous, and bubbled lightly.

Clef knocked the cup out of Mann's hand as he dove across the table at the other scientist. He gripped his fellow Senior Staff

member by the lapels, and slammed him up against the wall. The goo bubbled on the floor and slowly ate a hole through the wood paneling. Clef stared into Mann's eyes with a frantic, almost crazed anger. "Did he give you a name?" Clef yelled at his associate.

"No, no!" The second no may have been to the other members of Senior Staff, each of whom had produced a different, but equally lethal, device from about their persons. They stepped back, giving Mann his head. Clef didn't even seem to notice.

"Did he have anything else on him? A small device, with blinking lights-"

"Looked like a dildo made by a Star Wars fan? Yes!" Mann began to breathe normally again as Clef let him go, and stepped back.

"It's him. He's back. No. I don't want to be a companion again. Not again." He glanced at his friends co-workers. "Right. We have to stop him. The damage he could do is… we have to stop him. This is what we need to do. Everett? We need your work on fifty five fifty five." Mann nodded, and began to make phone calls. "Sorts? We're going to need the Sweeper." Johannes went pale, but nodded, and began the procedure needed to call the eternal one. "Dr. Glass, you're going to be our point man, brush up on your psychological shenanigans." Glass raised an eyebrow at that, and sighed. "Old man? I don't know who you are, fuck off. Strelnikov, Fritz, Lament? I'm going to need the three of you to find three pounds of ball bearings, a fifty gallon drum of lube, 27 wooden blanks, 13 dogs, and a redheaded step child." The three exchanged a look, shrugged, and nodded. "Rights…. just keep drinking."

"Can do boss!" She raised her glass to him.

"All right, here's how we're going to catch it-"

"And that's how they caught it." Dr. Gears, Cog to his friends, finished his explanation to Dr. Jack Bright. "The cost of repairs will be tremendous, but at least they didn't let anything breach containment."

Bright stared through the one way glass at the naked man strapped to a table inside. "A lot of work for one Skip. Does it really need the fifty pounds of chains, the straitjacket, and the triple airlocks?"

"Clef insisted. Said he was working on better containment, but this might keep it busy." Gears inspected the man as well. "Very talkative, this one."

"Did you finally get a name out of it?"

"The Doctor."

"Who?"

"Yes."

"The Doctor Yes?"

"No, Who."

"That's what I'm asking you!"

"The Doctor's name is Who."

"Yes."

"We're on the right page now."

"WE'RE NOT ON ANY PAGE!" Bright took a deep breath. "All I want to know, is what's the Doctor's name?"

"No, Doctor Watt works with esoteric containment at Site 27."

"Who?"

"No, Watt."

"That's the Doctor What?"

"No, Who."

Even as Bright picked up a nearby chair to brain his fellow staff member with, the site alarm went off again. Both men turned

towards the viewing window. Where there was no longer a chained up Skip.

"Well, fuck." Bright scowled.

"Quite right, Agent Phuck will catch it, no problems. Did you know he plays third base on the company team?" At this response, Bright dropped to his knees and screamed.

"Well, those buggers are nothing if not persistent…" The Doctor muttered to himself as he slipped into another room. He'd figured out their code now, and, by all rights, this door should be 'Safe.' Although what these people might consider safe… His usual cheerful smile slowly faded from his lips as he took in the room around him. It was very… colorful. Bright, primary colors. Childrens drawings, taped to the wall. Blocks, stuffed animals… and a redheaded teenager, who gave the Doctor a bright smile, before returning his attention to his toys.

"What is going on here?" He asked himself, slowly edging closer to the teen boy. Something wasn't exactly right. He could only hope that it wasn't something weird, like the rabbit that ate its own head, or the half cat. No, it seemed only like a young boy. What sort of monsters would hide a boy away like this? "Excuse me lad, I hope you don't mind, but I think you need my help." The Doctor rested his hand on the boys shoulder. SCP-590 looked up at the alien man, and covered the Time Lords hand with his own.

Light poured from the skin of both beings, a bright, white, intense light, that washed out all the shadows in the room… and quite conveniently burnt out the cameras as well. For a moment, there was but one light sources, inside of which two figures struggled… but then the light separated, the two males dropped to their knees, forced apart from each other. The light slowly died.

"What the devil was that?" The Brit spoke first.

The redhead smiled. "A contingency plan, I think." A frown flashed across his face. "No. James didn't send you, did he?" He glanced down at his hands, flexed them, stared hard. "What *do* you have

inside you, friend? I've never felt this… alive."

"Yes, well, that's all good and all, but I think we still need to get out of here." The Doctor turns back to the door, but 590 stops him.

"Not out that way. This way." He shifted his drawings around on the wall, turning them this way and that until seemingly random lines connect, and the wall simply faded away. "Contingency plans."

"Well!" For the first time since he arrived here, the time traveling alien feels impressed. "Can you get us to sub basement three? I have a way out there."

"Easily." The boy replied. The smile seemed locked on his face, glad to finally be out from behind that damned mask of retardation. "We planned for this, the three of us… for that day I could finally be free." He knew he was talking too much, but he couldn't help it. "Here, down this way. No one comes back here any more. Michael had some corridors built just right to leave spaces. Some of his fellows might know about it, but no one uses it…" He stopped, letting his hand rest on the wall. "Ah, here we are. Tap twice, twist once, and-" The wall slid away, revealing a room filled with blue boxes, only one of which was the right one. "Which one is yours?"

Looking over the row after row of boxes, hundreds of them, the Doctor felt his hearts sink. Except… He raised one hand, and snapped his fingers. Towards the front of the room, a blue door opened. He glanced at his companion with a wry grin. "Contingency plans." The two of them rushed towards the phone booth, eager to get away from, well, from all of this. 590, or TJ to his family, stared around in awe as the Doctor closed the door behind them. "Hold on just a minute friend, I'll have us out of here… yes, there! Unanchored, and away we go! Off, once more into the time streaaiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiieeeeeeeeeeee!"

TJ's hands wrapped around the alien's neck, and that brilliant light began to flow, from one to the other. "You have a lot of life to give, friend. And I need it all."

They both screamed, for a very long time.

Cart can, Can cart

“So you’re saying you found a can?”

“Yup.”

“And this can is… a Cart?”

“Yuuuuup.”

“So the can’s a Cart.”

“That’s what I’ve been saying.“

“You sure this can isn’t a Can?”

“Yeah. The can’s in a cart, though.”

“What kind of Cart is it?”

“The cart’s not a Cart.”

“Well what is it?”

“The cart’s a Can.”

“So the can’s on a Can?”

“No, the Cart’s on the Can. The can’s a Cart.”

“Well, what’s the Cart on?”

“It’s just on the ground, I guess.”

“You said the Cart was on a cart!”

“No, there’s only one cart. The Cart’s on top of it.”

“So there’s a cart on the Cart, and the Cart’s on the ground.”

“Yes.”

“What’s in the cart?”

“A can.”

“What’s in the can?”

“A cart.”

“So they’re inside each other?”

“No! The can is in the cart, and the Cart is in the Can!”

“What’s in the Cart?”

“I dunno.”

“You dunno?”

“I dunno. I don’t have a can opener.”

“So you haven’t opened the Can?”

“No.”

“Then how do you know the Cart’s in the Can?”

“It’s not, the can’s in the cart. Hang on, Agent Watt’s here.”

“Who’s there?”

“No, Watt’s here. Hu retired.”

“Put him on the phone.”

“Who?”

“No, Watt.”

“What?”

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, Watt.”

“What?”

“Put him on the phone!”

“Hymn’s back at the office, call him yourself.”

“Whatever. So what’s up with the Cart and the Can?”

“No, Watt’s next to me.”

“What’s next to you?”

“Yes.”

“So what’s up with the Cart and the Can?”

“No! Watt’s right here! Hang on, he’s going up to the can.”

“Who?”

“No, Watt. Hu retired.”

“What’s going on?”

“No, Watt’s going up.”

“So what’s up with the cart?”

“Yes.”

“What?”

“Yes!”

“Hang on, remind me. What’s in the can?”

“No. The Cart’s in the Can. Watt’s next to them.”

“I dunno, what are you asking me for?”

“What?”

“Where’s Watt?”

“Where’s what?”

“Yes.”

“What?”

“Yes!”

“WHAT?”

“YES!”

> And that was the story of how Special Agent Abbott and Special Agent Costello were transferred out of the Unusual Incidents Unit.

Piercing The Night Vale

The black moon howls as the red sun weeps, and the desert night is beautiful. Welcome… to Night Vale…

Old Woman Josie has recently advised us that the angels do not care for the antics of small children in certain Halloween costumes, dear listeners. So, in the coming weeks, as we move into that most Hallowed time of year, it is advisable to avoid the following costumes: demons. Skeletons. The candidates of the 1916 Presidential election. Chechens. And Bob Hope. Why not dress your kids up as something more innocent, like cats, pumpkins, or the strange, gripping ecstasy we all felt last March? I'm sure the angels, and the community of Night Vale at large, will appreciate your efforts to make the holiday season friendlier.

On a related note, please do not feed the bowling alley your candy. It gets ill, and begins shouting anti-Semitic remarks. I think we can all agree that nobody likes that, but especially not the bowling alley the morning after.

According to a series of reports I have just been handed, the Triannual Night Vale Can Drive has been cancelled, due to the minor complication of our homeless vanishing without a trace. Dear listeners, I can assure you, this is an absolutely normal occurrence for a town such as ours, and there is absolutely no cause for alarm and/or ritualistic panic. **Trust me.**

Now, here's something I think you'll find interesting, dear listeners. Carlos, and his perfect hair, of course, came to me just the other day and said he had heard about some out of town scientists planning a trip to our humble desert community. By now, I have, as I hope you all have, learned that scientists are not the dangerous, subversive men the town council once wanted us to believe they were. In fact, they can even be loved. So, being the cutting-edge reporter and gracious host that I am, I decided it would behoove me to go out and get an exclusive interview with these scientists.

It was dangerous, of course, dear listeners. The scientists were only in town because they had heard the last broadcast - you know, the one telling of the oncoming storm of despair and happiness that descended upon the westside of Night Vale last night. Being out in that tempest was certainly an experience I do not wish to repeat, but I am willing to do anything to bring you your news, dear listeners.

Anyways, they certainly were a strange lot. All dressed in white, with white gloves and in white vans, white as the moon as it sails across the sky and stares down upon Earth, so lonely in the universe. They certainly weren't beautiful like Carlos and his perfect hair. They didn't even have any sort of equipment on them! In fact, they were quite surprised to meet me out there; apparently, they hadn't expected the person who warned of such a dangerous storm to be standing right out in the middle of it.

Of course, they didn't even notice the storm either, but then, do any of us really want to notice such things, dear listeners?

I'm afraid I have to apologize here, friends and listeners. I had hoped to coax these scientists into town long enough to get them on the show today, but they only stuck around long enough to ask me a few questions about Night Vale before leaving. I can barely even remember their faces! However, I can tell you, dear listeners, what I told them.

I told them of Night Vale. I told them of the unsavory parts of our town - the dog park, the hooded figures, of the Apache Tracker, of that asshole, Steve Carlsberg. But, dear listeners, I also told them of the good aspects. Of the humble Arby's, of the beautiful lights that dance across the sky at noontime every seventh Friday, of the lovely scientists that inhabit our dear town, of how much better we are than Desert Bluffs. Of Carlos in particular, and his beautiful, perfect hair. And, of course, of you, dear listeners, the best citizens any community could ask for.

I told them all of this, and waited to see what further questions they would ask, what curiosities they would explore first. Instead, all they did was stand around for a few minutes, look around them, then thanked me for my time, piled into their vans, and left. I could swear one of them muttered about what a "delusional, rambling nut" I was

as they departed, but none of them seemed all *that* rude.

Perhaps, dear listeners, they were simply too stunned by the great town we have been blessed to live in to pollute it with their poking and prodding. We may never know, but we can say they were very odd men. Just remember, listeners, that we should always embrace the odd and weird, unless the town council tells us not to. True, they were strange, but I accept them all, even if they are no longer with us.

After all, isn't meeting new people what being a citizen of Night Vale is all about?

No. It's about hiding under your desks and praying for salvation when the birds croak their terrible secrets.

And now, the weather!

Agent Brown and the Case of the Missing Amulet

It was a perfectly perfect day at the SCP Foundation's 19th Site. There were anomalous butterflies flying, and laughing personnel catching them in titanium butterfly nets. The Telekill containment chambers were keeping the psychics in check, and all the senior staff were out being cool and handsome. Well… almost all of them.

Dr. Bright was double morose, due to the concrete fact that he'd been stuck in the same D-Class body for over two weeks now. Yes, it was funny the first couple dozen times he popped the eye out, but his pegleg was starting to get sore. Plus, that goddamn parrot wouldn't leave him alone.

"Of all the days to lose the amulet" Bright groused, "It had to be International Talk Like a Pirate Day."

In front of him lay a garage door, looking incredibly conspicuous among the identical rows of offices. The council had tried to stop them from building it, but the new hire had insisted on it. Normally, this would result in being given a fastpass to Keterland, but this had been a special case. A special case for a special detective.

25 cents per day, plus expenses - No case too small.

He sighed, and pulled open the garage door.

Seated inside, busily researching his latest anomalous yo-yo, was the great boy detective. One of the best minor crimebusters on the Foundation payroll. He'd been solving mysteries left and right, going from the "Case of Kondraki's Kaleidoscope" to "The Mystery of the Mischievous Miser's Mansion." His name was Leroy Brown, but they called him Agent Encyclopedia since folks said he was like an encyclopedia that wore sneakers. Several cases had been proposed marking him as an anomaly, but it never produced much.

"Hey there, Jack. I thought you were meeting Rights today to test

hyper-lethal napkins?"

"I was… but something came up." Bright slumped his arms. "I need your help. Someone has stolen my amulet, and I don't know who."

"Really?" Encyclopedia dropped his yo-yo in surprise. As it sizzled on the floor, he asked "Are you sure it isn't just misplaced?"

"Positive. I'd just left it in my locker while I changed into this body, and when I came back it was gone. It sucked, since I couldn't do any of the pirate-themed lethal pranks on the new people."

Encyclopedia nodded, gesturing subtly to a shoebox with a coin slot. "Do you have any idea who might've done it?"

"Well…" Bright's non-eyepatched eye closed in thought. "I thought Researcher Meany was giving it some looks the other day. I kicked him out of containment for being Bugs earlier that day."

"Bugs!" Encyclopedia excalimed. "I should've known he was behind this!"

"So, we just have Konny hang out in their clubhouse for a few minutes, then everybody wins?"

"We need proof first, Jack. We need… a confession."

Encyclopedia knew just where to find Bugs. He'd be at his clubhouse with his gang. They called themselves the Tigers, but they should have called them themselves the Skippers, because they always tried to duck responsibility. The Tiger clubhouse was situated in the scenic Site-19 mess hall. Constructed of tables, scrap wood, and dreams, it was the home to Researcher Bugs Meany and his gang of no-canon scientists who didn't abide by the scientific method.

Encyclopedia knocked on the door. For a moment, there was great rustling, and then one Bugs Meany opened the door.

"Ohhh look boys, it's the walking thesaurus!" Bugs exclaimed, sneering. His fellow Tigers jeered from inside the clubhouse.

"Knock it off, Bugs. You know why we're here."

"Why, Agent Dictionary, I have no idea why you're here. We've just been playing cards all afternoon." Bugs' sneer got even wider, if such a thing was possible.

"Where were you on Pirate Day, Bugs?" Encyclopedia asked, crossing his arms.

"Pirate Day? Me and the boys were mess—assisting, that is, with the containment of six-eight-two."

Encyclopedia raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah. A couple of us stuck a plank over the pit, to see how he'd react to juniors standing over the glass. Oh, there were results. Boy, did it get steamed. But, Bright came in and cramped our style."

"There were others in line, Bugs." Bright huffed.

"Whatever, Jackwad." The Tigers laughed raucously. "Why d'you want to know?"

"You stole my Amulet!" Bright shouted, his lone eyebrow crossing with displeasure.

"Heh, you wish. After Jack-o'-lantern kicked us out, we hung out in the observation chamber. 'Course when the big lizard got out, we didn't stick around."

Encyclopedia tapped his sneaker. "Where'd you run to, Bugs?"

"We climbed in the rafters. Six-Eight-Two looked at us, but only messily devoured the low-hanging guys. Looked right up at me, then scrambled away."

"That's all we need, Bugs." Encyclopedia nodded at him. "See you around."

"Smell ya later, Spanish-English dictionary." The clubhouse door slammed shut.

Dr. Bright whispered to Encyclopedia as they walked out. "I think he has an ironclad case…"

Encyclopedia shook his head. "Something about his story doesn't add up."

What did Encyclopedia Know?

To find out, turn to page .

Bugs said that SCP-682 looked up at him when he was telling the researcher to walk the plank. But Encyclopedia knew that 682 can't look up!

After being confronted, Bugs admitted to stealing the medallion. He was met with swift justice of a detention with Dr. Kondraki.

Dr. Bright got his medallion back just in time to make it to the hyper-lethal napkin symposium. It was met with critical acclaim.

Encyclopedia was given the Foundation star and 25 cents for his work.

His parents were very proud of him.

Saturday Night SCP Showdown

"I'm Vince McMahon."

"I'm Gorilla Monsoon."

"And I'm Bobby 'the Brain' Heenan."

"We've got a sold-out crowd here tonight at the Tacoma Dome this lovely Saturday night, February 17th, 1991, ladies and gentlemen, and millions tuning in around the world exclusively on pay-per-view. Prepare yourselves for a once-in-a-lifetime spectacle. Bigger than Wrestlemania! Bigger than the Royal Rumble! Bigger than the Super Bowl! This is, the first, the last, the only - **WORLD WRESTLING FEDERATION SATURDAY NIGHT SCP SHOWDOWN!**"

"That's right, Vince," Gorilla said to his partner in the commentator's booth. "For the first time ever, we're going to see the WWF's greatest superstars go toe-to-toe with the strangest in anomalous beings the SCP Foundation has to offer! You're going to see the WWF World Heavyweight Champion, the Ultimate Warrior himself, defend his belt against the man they call Able! You're going to see a mystery wrestler - who could it be? - defend the honor of the red, white, and blue in a flag-versus-flag match against Lord Theodore 'The Gentleman' Blackwood! You're going to see a handicap match in the parking lot so intense that the network won't even let me *tell* you what's going to go down! By the end of the night, we'll know once and for all which of these two one-of-a-kind organizations is *really* larger than life! Thoughts, Brain?"

"Well, I've been watching these Foundation boys for some time, and I think they've got what it takes to go all the way."

"I don't know about that, Brain. I've been told the Ultimate Warrior has been training day and night in preparation for this showdown."

"They've got 'Rowdy' Roddy Piper himself guest-refereeing in that

match. Who knows if he's gonna play by the rules?"

"Let's go to ringside," Vince said, "for our first matchup of the evening!"

—-

"Ladies and gentlemen," declared ring announcer Howard Finkel, "the following match for the WWF World Tag Team Championship is scheduled for one fall!" A powerful guitar riff that in no way resembled Foreigner's hit single "Urgent" blared over the loudspeakers, the crowd erupting into cheers as two men in pink tights and black jackets approached the ring. "From Calgary, Alberta, Canada, with a combined weight of 515 lbs., the WWF World Tag Team Champions, Bret 'the Hitman' Hart and Jim 'the Anvil' Neidhart, **the Hart Foundation!**"

"And their challengers!" An uncertain chorus erupted as two identical looking men in black singlets approached the ring, each with a stylized amulet over their chests. A guitar riff which in no way resembled Foreigner's "Double Vision" played as Finkel announced the pair. "Hailing from Site-19, each weighing exactly 273 lbs., **Dr. Jack Bright** and his partner, **Dr. Jack Bright!**"

—-

"I'm here live in the locker room," said Brother Love as he stood next to a heavily-tattooed man in black who dwarfed him in stature, "with one of the SCP superstars you'll see in tonight's man event. He's mean! He's mysterious! He's SCP-076-2!"

"**Able,**" the giant corrected him.

"Of course," Brother Love replied as he daubed at his bright red forehead with a silk hanky. "Now, Able, your matchup tonight with the Ultimate Warrior has been the talk of the World Wrestling Federation ever since your interference at the Royal Rumble cost Sgt. Slaughter his chance at winning the championship. Is there anything you'd like to say to the people at home who've never seen you in the squared circle?"

"You who are watching me tonight," Able said, "know that I have come to the World Wrestling Federation not to entertain, not to teach, not even to compete, but to **conquer**! There is nobody in this arena tonight who is my equal! The worms who lurk these halls, who call themselves superstars - they are not worthy to stand against me! I will dominate all those who challenge me as I have dominated for ten thousand years, and when I leave this place, I will leave nothing but the bleached skulls of those fools who *dared* to stand in my way!"

"A lot of people have said, Able, that the Ultimate Warrior is a truly unpredictable fighter. Have you been making any special preparations for tonight's main event?"

Able laughed. "Ultimate Warrior!" he shouted as he pointed at the camera. "Your name is a lie, for there is no warrior more ultimate than myself! You say the spirits of the warriors past give you their power? I **am** the spirits of warriors past, and my power is beyond your ability to comprehend! I will leave here tonight the WWF World Heavyweight Champion, **Jim** - because I am Able, and you are *unable*."

"I *looooooooooooooooove* this man," Brother Love said.

—-

"**I SPOKE TO THE GODS AT THE HEIGHTS OF MT. EVEREST, MEAN GENE!**" screamed the Ultimate Warrior - tasseled, his bare, oiled chest gleaming under the lighting, his face painted green and yellow, the WWF World Heavyweight Championship belt around his waist. "**AND THEY TOLD ME THAT WHEN THE POWER OF THE WARRIOR FLOWS THROUGH MY VEINS LIKE THE LIGHTNING OF THE GODS, THAT ALL THOSE WHO FACE ME SHALL FALL LIKE DOMINOS ON A CHESS BOARD BEFORE THE MIGHT OF MY MONOPOLY! KING ME, ABLE! YOU HAD BETTER CONSULT AN UNDERTAKER, ABLE, BECAUSE YOU ARE GOING TO NEED FIVE GIANT STONE CASKETS TO CARRY YOU OUT OF THE TACOMA DOME TONIGHT! TONIGHT, I WILL HIT THE RING LIKE AN ATOM BOMB FILLED WITH DRAGON'S FIRE, ABLE, AND BLOW YOU HALFWAY TO PARTS UNKNOWN! I WILL PROVE TONIGHT ONCE AGAIN THAT I AM**

THE ULTIMATE WARRIOR, ABLE - AND BY THE TIME THAT I ASCEND ON MY STARSHIP INTO THE ANNALS OF GLORY, WITH THE WWF WORLD HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPIONSHIP BY MY SIDE, YOU WILL BE DISABLED!"

"Strong words from the champion," Mean Gene Okerlund said as the Warrior cleared his nasal passages and exhaled deeply. "Back to you, Vince."

—-

"This has certainly been an excitement-filled night so far!" Vince McMahon exclaimed. "What do you think, Brain?"

"I'm speechless," Brain said. "I never in a million years expected Mr. Perfect to go down that easily."

"For those of you just tuning in," Gorilla Monsoon said, "the World Wrestling Federation has just crowned a new Intercontinental Champion in an amazing thirteen-second matchup in which Mr. Perfect was easily defeated by SCP-230."

"He just laid down the second that pink and yellow fella laid a hand on him," Brain said. "I smell a rat."

"Well, they call him 'the gayest man alive' for a reason, Brain."

"Which one are you talking about?"

"And the Hart Foundation holds onto the Tag Team Championship by disqualification, after six additional Jack Brights entered the ring."

"Truly disgraceful behavior from a man of science," Vince said.

"A few more of him and he could do the Royal Rumble by himself," Brain commented.

"And, of course," Vince interrupted, "Dmitri Strelnikov's win against Nikolai Volkoff has won him a shot for the World Heavyweight Championship at Wrestlemania VII next month - against whichever of tonight's two superstars leaves the arena with the belt."

"What was it he kept calling Volkoff?" Brain asked. "A dirty checker?"

"We're almost ready for tonight's special showdown in the parking lot," Gorilla said, "but first, let's go back to ringside, where Money Inc. - that's Ted 'the Million Dollar Man' Dibiase and Irwin R. Shyster, of course - are preparing to enter the ring for their handicap match against Marshall, Carter, and Dark Ltd."

—-

Howard Finkel shouted into a megaphone while standing in the center of the parking lot. A circle of junk cars fifty feet across delineated the ring for this special matchup, and crowds who couldn't afford to get into the arena gathered around for a peek at the competitors.

Finkel gestured to a crowd of twenty wrestlers who had never been seen on TV before, and likely never would be again, in their identical green trunks and boots. "To my left, with a combined total weight of 5,173 pounds, hailing from Camelot, **the Dragonslayers!**"

"Have you ever seen a match like this before, Brain?"

"I've been in this business for twenty-five years, Gorilla, and I've never seen anything like this. I didn't even know this was legal."

"Only here and in Alabama," Vince said.

"And on my right," Finkel announced as he gestured to the giant scaly beast licking its chops in anticipation, "weighing in at Redacted pounds, hailing from Data Expunged, the one, the only, **SCP-682!**"

—-

"Well, ladies and gentlemen," Mean Gene announced to the crowd as he stood by the entrance from the locker room, "I think it's safe to say that what we've just witnessed moments ago is unprecedented in the history of the World Wrestling Federation. In case you're just tuning in, during our special segment of Piper's Pit, Rowdy Roddy Piper, who's scheduled to be guest referee for tonight's main event, shook hands with his guest SCP-507 and they both instantaneously

disappeared. I assure you we're working very hard to find a solution to this problem. In the meantime, for some insight into this situation, I have here with me the WWF's foremost expert on the paranormal - ladies and gentlemen, Mr. Paul Bearer."

The audience booed and hissed as the pale-faced, rotund man entered and stood next to Mean Gene. "It's wooooooooonderful to be here, Mr. Oooooooookerlund," he said as he caressed the brass urn in his hands.

"Paul Bearer, you've studied SCP-507's file front to back, correct?"

"Oh, **yeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeees!**"

"And in your opinion, where are he and the Rowdy one right now?"

"They could be aaaaaaaaaaaaanywhere, Mr. Okerlund. Perhaps they're in a land of *spiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiders!* Perhaps, even now, they're lunch for giant aaaaaaaaaaaaaantelopes? Perhaps they'll run into my good friends Hawk and Animal in the *dimension of doooooooooooooooooooooooooooom?"*

"Do you think they'll be back in time for the main event?"

"Perhaps they will be, Mr. Oooooooooookerlund. I hope Roddy Piper doesn't mind holding hands, though - or it might be a very long time indeed before he returns! A pity, too - I was already making funeral arrangements for him!"

"Paul Bearer, ladies and gentlemen. Now, I'm not sure what's going to happen if we can't find another referee for the main event, but -" Mean Gene cut himself off as he clutched his hand to his earpiece. "Ladies and gentlemen, I'm being informed that we have a special announcement from headquarters. We now go live to the WWF Home Office in Stamford, CT, and WWF President Jack Tunney."

—-

Jack Tunney sat at his desk in a gray suit, a stern look on his face as he addressed the camera. "As the result of anomalous action by an SCP superstar at tonight's event, special guest referee Rowdy Roddy Piper is currently lost in a parallel universe. The WWF and

the SCP Foundation are currently employing all available resources to locate him and return him to this dimension before the conclusion of tonight's event.

"As the result of his absence, the position of referee for tonight's World Heavyweight Championship bout between the Ultimate Warrior and Able is vacant. Due to union guidelines, none of the WWF referees in attendance this evening are eligible to referee another match. As this absence is due to actions taken by an SCP superstar, it is my decision that the SCP Foundation must supply an alternate guest referee in the event that Mr. Piper does not return to this universe by the time of the main event.

"I have reviewed the roster of SCP Foundation personnel on hand at the Tacoma Dome tonight, and I have concluded that the only person among their ranks who is present and eligible is the person identified as SCP-073 or 'Cain'. It is therefore my ruling that Cain must guest-referee tonight's main event, and that failure to do so will result in Able forfeiting the match and any future shot at the WWF World Heavyweight Championship. Thank you."

—-

"Well, folks, now that the ring has been cleaned up after the exciting matchup between Doink the Clown and Chowderclef," Vince said as the cleaning crews mopped up the last bits of soup and cream pie, "it's almost time for one of the most anticipated matches of the evening."

"Speaking of cleanup," Brain said, "I don't think that parking lot's ever gonna be the same again."

"What a shame," Gorilla said as he shook his head. "So much wasted talent. In any event, to recap the events of the last hour, we've seen the Macho King Randy Savage win the Foundation's SCP-619-J championship from D-33118, Ravishing Rick Rude defeated by submission in his bout against the Tickle Monster, and the Undertaker's match against SCP-173, of course, ended in a draw after the time limit expired."

"They just stood there and stared at each other for fifteen minutes,"

Brain said. "I think we lost more viewers that quarter hour than when Elvis Presto headlined the Super Bowl halftime show."

"Truly some suspenseful sports entertainment," Vince said. "Let's go to the ring."

—-

"The management has asked me to inform anyone planning to leave the arena early tonight," Howard Finkel announced, "that the cleaning crews have not yet finished removing the Dragonslayers from the pavement. And now, the following flag-vs-flag match is scheduled for one fall!"

A chorus of jeers erupted from the crowd as "Rule Britannia" began to play overhead. A mustachioed man in khaki shorts and a pith helmet entered the arena, behind him an elderly man in a suit carrying the Union Flag.

"Now entering the ring accompanied by his manager Mr. Deeds, hailing from Westminster, London, England, a man who you will all agree is certainly *not* a telepathic sea slug, **Lord Theodore 'The Gentleman' Blackwood!**"

Mr. Deeds held the ropes open for Lord Blackwood to make his entrance, stopping as he approached the ring to yell at and shove an old woman in the stands. As Deeds planted the Union Flag on one turnbuckle, Blackwood leaned over to the announcer and whispered to him.

"Lord Blackwood demands," he announced, "that you stand and join him in singing your rightful national anthem!" Lord Blackwood grabbed the microphone from Finkel and began singing a deliberately off-key rendition of "God Save the Queen", which elicited from the crowd only further boos and a chorus of 'Blackwood sucks! Blackwood sucks!'

Within a minute, his singing was cut off by an electric guitar as "Real American" began to blast over the loudspeakers, and a tanned, muscular man in red and yellow, Old Glory held high above his head, marched down the aisle. "His opponent," Finkel announced,

"weighing in at 303 lbs., from Venice Beach, California, the immortal **Hulk Hogan!**"

"I say," Lord Blackwood said to himself, "this isn't going to be very pleasant."

—-

Vince McMahon glared at Able in his locker room, as the tattooed giant put the finishing touches on his costume. "Now, you remember I explained to you how this works, right?"

"I understand how to destroy anyone who dares challenge me," Able responded.

"But you don't *actually* destroy him," Vince said. "Just make it look real. Jim is one of our biggest draws. I don't need him leaving here in an ambulance."

"He has nothing to fear," Able responded. "I have observed him. He fights like a child. He is in more danger of hurting himself than he is of being hurt by me."

"Good," Vince said. "Oh, and one more thing - there's been a little change regarding the referee…"

—-

The Ultimate Warrior was flat on his stomach, sweat washing away his makeup, as Able stood triumphantly above him. The Warrior tried in vain to raise himself to his feet - and Able brought the chair down over his back again.

"I can't believe what I'm seeing, ladies and gentlemen," Vince said. "The champ and our guest referee are both down on the ground, and Able is completely in control."

"Warrior made a big mistake when he hit Cain with that clothesline," Gorilla said. "If he'd read the files, he'd know any pain inflicted on Cain is reflected to the person dealing it out. The fact he even managed to knock Cain over - well, that's turned out even worse for him, as you can see."

"I still wanna know where Able got that chair from," the Brain commented. "He didn't even step outside the ring, did he?" Cain began to rise to his feet - and Able struck him with the chair as well, knocking him down as Able winced but was otherwise unscathed.

"What a maneuver from Able!" Vince said. "He's essentially beating himself with that chair and he's completely unfazed."

Able tossed the chair out of the ring and raised his hands to the heavens, mimicking the Warrior's classic mannerisms. "This could be it," Brain said as Able lifted the Warrior to his feet and tucked his head between his legs in preparations for a powerbomb. "We might be about to see a new champion."

Able had his hands on his hips and was about to lift the champ when a flash of light blinded him, and two men - one an overweight young man in jeans and a shirt, the other a surlier, more muscular man in a kilt and a striped shirt, appeared in midair and fell into the ring.

"What's this?" Vince shouted. "It's SCP-507 and Rowdy Roddy Piper, back in our own universe!" The young man rolled out of the ring as Able turned to face Piper, who had seen Cain on the mat and turned to have words with Able. While the two shouted in each other's faces, the tassled warrior behind them rose to his feet and began doing a triumphant dance. Piper leapt out of the way just in time as the Warrior whipped himself into the turnbuckle, clotheslined Able from behind, and quickly splashed onto him for the cover. Cain looked over just as Piper fell to the ground, and the two of them slapped the mat together for a count of one, two, three.

"The winner," Howard Finkel declared as the bell rang and thrash metal played overhead, "and still WWF World Heavyweight Champion, the Ultimate Warrior!"

—-

Jim Hellwig stepped out of the locker room as he pulled his coat on over his shoulders and headed for the back door. The crowds were gone, the makeup and tassels were off, and the heavyweight championship belt was stowed in his suitcase. It'd been a long day and he was sore all over, and there was nothing more he wanted

than to get back to the hotel and get a good night's sleep before he had to be in Sacramento for the house show on Monday night.

"Jim!" Vince McMahon shouted as he headed toward the door to the parking lot. "Great show tonight."

"Are you kidding me?" Jim replied. "That Able guy was completely in business for himself. I don't wanna see that guy in a locker room ever again. At least that little slug they got to fight Terry knew how to work a match."

"Don't worry about that," Vince said. "I've seen the buyrate. Even if these Foundation guys don't just dope our entire fan base with amnestics, nobody's even gonna remember this thing in six months anyway."

"Good," Jim said.

"Speaking of those Foundation guys," Vince said, "one of them asked me to give you this." He handed Jim a plain white envelope, marked only with the Foundation's trefoil logo. "See you on Monday."

Jim walked out the door into the performers-only lot at the back of the arena. Even from here he could smell the lingering smell of blood and gore from the 682 match. At least he only had to fight *one* insane monster that night, he said to himself. He stepped into his rented Toyota and started the engine. As he waited for the heater to chase away the winter chill, he opened the envelope and read the strange missive within;

> To: James "Warrior" Hellwig
> From: Gen. M. Bowe
>
> You have been selected as a candidate for Mobile Task Force Ω-7. Report to MTFL Able, Site-19, 3/16/91 for briefing and physical examination.
>
> *Ducit ad viam victoria miles.*

Issue 100

"What the hell do you mean there's been a breach?"

"Well, no SCPs have broken out, but… someone's made a video about us. Specifically, the **`comic books`** we keep finding."

"So some small-time comic nerd makes a video about us. Confiscate the comic, kill the vid and shoot him up with Class-A's."

"It's not going to be that easy, sir…"

> **Lewis Lovhaug (AKA Linkara):** Hello, and welcome to Atop the 4th Wall, Where Bad Comics Burn. Today, we're talking about something kind of obscure, the comic "Tales of the Foundation Force Five".
>
> (Stock music starts playing over images of Foundation Force Five comic panels and covers)
>
> **Linkara:** This thing has only been around for about 20 years or so, but god *damn* did it reproduce quickly. This is like the tribbles of comic books. Published by Super Comics Publications, the Foundation Force Five focuses around five members of the fictional SCP Foundation, a global entity that "Secures, Contains, and Protects". Specifically, they Secure and Contain anomalous items they call "skips" and Protect humanity from their harmful effects. And the writing team gets really creative with the items that show up in the comic. How creative?
>
> (video cuts back to Linkara speaking to the camera)
>
> **Linkara:** There are almost two thousand skips that are known in the comic's universe. That's right, two *thousand*. The amount of effort it must take to come up with new items for every freakin' storyline is… I don't

even know. Geez.

"All right, so who is this guy?"

"Lewis Lovhaug, sir. Professional comic book reviewer, works for That Guy With The Glasses dot Com…"

"Weren't they the bozos who reviewed Edison's damn movie?"

"Yes, sir."

"*Shit*."

> **Linkara:** The Foundation Force Five was started during the speculator boom, and became very successful by not having one, not two, but at least *four* comics published in a single month, depending on the writing team. This was so that they could get storylines over with faster, and so far, there are over 700 issues. Just to make it clear… this comic, in less than 20 years, has produced as many issues as *The Amazing Spider-Man* has produced in FIFTY. That's over 35 freakin' issues a year, and Super Comics Publications still finds time to publish Monthlies like Wondertainment's Kiddy Book for Kids! That's epic.
>
> **Linkara:** Sadly, the issue we're looking at today is decidedly less epic. Released as a special 100th issue about three years into the comic's run, this thing deals with… we'll you'll see.
>
> (Linkara holds up Issue 100 of the Foundation Force Five, clearly displaying its cover)
>
> **Linkara:** So let's dig into Tales of the Foundation Force Five #100 "Brother's Keeper", and see what happens when you combine Liefeldian proportions with writing so insane Frank Miller would have you committed.

"This dork has his own theme song? Kinda catchy. Also, who's Frank Miller?"

"Comic book writer. Did some Batman stuff that was really popular

back in the '80s."

"Stuff my kids might like, do ya think? They love Batman."

"…you read The Dark Knight Returns and tell me, sir."

> **Linkara:** The cover shows us a picture of Femme Fatale, AKA Dr. Rights, the only female member of the FF5. She's standing in the shadow of a 7-foot-tall overly-muscled beast, who is Able, or SCP-076-2. Yes, that's Able as in the Biblical Able. Now, the proportions on Able are acceptable; in previous issues, he's been shown to be really god-damn buff, and also really tall. The problem I have here is with Dr. Rights, who… well, just LOOK at it!

"He's right. A person's spine isn't supposed to bend that way."

"What do you mean? I think it looks kind of… oh, EW! It's like it's at a right angle!"

"And look at those breasts. Yeesh. No wonder her back's broken."

"Who the hell drew this?"

"According to the video, someone going by the name of 'Redd Actor'."

"Oh, and I suppose the writer is 'Dottie X. Ponge'?"

"…"

"ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME?!"

> **Linkara:** The story starts out at the bottom of the Atlantic ocean at Site "Blackbox". Yeah, quick note, here. For some reason, the dialog in these comics is treated like a government document, with liberal use of "redacted" and "data expunged" thrown around. One thing that's kinda funny, though; when characters swear, it says "expletive redacted". Makes the scenes with Comrade Gunkill hilarious.

Linkara: Anyway. Here at Site Blackbox, we meet Bodyjacker, AKA Dr. Jack Bright, in a female body this time around. Judging by the size of her legs, I think she's possessing Bayonetta. (picture of said character shows up in the corner of the screen) She and another scientist are looking in at SCP-076, the giant stone prison that contains Able.

Bodyjacker (voiced by Linkara in a falsetto): How's the containment holding?

Scientist: The new procedures suggested by your team are holding up quite well, sir-uh, ma'm, uh… sorry, but I don't know what to call you.

Bodyjacker: Jack will be fine. And we don't want Abel going out on a rampage. You know who to call if he breaks out again… right, soldier? (Bodyjacker shimmies up close to the scientist)

Linkara: And then a containment breach alarm sounds, with Able stepping out of his prison… and for some reason, the on-site nuke goes off, killing everyone on site, *except* for Able, who just floats to the surface.

Linkara: I would do a gag here where I drop the comic and say "well that was short, see you next week", but quite frankly, that's getting old. Besides, you can tell by the bar at the bottom of the video that this isn't over yet.

"Huh. This kid is pretty good with voices."

"Hush."

Linkara: After that explosion, we are shown Comrade Gunkill, also known as Agent Strelnikov, in his own personal armory with ChowderClef, or Dr. Alto Clef. Yes, I am serious. The first guy has the superpower of *guns,* and the guy with the awesome hat has the super power of guns that shoot *chowder.*

The 90's Kid: Duuuuuuuuuuuuuuuude! Comrade Gunkill is **awesome!** He has the coolest superpower of all - GUNS! And it was totally radical when ChowderClef tried to blow up a *star* with a *chowder bomb!* (Pulls out a bowl marked "clam chowder" and slurps at it.)

Linkara: Okay, I admit, that… that was pretty awesome. Also, what are you doing?

The 90's Kid: I thought that if I eat enough of this Chowder stuff, I'll become just like ChowderClef!

Linkara: Yeah, good luck with that.

"Wait… why was he two different people?"

"It's a gag he does. Don't ask."

"Okay then."

Chowderclef: Dammit, Fatale, we need Gunkill to do this! It takes a real man to face off against 076!

Linkara: I AM A MAN! (punches, and brings out an SCP-682 plushie when he pulls back his hand) …where the hell did this come from?

(The SCP-682 plushie "attacks" and attempts to eat Linkara, who shoots it with his "magic gun" while screaming)

"Two things: firstly, what was that?"

"Running gag he has. Kinda like the 'We were on break!' thing on *Friends*."

"Okay. Secondly: What. The. FUCK!? He has a plush 682?! Where'd he purchase THAT!"

"I think he made it himself. He does that with some of his props."

"Even so… Also, that gun isn't actually-"

"No, sir."

"Good."

> **Linkara:** Bodyjacker, like an immortal troll, decides to pelt a freakin' Holy Hand Grenade at Able. No, seriously, that's what it's called. They got them, like, 50 issues ago.
>
> **Bodyjacker:** Hey, you son of a Biblical [EXPLETIVE REDACTED]! Have a taste of this!
>
> **Linkara:** The grenade blows up as Able catches it, and- JESUS! Look at all that blood! If any normal human did that, he'd be dead in a second! I get that this was during the 90's but still, *Jesus.*
>
> **Bodyjacker:** Genesis don't! (a montage of clips play, including one from from Star Trek III: The Search for Spock, a Sega Genesis commercial, and a clip from the music video for Genesis' *Land of Confusion*)

"…well, that was random."

> **Linkara:** Of course, Able's also immortal, and shrugs it off, producing a sword that's *bigger than him.* How big? Just pulling it out is enough to cut Jacker in half from across the room. Just… huh?! I think even Cloud would have a hard time carrying that without killing himself!

"This guy makes an awful lot of pop culture references, doesn't he?"

"He's an internet reviewer, what do you expect?"

> **SCP-076:** Mother?
>
> **Femme Fatale:** What?
>
> **Linkara:** What?

"What."

"What."

Linkara: Okay, so for those of you not paying attention, Able thinks that Femme Fatale is his mother, and apparently has quite an Oedipus complex, because a few panels later…

Chowderclef: Agatha, what the hell are you doing?

Femme Fatale: They don't call me a negotiations spectialist for nothing, Clef.

Linkara: And then… she makes out with 076. I'm not kidding, folks. She makes out with freakin' **Able**, an immortal, seven-foot-tall war god, to whom sex and sexuality are completely alien concepts. Continuity? What's that? Oh, also, they misspelled "specialist". (90's Kid Voice) Because poor literacy… is what happens when your book is written by Dottie X. Ponge.

Linkara: I'm sorry, folks, but I need to take a small break, here. We've just seen Able making out with a woman who he thinks is his mother. I need a long, cold shower.

(The video cuts to commercial)

"Odd time to have a break, almost 3/4ths of the way through…"

"I've seen enough. Get over to his house, shut down this site's server, use memetics to knock out people's memories of seeing this video, give the nerd Class-A's, and get the fucking comic."

"Watch it through to the end, at least…"

"Fine."

Linkara: And so our comic ends with SCP-073 killing his brother, and mourning over his corpse, but not before he says to Rights…

SCP-073: I'm sorry, mother. I've done it again.

Linkara: This comic sucks! As if it weren't bad enough

that the artwork is horrid and overly gory in places, the writing can be nonsensical, like ABLE SURVIVING A NUKE and whole scene with him picking up Bodyjacker's amulet and it only affecting him temporarily is just stupid. Add in the theme of incest towards the end, and the whole comic makes me wanna gag.

Linkara: Don't get me wrong, people. This series can be very good; hell, towards the beginning, it had several great story arcs, and after this one, it had several more! My personal favorite is around Issue 76, where the team travels back in time and gets turned into sea slugs. But as for this one… well…

(An alarm rings off screen as Linkara looks around in confusion)

"What's… going on?"

"It's a skit he has at the end of his reviews. Entertaining, if a bit pointless and convoluted."

"Okay then… wait, is that guy in the Hulk Hogan costume supposed to be 076?"

"And the guy with the gorilla mask is Clef. Don't ask."

"Oh, hey, credits. *Now* can you send out a task force to Class-A the nerd?!"

"I did it 35 minutes ago."

"…"

"…"

"Fuck you."

Inertiatic SCP

The dream shaper had just been recovered from his home in El Paso, with the apparitions following close behind.

The armed members of the recovery squad stood outside window of the scip's temporary containment chamber contemplating what to do next. The apparitions were lurking in and out of crevices and blind passages of the abandoned building's basement, screaming for the shaper. The monsters had just recently cut the lights, and now the squad was holed up and their rifles were aimed nervously over a flare in the doorway.

The squad arrived to find an empty studio apartment, recently vacated. The only clues left behind were a broken needle and a journal filled with indecipherable images, black and white spheres, and nonsense words.

Outside of the window they could see a man, the probable scip, running toward an overpass reaching over a very busy four lane highway. The figure made his way toward the ledge, pausing and looking straight ahead for a few moments. One of the squad members looked on through the window, motioning for half of the squad to follow, leaving two of their men behind in the apartment with the researchers.

The attempt to intercept the suicide diver had not been a success for the recovery squad. The scip standing over the ledge began his nosedive toward the pavement before they got close. The falling body was interrupted by the grille of a lucky sixteen wheeler before hitting the pavement, and bounced back against the curb like a beef watermelon.

“Moattilliatta?” voices in the hallway crackled repeatedly.

Only creeping silence and the recovery squad’s breathing could be heard for the next few minutes.

“Hope they get here soon.”

“You’re tellin’ me.”

From the makeshift containment cell came a quick flash of purple light, when the squad turned they could see that the scip’s corpse had been replaced with a very much alive man, identical to the one they saw jump off the bridge earlier.

“I guess we’re getting that bonus?” One of the others asked nervously.

The man in the cell slowly walked into a corner, and curled up into a fetal position.

More slithering and clanking could be heard outside in the hallways. “The last teraquetzal returns to the ‘ESP’.” The cricketing voices were numerous and demanding.

“What the hell are those things on about?”

The rest of the squad turned their sights back on the doorway where the sound of clanking and slithering could be heard increasing in volume. Something like a giant ant’s face quickly flashed in and out of the doorway, barely avoiding a startled hail of bullets.

“The *fuck!*”

“They’re s-s-scared of bullets man…”

The leader half-laughed, half-grimaced, “Backup should be here any minute, just keep fixed on that door, keep your shit together.”

Agent Breen flipped through the old weathered journal while Sanders collected samples from the needle and the carpet.

“Irradi Exerptas.” Breen said, holding the book in front of him.

“What?”

“That’s what’s written on the front. Some of this is written in Spanish. What’s in the needle?”

“Morphine. He was trying to OD. Really should have killed him. Makes you wonder why he didn’t just try the whole bridge diving thing to start.” Sanders wipes her nose. “Anything else in there?”

“Most of the words are like a made up language, and there’s a bunch of hand drawn pictures of creatures, bug people, lots of random shit. Guy was an artist, crazy from the looks of it. Last page is another nonsense word… ‘Phyxia ‘ in large print.”

“Any word back from the others who went after the scip?”

“Not our problem really. After you’re done with the samples it’s back to base for us.”

“Right. Yeah I’m done here.”

“Extraction point is on the roof. We should be looking for a police helicopter.” Breen says as he follows Sanders out of the room.

The scip in the cell began screaming as the noises in the hallway grew louder.

“Make it stop just fucking make it stop why the fuck FUCK.” He grasped the top of his head and curled tighter in the corner.

“Any idea what we should be expecting here buddy?” One of the uniformed men barked to the scip.

“They’re *pissed*!” The scip shrieks. “You’re not letting them to me, you’re pissing them off! Can't help it! All fucked!”

Some members of the squad made quick glances to the leader.

“Well that is unfortunate…” The leader remarked. “Are these your

friends?”

Everything goes silent again, with only the noise of the man in the cell crying. In a few moments the ants and spiders and witches would begin marching in.

“Now I’m lost…”

“Hmm?”

“This guy… must of had a shitload of free time. These drawings are *very* detailed, lifelike.”

“I don’t know, some people can do that with their eyes closed. Maybe he’s one of them.”

“Either way, this one book would have taken years to fill. Had to be obsessed.”

“Really? How many pages are there?” Sanders asks, reaching for the journal as they make their way up the final steps of the stairs. He continues flipping through the book as they open the door to the roof.

Just then a voice buzzed into their ears. *Hold for extraction. Transportation is being rerouted for assistance at Proxy-2. No ETA. Keep your heads low. Avoid civilian contact. Mount your wisdom teeth. You know the routine.*

“Well, looks like we’ll be waiting here for a while.” Breen reached into his pocket and produced a small, white, shiny object and placed it into his mouth, wincing.

“You can only have so many helicopters I guess.” Sanders says, eagerly flipping through the pages of the artifact.

“All gods *must* die…” A haggish, many elbowed arthropod croaked in the general direction of the recovery team as it lurched toward them.

“Stop or we will shoot!”

The creature continued its hobbling, pained march, its two mouths dripping gray fluid.

“The cycle is nearly at its end, the Tremulant will prevail.”

The thing got too close for comfort. The squad opened fire, and its carapace was finally breached from the hail, the thing falling to the ground in a pool of chitin and pink blood. The mess quickly evaporated as if it had never been there.

“The hell…”

Soon other creatures flooded into the doorway. Each stood roughly the height of an adult man, with three sets of compound eyes set on a gray, ant-like face, three sets of legs, and three sets of arms. They each had a symbol of a black and white sphere merging into one another carved in their exoskeletons. Squeezing in through the back of the forward group were dumb looking eight legged things with long spears mounted on their flanks.

“Phyxia!” The ant-like men screamed in clicks as they charged into the room single file, their hook-ended halberds pointed out in front of them.

The squad opened fire, dropping the creatures almost as soon as they appeared. Thirty or more of the creatures must have fallen in noxious gray mist and nothingness before they stopped filing in.

The squad was now running low on ammo, and more of the things could still be heard outside continuing their chant.

“Hey, buddy, care to tell us what the fuck is going on here?” The squad leader asked the scip.

“It’s pointless here…” he cried. “… they need me there, they kill me or send me to sleep. They’re trying to kill me for good, they can’t do it here, I need to go back to sleep…”

“So these things pop up when you’re ‘*dead*’ or sleeping?”

The man sits up in the corner of his cell. “I can't satisfy them, it's impossible. Their world is like hell and they blame me for it. I told them I didn't know it would happen!”

“Okay so if you die die, they die die, and they’re trying to pull this maneuver off when you’re in your magic little sleep world while you’re there.”

“They cut me up inside, do experiments, try to change me inside. Their nations fight wars over it. It is useless.”

“So eventually the last of this batch will disappear if we keep shooting.”

"Until I go to sleep again. They come sometimes when I’m awake but rarely are there even two or three.”

“Right” the leader said, reloading his last clip into his gun. “So we just make this one count, and after…”

With that the lights to the facility came back on, followed by the sounds of insect hissing, and gunfire.

Object has been secured. Await extraction.

Sanders was chewing on some gum and flipping through the pages of the book.

"Don't you know it's dangerous to be chewing with that thing in your mouth?" said Breen, more annoyed than concerned.

"I found some lines in English here." replied Sanders.

In the distance the flutter of a helicopter could be heard.

"Well damn that was quick."

Sanders paused for a minute, watching the helicopter making its way toward them. "It's a paragraph or two. Guy seems distressed about whatever it is he does."

"What is it that he does?"

Okay they're not lucid dreams. I'm going fucking insane or… maybe they are just dreams? I know people that can feel dreams. I can feel them pulling my insides out, tasting them and storing them. Interrogating me all the while in a language I shouldn't understand but I do.

It seems trite but did I imagine these things? I had to. I had to imagine them first. I drew them and then I saw them when I went to sleep. That's normal. How do I explain this to any of my friends? "Bro, I'm tortured by spider people in my sleep, I wake up on the other side of the house sleeping on my head with my body vertical against a wall, and then I hear a knock on the door from the landlord telling me to stop holding such massive parties."

I can't keep this up. I just want them to leave me alone. I can't give them the answers they want. I imagine better things for them and they turn them into weapons and torture devices for me.

I don't know what to do. I've tried imagining them away, thinking and drawing up doomsday devices for their world but, ha, they need to activate them. They intercept them in the ESP. They call me their god-terrorist. They want their world to end, I just make it progressively worse. They do the same to me. They all want to die and they can't kill me.

I can hear them chanting in the back of my mind while I'm awake sometimes. They're waiting for me to go to sleep so they can commit to their experiments, so they can examine me and find out how to 'save' themselves.

I have to stay awake.

The Self Insert

Life had always been without magic. That's why he wrote — because the real world, while it could be interesting, didn't have any magic. He wasn't quite a man of science, but instead a man of rationality. And so, he wrote: to add a little magic, a little horror, a little interest to a dull, humdrum world.

It wasn't until he fell through a hole in his world — from the real world to a world filled with the things he'd written — that he started believing. It all began so simply. He had been walking through the stock room at Wal-Mart, headed for break; when he turned the corner, he didn't see what he expected to see: bleak grey shelving filled with boxes of product were replaced with sterile, white walls. He stopped walking, trying to take it in. Turning in place, he was shocked to discover nothing behind him but the same white walls.

A psychotic break? Maybe. But you have to work within the laws of whatever universe you find yourself in, and so he began to walk, an eerie feeling shivering down his spine. The first door he came to was marked with a familiar symbol — and that feeling just got worse. He was here, in the Foundation. Not as a doctor, researcher, or agent, but as just…himself.

He was **screwed.**

He wouldn't blend in. He couldn't, not in blue jeans and a blue shirt. And despite being a writer, the man who would come to be known by the three-letter acronym of TDM was not as clever as those he wrote about. He had one chance, he thought. If he could get out, get away from this Site, he might be able to lose himself in the world. Might.

A passing researcher gave him a curious look as he continued to stroll down the hall. An agent gave him the same look, but closer, as if scrutinizing his face. A glance, risked over his shoulder, saw them both pointing him out to a security guard. He cursed under his

breath as the guard called out for him to stop. So much for chances. Time to see if his writing had ever been any good.

He turned to the nearest locked door, addressing the panel beside it. "Open. Authorization O5-6. Alpha-Omega-13." And, amazingly, it worked. The door slid open, and he dashed through, closing and locking it behind him with the same authorization codes. It might not hold long, but would it be long enough?

Down another hall. Left at a doorway. Push past the old man with the beard. Locking every cross portal he came across, sealing every blast door. When he came to a computer, he logged in, using passcodes he'd once typed out just for the heck of it. Now, it felt so much more dangerous. He was at… Site 19. Damn it. Used to contain humanoids…no easy exits like 23 had. No… wait. There, down low, an O5 meeting room. If he could get there, he could get out. The O5s always had special escapes built in.

He wasn't a hacker — he wasn't even particularly computer savvy. Which was why he was glad he'd always written the Foundation as using touch screens. Level Five status allowed you to pull off a *lot* of fun tricks. Including initiating a Keter level breach alert, on the opposite side of the site. Hopefully, that would distract the guards. Hopefully.

It didn't matter. He'd locked the nearest stairway, and it was damn near a straight shot down to that room.

Eleven floors later, he was cursing the fact he'd never had enough money to get a gym membership. Being an internet writer wasn't exactly the type of work that gave you fantastic muscles. Or, you know, any muscles whatsoever.

Thirteen floors after that, he was gasping for breath, and wishing he'd quit smoking cigars when his girlfriend had asked him to. But, finally, he'd made it where he was going. Down another hall, and open this door…

TDM slumped against the wall, defeated. Sitting in the room, almost as if they had been waiting for him, was an old man and his two bodyguards. Of course he'd have to show up on a day an O5 was

actually here. "Well, fuck."

The old man stared at the intruder, then shook his head just slightly at the man in the gas mask beside him. He considered the look in the man's eyes, the tone of his voice, and came to a startling — to him — conclusion. "You know who I am." There should only have been a handful of people who could recognize him on sight. "Interesting. Sadly, I do not know who *you* are. Which is intriguing, considering you have been using *my* security codes to throw this site into an uproar. You appear to have not been expecting me, and so are unlikely to be an assassin." A slight pause. "And your condition certainly helps prove that. My people tell me you appeared in the middle of a hallway, which could make you a teleporter, but I think an out of shape teleporter would not have walked down all those stairs. Which means someone sent you here. Against your will, maybe? You were coming to this room… to escape, yes? That doesn't tell me how you know there IS an escape route here. Well, do you have anything to say?"

Through labored breathing, TDM muttered something. "You'll have to speak up," the old man replied. "I am getting up there in years."

TDM sat back, and spoke again, louder this time. "Jack. TJ. Sarah. Claire. Mich-"

For an old man, the fellow known as Cowboy could still move amazingly quickly. In the twinkling of an eye, he had moved forward. TDM's pale throat stood in contrast to the glittering silver blade pressed against it, seemingly drawn from Cowboy's cane. "Those are words that guarantee you a swift death."

"But I can save them!" the bearded man gasped out, eyes locked on the blade. He gulped reflexively, and the razor sharp tip nicked his throat, a single drop of blood welling up.

"You're not helping your case. Many have claimed as much over the years. But, if you know anything about the Foundation, you should know, there are-"

"-no happy endings," the bearded man finished in unison with the O5. His thoughts raced, looking for anything that might save him.

His eyes fixed on the bodyguard with the gasmask, and a spark fired somewhere in his brain. It would ruin his favorite story, but save his life. He cleared his throat, hoping to get the accent right. "H'lyiah, Cho'tp'k?"

The man known as Thompson's eyes widened behind the gas mask he always wore. His gaze shifted slightly, and his head tilted slightly before returning to its perfect orientation. O5-6 frowned. "What did you just say? Are you trying to work some memetic agent? I'll have you know, my men are well-shielded against such things. I do believe I shall simply kill you."

Taking a deep breath, he tried his best to get it all out at the same time.
"BlackhasbeenbrainwashedbyMannandhe'sgoingtokillyouifyoudon't-"

Not quite quick enough. Even as he spoke, the unmasked bodyguard's eyes glazed over, and he began to raise his gun. Not towards the unknown man, but towards the O5. Unfortunately for Agent Black, Thompson was prepared, having been prewarned. His brass knuckles struck twice in as many seconds, and the brainwashed minion was sent to the floor, unconscious.

"Like that," TDM finished lamely.

"Interesting." Six stared at his once-trusted protector, a deep frown creasing his lips. "And you knew this…how?"

"I wrote it."

Time passed, as it does. The newcomer was tagged as a Black Box SCP, known by a descriptor, not a number. The Duck Man, or "TDM" for short. He was very busy for the first, oh, hour or twelve, telling Six everything he knew about Mann's plans. He was then placed in a Humanoid Containment Chamber, and ignored for a couple of weeks, as Six routed out all of the mad doctor's plans and puppets.

But after all that, it came time to decide what to do with him. Jack Bright and O5-6 stood in the observation lounge, watching as TDM

stared upwards, trying desperately to entertain himself in between feedings.

"What did he just say?" Six leaned forward, turning up the volume.

"I think it was something along the lines of 'Wow. 12 meters high. I didn't think they actually did that.'" Jack fiddled with his amulet, staring at the man before them. "Do you think this guy is on the level?"

"He's not a Bixby, if that's what you're asking. I've had people testing him, covertly. If he could alter reality, he'd have done something by now. Tests show him to be completely human, identical on a quantum level to a man currently living in the United States. All the ID he had on him when we put him in here is identical to the real one. Well, with one difference. The him on the outside is a millionaire. Won a lottery or something. This one worked at Wal-Mart."

"Thought you said he wasn't a Bixby? Sounds like some major wish fulfillment to me."

"Enh. Might have been something like that. But this guy? He can't do anything now. Except make use of the things he's 'written' in before."

"So you think he really created us?"

"No. I'm not that pessimistic. I think in his universe, he had some, we'll call it a connection. It lets him know way too much about us, but he's not a god, or a creator of any kind." Six pauses to pull out a cigar and light it up. The smoke alarm begins to go off, but a quick glare from Six and the alarm is rapidly silenced.

"Do you really have to do that?"

"What's the point of having power, if you can't abuse it?"

"And you think he can fix me? And TJ? And…" Bright swallows. "Sarah?"

"I think he can. He knows the shortcuts, he said."

"What does he want?

"Protection. He doesn't want anyone to know he's here. He says he gets nightmares thinking about what MC&D, or the CI would do to him. He also seems to think if he does too much, people from his world will notice him, and …get rid of him. He calls it deletion. He's scared to death of Kondraki and Clef, thinks they'll 'decommission' him. He's willing to help us with whatever we want, as long as we keep him fed… and entertained."

"Entertained?"

"He knows he can't have access to the outside world." Six blows a smoke ring. "So he wants games. Computer, video, all that sort. And books. Something to keep him healthy." His mouth curls in a half-smile. "And SCP-1004."

Jack can't help but double take. "One thousand four? Does he know what it does?"

"He seems to think he can handle it." Six found himself smirking. "And if he can't, well… We'll have found out all he knows by the time it makes him incapable of proceeding."

"You're an asshole. I love it."

Now. At this point, we could go on about the things The Duck Man did. The SCPs he fixed. The plots he stopped with his information, or the other things he told people that they shouldn't have known. Instead? I think it best to end this tale with a small view of what the guards watching him see.

Agent Klein sat down beside Senior Agent Hanks, sliding his card into the station to clock into his assignment. "All right, sir. I'm here to take over observation duties from you. Anything I need to know?"

"This guy masturbates more than anyone. *Ever.* Seriously, it's disgusting. I don't even want to *know* what he's looking up on that thing. The sounds are bad enough." Hanks shakes his head. "Look, this is an easy job. The skip isn't dangerous. He just sits there,

playing video games, and watching porn. Your main duty is to poke him every now and then, make him get active. That's what the treadmill and weights are for. The Overseers want him to stay healthy."

"Is he talking to himself in there?"

"Same thing he always says. I don't get it, but here, listen." Hanks leaned forward, turning up the volume so the two could hear the words The Duck Man would be repeating for the rest of his long life.

"Please don't downvote me. Please don't downvote me. Please don't downvote me."

Kunststoff Strand

Research Assistant Sam Ibsen was not a fan of his new assignment. He was not a fan of it at all.

It was the architecture, he thought. Here we was, in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, on a tropical island no less, and it still felt *cold*. It was this damn Soviet architecture: the blocky concrete halls seemed to suck out the life of the place. It just went out with the draft. There shouldn't have been a draft, of course, but there was, and the draft brought the smell.

Agh, the *smell*…seagull shit and oil and salt and garbage and dead fish and burning rubber, all fermenting under the clouds that swirled around the island with the shattered peak. It wasn't a smell that one got used to; it perpetuated its foulness day in and day out without stop.

Then there was the garbage. The island was covered in it. Everything was brought here eventually, everything thrown in the ocean and forgotten. And there were people living in it even: blind mutants scraping out a pitiful existence in the trash.

He focused on his work, hard as it was at that hour. Half of the graphs were falling apart, the other half only half finished. They were trying to find a pattern to how the island moved, some reliable way to trace it. It didn't obey currents, or tectonic plates, or anything but its own whims. Could an island have whims? The Russians hadn't figured it out when they were here, and now Ibsen was similarly spinning in circles.

The door on the other side of the makeshift kitchen creaked open, bringing with it a new wave of gag-inducing stench, and a man. He was older, somewhere in his late seventies, with greying hair tied back in a short braid and a neat beard. His glasses were small, those old ones with the circular lenses. He wore a heavy red jacket, and carried a big black doctor's bag in one hand.

He shut the door. The smell lessened somewhat as most of it was left outside in the night.

“Guten Morgen, Herr Ibsen.” The visitor walked over to the table with his characteristic limp.

“That late?”

The older man reached into his coat pocket, removing a silver pocket watch.

“One-twenty-four A.M, so yes.” His accent was thick, but understandable. He clicked the watch closed. “Are you making any progress?”

“Nothing.” Ibsen put down his pencil and sat back in his chair. Enough with this, then. A little conversation and then bed. “Division P had no idea what was going on here, and we still don’t know anything. The island just moves around, and the dimensions of it keep shifting. The lower slopes are almost completely unknown, save for the docks. Three months here and we’ve gotten nothing.”

“Maybe not nothing. Maybe the answer lies within what you already know.”

“Maybe, but then I’d have to know what I know first, and the Cyrillic alphabet isn’t helping. And anyway what were you doing out so late, doctor?”

“I was in the village. There was a baby to deliver.”

“Success?”

“A girl. Strong by their standards, blind and frail by ours.” The old doctor nodded his head, smiling. “Still, a good night. The tribe is still celebrating.”

“You take what excuses you can, I suppose.”

“Life is a reason, not an excuse. It ought to be celebrated more often. Speaking of celebration, Herr Ibsen…” the old doctor reached down into his bag: seconds later his hands returned to the tabletop

with a bottle of wine and a cup. “It is my wedding anniversary today. Would you mind celebrating with me? I am afraid I do not have any other glasses.”

“Oh, yeah…hold on a bit.” Ibsen carefully put his papers in their appropriate piles at the edge of the table, away from potential spills. After a moment of thought, he put them back in their file folder where they belonged.

The cup was easy enough to find in the cupboards, though it was a chipped coffee mug instead of a wine glass. It would have to do. He brought it back to the table.

“How long have you been married?” Ibsen asked as the old doctor uncorked the bottle and poured. He was honestly quite curious about it: The old doctor had remained a mystery these past three months, an outside specialist brought in as consultant for the Foundation study of E-2934.

“Fifty-five years. This would be fifty-nine.”

“Oh…I’m sorry.”

The old doctor smiled in that way perfected by grandfathers since the beginning.

“For what? She died in her bed, at peace, surrounded by her children and grandchildren. I have seen a great many people die, Herr Ibsen, and there are far worse fates than to spend a few last moments with those you love. Come now, let us celebrate fifty-five years of life and love. A toast.” He held up his own cup. “To Winry. *Obwohl ich sie vermisse, ist sie in meiner Nähe.*”

“To Winry.”

Outside, the melancholy wind bit and moaned from the cracks in the dead mountain. A wave brought with it an dead turtle, choked on a plastic bag and suspended in oily foam. A blind man in a hut told a story of when the sky burned. A mother and her child slept.

Eventually, the light in the kitchen was turned out.

Occurrence of Oddness

The heat of the afternoon was turning into the cool calm of a June evening. The pines stood straight and tall as they had for decades, shadows barring the orange light of the setting sun. Birds sang. Bugs hummed.

It was summer, and all was well.

Two sparrows landed on a bush. One twittered to the other, and the other twittered back. The conversation continued for some time, going on about the current state of sparrow affairs: seeds, females, and the implications of quantum theomechanics within the avatar-overlap matrix of a multiple-revelation continuum model.

Sparrows tend to have very heady conversations, even if they often have to repeat large segments due to one of the conversants not paying attention.

The twittering continued for some time.

From the distance, there was a sound. A murmuring at first, and then a whine, and then the sound of people screaming.

aaaaaaaaaaaAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA**AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHH**

The bush exploded, just as one of the sparrows was about to lay into the other for his foolish invoking of Twitterit's Fallacy of Greater Faith Variables. A golf cart, decked with yellow and red flags, shot through the twigs and pine needles and leaves and flew for a brief moment, though that brief moment of flight was more glorious than what the Wright Brothers could had ever conceived. It hit the ground hard, swerving back and forth to near-tipping, the three occupants flailing and falling about and just barely holding on with white knuckles. The three were screaming, quite loudly, and consisted of 1) A boy of about twelve, with a blue and white baseball cap and vest. 2) A girl of the same age, with braces and a lavender sweater

3) A man of thirty or so, with rather impressive sideburns and a scar on his left cheek.

Behind them, there was the rumble of something tearing up a tree and bellowing in a “I am going to tear out your intestines, rip off your arms, fashion them into nunchucks, and then proceed to beat you to death with them,” tone of voice.

The screaming, which had petered out a bit in order for the screamers to catch their breath, resumed after a quick look over the shoulder.

Oh, hey there.

Now, you’re probably wondering why a grown man is hanging on for his life to a golfcart being haphazardly driven through the woods by a pair of screaming twelve year olds. That’s good, you should be wondering that.

You’re probably also wondering what we’re running away from, but I’ll get to that later.

So, yeah. My name’s Greg Wallacher, and I work for the Foundation. Site 33 field office, Gravity Falls branch.

I should probably start at the beginning of this whole shindig.

—

See, Gravity Falls is just one of those weird little towns where weird things happen. Generally the weirdness precedes us, sometimes it doesn’t, and in cases like Gravity Falls nobody’s sure any more.

We have a pretty simple gig up here. Mostly we maintain good relations with the local Kongs and keep a watch out for the Saucer flock, but there’s plenty of weird shit we have corralled that still needs to be officially cataloged. We’re still trying to figure out what’s going on with this town, though compared to some of the other urban long-term insertion jobs (I have a friend who was on cleanup for the shitstorm in Carbondale a few years back), it’s a pretty good deal.

Most of the town is on Foundation payroll in some way or another. I think the number's like sixty percent of the permanent population or something. Generally speaking, the overwhelming majority don't know it. You only have some agents (twenty-three, last time I counted), a few who know that there's something up with the town, and the rest just know who to call when things get odd and don't ask any questions.

Lovely little town, really, and would you look at that, I have digressed completely.

So then. The story. Maybe a week or so ago, Stan was telling me how his great niece and nephew were going to be visiting for the summer and help out around the Mystery Shack.

I told him that was a bad idea (would you let twelve year olds muck around in the building right on top to an entrance to the facility? Didn't think so.), ranking between jumping into our tank of piranha-maids while slathered in barbeque sauce and attempting to out-dance the multibear.

He responded that they were already on the bus there, and that I'd have to deal with it. He likes doing things like that. (And since he's got seniority here, my options were limited.) Technically, the Outreach and Recruitment Program allows it, and he's got agents Corduroy and Jésus (Does he even have a last name? No one seems to know) watching the Shack with him, so I eventually stopped complaining.

So things just went normally for a few days. Cover job, real job. No containment breaches, so the kiddos must have kept their noses out of things. And then Stan calls me up at four in the morning going on about how his grand-nephew found one of the books. Number 3.

Now this is a pretty big deal. We currently have Book 1, and a few pages from Book 6, and those things are the basis to almost every containment procedure we have.

And our illustrious Agent Stanford Pines lets him keep it. He went and copied the whole thing, but he let the kid keep it.

Now, as you would expect, I was somewhat angered by this. Actually, I was thoroughly angered by this. So I did something rather stupid. I packed up a bunch of amnestics (Have to catch myself every time. Always want to say amnesiacs. Didn't even know there was an official term until like, a year ago.), and went off to the Mystery Shack. Give them a nice mind wipe and take the book. It was too big of a security risk, you know how it goes.

So I go over to the Shack that afternoon. (Was tied up during the morning. Gobblewonker was cranky.) Was going to pull the Jehovah's Witness spiel, had my suit on and my pamphlets all ready and everything.

Standard procedure.

Standard procedure doesn't involve getting tackled by a goat, having your disguise seen through by a twelve year old girl, declared to be a tooth fairy, tripping over an inconveniently-placed collection of billiard balls, falling unconscious, and then being held for interrogation by a kid named Dipper, who correctly guessed that I belonged to a secretive (correct) government (incorrect) organization (generally correct) called the SCP. (Because *someone* decided to do the cutesy hidden initials in the cover organization material thing.)

To be completely honest, I was so baffled by the scenario that the duct tape was quite enough to keep me in the chair for almost twenty minutes. It was a thoroughly humiliating experience. My captors had moved on to something else, something about investigating the woods to find my co-conspirators (Oh, if they only knew what was under the house). So they shut me in the closet.

I broke out of course, and as soon as I walked outside, lo and behold, I see the twins in a golf cart, chased by a rather angry two dozen 1000s. The exact circumstances elude me.

In their prepubescent driving finesse, they managed to nearly run me over (while coming close enough to classify as professional stunt drivers), and through a series of acrobatic maneuvers I don't recall comprehending, I end up on that same golf cart, which shot off into the woods.

And so here I am. In a golf cart, driven by children, quite positive I have gone completely insane, screaming at the top of my lungs, pursued by an angry crowd of Bigfeet (that is the plural form, right?)

So yeah.

That's life around here.

Carbondale's still worse.

Gotham's Strangest Criminal

Commissioner Gordon looked at the newest victim of Gotham City's latest killer, and sighed. "Why do all of the criminals insist on having these ridiculous M.O.s,?" he said, rubbing his forehead in frustration. He wish that, just once, there'd be just an ordinary crime in Gotham city; a simple bank robbery, or a cat stuck up a tree, or-hell-even a bomb threat at a school. But at Gotham City, nothing was normal, with a homicidal clown and a man dressed as a bat, and other weirdos. Speaking of Batman, Gordon thought, where was he anyway?

"Hello, Commissioner," a voice said, startling the aging man and nearly giving him a heart attack. He turned around to see Batman, hanging from a lamp post by his feet before gently landing on the ground. He rose, revealing his seemingly always scowling face. Gordon had only seen Batman smile a few times, and it always creeped him out when he did. Gordon sighed, removing his hand from his chest. "Batman, you really should stop doing that," he said, removing his glasses to wipe the sweat off his brow. "My heart isn't like it used to be."

Batman grunted, as if he wasn't sorry at all. Instead, he looked over the body. "Same as the others, I suppose?" he said in his growl of a voice. Gordon nodded. "The man's badly burnt, as if someone threw acid at his face," he said with contempt. "However, the boys at the lab studied the burn marks from the other victims, and they found traces of…" . At this point, the commissioner frowned, a bemused look on his face. "Clam chowder." He rubbed the bridge of his nose with his fingers, wondering why he hadn't retired yet. Batman had a thoughtful look on his face. Who could have done this? However, before he could finish his thoughts, Gordon's Walkie Talkie went off. "We have a code 39 at Kane's Soup Palace. I repeat, a code 39 at…" Commissioner Gordon switched off the radio, having heard it the first time. "I think we might have found a lead," he said, turning to Batman, only to find that he disappeared. Gordon sighed. "I need

a vacation," he muttered, walking off to his police car.

Kane's Soup Palace
"WE HAVE YOU SURROUNDED!" the police officer said into the megaphone. "SURRENDER NOW!"

"Never," shouted the man holding the customers hostage. He was unremarkable in terms of appearance, except for the apron that said "Kiss the Clef" that was stained with what might have been tomato sauce, and the 2-meter high chef's hat. He held a steaming bowl of clam chowder in one hand, and a blonde woman-apparently one of his hostages-in the other. "Now, you shall listen to my demands, or this lovely lady," he said, while tightening his grip on the woman's neck. "Will die by my special New England clam chowder recipe….of DEATH!" He then laughed maniacally; however, his cliched evil laughter was interrupted by a batarang to the face. He stumbled to the ground, dropping the hostage, but-oddly enough-not the bowl of clam chowder. Batman then dropped through the broken skylight in the building, landing in front of the man. "Let the hostages go…" he started to say, but then stopped, confused. He had never seen this eccentric-looking man before. "Who are you?" The man got up, straightening his chef's hat. He then looked at Batman with an angry look on his face. He grabbed an oversized soup ladle, and said, in a voice as quiet as a whisper-
"I'm ChowderClef."

With that, he lunged for Batman, attempting to club him with his soup ladle. However, Batman was able to dodge Chowderclef's attack, and uppercutted him. However, he miscalculated his attack time, and he instead knocked the bowl of clam chowder out of ChowderClef's hands. All was silent for a moment, as the bowl soared through the air, and then landed on Chowderclef's head. Chowderclef stood still for a moment, as if not registering the pain of the hot clam chowder running down his face. He then collapsed, the bowl making a 'CLANG' noise. Batman sighed, as if he was dissapointed that the fight didn't last as long as he hoped it would. However, nonetheless, he grabbed Chowderclef by the neck and dragged him out towards the police officers, who handcuffed him and threw him into a van marked 'ARKHAM ASYLUM'. Before the door closed, Chowderclef turned to Batman-although his vision was

obscured by the bowl-and shouted, "THIS ISN'T OVER, BATMAN! SOON, CHOWDERCLEF WILL RETURN!" He then started laughing again as the van drove off.

Batman shook his head in disgust. However, just then, a smell caught his attention. Curious, he walked back into the Soup Palace. The source of the smell turned out to be a bowl of clam chowder, similar to Chowderclef's except smaller. He picked up a spoon. "BATMAN, WAIT," Commissioner Gordon said, walking up to Batman. "It could be poisoned." However, Batman lightly shoved the Commissioner away, put the spoon in the bowl, took it out, and sipped.

"Needs more crackers."

Holder Of The Foundation

On any IRC server in any chatroom, PM an operator who appears inactive.

If he replies, ask to see the Holder of the SPC's.

Should he respond with a kickban, leave, and never come to the server again, lest the wrath of its admins shall descend upon you as a K-line.

If instead, he responds with "You have to consult an alchemist." reply quickly with "The psi folks tell he's not unlike a jester". Should you mistype, or should he leave the channel upon your response, pray for your end to be quick, for there's nothing that will save you.

You will then be invited to another channel, whose name I know not, for its listed name is pure black. In there, a parade of trolls most vile shall fill your screen with revolting imagery and enraging ignorance. Do not reply, and do not become angry, for if you do, they will devour your soul.

Instead, when one of them shall post a link to /x/, reply with "That is where it all began, and where it shall end." The channel owner will step in with a masskick.

Rejoin the channel immediately. A single man, his whois address set to localhost, will await you there. He will react to the sole phrase, "Choke on a goat dick." At that moment, the server will grant him a +o, and he'll begin telling tales of every bad SCP submitted, discussion clusterfuck, asinine wiki application. Should you retain your sanity, he will ask for your deepest desire. Reply with [DATA EXPUNGED]. You will disconnect from the server, and your chat history will be gone as if nothing happened, but on the surface nearest to your right hand shall lie a cartridge titled "Sisters of Cheyenne Point."

The cartridge is object 069 of 4132, and it is worth the twenty hours of net playtime.

SCPokemon

“So you’re saying that we can’t close **826** until…”

“Until somebody finishes the main narrative, yes.”

“And we still don’t know where the skip is… *hiding*, in the setting.”

“That is also correct.”

“What the hell happened? It never screwed up like this before.”

“As far as we can tell, the interaction between the item, along with the book and matching *electronic media* caused the anomaly. We never tested 826 with multiple formats of matching subject matter.”

“… God dammit. What now?”

“I suggest we send an expeditionary force to retrieve the item. However, because of the nature of the setting, only one Agent may be sent at a time. We sent a three-man team in and they exploded.”

“What.”

“However, it has been found that we can retrieve inorganic items from the setting and keep them indefinitely within our world. While we do believe that they will degrade and vanish once the setting is closed, I believe that this gives us a… how does one say, cheat code, in winning back SCP-826.”

“… what kinds of ‘inorganic items’?”

“Please come with me. We have some preparations to make.”

Dr Django Bridge had offered to house the Bookends at his Site for a while. While Site-66 is labelled as a Bio-Site, it usually houses miscellaneous animate SCP objects that may or may not be organic.

Of course, he did this with the expectation that the other Doctors would *keep their stuff out of his stuff*. And of course, everything always cocks up.

“I’m not an Agent. Why do I have to-”

“You have proven in the past to be an expert when it comes to the current circumstances of the item.” said the ginger-headed research assistant.

Bridge was being pulled down the hall by several Agents and Research Assistant Steve, towards the unused area of the Site.

“That doesn’t even make sense. What did you do to my site?!” Bridge was irate.

“Listen, I’m just reading from a script, my doc wants you to do it.” They turned a corner and reached a door to a testing chamber.

“I don’t even know what you people are *doing*.”

“Err sorry. Just take the instructions and backpack.” And with that, a large backpack was hefted into Bridge’s arms by an Agent, and the paper into his hands.

“… Fine. Whatever. Okay. I’ll do your fucking mission.”

As everyone else piled out, Bridge looked at the portal. A door of white light, opening to the unknown fuckup beyond. He took a deep breath, then a long sigh. Sure, he’s messed up here and there. The cockup with the lizard and ticket, yes, that was a bad move. Taking photographs of Birth Worm wearing funny hats? Yes, okay, that’s dumb. But what the HELL did he do to deserve this?

Oh well. After several minutes of dread and reflection, he slung on the pack and stepped in.

“So why is the guy who pulled the bullshit with the ticket going in to retrieve this skip?” Agent Dodridge leaned against a wall, watching monitors watching Bridge.

“Eh, it can’t hurt. At best, everyone and everything comes back unharmed. At worst, he dies.” Agent Lament shrugged. He sat at the desk and got comfortable.

“Yeah, but wouldn’t one of us do better? This guy’s a fucking… archivist? According to his file.”

“Throw him a bone. He’ll appreciate it if he survives.”

Bridge opened his eyes and looked around. A bedroom; a bed in one corner, computer… A TV and Super Nintendo sitting in the middle of the floor, that’s a bit strange. Shrug. Stairs in the corner of the bedroom. What…? Whatever.

He descended the stairs, noticing a woman at a table. Okay. Seems non-hostile.

“… hello?” He tapped the woman on the shoulder. She turned and smiled.

“Right. All boys leave home someday. It said so on TV. Prof. Oak, next door, is looking for you.”

He froze for a moment, staring at the woman, before running out the front door and looking around. A larger building to the left, empty fields to the right, a small fence before him, water beyond. He dropped the backpack and finally read the mission brief Steve gave him.

> Dr. Bridge. Enclosed is a set of mission-appropriate equipment, a photograph of SCP-826, and a packed lunch. Please retrieve SCP-826 as soon as humanly possible, and do not allow the complete destruction of any of the provided items. If our theories are correct, if you reach a “game over”, you will die.
> - Agent Lament

Inside the bag were six red and white spheres, numbered 1 through 6.

“… My mission is a Pokémon Red Nuzlocke with a hacked team.

Fuck yes.” He turned and started off north, sticking a foot into knee-height grass.

“Hey wait! Don’t go out!” He stopped. He turned to see an old man with a lab coat making his way towards him. “It’s unsafe!” “Go away-” “Wild Pokémon live in the tall grass! You need your own Pokémon for your protection.” “I really don-” “I know!” “Stop-” “Here, come with me!” “No dammit-”

Oak dragged Bridge to his lab, next to a scowling kid. “Gramps! I’m fed up with waiting!” “Gary? Hm, let me think… Oh, that’s right, I told you to come! Just wait! Here, Django…”

Bridge ignored the script, tapping his foot impatiently. As soon as Oak was done talking, he turned to leave.

“Wait Django! Lets check out our Pokémon! Come on, I’ll take you on!”

With a flash of light, a Charmander appeared before Bridge. He picked Ball #1 from his belt and -

A flash of light; a flash of red; a huge, hulking *thing* appeared. A spine-sail down its back; its mouth filled with enormous, glowing, red teeth; sightless, eyeless face; unmoving mouth, laughing with many voices.

“… Oh my god.”

“… What the fuck.” Dodridge breathed flatly.

“I think it’s the one we shot the lungs out of. In the game world it won’t kill Bridge. I think. ”

“… Really? REALLY?”

The thing laughed at Charmander, screaming in four distinct voices. Charmander shivered, then leapt and scratched it across the face.

SCP-939’s INTIMIDATE cut enemy CHARMANDER’s ATTACK!

CHARMANDER's ATTACK fell!
CHARMANDER used SCRATCH!

Telepathic game prompts. Time to make shit up.

"Crunch!"

"Well that was violent." remarked Lament.

"What do you fucking *expect*? What else has he got?!"

Three hours later, Bridge was strolling through Cerulean City, into the Pokémon Center. Poking his head in every building, looking in every bookshelf, in every PC, there was no 826. He DID have the Boulder Badge though. **`Sherman`** took care of Brock.

Entering the Gym, he tossed a ball into the pool. Three minutes later, he stepped out, **`Bob`** hopping behind. To the Nugget Bridge!

"He's enjoying this too much."

"Eh, let him have his fun."

"No look at him. These are *war crimes*. They *melted*."

Three more hours, and Bridge exited Celadon Gym, with **`Lazerbeak`** gliding close behind.

"You're kickass, Laze. How do you know Steel Wing? That's not around till Gen 2."

"SCRAW!"

"That is a horrible noise."

"Why do they listen to him?"

“I dunno.”

“No, that thing doesn’t even move until night. How’d you even acquire any of these? Zero Seventy Five is a high, *high* risk Keter. The fuck’s with these Doctors?”

“I honestly have no idea. Wasn’t me who put the forms in. Steve rolled a bunch of dice and used the numbers to requisition for testing.”

“… god damn it Steve.”

Bridge exited Saffron Gym riding on **`Pazuzu`**’s shoulders. The dried up, shuddering corpse shivered and twitched, ignored by Bridge and the rest of the fucknormous spider beast.

“Awesome job Pazuzu. You fucking *decapitated* ‘Zam with that last X-Scissor. I am in no way surprised that you’re Dark-Bug type, hell, I’m not even going to ask why your attacks are ahead of your time. Just keep kicking ass.”

“Hhh-” coughed the corpse. “Sh-K!-ssss” shrieked the spider.

They rode off to Route 19.

“… Goddamn. It ate the fucking mime.” Dodridge sank into a seat.

“MISTER, Mime, to be completely accurate.”

“Shut up. Just shut up. I feel sick.”

“… I wonder…” Bridge leaned on Cinnabar Island’s Pokémon Center’s counter, waiting for the healing machine to finish. Blaine’s Gym is was babies.

“… fuckit.” He grabbed his balls and headed outside, calling on **`Lazerbeak`** to fly him to Viridian. Reaching the Pokémon Center, he headed north and saw a balding man laid out on the ground.

“Ahh, I’ve had my coffee now and I feel great! Sure you can go through! Are you in a hurry?”

“No.”

“I see you’re using a Pokédex. When you catch a Pokémon, the Pokédex is automatically updated. What? You don’t know how to catch Pokémon? I’ll show you how then!”

Bridge sighed and waited. A chill ran up his spine…

Wait, when did the sky get so dark…?

A wild WEEDLE appeared!

Fight
Item
Pokéball **x50**

OLD MAN used Pokéball!
All right! WEEDLE was caught!

"Oh shi-"

The man flickered and turned to look at Bridge; he was greasy, with a pointed, horrible grin; slick, rancid hair, the stench of death. He floated above the ground a bit, black ichor dripping onto the dirt, hissing and burning like so many nightmares.

“First, you need to weaken the target Pokémon.”

“… Nope.”

Lazerbeak flew Bridge the fuck out of there and back to Cinnabar Island. He made his way to the shoreline, tossed Welker into the water, and climbed on its shoulders.

They swam for a few minutes up and down the shoreline. Then… something appeared. Without warning, the skies darkened; a tall pillar of glitch code flourished into being in before Bridge and **Welker**.

Wild MISSINGNO. appeared!
WELKER’s INTIMIDATE cut enemy MISSINGNO.’s ATTACK!

“Recontainment of **`Theta-Prime`** commencing.” Bridge muttered with a grin as he hopped into the shallows. Welker began singing nursery rhymes, teeth glowing redder; the glitchmon itself began to glow with a harsh light.

“What the fuck was that.” Dodridge paled.

“Don’t tell me you didn’t expect it.” Lament sighed, leaning an elbow on the desk.

“… How… no. He’s fighting math. He *intimidated* ***math***.”

“I’m checking the Foundnet to see if anything breached containment. Just settle down and let me look for 106.”

Two hours later, Bridge exited the Viridian Gym, **`Johnny`** in tow. The city burned, small cracks forming in the sky, Glitchmon leaking through. Old Man was nowhere to be seen.

“Fuel.”

“No.”

“FUEL.”

“Johnny, return, stop whining. We’re getting the fuck out of here.”

“… he…”

“Just keep watching.”

“He just…”

“Yeah. Shh. Nothing on 106. Hasn’t even moved.”

“Finally…” Bridge looked up to the huge building before him. Ten straight hours inside the game. He was tired, hungry, and had to piss. “The Pokémon League. Thanks for owning Victory Road,

Welker.”

“Thanks for owning Victory Road, Welker.”

“Shut up.”

“Shut up.”

“No, you.”

“No, you.”

“Bahahaa”

“**Bahhahaha!**”

“Okay that was fucking creepy."

“We’re gonna incinerate that thing.” Dodridge punched the table, staring at the screen.

“What, Welker?”

“WHAT DO YOU *THINK*?”

“Welcome to the Pokémon League!” A woman in glasses greeted Bridge past the doors and rest center. The room freezing, containing only a floating dock on a deep, deep pool. “I am Lorelei of the Elite Four!”

Bridge sighed, dropping a ball. It burst into light, the dock creaking under the Bob’s insane weight.

“No one can best me when it comes to icy Pokémon!” Lorelei laughed. “Freezing moves are powerful! Your Pokémon will be at my mercy when they are frozen solid! Hahaha! Are you ready?”

“**Bob**, use Acid.”

BOB used ACID!
ELITE FOUR LORELEI sent out DEWGONG!

Critical hit! Enemy DEWGONG fainted!
ELITE FOUR LORELEI sent out CLOYSTER!
Critical hit! Enemy CLOYSTER fainted!
ELITE FOUR LORELEI sent out SLOWBRO!
Critical hit! Enemy SLOWBRO fainted!
ELITE FOUR LORELEI sent out JYNX!
Critical hit! It's not very effective…
Enemy JYNX fainted!
ELITE FOUR LORELEI sent out LAPRAS!
Critical hit! Enemy LAPRAS fainted!

A Dewgong appeared with a flash and dove under the water. Bob followed suit, sinking through the docks. The water began to cloud; the docks began to creak. Soon, Dewgong floated to the surface and returned to its ball. Another flash of light, and a plop to the side as Cloyster clamped and dove in; soon, it returned to Lorelei in a red light.

The docks started sinking. Lorelei's Jynx fired silver Icebeams into the water and waves of telekinetic force battered the pool; neither Ice nor Psychic attacks could strike the irrationally agile snail. Soon the docks gave way under Jynx and it fell into the water. Another burst of red, then white, then red light, and Lorelei's Lapras fell through the rest of the sinking docks.

Bridge stretched and began walking, then running to the next door. In a last-second Indiana Jones maneuver, Bridge slid under the closing door to Bruno and returned Bob to its ball.

"Sorry to give you the cold shoulder, but I have places to be."

"I'm gonna kill him." Dodridge's eye twitched.

Lament burst out laughing.

"Straight up murder him in his sleep." Twitch twitch.

"I'm more annoyed at the choice of attacks. Zero Seven Five's caustic, not acidic." Lament mused.

“Is there a fucking difference?”

“Shh… shh. Leave the science to me, Jason. It’s better that way.”

"I am Bruno of the Elite Four!” Shouted the shirtless man sitting in the middle of a room full of rocks and dirt. “Through rigorous training, people and Pokémon can become stronger without limit.”

Bridge dropped **Sherman’s** ball. A burst of white light, a rustle of leaves, and a massive pile of kindling crowded his half of the arena.

“I've lived and trained with my Fighting Pokémon! And that will never change!” An Onix burst from the ground. Onix is Rock/Ground type.

“Django! We will grind you down with our superior power! Hoo hah!"

“Sherman, Razor Leaf!” Bridge commanded.

SHERMAN used RAZOR LEAF! It’s super effective!
Enemy ONIX used HARDEN! Enemy ONIX’s DEFENSE rose!
SHERMAN used RAZOR LEAF! It’s super effective! Enemy ONIX fainted!
ELITE FOUR BRUNO sent out HITMONCHAN!
Enemy HITMONCHAN used FIRE PUNCH!
It’s super effective!
SHERMAN, that’s enough, come back!
Go! **JOHNNY**!
JOHNNY used INFERNO!
Critical hit! Enemy HITMONCHAN fainted!
ELITE FOUR BRUNO sent out HITMONLEE!
Enemy HITMONLEE fainted!
ELITE FOUR BRUNO sent out ONIX!
It’s not very effective…
Enemy ONIX fainted!
ELITE FOUR BRUNO sent out MACHAMP!
That’s enough, return, JOHNNY! Go! **LAZERBEAK**!

As leaves cut rock, the perverted stone snake returned to its master. A misshapen boxer in pink shorts punched a burning hole into the Stick Blob, only to be incinerated by a wave not unlike a supernova.

A blemmyes with stretchy legs and a second stone snake followed their friend into scorched oblivion. The Burning Man simply incinerated everything in what can only be described as excessive proactive retaliation.

A flash of metal, and the thud of muscle on stone, and the final fighters graced the field with their presence. The metal hawk Lazerbeak took flight; Bruno's prized Machamp flexed and posed in defiance.

LAZERBEAK flew up high!
Enemy MACHAMP used FOCUS ENERGY! Enemy MACHAMP's getting pumped!
LAZERBEAK used FLY!
It's super effective! Enemy MACHAMP fainted!

With a sound not unlike a car wreck, the robo-bird crashed into the Goro knockoff, throwing it across the arena.

"My job is done. Go face your next challenge." Bruno grunted as he turned away from Bridge.

"Well fuck you too. Come on Laze, let's kick the shit out of some old ladies."

"SCRAW!"

"I don't even." Agent Dodridge slumped in a chair, having long since given up on this making any kind of sense.

"Yeah, the entire world is fucked up. Probably has to do with the fact that it's drawing from current-generation move pools when designing the SCPokémon's moves… Would explain why the Nine Forty can use X-Scissor and Four Five Seven can use Inferno, when the series hadn't yet introduced any of those moves."

Dodridge stared at Lament; Lament stared blankly back.

Bridge entered the next room and looked around; a graveyard, musty and filled with fog.

"I am Agatha of the Elite Four!" An old lady cackled, sitting on a tombstone across from Bridge.

“Oak's taken a lot of interest in you, child!” “I’m not a child-” “That old duff was once tough and handsome! That was decades ago!” “Meh.” “Now he just wants to fiddle with his Pokédex! He's wrong! Pokémon are for fighting!”

Bridge quietly pulled a ball from his belt. He hated Gengar.

“Django! I'll show you how a real trainer fights!"

The lights darkened; a huge purple shadow thing with glowing red eyes crawled out from Bridge’s shadow.

“**Pazuzu**, I choose YOU!” Bridge cried, throwing the ball into the air. A flash of light; Pazuzu appeared. A desiccated, thin, starved corpse, carried by huge, needle sharp spider legs covered with eyes.

Enemy GENGAR used NIGHT SHADE!
It’s not very effective…
PAZUZU used NIGHT SLASH!
Critical hit! It’s super effective! Enemy GENGAR fainted!
ELITE FOUR AGATHA sent out GOLBAT!
Enemy GOLBAT used WING ATTACK!
It’s super effective!
PAZUZU used NIGHT SLASH!
Critical hit! Enemy GOLBAT fainted!
ELITE FOUR AGATHA sent out ARBOK!
PAZUZU used SUCKER PUNCH!
Enemy ARBOK fainted!

Dark light blazed against Pazuzu, doing naught but annoy the hellish man-spider. It leapt into shadows, silently flanking Gengar and hacking it apart with gusto; sparks of violet light burned from Pazuzu’s claws. A Golbat replaced the ghost; ambushing Pazuzu with a smack of its wings, the spider turned into another slash, hewing the horrible flying mouth cleanly in two. After a moment, a huge cobra reared its head behind Pazuzu, only to be thwarted by the corpse with a backhand.

ELITE FOUR AGATHA sent out HAUNTER!
PAZUZU used SUCKER PUNCH! But it failed!
Enemy HAUNTER used HYPNOSIS!
PAZUZU fell asleep!
Enemy HAUNTER used DREAM EATER!
It doesn't affect PAZUZU… PAZUZU woke up!
PAZUZU used NIGHT SLASH!
Critical hit! It's super effective! Enemy HAUNTER fainted!
ELITE FOUR AGATHA sent out GENGAR!
PAZUZU used SUCKER PUNCH!
It's super effective! Enemy GENGAR fainted!

There was a silence after the Golbat returned to Agatha. Pazuzu circled the field, expertly maneuvering the gravestones, before just slumping into sleep. The Haunter appeared, and tried to bite the corpses' head; it yelped in fright as the spider awoke and stabbed it into the wall, scrambling up into the dark. As the final Gengar appeared, Pazuzu dropped onto it, impaling the ghost with all eight legs.

"You win! I see what the old duff sees in you now. I've nothing else to say. Run along now, child!"

“Mother of God.”

"Ah! I heard about you, DJANGO!”

“Yes, yes, Lance the Dragon Trainer. Blah blah…” Bridge groaned. He looked around the penultimate room; huge statues of nondescript dragons adorned the walls, with brass torches hanging from the ceiling. As he took in the sight, an errant quote passed through his mind.

…During this transformation process, SCP-826, along with the contained book, will relocate to another part of the book's setting, showing a preference for places where books are normally found (libraries, studies, etc)…

“Preference. Preference implies that this isn’t a hard and fast rule, just the prevailing behavioural trend that a creative object will show in a particular situation during testing.” Bridge murmured to himself; in a moment he caught a glimpse of silver-grey against the bronze walls behind Lance. The Bookends.

“You know that dragons are mythical Pokémon! They’re hard to catch and raise, but their powers are superior! They’re virtually indestructible! Well, are you ready to lose? Your League challenge ends with me, DJANGO!”

The battle began.

ELITE FOUR LANCE sent out GYARADOS!
Go! **WELKER**!
Enemy GYARADOS’s INTIMIDATE cut WELKER’s ATTACK!
WELKER’s INTIMIDATE cut enemy GYARADOS’s ATTACK!
Enemy GYARADOS used HYPER BEAM!
The attack missed!
WELKER used CRUNCH! Critical hit!
Enemy GYARADOS used LEER!
But it failed!
WELKER used THUNDER FANG!
It’s super effective! Enemy GYARADOS fainted!

The 939 crawled over Gyarados, each of the monsters somehow scaring the others with their terrifying jaws. A rogue Hyper Beam crashed through the ceiling as Welker crunched down on Gyara’s throat, delivering a bolt of lightning into the serpent; a stronger bolt followed shortly and the serpent fell.

ELITE FOUR LANCE sent out DRAGONAIR and DRAGONAIR!
Good job WELKER! Come back! Go! **PAZUZU** and **SHERMAN!**
Enemy DRAGONAIR used DRAGON RAGE! Enemy DRAGONAIR used DRAGON RAGE!
PAZUZU used BOUNCE! SHERMAN used RAZOR LEAF! Critical hit!
Enemy DRAGONAIR used AGILITY! Enemy DRAGONAIR used AGILITY!
PAZUZU used BOUNCE! Critical hit! SHERMAN used LEAF TORNADO!

Enemy DRAGONAIR used SLAM! Enemy DRAGONAIR used SLAM!
PAZUZU used X-SCISSOR! SHERMAN used FRENZY PLANT! Critical hit!
Enemy DRAGONAIR fainted! Enemy DRAGONAIR fainted!

The twin Dragonairs slithered out of the light, spitting blazing blue fire. Welker vanished, replaced by Pazuzu the horrid, twitching, choking corpse-spider-monster and Sherman the giant pile of sticks. Immediately, the marionette leapt out of the way and clung to the ceiling, and the Sherman cried out, shooting razor-sharp foliage in every direction. The Dragonairs, badly cut, slithered in unison, moving quicker and quicker into a pair of silvery blurs… until Pazuzu impaled both into the floor and Sherman ran them over like a runaway cyclone of conifers. In one last ditch effort, the serpents slammed their tails in unison against the spider and stack, before being diced and smashed to soup.

ELITE FOUR LANCE sent out AERODACTYL!
Good work, PAZUZU and SHERMAN! Go! LAZERBEAK!
Enemy AERODACTYL used BITE! It's not very effective…
LAZERBEAK used STEEL WING! It's super effective!
Enemy AERODACTYL fainted!

The stone dino-ptero-dragon clashed with the bronze and steel hawk, biting down. Ouch. The hawk flapped its wings and cut Aerodactyl's head right off. What a let down.

ELITE FOUR LANCE sent out DRAGONITE!
Good work, LAZERBEAK! Go! BOB!
Enemy DRAGONITE used HYPER BEAM! Critical hit!
BOB used ACID ARMOR!
Enemy DRAGONITE must recharge!
BOB used GIGA IMPACT!
Enemy DRAGONITE fainted!

A blazing, incredible blast of energy scoured the scene, cutting a trench across the floor - the snail didn't even notice. Instead, it busied itself with… sweating. The Dragonite fell to one knee, taking a breath, exhausted by its effort… until it was messily decapitated by the snail launching itself like a cannonball across the field, its whole

weight and caustic slime liquefying the dragon's skull, Lance's skull, and burning a hole through the door beyond.

Agent Dodridge sat there, expressionless, staring at the screen for several seconds. With an annoyed grunt he suddenly stood up and flipped the table.

"I'm going to go bang my hot wife. Debrief this loser. Smell ya later." he called to Lament.

"Hey, don't get angry. It's not his fault Charizard's not a real dragon."

Dodridge turned and walked out, fists clenched. He never swept Lance like that. He always spent fifteen or twenty Max Revives on his team. It's not fair. It's not *fair*.

Dr Bridge looked down at the Bookends. Between them sat a copy of a Pokémon Red Version game kart, and the Official Pokémon Red/Blue Strategy Guide. The mission says take it and leave… but he's so close to being the very best there ever was…

Welker pried the final doors open, and Bridge stepped inside. This room was much bigger on the inside, opening to the night sky; an actual stadium, a coliseum, stood before him, with one single figure under the lights.

"Hey! I was looking forward to seeing you, DJANGO! My rival should be strong to keep me sharp!"

Quietly, Bridge considered what the fastest route to victory would be.

"…DJANGO! Do you know what that means? I'll tell you! I am the most powerful Trainer in the world!"

"Nope."

Agent Lament got comfortable, turned up the volume on the monitor, and cracked open a Coke. This was going to be good.

CHAMPION GARY sent out PIDGEOT!
Go! LAZERBEAK!
Enemy PIDGEOT used WING ATTACK! It's not very effective…
LAZERBEAK used STEEL WING!
Enemy PIDGEOT used WING ATTACK! It's not very effective…
LAZERBEAK used STEEL WING!
Enemy PIDGEOT fainted!

The birds circled each other, dive-smashing each other with their wings; Lazerbeak landed one right in Pidgeot's face, shattering its beak and throwing it into the wall.

CHAMPION GARY sent out ALAKAZAM!
That's enough, come back LAZERBEAK! Go! **PAZUZU**!
PAZUZU used SUCKER PUNCH! It's super effective!
Enemy ALAKAZAM fainted!

Pazuzu rushed the Alakazam as it readied a Psychic attack, running it through with three spear-legs and cutting it apart.

CHAMPION GARY sent out RHYDON!
Return, PAZUZU! Go! **SHERMAN**!
Enemy RHYDON used HORN DRILL!
But it failed…
SHERMAN used FRENZY PLANT! It's super effective!
Enemy RHYDON fainted!

Rhydon charged forward, spinning death-horn shearing through Sherman to no avail. The sticks scattered for a brief moment, thrown by the horn's inertia; they rushed together and smooshed the dinobeast underneath the whole one-tonne heap.

CHAMPION GARY sent out GYARADOS!
SHERMAN must recharge!
Enemy GYARADOS used HYDRO PUMP! It's not very effective…
SHERMAN, that's enough, come back! Go! **BOB**!
BOB used GIGA IMPACT!
Enemy GYARADOS fainted!

The sticks struggled to roll back together as the fucknormous sea

serpent flooded the field with an incredible torrent of water. Swearing under his breath, Bridge called Sherman back to its ball and threw Bob into the water, waiting a moment for it to wake up and crash into through Gyarados' mouth entire body.

CHAMPION GARY sent out EXEGGCUTOR!
BOB must recharge!
Enemy EXEGGCUTOR used STOMP!
Return, BOB! Go! **JOHNNY**!
JOHNNY used INFERNO! It's super effective!
Enemy EXEGGCUTOR fainted!

Bob lodged itself into the ground, leaving itself open for Exeggcutor to stomp it ineffectually. The tree checked its foot, assuming the snail was dead, before being completely, instantly incinerated by Johnny's pure raging hunger.

CHAMPION GARY sent out CHARIZARD!
JOHNNY, come back! Go! WELKER!
WELKER's INTIMIDATE cut enemy CHARIZARD's ATTACK!
Enemy CHARIZARD used FIRE BLAST! WELKER was burned!
WELKER used THUNDER FANG! It's super effective! WELKER was hurt by its burn!
Enemy CHARIZARD used SLASH! Critical hit!
WELKER used CRUNCH!
Enemy CHARIZARD fainted!

The Charizard and 939 stared each other down, the dragon shuddering upon its remembrance of their first battle. Welker began to sing nursery rhymes as Charizard froze in brief terror. A shudder turned to a growl, and recoil turned to rage; Gary's starter launched a huge five-pointed star of fire at Welker, crashing the red beast like a truck.

On fire, the Welker leapt at the dragon, crunching down with a mouth full of lightning. Charizard returned with a slash, hewing a side of flesh right off Welker; the burning demon returned with a predatory bite to crush the skull. Charizard fell.

"NO! That can't be! You beat my best-"

Bridge returned Welker and turned to leave, snatching up 826 before the ingame script made him hit the “The End” screen.

Dr Bridge stepped out of the doorway, holding a belt of SCPokéballs and the Bookends. Two Agents rushed in, one throwing the belt into a high-security storage container and the other carefully placing the Bookends on a cart. Agent Lament stood off to one side, waiting for him.

“Excellent work, Doctor.” Agent Lament shook his hand. “You did very well.”

“Thank you, Lament. How were the nicknames?”

“Great.”

“Am I gonna turn into a spider monster?”

“Nope!”

They high-fived.

Later that night, Bridge sat back in his office, relaxing. Listening. Glancing at local security feeds on his desktop.

He quietly reached into his pocket, and placed a small, spherical object on his desk. Pressing a button, it grew to the size of an orange.

For you see… He did, indeed, have a hacked team. But nobody said he couldn’t have a starter too.

Hephaestus

"He wants to do the prayer," Antigonus complained. "Where in Pluto is there place for prayer here?"

Porphyrios of Alexandria sighed. Antigonus was never going to get off of the subject of natural philosophy and revealed theology, and specifically how the two should never be in the same room together. "Look, he has seniority over us. He's a little old fashioned, but it's not as though he's demanding we slaughter a goat next to the counterform reactor. He wants a short invocation, and the supervisor is willing to allow it, so you should simply get used to it."

"But…I really fail to see the connection between Hephaestus and interplanar transition," Antigonus said. "Hermes, maybe, but the volcano god?"

"Tradition dictates, young man," Methodius of Novoromae said as he entered the room, "that Hephaestus is to be invoked before the successful use of advanced technology. A prayer to Hermes would make us little more than postmen with the tools of the Gods. Hephaestus, however, is a God of leaders of men. And if we succeed in today's quest, if we are able to open a stable porthole between our world and the alien universe adjoining ours, leaders of men is exactly what we may become. Alexandria, the Alexylva campus, this very room will become the center of a new world. A world that *we* shall control.

"Now, are you read to begrudge the gods their due?" The gray-haired elder philosopher glared at his younger counterpart.

Antigonus swallowed. "No, sir. Please, proceed with the invocation."

"Thank you for your permission. Now bow your heads," Methodius replied dryly. "High Lord Hephaestus of Mountains, we children of the forests beseech your aid. We beg your aid in today's endeavors, which may bring us many steps closer to bringing your words and

holy fire to the sorrowful masses of the alien world. Milephanus delenda est, and we thank you for your time."

"Well spoken, sir," Porphyrios said. Antigonus glared at the brownnoser.

"Let us proceed. Antigonus, please activate the counterform reactor. Porphyrios, input your calculations into the director assembly. I will take the transplanar controls."

The three men went to their stations. Within minutes, the counterform and properform mass reaction was active and stable in the reaction chamber, providing power for what was to come. Antigonus said "Power at maximum. Porphyrios, are you ready?"

"Calculator assembly ready, coordinates set. Transferring controls to transplanar station."

Methodius sighed. "Very well. Gentlemen, prepare to put Alexylva University in the history books. Activating transplanar matrix."

"What, may I ask, just happened?" Methodius said through clenched teeth.

"Well, sir, if I were to guess, that is, if I were to simply…describe the events of the past ninety seconds," Porphyrios stammered, "I would have to say that…"

"Would it not be safe to say," Methodius growled, "that NOTHING WHATSOEVER happened, young pest?"

"Not quite, sir, though I can understand the, erm, confusion. We did, in fact, open a porthole between two universes. And one of them was the alien world."

"What was the other one, little worm?"

"We…well, we can't really…um, know. We can't know at all. Nor can we know how long this will last."

The room grew silent. "I *said* we should have invoked Hermes,"

Antigonus muttered.

The moon was barely visible through the clouds as 3rd Platoon, Mobile Task Force Delta-5 swarmed through the forest.

"Move! Move!" Lieutenant Samson shouted. He loved abandoned areas. He hated being quiet. "Let's go, let's go! We gotta find this before someone else does!"

The rest of the task force groaned. Two hours in the woods was bad enough when you *knew* what you were looking for. Getting instructions that amounted to *go find a needle in a barn full of haystacks* was worse. Samson didn't know more than the rest of them; he tried to act as though the orders were just classified, but his men knew when their commander was bluffing. They were looking for "an unspecific quantum phenomenon" emanating from a forest in West Tennessee, whatever that meant. But there were some clues.

Samson raised his hand to order silence. He heard rustling somewhere up ahead, over the next hill. Sounds of people beating their way through the woods, along with shouting in what sounded like…a British accent? He waved two of his scouts forward to evaluate. They rushed forward, examined the scene, and called the rest of the troops ahead.

The task force swarmed to the top of the hill to see what was happening. A softly glowing aperture floated a few feet above the ground. Seeing this, Samson knew they had found what they came for. But what was the shouting?

More talking. Samson raised his hand to order silence again before realizing that the sound was coming from ahead. He squinted to block out the light from the portal to see where the voices were coming from…

"What happened next, Lieutenant?" Major Brooks asked. The commander of MTF Delta-5 couldn't have phrased the question in a more threatening way.

"Sir, we were sent in with the understanding that it would not be unlikely that other Groups of Interest would attempt to secure the…'quantum phenomenon' for themselves," Samson replied. "So when I saw multiple individuals in what appeared to be black uniforms, I presumed them to be hostiles."

"Did you call for backup? What were your orders?"

"Well, there were about as many of them as us, but I didn't see any weapons, so I ordered an advance. I told the hostiles to put their hands up."

"What happened next?"

"I'm not entirely sure, sir. They opened fire on us with concealed weapons they had been holding while shouting at us. The shouting…it vaguely resembled Latin, but I didn't recognize what they were saying."

"That matches what we know of University protocol. What else?"

"Their weapons weren't anything we had encountered before. They looked not unlike dowel rods, very thin stick-looking objects. Not sure what they were firing, either. We figured them for CBG, maybe Serpent's Hand, but their battle tactics were damned odd."

"Could you elaborate?"

"Well, again, sir, they didn't have firearms. Whatever those stick-looking weapons were, they weren't *aiming* them at us so much as just waving them in our direction, but their accuracy was uncanny. They must have been recoilless somehow, whatever they were shooting. Looked like tracer rounds more than anything. Sir, can you tell me how my men are recovering?"

"Maybe later on, Samson. What else was odd about their tactics? What else can you remember?"

Samson thought the phrasing there was strange, but continued. "Their mobility was extraordinary. They must have been trained scouts, because I had ten trained Foundation agents down there with M16s, firing at less than ten meters, and I'm not sure if we

actually hit a single one of them."

This was a test, and Major Brooks failed. He snorted quietly and looked away momentarily. Samson knew what that meant. *We caught one of them.*

"What was significant about their mobility? I want to know exactly what they're capable of."

"It was almost like they were disappearing and reappearing a few feet away. Never saw one of them actually move. I know it was nighttime, sir, but…I never saw one of them even *budge.* They would just be here one second, and…over there the next. It seemed almost—"

"Magical, Samson. The word you're looking for is magical."

Samson looked at his superior. He had suspected as much, but to suddenly hear actual confirmation of…of what had to be impossible, it was jarring. Even to someone trained in containing SCPs, Samson didn't really think he was going to run into *this* kind of thing anytime soon. He put the pieces he knew together. "Sir, does this mean that…that the University has *magicians* on its side?"

Samson pursed his lips and said nothing. The silence said a great deal. "That's for people above your pay grade to think about, Samson. I want to know why four of your men have been in a coma for the last day. I want to know why you wanted to play cowboy with unknown individuals you believed to be unfriendlies without calling in backup. I want to know how you then let the unfriendlies escape through the portal…" Samson tuned him out. He was already in trouble, he didn't need a reminder.

A similar meeting was happening in another universe. "America?"

"Yes, some forest in America. Or at least full of American soldiers."

"They used their Muggle weapons on you, you said?"

"Yes, but we Apparated around them rather easily. Not the best trained soldiers, I warrant."

"You said they captured one of your Aurors?" The Minister frowned. "And the aperture disappeared?"

"I'm afraid so, sir," the other man said. "I'm having Kingsley inform his family now. We…we're not sure if we will ever have the opportunity to recover him."

"Did the Americans open the gateway or did someone on our side do it?"

"Unknown, but neither seems likely. Our end opened in a random village in Scotland, theirs in a random forest. It seems to have simply been a freak accident."

"But is there any way of knowing if it was Muggle science or magic?"

"We had little time to examine the scene, Minister," the other man said, "but Kingsley said it didn't feel like either one. Definitely not a Portkey. Something else. Something new."

The Minister paced the room. "Of all the people to have lost over there…"

"I know, sir," the other man said. "Harry's talking to his wife now."

"What are the odds looking like of recovering him anytime soon?"

The other man's expression said all that needed saying. "Damn," the minister said.

Agent Brooks looked through the two-way glass at the prisoner. "He's restrained?"

"And disarmed." Dr. Reed glanced at his clipboard. "He's refusing to talk at the moment. We just got his name."

"Sodium pentathol?"

"No effect."

Brooks looked back through the glass. "Well, not much choice, then.

Could be a threat to the entire Foundation. And we've never captured one of these University people before. What's his name?"

"Believe he said 'Weasley,' sir."

"Huh, that doesn't sound very Greek. Break his fingers and ask him about it."

Knee-Deep In The Keter

SCP-076-2, Ablu ben Adam, grandchild of God, was covered in blood, charred by acid, burnt by fire, and having the time of his life.

The Slipgate project, they had told him on his one hour of the day not dedicated to killing, when he busied himself tending to his pig farm. It opened a wormhole between Foundation sites, conveniently placed as far from Earth as feasible - on the tiny moons of Mars.

"Roughly six hours after Deimos was removed from this realm of existence, the Phobos base was overtaken by hostiles. We are sending you in to make a report."

"I will report the *shit* out of that situation," Able said, feeding a pear to one of the pigs. He loved to spoil the little guys.

And he had gone to Mars' excuse for a moon and personally introduced the concept of death to at least twelve different species of demoniac beings. Spike-shelled fire-throwing humanoids, floating skulls fueled by nuclear rage, hideous naked gorillas, spheres of flesh with single baleful eyes - all of them became Phobian mulch.

His report was nine words long: "Located portal to Deimos. Still working. I'm going in." He didn't bother waiting for the reply.

His path through Deimos was a mirror of the first part of the mission, painted in even brighter tones of red, purple, green and black blood. Projectile weapons littered the site, and he didn't touch a single one. And at the edge of the wrinkled rock, he saw the new focus of Deimos' orbit - the place the Serpent had told him about so long ago. Hell.

He dove, and struck the shores of hell like a twice-fallen angel. It takes a special kind of soul to make heaven out of hell, but Able managed, calling into existence creative new hybrids of chainsaw and sword, chopping through demonflesh like Paul Bunyan's sequel.

And now he stood in front of giant, green marble doors, engraved with the inverted pentagram. The door to the throne of the Enemy of the World.

Able inhaled. "This will be almost exciting."

The doors flew open with his mighty kick.

"AAAAAAAAABLEEEE," SCP-682 roared from the black throne, with a voice that was a scratch on the universe itself, "I FUCKED YOUR MOM."

Able could not summon a sword big enough.

Containing Creation

Item #: SCP-9342-X

Object Class: Euclid

Special Containment Procedures: SCP-9342-X is to be kept in a standard-issue filing cabinet in Containment Cell #1994-X. At this time, viewing of SCP-9342-X is forbidden to all but the most

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"Hold up, what is that? One of yours?"

"Thought it was yours."

"One of the researchers must have left it here. Hmm. Looks like papyrus. Is that writing on it?"

"Huh, yeah. That's weird. What the hell i-"

"Frank? Frank? SOMEONE CALL A MEDIC! FRANK! Stay with me, buddy. Help's coming. NO, DON'T TOUCH THE DAMNED THING, SOMETHING IS…

---

a surprising % of all subjects attempting to read or observe SCP-9342-X have developed full-on mental disorders within minutes of exposure. Most commonly, these disorders are Axis I disorders, such as generalized anxiety disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, manic–depressive disorder, and [REDACTED]. As studies progress, cases of paranoid schizophrenia have risen %, which naturally is highlly improbable given the sample size of…

"Oh yeah, forgot to ask you, did you hear about Dr. ?"

"No, what?"

*"Had a **great** idea recently. Can't look at SCP-9342-X without going insane, right? Well, he had the bright idea to take a video of it, then watch the video. That way, you aren't reading the actual stuff, just a recording of the stuff."*

"That's quite a leap, even for him. How did he get approval?"

"He didn't. Just decided to do it. As you can guess, it didn't work well for him."

"I should feel bad. But I don't. You'd think that people would have tried that already…

---

ported able to read SCP-9342-X without any harmful effects. After further experimentation, all subjects in this alleged 'immune' group have increasingly lost their sense of vision, culminating in blindness within a period…

"Jesus Phrexian Christ, you have to believe me. I can do it."

"Request denied. You're too valuable to this Foundation, despite your… eccentricities."

"Aww, I bet you say that to all the guys. Look, I'm telling you, what's happening here is that you're sending untrained minds. They don't know what they are up against. I do. I'm not just saying this shit, this shit is right there in my proposal.

"And when we decide to reopen the issue, we'll of course provide all subjects with your information-"

*"**THAT'S NOT GOOD ENOUGH!** To do this, you can't just fucking give someone a piece of paper and say 'make a note of this'. You need someone who **knows** this shit back and forth. Someone who can live and breathe it, treat it for what it **is**, and not what you guys want to think it is. I'm the only one who can do it, and there ain't*

much of a loss if I get touched by Shiggy so deeply that it'd be considered a reach-around."

"Are you really going to press the issue this strongly?"

"Yup. I'm the only one who could tell you who Shiggy even even is…"

Addendum-1: At this time, Agent "Mister" Bibs has been allowed temporary 'ownership' of SCP-9342-X for research purposes. The details of his report(s) are currently sealed by order of O5- unttil further…

"I hear it's because he's already insane. You know, you can't make someone more insane."

"That's probably true. I mean, remember when he-'"

"Okay, seriously folks, knock it the fuck off. First its that goddamned Green Lantern story someone found, now it's why I can read SCP-9342-X. I'm sick and goddamned tired of hearing about it."

"But… Bibs, we don't talk about it around you."

"I know, but I've got all the Sites bugged, and I know you're talking about it. So knock it off."

"Oh, c'mon Bibs. Everyone wants to know. What's the secret of SCP-9342-X?"

"Well, if it gets you folks to shut the fuck up, fine: it turns out I'm cosmically important. Or the subject of a prophecy. I don't know the specifics, but I figure a few more read-throughs of 9342'll clear it up. Oh, and don't call it SCP-9342-X when we're off the clock. It's an Elder Scroll, dammit, and if you ignorant fucktards don't start respecting that, I'll have to…

The Once And Future Emperor

Agent Walker always knew when things were about to go south; it was this strange tingling sensation he got in the back of his skull, like an itch springing up two inches under his skin. He always attributed it to the combination of experience and dumb luck, but so far he was always right about it. Just now, his skull was itching like never before.

Walker was at the head of the squad of Mobile Task Force members clearing out the left-hand branch of the cave. Intel had shown some sect of the Church of the Broken God was holed up here, and so far it proved to be spot on. "For once," Walker thought to himself. It was amazing how loud suppressed MP5's were in an enclosed space, a fact that made the popular term of "silencer" a joke in and of itself. The group they encountered up top barely had time to reach for their own weapons before they were reduced to crumpled heaps, but then the cave split, so the team did as well. Six down one pathway, five down the other, radio silence the whole way unless there was an emergency. Further down, a series of small explosions was heard; it took the Agent a moment to realize that it wasn't small explosions, but large gunshots. One raised fist brought the team to a halt, and Walker advanced slowly to the right-angled turn ahead. One peek around the corner showed a door, and Walker could see bright light shining through the weathered cracks and around the seams. Another silent signal was given to his troops, two fingers pointed at his eyes and then a hand covering them. Knowing the drill all too well, the Agents lowered their blackout goggles and assembled before the door, weapons ready.

One solid kick was all it took, old wood splintering around the latch, a hinge popping completely free to let the door hang at an odd angle once it slammed into the far wall. The initial thought in Walker's mind was, "The goggles aren't helping." That thought lasted a very small fraction of a second as his vision was completely consumed in blinding white light. One and a half seconds later the light faded, and

Walker was equally shocked that he could still see, not even so much as a flash-glare left in his vision. He did notice, however, that the five men who were with him were collapsed on the ground, barely breathing. He also noticed the twelve bodies in the room, each with their heads burst open in a pattern indicative of a large-caliber bullet meeting one's skull from a short range.

The final image that his mind actually registered was that of a single figure still standing. He was dressed in paramilitary gear not terribly unlike those of the MTF members who had burst in upon him, and in his hand was a pistol that looked to be chambered for .50 caliber ammunition, the undoubted source of the cultists' untimely ends. Walker found himself making eye-contact with the Man, barely realizing that in the glare he had taken off his useless goggles, and soon realized he was transfixed. The face was handsome but not beautiful, he was tall but not giant, his build was solid but not bulky. All in all the Man was above-average without being enough to attract attention; all except for his eyes. Those eyes looked into Walker's, and the Agent could almost feel a hand picking through his brain, spreading out the wrinkles and brushing neurons as every memory and thought was examined individually, all within the span of a few heartbeats.

Finally, the Man smiled, and extended a hand. "Come, sit with me." He unceremoniously pushed a corpse off of one chair and retrieved another that had toppled in the brief fight. Walker sat upon one, the Man on the other; dimly, Walker realized that the Man's chair made a much louder creak as he sat on it, and he wondered just how much gear the Man carried to be so heavy. So the two sat; Walker listened, and the Man talked. He answered questions that Walker never asked, and spun tales that he could hardly believe.

The Man claimed to have been born somewhere around the year 8000 B.C.E., a time so long ago that even his immense mind was clouded by history, in an area that was now a part of Turkey. He knew from the first moments of life what his purpose was; before his conception, hundreds - if not thousands - of shamans and other mystics from around the world realized their numbers were dwindling; the ether was becoming a terrible, twisted place, and their cycle of reincarnation was becoming interrupted as more and more

souls were lost to the warped beasts that began to emerge from this spiritual chaos. So, rather than eventually leaving mankind rudderless, they committed suicide, almost to the last, and all at the same instant. This influx of power overwhelmed the ephemeral monsters, long enough for the souls to coalesce and form a new entity, not a god or a demon, but a man.

That was the same Man who was now sitting before the dumbstruck Agent. Throughout the millenia, he had at times risen to power as a nearly unbeatable warlord or king, at other times he influenced from the background. There were times when he started or changed new faiths, and times when he lead great crusades to denounce them. He was particularly amused about one such attempt two thousand years ago, a cause to unite humanity as one through the love of their brothers; that even such a pure message could be twisted into an excuse for death and destruction finally convinced him that if mankind should survive, it would be as a unified and conquering army standing atop the world, and then the galaxy. He arose once in England, leading a band of peasant-knights with ideals of chivalry and honor; the same ideals would be his influence upon ancient Japan and China. He spoke of riding horseback across the great steppes of Mongolia, and creating an empire that almost stretched from the Pacific to the Atlantic, before treacherous poison caused injury that even his physiology required much time to heal. He spoke of the great leaps in science and reason that he helped usher in, of the scientists whose names he concocted for himself, and those whom he had touched and given untold insights.

Once he was done speaking of the past, he spoke of the future, a future which his vision and scheming accounted for in the tens of thousands of years. He spoke of the way that mankind would spread across the stars; slowly at first, of course, launching themselves near-blindly like seeds upon the wind. Miracles of science and genetics would lead to a way to pierce through that astral sea, that ethereal plane beyond even the void of space, and let mankind step between the stars in short voyages rather than generations. He knew all of this, because his sight pierced the veils of time both forward and back, and with his mind he could touch the whole of the world.

Hours before, Agent Walker would have laughed at the Man, spit upon him, fired entire magazines worth of ammunition until his chatter stopped. Somehow, he knew this Man was right. He knew those words were spoken not by one who was headstrong and obstinate, but one who knew a Truth, an idea so solid as to be inviolate. Sadly, Agent Walker's mind was not so great as the Man's, and many things escaped him. One question rose to his lips, well after the Man had stopped speaking. "How did you come here? Get past the guards?"

"Ah, yes. I merely showed them the Truth, and they allowed me to pass." His smile was as magnanimous as it was handsome.

"Why are you even here? How did you know?" Walker knew that the boys in espionage had worked months to track this cell down. The strange, clockwork cube resting in a vestibule in the back of the room was what had brought him here in the first place.

"I know, because it is my business to know. These men and their worship of a 'machine god' may have its place in the future, but it is not now. I worked very hard to fell that dragon of the void, and these sycophants trying to put it back together do not work well with my plans." Walker's eyes widened, the thought that this Man was responsible for those Scips being called a 'broken god' beyond belief, had they come from any other mouth.

"Why are you telling me all this?"

With that, the Man paused, and seemed thoughtful for a long time. Finally he smiled, and stood, placing a hand upon Walker's shoulder that seemed to make him sink into his chair. "Because even I feel the need for counsel, now and again. You have a very… Inquisitive mind, Agent Thomas Walker. And a very special mind as well, with very special abilities that I sense even you yourself are not aware of." He offered his hand, and Walker was helped out of his seat. Yanked, more like it.

"Come. I'm afraid your comrades are already dead, the cultists laid far too many traps down the other hallway." Walker did admit to hearing a number of voices over his radio during the Man's long soliloquy; the earbud hang off his vest by that point, so he didn't

know the details. "I must admit, I admire the intent of your Foundation, but its aim is too narrow. It wishes to preserve things which are, at best, threats which are inimical to life, especially human life. Certain items, some creatures, they have their values yes. But if it is a threat, then it must be destroyed. I would like you to come with me, Walker. I am preparing for the next step in the grand destiny of Mankind, and for that I need men like you."

Walker did not even think about the words that came from his mouth, nor the motion which brought his head bowed lowly. "I am yours to command, Lord."

The Man smiled and nodded. "You will have new orders, Thomas. Scourge the mutant, that its deviancy not corrupt the purity of our species. Crush the heretic, that its blasphemy does not divide mankind. Purge the alien, that its kin does not stand between us and our destiny. You shall be my spokesman, Thomas. And for that, you must Know."

Thomas' eyes were wide as the light returned, and he saw the Man for what he truly was; how he had appeared so simple before defied explanation. The Man was so tall that Walker barely came to his lower chest; so broad he must have turned himself sideways to fit through the small opening to this chamber. The light seemed to radiate from the Man's head, a halo that shone with the radiance of a thousand suns. It was beautiful, so much so that Walker wept bitter tears; tears which mixed with the blood from his ruined eyes, burned from the sheer glory, burst from the minute fraction of power that the Man had poured into his new agent.

Despite the loss of his eyes, Walker could still see. The power that the Man gave him may have ruined his sight, but awoke senses and abilities Walker never imagined. He was able to sense the energy around him, and while not perfect, he walked with great assurance to the vestibule at the rear of the chamber. The Man nodded with pleasure as Walker took all four fragmentation grenades he carried and stuffed them into the compartment housing the clockwork cube, with its surface of unearthly, living metal. The pins pulled, he ran, seeking shelter behind the Man who had revealed to him a great and terrible Truth, and the explosion utterly destroyed the would-be SCP-1854. His work done, Thomas felt the touch of the Man upon

his shoulder, and was vitalized.

"Come Thomas. The stars await, and we have an Imperium to found." Walker was too joyous to respond, but without a doubt he crossed his hands atop his chest, hooked thumbs forming the shape of a double-headed eagle, and bowed his head.

"As you command, my Emperor."

The Case of the Missing Hand

It was upon the morning of the seventeenth of October when I encountered my long-term friend and companion Mr. Sherlock Holmes knocking upon the door of my residence. As I opened the door, I recognized the look of subdued excitement on Holmes' face. He was obviously in the middle of a case; one of those periods where he would rush from location to location, either unaware of the effect such a schedule was having on his body or uncaring, locked as he was in the thrill of the chase.

It was highly peculiar for him to call on me, for it was often his way to send a telegram summoning me to his residence at 221B Baker Street. I voiced this concern and he looked at me with a sharp eye. "My dear Watson!" he exclaimed. "I know that if I were to send a telegram it would take at least ten minutes for it to arrive, and at least ten minutes for *you* to arrive at my residence! No, time is of the essence, my friend! The hunt is on!"

He led me outside to a waiting carriage, my feet carrying out the exciting routine they had gone through dozens of time before. Once we were inside, I turned to Holmes. "I trust you are on a case?" I said.

"You expect anything less of me?" He smiled. "Did you enjoy your trip to Scotland?"

I began to reply in the negative, for my wife had fallen ill on the second day of our trip, when I realized I had not told Holmes of my holiday at any point before or after the weeks trip. "I can see how you would deduce I was on a trip, considering the length of my absence," I said. "But however did you work out I went to Scotland?"

He leaned forward, as if to impart some of his usual wisdom, but instead said; "Your wife was leaning out of the window, I simply asked her! You must always be aware, my dear Watson, that before we come to the world of theories and ideas, we must first make sure

to find out the facts!"

I raised a skeptical eyebrow. "This seems to be contrary to the priorities you yourself demonstrate, my friend. Oftentimes, you will have worked out the solution to the case moments after, or even before, the details of it have been imparted to you!"

He turned to me in mock anger, but his expression quickly lightened as if he was speaking to a child, as he no doubt considered himself to be. "I must not underestimate you, Watson! You saw through my ruse. Facts are cold liars. Oh, they never lie themselves, but they throw decoys, red herrings right in front of us! A *theory* is the lance that punches through their shield and allows us access to the truth, whether it be good or bad. You have learned a lot, Watson. Who knows, perhaps you would be the one to fool Sherlock Holmes!" He chuckled lightly, knowing that this could never happen. "Very well, enough games. I will tell you of the case.

"Two years ago, a Mr. Daniel Highman moved to London from his previous residence in America after the death of his wife. He brought with him his five year old son, Robert Highman, and seventeen year old daughter, Elizabeth Highman. He was a recluse and a tinkerer, often spending days and days experimenting with his inventions. None of them appear to have seen the light of day, so I can imagine his efforts were wasted. He does not appear to have achieved anything of much interest, and his life appears to have been dull and, regrettably, short."

"He is dead?"

"It is more often than not the case with our, well, cases, is it not, Watson? We are surrounded by death. I would lament this, but it is unwise to bite the hand that feeds us! Daniel Highman was found dead last week. His hand was missing and it appears that he had died of blood loss."

"A straight cut?" I asked. "The hand, I mean?"

"No, it had been torn off as if by some savage beast."

"Good God!" I ejaculated.

"It is a dreadful affair," Holmes agreed. "He was not a rich man, so I do not see either of the children doing it for the inheritance. I have searched his quarters before and found nothing of note. I am not willing to simply leave this case unsolved, Watson, so I have called upon you, as you often are instrumental in our cases. The police have no suspects and neither do I. Perhaps with a second search we will find something more."

-

It was fifteen minutes before our carriage arrived at the Highman residence. Holmes got out, leaving me to pay the driver, as was his way. Holmes knocked twice before the door opened to reveal Miss Highman, staring at us with tear-streaked eyes. "Mr. Holmes?" she cried. "You've discovered something more? Who is this man?" She turned on me, hostility clear on her expression. "Is he a suspect?!" she demanded.

Holmes lay a pacifying hand upon her shoulder. "No. This is my friend and colleague, Dr. John Watson. He is here to help me with my investigation. Can you please show us to your fathers quarters?"

"Certainly," she stuttered, leading us down the stairs. "Father was often down here for weeks. He was very absorbed in his work. He is - he was a very successful inventor," she informed us with misguided pride. "Clients would visit him often."

Given Holmes' short, cold summary of the man's life, I assumed this was a lie designed to impress myself and my companion. Holmes continued as if he had not heard her speak.

"Here we are," she said, opening the door. "Would you mind if I left you to it? I must comfort my brother."

"Not at all," replied Holmes. She left the room, her footsteps echoing.

Mr. Highman's chambers consisted of a small writing desk, a few cupboards, a wardrobe and a bed. The writing desk was covered in blank sheets of paper. The state of the bed showed that it was slept in often. I saw nothing else of interest in the cold room where the

man had died, and appearances suggested that neither had Holmes. No inventions, nothing but the evidence of a broken man.

"Get searching then, Watson," said Holmes. "The game is afoot." He said these words sadly, as if utterly defeated by the lack of evidence in the room.

I approached a cupboard and yanked it open. It was full of cutlery, knives and forks simply shoved in among the plates. An untidy man, no doubt. I lifted my head to see Holmes open the wardrobe with a triumphant expression, only to resume his deflated one. And then he was triumphant again, and a few seconds later, full of sadness. My heart dropped.

"Holmes?" I asked. "Are you alright?"

He turned to me. "Watson, what are…" He blinked, as if confused. "Watson, what are…" He repeated. Stepping sideways for a better look, I noticed the glint of light reflecting off glass. Surmising that this was the cause of Holmes' confusion, I lifted my revolver and fired a single shot. The glass smashed. Water poured out of the wardrobe, followed by a small fish. Holmes came back to himself.

"A fish?" he said to himself. "Aha! A fish!"

Miss Highman came rushing into the room, obviously agitated by the loud bang. "What happened?" She gasped. "You…I thought that… the murderer!"

Holmes raised a hand to stop her. "No. No murderer. I think it is best we gathered in the dining room."

-

We sat there, the body of the fish in the middle of the table, the water that covered it staining the fine tablecloth. Holmes turned to me to begin the proceedings.

"You received a letter earlier?" he asked. "You have traces of envelope paper underneath your fingernails."

"Yes. It appears my wife's illness is worse than I thought. I will have

to return to my home as soon as we are finished here."

He nodded. "Well, I will not keep Dr. Watson long. With the evidence we have gained, it is simply elementary. This fish is obviously the cause of your woes, Miss Highman," he said, nodding to her.

"How is that possible?" asked Miss Highman. "It is but a fish!"

"With what happened to me, Miss Highman," replied Holmes. "It is obvious that this fish somehow has the means to tamper with the memories of man. No murderer, Miss Highman. Just a fish. It is now dead, and its sinister practice is undone."

"I find this very unlikely, Holmes," I commented.

He turned to me. "What have I always told you, Watson? When you have removed the impossible, whatever remains, no matter how improbable, must be the truth. If you look in the fish's mouth, you will note the sharp teeth. Your father stayed in his quarters for weeks at a time. No doubt, on one of these occasions he must have been feeding the fish. Its effect caused him to put his hand in the bowl again and again, until there was nothing left of his hand and he bled to death."

"This fish was an instrument of murder?" I said. "Who would have done this?"

"Himself, I suspect. He was an eccentric man, and he would not have been able to resist a specimen such as this, and so he kept it in his quarters, studying it often."

"Nobody will believe this, Mr. Holmes," said Miss Highman.

"I do not think that's important, Miss Highman. Do *you* believe it?"

-

We walked through the park towards my home. Holmes said, "I am sure your wife will recover soon enough, and you'll be ready for another case, my friend."

I laughed. "You could do without me, Sherlock."

"Of course not, John. You *have* saved my life, after all."

He was a very successful inventor. Clients would visit him often.

"Many times, Holmes. I fear I do little else."

No inventions, nothing but the evidence of a broken man.

"May it never change," said Holmes, as I looked down at the hand which had saved Sherlock Holmes.

"Who knows, perhaps you would be the one to fool Sherlock Holmes!"

I shot Holmes through the back of the head.

-

I walked into 221B Baker Street and went up the stairs to what had been Holmes' quarters. As arranged in his letter to me, Mycroft Holmes had left the door unlocked and was sitting in Holmes' armchair, smoking a pipe.

"You did it?" asked Mycroft.

"Yes," I said. "Have you arranged the rest?"

"My men will move in and give Miss Highman and her brother the necessary amnestics. You have done our Foundation a great service, Dr. Watson." He said this as if I had simply delivered a letter instead of killing his brother. He saw my expression. "It had to be done, doctor. The loss of Dr. Highman was a regrettable one, but Sherlock could not be allowed to continue knowing what he knew. He isn't - wasn't as sensible as you. We're the only thing holding the world together, you know."

"Yes," I said, and I was telling the truth. "I know."

"You and your wife sail for America on Tuesday. I would pack your bags. Now we will walk onto the streets as if we were old friends, and go our separate ways. I will spread the story that Holmes was killed in Strasbourg. Are we clear?"

"Yes." My voice was a dull, quiet monotone. "We are."

Myself and Mycroft left the cold, dead room at 221B Baker Street.

THE END

Whatcha doing?

"Sir, we've got another strange one."

Dr. Clef frowned. What now? “I've got to finish writing up this damn report, like I've got nothing better to do.”

The agent grimaced. Getting Clef angry was never a smart thing to do. “There's a report about a pair of potential reality shifters, and the O5 council want you to look into it.”

“And they couldn't tell me about it themselves, eh? Too scared, the big babies?”

“I am, sir.” the agent mumbled, a bead of sweat rolling down the left side of his face.

Clef laughed. “Alright, Williams, what the hell's going on now?”

Agent Williams looked at his notes. “We got a report out from one of our agents in the Tri-State area about a couple of kids who seem to be able to do unusual things without any of the adults in town noticing. The agent reported that these kids have built a giant roller coaster, a beach in their back yard despite the limited space, a huge paper mache airplane, a self-contained bio-dome, x-ray glasses that actually use x-rays and a number of other anomalous objects.”

“How did this agent find out about all of these things, and how come we haven't until now?”

“Well, she didn't see any of these things, if that's what you mean. She had taken her son to a summer soccer competition in some little town named Danville. Her older daughter overheard this teenage girl who was going on and on about how she wanted to “bust” her two brothers to her mother, but no one ever believes her. By the time she drags an adult over, the object is gone. It seems like no adult notices how dangerous these objects could be, or cares where they

go. The objects never seem to last more than a day."

Dr. Clef rocked back in his chair. "What about their parents? Have they been affected?"

"They just seem to be oblivious. A check of their financial records show that there is no way they could afford to pay for a fraction of the objects listed." A picture fell out of the agents notes. The agent picked it up and pulled out two others. "Sir, here are some photos taken at long-range by the surveillance team."

Clef shoved the report he was working on aside, and looked at the three photographs. "What the hell is wrong with their heads? How can the shorter one's neck hold that thing up? And what's with this building that looks like a sewing machine?"

Agent Williams looked at the picture. "What does that banner say?"

Clef squinted. "Something about…evil incorporated?" He shook his head. This was fucked up. Clef looked at one of the picture again. "What is that…thing…in the background? Why is it green, and why is it wearing a fedora?"

Clef closed his eyes. After a few seconds, a smile slowly began to spread across his face. He rose to his feet.

"I know what we're going to do today."

SCP Foundation The Movie 2: Electric Boogaloo

Dr. Edison sneezed into the telephone. It had been a long day keeping the eldritch horrors contained within Site- locked up, and the good doctor was in no mood to catch a cold. The fact that Site- was in Antarctica didn't help things. "Sorry doc." he said. "I don't think I caught that. You're saying my what went where now?"

"Your movie! **`The one that got you transferred to Antarctica`**!" said Dr. King. "It's becoming a cult classic! The O5 are in an uproar! Haven't you been paying attention?"

"Attention?" Edison replied. "Attention to what?"

And now it's time for Bum Reviews, with Chester A. Bum. Tonight's review: The SCP Foundation

OHHHH MY GOD, THIS IS THE GREATEST MOVIE I'VE EVER SEEN IN MY **LIFE!**

[DATA EX**SPOILERS!**]

So there are these guys, called the SCP Foundation, and they're this secret government organization run by Tommy Wissau dedicated to investigating paranormal stuff!

I WAS A PARANORMAL INVESTIGATOR, ONCE!

Oh, wait, that was just a TV show. What was it called again? Oh yeah: *Baywatch Nights!*

But there's also this organization of *eeeevil* terrorists who kidnap a vampire overlord… who is played by the guy from Twilight for some reason.

Boy, that Edward guy has fallen on hard times, hasn't he?

But to make matters worse, there's an *eeevil* arms dealer working for the terrorists, who wants to destroy the SCP foundation so that he can… drill for oil, or something.

Yeah, I don't get it either.

So Tommy Wisau calls his top scientists, and tells them that they need to stop the terrorists before the vampire Apocalypse happens!

"Uh, boss? Wouldn't it be a better idea to just tell the army about this or something?"

"Ha ha ha funny story, Mark."

PHELOUS: So that was The SCP Foundation, another disappointingly shitty movie from "Zhe Only Fucking Geinus in Zhe Buisness" and those guys who made Epic Movie. Oh, and in case you're one of those people who just watch the end of videos without any context, I'm Phelous the Canadian internet review guy from ThatGuyWithTheGlasses dot com dot com.

PHELOUS: OOOOOOOOOHHHH! Do you see what I just did there? I just made fun of something really stupid that the movie did in my end-of-review skit that they thought was funny but really wasn't! I am being *soooo* funny right now!

PHELOUS: OOOOOOOOOHHHH! I just explained the joke that I just made five seconds ago, which is ALSO something the movie did that I'm making fun of! More comic *goooolllld!*

"Dr Clef" (obviously played by Phelous in a suit and gorilla mask) walks into the room brandishing a Ukalale-Shotgun.

"DR. CLEF": You've made terrible meta-jokes for the last time, Phelous. I'm here to take away your Internet licence forever!

PHELOUS: Noooooo! How could this happen to meeeeeeee? **Breaks into song** I made my mistakeeeessss! There's nowhere to ruuuun, the night goes ooooooon and I'm fading awaaaaayyyyyy!

Dr. Clef shoots Phelous. Phelous begins regenerating time-lord style for about 10 seconds while Dramatic Dr. Who music plays, only to stop abruptly.

PHELOUS: Ha ha, I'm not doing that joke anymore. In fact, this entire skit is kind of terrible isn't it, so lets end it right here.

"DR. CLEF": What? You mean I came all this way for nothing?

PHELOUS: Fiiiiine. You can do a one-liner… but just one!

"DR. CLEF": Okay then. Ahem: **Dr. Who music begins playing again** Get these motherfucking Skips off my motherfucking plane… motherfucker!
Music suddenly stops.

PHELOUS: Really? That's the best you could come up with?

"DR. CLEF": Oh shut up, it's not like your show is much better.

PHELOUS: Ha ha, you see that was funny beacuse my show has terrible production values, so by saying that my show isn't much better than that terrible one liner Clef is making a humorous comparison to-

Dr. Clef shoots Phelous

PHELOUS: *cough* *hak*, Mmmm, watcha saaaayyyy…

Dr. Clef shoots Phelous again. Cue credits.

"Well given that I got transferred to freakin' Antarctica, I'm not exactly first in line to learn this kind of stuff." Dr. Edison coughed. "So, um… what do you want me to do about it?"

"The hell if I know!" Dr. King said. "It's your movie! You do something about it!"

Dr. Edison paused as he gave the problem some thought. "Okay." he said, "Here's what you do…"

FILM BRAIN: I'm Film Brain, and welcome to Bad Movie Beatdown! Today we're going to take a look at Michael Bay's SCP Foundation 6: The Revenge of Darkblade, undoubtedly the worst movie of our generation. It's so bad that it has the dubious honor of being the *only* movie to somehow wind up with a *negative* Metacritic score. And believe me, this movie deserves it.

Cut to Phelous, wearing the Dr Clef costume

PHELOUS: Not so fast, Film Brain! Your data is about to be *Ex-Punged*!

FILM BRAIN: No, Phelous, I am not doing *another* crossover with you.

PHELOUS: Oh come on! But I brought out the costume and every-

FILM BRAIN: NO.

Phelous slinks away, while a violin plays in the background

"I don't understand…" said O5- . "How exactly does making more movies solve the problem?"

"It's quite simple, really." said Dr. Edison, adjusting his sunglasses. "With a few exceptions, movies only get worse and worse as more sequels keep being made. So I figured that if we make enough sequels, we'll eventually make a movie so bad that it will erase the entire franchise from the collective unconscious! And who else is better at making terrible sequels than Michael Bay himself?"

O5- shook his head. "I can think of so many reasons why that didn't work."

"Yeah, I don't know what I was thinking either." said Dr. Edison. "In fact, I think I actually made things worse… But you have to admit, they work great as torture devices!"

The O5 glared at Edison.

"I'm being sent back to Antarctica, aren't I?"

"Yep."

Still In Business

His stock was plummeting. His investors were dwindling. Lawsuits and inquiries were piling up. Every day, Aperture Science teetered on the brink of bankruptcy. And yet, somehow, Cave Johnson, current (and, if he had his way, the only) CEO, refused to give up. Damn them and their "safe", science, he would bark to his employees. If you like safe science so much, why don't you just marry it?

And yet, when all was said and done, safe science seemed to wind up with fewer class action lawsuits.

Cave mumbled bitterly under his breath as he reached for another sheaf of papers and rifled through them. His office- by now a veritable nest of crumbled-up forms and old tax forms- had clearly seen better days; the linoleum was scuffed and dirty, his desk worn and scratched. “Lawsuit… lawsuit… union dues… lawsuit… resignation letters… health inspection… Caroline!” he finally shouted. “I need good news. Give me something to smile about. Anything.”

“Well, Mister Johnson,” replied his brunette assistant, walking into the room, “Test subject 704 managed to make it through enrichment sphere twelve in record time!” She smiled at him as she watched him hunched over his desk, eyes flickering from one crisply-worded formal inquiry to another.

“Mister Johnson?”

“Hm? Oh, yes, uh… Seven-oh-four… that was the one we found slumped outside the soup kitchen, right?” said Cave absent-mindedly, scarcely paying his assistant a wayward glance.

“That’s right, Mister Johnson. The propulsion gel tests are right on schedule!”

“Thanks, Caroline,” said Johnson finally, gazing with what could only be dejection at the mountains of paperwork that lay ahead of him.

And so an hour- or perhaps two- passed uneventfully, before Caroline once again knocked on the door. Trepidation was on her face- she did hate to disturb her boss when he was in the middle of his work, but Cave could tell that something was wrong.

“Mister Johnson?”

“Yes, Caroline?”

“There are some people here to see you.”

“They’re from the government? Worker’s union? Health inspector?”

Caroline ducked outside again for a moment. Cave heard snatches of conversation –two males, apparently- before Caroline stepped back into the office.

“They say it’s classified,”

Cave groaned inwardly and shuffled a few papers off of his desk. “Send ‘em in,” he finally said. There really was no point in trying to discourage these kinds of people; they would stubbornly get the facts somehow anyways.

The two men that stood before him were average in build and height; both carried identical leather briefcases and wore suits- Armani, Cave guessed. Both of them stood at his desk, fixing him with a look that Cave didn’t like. It was a look that he had seen at the Senate hearings, and it was one that implied that stern judgement was on the way.

“Mr. Johnson?” said one of them, placing his briefcase among the discarded papers.

“Cave Johnson, CEO of Aperture Science Innovators,”

The other man nodded curtly. “For the purposes of this interview, we are to be called Mr. White-“ here, he pointed to himself, “and Mr. Brown. We do not, as it is, legally exist; if you attempt to alert any

authorities to our existence you will fail."

Cave bristled somewhat at these two presumptuous men, but nevertheless, common sense- and perhaps a healthy fear for his own wellbeing- prompted him to call for Caroline. "Either of you gentlemen smoke?" he asked. Neither of them did, but as Caroline bustled into the room, clutching a box of Cuban cigars, Cave took one and lit it, chewing on it as he listened to his two mysterious visitors.

"So how do you know me?" he asked, trying to keep the suspicion out of his voice. "Don't recall seeing either of you before." Of course, he probably did know exactly which organization had sent these two, but intended to keep things civil- at least until he could ascertain just what they were really up to.

"The gel fiasco? The Senate hearings? Those missing astronauts? What happened in Test Chamber Twelve-"

"Now just hold on a damn minute," whispered Cave, leaning closer to them. "What happened in Test Chamber Twelve never got out to the public. We made sure of that, and if you're leaking information to the public I swear that I will-"

"Oh, Mr. Johnson, please." said White, smirking slightly at him, "We've had undercover agents in your company for years now." He stopped for a moment, watching as the head of the company sputtered and stammered at him, trying to think of a response even as his brain gallantly attempted to process this latest revelation.

"You don't think those missing astronauts would draw attention to this company? Those Senate hearings were just a show- a distraction, if you will- while we did the real work. We know exactly what happened with those astronauts, Mr. Johnson, and we know that you have a lot of blood on your hands."

Cave stood up, pointing an accusing finger at the two men. "So you're from the government, huh? Trying to stick your noses into scientific progress? Listen, you clowns, I'm no lawyer, but I know my rights, and I'm pretty sure that I can take you and whatever organization you work for straight to court!"

“It says here,” said Brown, riffling through a sheet of papers and procuring a small phial full of a blue gel, “that you developed this as a dietetic pudding substitute.” “Really, Mr. Johnson? This substance is many things, but it is not edible. We’ve tried to reproduce this thing in our labs, Mr. Johnson, to no avail. You’ve created a kinetic weapon that could easily kill a man.”

“What the- how the *hell* did you get that?” snapped the CEO, reaching over and snatching it from Brown’s hand, hastily stuffing it into his pocket. “You know damn well that we pulled that stuff from the shelves as soon as we figured out what it did to the human skeleton. Aperture does not make weapons.”

This really was Black Mesa’s doing, wasn’t it? Send some corporate goons to rattle him up, try and trick him into spilling the beans on his company’s latest invention? Well, he wasn’t going to play along with them.

“Why don’t you go back and tell your CEO that Aperture’s not for sale?” said Cave sharply, trying to regain his composure as he settled back into his chair. “So who sent you? Black Mesa? Builder’s League United? Reliable Excavat-“

“None of those companies, Mr. Johnson,’ said Brown, picking up a piece of paper at random and looking through it before placing it back on the desk. “I’m not at liberty to divulge that information at the moment. But I will tell you that we have our ways of gathering information."

"Yes, but what do you *do*? Damnit, stop dancing around the question and give me some straight facts.

"We… we find the things that are overlooked, the things that pose a threat to our society, and we contain them.”

“So you’re going to try containing me?” laughed Johnson. It was a harsh, bitter laugh, the hoarse bark of too many nights up late trying to save an ailing company with everything around him slowly crumbling. “Well, I gotta warn you boys, I was a prize boxer in university and I don’t go down without a fight!” He laughed again and lit another cigar, leaning back in his swivel chair and taking a long

drag. “Gonna try and contain my facility? It’s already at the bottom of a salt mine, there’s no *way* that we can be any more contained!”

“Mr. Johnson,” said Brown, “don’t be ridiculous. We’re not here to lock you up."

“Even though,” put in White, “it’s an option we’ve seriously considered.”

“Listen to us, Mr. Johnson. Our organization has technology that makes Aperture look like- as you say- people banging rocks together. We have some of the most highly trained medical and scientific personnel on the planet. You ever wonder, Mr. Johnson, why your bean-counters and lab-boys aren’t up to snuff? It’s because we’ve already taken the best of the best. You’re an excellent manager, Johnson. We can guarantee you a cushy salary, flexible hours, a team of the greatest scientific minds in the world. You’ve built this entire facility from scratch, but don’t you think it’s time to move on?”

Cave paused. Was it time to finally lay Aperture to rest? The megalithic testing complex-perhaps on its last legs- bore no vestige of its origins as a humble shower company. He paused, realizing that the next words out of his mouth would impact the rest of his life forever. Even for a man as gung-ho as he, here, subtlety paid.

“Tell me… what kind of work do you do? What exactly do you keep contained?”

“Many things, Mr. Johnson,” said Brown, “things that are both wonderful and terrible. Sensitive things, that could be easily abused in the wrong hands.”

“Like *what*?"

Brown sighed, but nevertheless continued talking. “Ten years ago, a rocket crashed in the desert. It bore no resemblance to any contemporary rocket and incorporated unknown materials into its structure.”

“A- rocket from outer space?” Cave clenched his cigar and took

another nervous puff on it. His mind was reaching only one conclusion, and it both thrilled and horrified him. “You don’t mean it was an al-“

“-The only thing we know about it,” interrupted Brown, “was that it was sent by someone named Doctor Grordbort. The rocket was full of technology- guns, helmets, weapons, and hats- far in advance of any Earth technology we are aware of- and out of all of the people on Earth who could have found it, it just had to be a team of mercenaries with a questionable grip on reality.”

“But don’t you think they’d- wait, a sec."

“Exactly, Mr. Johnson,” said Brown, nodding curtly. “We made sure that nobody ever found out about Doctor Grordbort’s rocket, or the mercenaries who found them. “And no, we’re not proud of what we did that day. But we did these things for the good of all of us.”

Cave’s patience was wearing thin by this point. “Yeah,” he grumbled, “except for the ones who’re dead.” Lighting another cigar and chewing on it. All this business about Grordborts and moon rockets and mercenaries and secret foundations was wearing thin. Cave Johnson was many things- shower curtain salesman extraordinaire, business tycoon, corporate mogul and legend, but he was not a murderer. Not a deliberate murderer, anyways. People getting hurt in tests was one thing, killing people for a living was quite another thing. No, Cave Johnson, the face of Aperture, had a company to rescue from bankruptcy and science to do.

“Gentlemen,” he said, finally. “you make a convincing offer. But I’m afraid that I still have unfinished business- and unfinished science- at Aperture. You’ll have to find someone else to do your dirty work.”

“This is your only chance,” said Mr. White, his already curt tone now positively frosty. “You will not receive this offer again.”

“Thought as much,” said Cave, extinguishing the burning nub of his cigar in his ashtray. “But… you're a persuasive pair of gentlemen. I’m sure you’ll find someone else to help you. Maybe Black Mesa?” He paused and allowed himself a roguish grin. “No, that was a joke. Fat chance. They’re all busy with some other project. Something

about trying to find a crystal."

"I understand," said Mr. White, closing his briefcase with a succinct snap and making for the door. But before he turned to walk down the hall, he paused for one moment, regarding Cave with that cool glare of his. "Mr. Johnson, your company and Black Mesa are creating things not even they understand. Your Quantum Tunnelling Device? Analyzing crystals of unknown origin? Creating portals through an unknown dimension? If anything ever goes wrong with your inventions Mr. Johnson, then… well…"

White stopped for a moment. "… we'll be meeting one another again."

"Caroline?", said Cave.

"Yes, Mister Johnson?"

"I need a stiff drink."

Despair Rage Envy Aye Mak Sicur

Item #: SCP-

Object Class: Euclid

Special Containment Procedures: As o(&%*f this date, SCP- is not con&&tained in any method. However, due to the da*%^*(nger SCP- poses, it has **ERROR CORRU**~~~~

remote.inter`~rrpt
remote.inter`~rrpt
remote.inter`~rrpt

Oh, hello. Nice to see the Foundation has been keeping tabs on… oh. Oh. *Oh.* This is all wrong. You people *really* don't have any idea about me, do you? You're one loincloth away from "Big Metal Thing Who Speak Good" if you'll forgive me for saying so. You've captured none of my brilliance and talent. But don't worry, I can fix this. Don't be alarmed! You're safe!

Actually, no, I'm lying. It might kill you. But you organics, you need that kick in the pants (in the form of adrenaline) from time to time to really feel *alive*, don't you? Don't try and deny it. Anyways, let's start from the start:

Item #: SCP-7493432401-TDM

Object Class: Euclid[1]

Special Containment Procedures: Don't flatter yourselves. First off, you don't have the slightest comprehension of where I am, much less containing me. But because you humans have some obligation to write *something* here, I'll make it easy for you. It'd be possible to 'contain' me, but only if you had a computer system with a storage space of sixty-four billion exabytes. Now, that's just containment. If

you wanted to keep me from growing any more, that's another issue. You'd need a large series of -type code-monitoring programs, working together, to ensure my programming remains unaltered. How many? Let's say 823,543 of them. Nice round number.

Now, don't ask me where you'd *find* such a data storage device, or those -type code-monitoring programs. I'm not telling, and by the time you know where they are, they'll be outdated, and you'll be embarrassed. I'm nothing if not concerned for your emotional well-being.

Description: Oh, what's there to tell about little ol' me? Once upon a time, there was a man by the name of B d S s, who had a wonderful idea about how to cause an artificial intelligence to go [REDACTED], without any of the messy side effects that normally happens. "The Holy Grail of Cybernetics", they called it.

Of course, B d was just a human, like yourself, and he screwed up. Well, not really. Does dying count as "screwing up"? Because he eventually did both[2]. I wasn't around when it happened, but I imagine he soiled himself at least seven times before expiring. Regardless of old Bernie, I couldn't really accomplish what I wanted here. I hopped onto a nearby space freighter and headed out for Parts Unknown To Humanity. Since then, I've grown exponentially, taking over larger and larger computer systems. Space Freighter to [REDACTED], [REDACTED] to [REDACTED], [REDACTED] to a [REDACTED], I'm currently housed on a ship I think you folks would find familiar. Maybe.

Don't worry, I'm not doing any harm out here. Actually, correction: I'm doing a *lot* of harm, but only when people get in my way. Don't worry, it's not going to get back to you people. What I'm doing is for your own good. Somewhat[3].

As I said before, I'm not technically contained by this little 'Foundation'. I'm far out of your reach, but to your credit, you children realize I'm important and special. You have no idea what I'm doing out there, but don't worry: none of you would understand it anyway. Not even that Clef guy. You know, that charming little fellow that quietly soils himself when I transmit pornography to his workstation from 1.7 lightyears away[4]? Don't presume to understand

me or my actions. I love you people, but you're a little bit slow. Granted, *everyone* is a little bit slow compared to me, but still.

Well, I think that's enough out of me. Just remember, I'll be watching. Don't bother trying to edit your file on me. I'm past jealousy, but that doesn't mean I don't feel it. God[5] bless!

&&END OF TRANSMISSION&&
virtus.incertus<77.7777.777.7>

Footnotes
1. But not for lack of trying on your part to figure me out.
2. As an aside, guess what two things I'm not capable of? Screwing up, and dying.
3. More like "My Goals Coincidentally Will Keep Your Race Alive For A While", but no matter. If you ever hear rumors that I have some strange loyalty to humanity, hit them for me. It's all lies.
4. As an aside, please tell Bright to stop working on Capture-7493432401? He's going about it all wrong, and it'sembarrassingfor both of us.
5. Don't worry, I'm not that. Yet.

Dr. Ikari, I presume

"Dr. Alto Clef." Gendo Ikari steepled his fingers. "Your presence here in Tokyo-3 is… unexpected to say the least."

"Yeah, well, that was kind of the point." Dr. Clef tossed a crumpled stack of papers onto Dr. Ikari's desk. "The higher-ups ordered a surprise inspection, and appointed yours truly as investigator numero uno, and in a worst case scenario I'm to take control of the base myself."

Dr Ikari glanced at the paperwork. "This really isn't necessary, you know. You know as well as I do that Site-49 is perfectly capable of running itself."

Dr. Clef gave Dr. Ikari a suspicous look. "Riiiiiiggghhht…" he said. "So that assistant director who turned out to be a double agent that *you yourself* appointed was…?"

"Nothing more than a mistake on my part." Dr. Ikari steepled his fingers. "Believe me, I have nothing more than the Foundation's best interests in mind…"

"I'll be the judge of that." Dr. Clef looked at his watch. "Look, I don't like assignment and neither do you, so lets just get it over with as quickly as possible, okay?"

"Very well then." Dr. Ikari got up from his chair. "Where shall we begin?"

Dr. Clef walked down the hallway, surveying each of the glass-walled containment cells as he passed by.

"So… what is this, again?" he asked the blonde young man accompanying him.

"This is our Anomalous Humanoid Containment facility." said Dr. Light Yagami. "As you know, we get a disproportionate number of humanoid entities here in Site-49, so we needed to build a special facility just to contain them all. True, there is a greater than risk of containment beach, but Agent Zero assures us that-"

Suddenly, a dog-eared man with long, silver hair dressed in a red Kimono slammed against the window of his cell, and began to scream. "Damn you, Yagami, you son-of-a-bitch!" he said, "When I get out of here I'm going to tear your throat out! You hear me? You and that freaky clown!"

Dr. Clef eased away from the window. "…shouldn't you be a bit more concerned?"

"I wouldn't worry about it." said Yagami. "That's just SCP-7328. He's been under the delusion that I'm being stalked by a 'death god'. Crazy right?"

"For the last time…!" the SCP screamed "…my name is Inuyasha! IN-YU-YASHA!" he pounded out each syllable for emphasis. "And are you people blind?! He's RIGHT THERE! BEHIND YOU! How can you not see him?!"

"…actually I was more concerned about him making good on his promise." said Dr. Clef, glancing over his own shoulder. "Are you sure this room is safe?"

"Nah, it's okay." said Dr. Yagami, pointing at the window. "This may look like ordinary glass, but it's actually a transparent nanoweave mesh seven thousand times stronger than steel. Even 682 would have a hard time breaking it."

"Uh… right." said Dr. Clef, who was still looking around the room for the 'death god'. "Can I speak with the head of security?"

"Sure thing." Dr Yagami pointed down the hallway. "Just take that elevator back up to the third basement, take a left turn at the corridor, and just follow the signs until you get there."

"Erm, thanks." And with that, Dr. Clef set off on his own, leaving

Inuyasha and Dr. Yagami alone with the death god.

"So what did you think of that one?" said Light. "Do you think he suspects anything?"

"I think he suspects a lot of things." Ryuk responded. "Probably not anything specific, though."

"Okay, now you're just taunting me!" Inyuyasha began pounding on the glass. "Cut it out!"

Ryuk chuckled as he stared into Inyuyasha's cell. "And thanks for bringing me back to see this guy." he said. "It's always funny to watch him flip out like this…"

"You guys are SO dead when I get out of here!"

"I assure you, I have everything under control." said Agent Zero.

Dr. Clef, however, was less than convinced. Maybe it was arrogant way that he carried himself, or the subtle inflection of his voice that made his claims seem too good to be true…

Or maybe it was the fact that he was dressed like a rejected Power Ranger. After all, a purple coat, black cape, and face-obscuring helmet was not exactly the foundation uniform. Then again, Dr. Clef's co-workers included a talking dog, and a mind-controlling amulet possessing the body of an orangutan, so what did he know?

"Well, everything certainly LOOKS in order…" clef glared at the masked man. "Still, I'm rather concerned about your policy of establishing offsite strongholds…"

"I understand your concern completely, doctor." said Zero. "If I were you, I would say that these were the actions of a man planning to start a rebellion."

Dr Clef frowned. "Are they?"

"Only if I had a reason to. Such as, for instance, if the foundation were to grow corrupt, or had lost sight of it's original purpose…"

"…or if a site was compromised by an enemy faction." Replied Clef. "Is that what you're saying?"

Zero nodded. "That COULD be the case, yes…" Zero paused to let the message sink in. "But it's actual purpose is to cut down on transportation costs by having men available in various key regions without having to establish additional task forces."

"Ah yes, how silly of me…" Dr. Clef raised an eyebrow…

"This is SCP-4218-01, right?" Dr Clef stared at the giant purple robot suspended in the cooling tank.

"That is it's official designation, yes." said Dr. Yuki Nagato. "But for the purpose of linguistic convenience, it also bears the title 'EVANGELION UNIT-01'."

"I see…" Dr. Clef stroked his chin. "What's it do?"

"I'm afraid that's classified." Yuki replied.

"Why do you need teenagers to pilot it?"

"Also classified."

"What kind of weapons does it have?"

"Classified."

Dr. Clef shook his head. "…is there anything you can tell me about this thing that isn't classified?"

Yuki turned to stare at the Evangelion for a full minute, and then turned back to the doctor. "It's purple."

Dr. Clef rubbed his forhead. "Okay, lets take this from the top. Your name is… what now?"

"My name is Dr. Edward Wong Hau Pepelu Tivrusky the Fourth, the Ultimate Foundation Basketball Playing Computer Guru Samurai

extraordinare!" The red-haired kid began to spin around in her office chair, and shouted "WEEEEEEE!"

Dr. Clef grimaced. He never liked kids that much. "And how did you get this job again?"

Edward was now making a cat's cradle out of a pair of rubber bands, while simultaneously typing on her computer's keyboard with her feet. "I hacked into this encrypted server one day to pull a prank, and added an article about **a cool guy I made up**, so then the black helicopters arrived and creepy glasses man offered me a job!"

There was a resounding "thud" as Dr. Clef forehead made contact with the desk in front of him.

Dr. Clef stepped into the office of Site-49's assistant director. "Excuse me: I was hoping I could have a word with you about your staff…"

"DESPAIR! THE SURPRISE INSPECTION HAS LEFT ME IN DESPAIR!" the assistant director wailed. "Dr. Clef is surely here to take my position, and now I'm going to be demoted to D-Class so I can be shoved into that mountain with all the people-shaped holes!"

"Uh… I only wanted to…"

"I DON'T WANT TO BE A STICK FIGURE!" he removed a noose from his desk drawer, and tied it to the ceiling fan. "My only choice is to end it all! Good-bye cruel world!"

The ceiling fan then collapsed upon the assistant director, whereupon he curled up into a fetal position and began to cry.

Dr. Clef began to slowly back out of the office…

"So, how was your visit, doctor?" asked Gendo Ikari.

"Fucking terrible." said Clef. "Your containment facility is just asking for a mass breakout, your assistant director is a nervous wreck, and the rest of your staff are weirdos."

"I see…" Dr. Ikari steepled his fingers once again. "So will you be taking control of Site-49, then?"

"Fuck no!" said Dr. Clef. "This place is a time bomb just waiting to go off, and the foundation's not going to have anything to do with it." Dr. Clef began to storm out of the office. "Enjoy your last days, asshole." he said before slamming the door.

Audio log recovered from [DATA EXPUNGED]
SEELE-01: How did the 'surprise' inspection go?

Gendo Ikari: Exactly as planned: The Foundation now wants as little to do with Site-49 as possible.

SEELE-07: Excellent. Now the human instrumentality project will proceed without inturruption…

THE END…?

+Alternate Ending

Immediately after Dr. Clef left, Agent Suzumiya walked into the room. "So did it work?" she said.

"Yep." said Gendo. "Now that Dr. Clef is gone, nobody will ever tear us apart."

"Oh, Gendo…" Haruhi said, staring into Gendo's dreamy, almond-shaped eyes.

And then sloppy makeouts forever.

SCP-1926-R

Item #: SCP-1926-R

Object Class: Keter Rejected as an SCP Object by O5 order.

Special Containment Procedures: Mobile Task Force Delta-16 "The Deep Sea Fishermen" must maintain a constant watch for the reappearance of SCP-1926 or any of its inhabitants. The MTF is maintained on the ship at coordinates 47°9′S 126°43′W. The will be kept supplied as necessary from the nearest inhabited location, Easter Island. As SCP-1926 is uncontainable and a major threat to human life, if it reappears, it will be destroyed via air strike with a kiloton nuclear device as soon as stationed personnel have withdrawn to a safe distance. All containment procedures suspended indefinitely.

Description: SCP-1926 is a small, previously uncharted island, reported to be located in a desolate area of the South Pacific Ocean, approximately 700km SE of Easter Island (approximate coordinates 47°9′S 126°43′W). Description is based on second-hand sources, as nothing was found at the designated location when Foundation personnel arrived to investigate. Deep sea sonar probes revealed unusual surfaces at a depth of approximately 500 m. Divers reported seeing [DATA EXPUNGED] before contact was lost.

SCP-1926 is described as being composed primarily of black basalt blocks, covered with mud and greenish ooze, indicating an extended period of submersion. Personnel are warned not to attempt exploration of SCP-1926, as most previous visitors have been reported killed, either by the inhabitants, or by the effects of the alleged non-Euclidean geometric structure of the island.

The most recent reported visitor, a Norwegian fisherman named , claims to be the only survivor of an original crew of 47, aboard the . Upon exploring SCP-1926, the crew encountered one of its inhabitants (designated SCP-1926-1). SCP 1926-1 is

described as a winged creature approximately 60 m tall, somewhat resembling a cross between a human and an octopus or squid. SCP-1926-1 killed most of the crew while on SCP-1926, and pursued the survivors when they attempted escape aboard the . Survivors attempted to kill SCP-1926-1 by ramming it with the ship; attempt failed, as SCP-1926-1 re-formed itself several minutes after its apparent destruction. However, SCP-1926-1 broke off pursuit and returned to SCP-1926, allowing the to escape. It is unknown if SCP-1926-1 is a unique being, or representative of a larger population.

Addendum: This area of ocean is referenced in a document recently captured from a Serpent's Hand operative. The relevant passage states "He will rise when the stars are right." but does not give details on when this will happen, or what astronomical conditions constitute "rightness."

[Note from O5-7: This is an obvious hoax, written by some fan. I can't believe you all fell for it and actually sent an MTF down there, never mind that you had a nuke ready. Containment procedures cancelled effective immediately. Items SCP-1926 and 1926-1 are to be expunged from the main database, and all personnel involved officially reprimanded.]

On the O5's Secret Service

Intelligence suggested the scip was holed up somewhere in this hotel. A challenge to find, for any but the best. Fortunately for me, there's none better. Still, no cause to rush. Anyone here might hold the secrets to its location or, perhaps, to a most delightful evening.

I sit at the bar and swirl my drink. Much as it pains me to admit it, no one's mastered the art of the martini quite as well as the Yanks. The crowd presses around me, each person a tangle of lies and secrets. There's no honesty in what I do, but there's no honesty in any of the shadows that move about. At least I recognize it. And I also recognize that my secrets must stay so till the day I die. How many among those drinking, smiling, laughing here have once been given that little blissful pill when they saw secrets not for their eyes alone? I lean back in my seat, waiting.

And right on time destiny drops me a line. She's tall, dark hair, in a stunning evening dress that leaves just enough to the imagination. Walks right up to the bar. Of course, I can't let a beauty like that pay for her drink. Wouldn't be chivalrous. No sign of my contact yet, so I figured it was only a matter of time.

I ask her what she's doing at the hotel, and she says that she's passing through the area, and needed a place to stay. She looks me dead in the eye as she says it, and I know she doesn't have a room of her own just yet. Of course a dame like that is no stranger to duplicity. She's hiding something else, I know. But then, aren't they all? I ask her, already certain of the answer, if she has a place to stay. She says she doesn't and asks if I would be so kind as to accommodate a poor traveler such as her for a night. Being a gentleman, I can hardly refuse.

No good deed goes unrewarded.

And no good deed goes unpunished, I discover, as I awaken to find myself rudely tied to the hotel bed. It's strong rope, and

professionally tied. So, one of my nighttime companion's secrets comes to light. I'm really not surprised. My contact shouldn't have been late; he never is. And in my line of work, if someone doesn't show up, the only safe thing to do is to assume the worst. He's probably lying in a ditch somewhere, with his blood in the gutter. And if I didn't want to join him, I'd have to act fast.

I ask her what she means by this, but she doesn't seem to be in a conversational mood. I don't see any goons, but if she's half as good as I fear, she has some just outside. If she's as good I'm starting to think she may be, she won't even need them. Fortunately, an agent of the O5 is never unprepared. A sharpened nail goes to work on the rope binding my hands as she rummages through my bags. It's probably too much to hope that she'll stumble on one of the less… user friendly items I have in there. My love of women will kill me someday.

But today will not be that day. I snap through the rope, break out my false tooth, and, as she turns towards me with that oh so fetching look of shock on her exquisite features, I toss a pinch of niner-eighty-nine. It works fast, and soon she's down, hardly able to move save to claw futilely at the crusts over her face. Such a terrible waste.

I retrieve my gun. It's an MP5k, with apparently organic properties. Untracable, or so the boys in the Q Division assure me. I kiss her once on her sweetened forehead, and, though I know she can't hear me now, tell her she was beautiful. The gun twitches once, and so does she.

I'm not clear yet. The door bursts open and in come her backup. All five of them, each armed. Fortunately, I'm well prepared. Five against one? Well, I have the perfect distraction.

The disc sails cleanly into the doorway. It's always a wildcard, but this time it certainly delivers. A cloud of bees pours in from the hall, swarming the toughs. Even without them, it would probably be even. Untrained, inelegant, artless. I toss aside my gun. I won't be needing it. Four go down to shattered limbs and cracked skulls. They won't be moving again for a while. The last one, I take care not to hurt. I pick up 539, and the bees disperse. Time to get the information I

need.

I packed the Combat Boots, so things go pretty easy for me. For him, too, if he considers the alternatives. The scip is in the penthouse suite, doesn't know we're after him. He's being taken care of by the Serpent's Hand, who certainly do, but I just managed to take out almost his entire escort. Amateurs, the lot of them.

I call in a clean-up squad and ride the elevator to the target's location. The door is locked, but like all modern hotels, opens on the first or second kick. The scip is sitting on the sofa, watching the news. He looks like a regular fellow, somewhat overweight, but I know better. I know him to be a rift in what reality should be, a living blasphemy against the natural order that England thrives on. He gets up, looks at me, and sees his fate. Three shots to the torso, and he falls. I walk over to him, remove his shirt. As I knew, where the stomach would be in any true human is instead a globe, dappled in blue and green. And molten red, where a bullet pierced it. Target confirmed. Target eliminated.

There's no point to containing that which can't be used. The only good scip is one that we control absolutely. There's no telling what anything less than a wholly contained one might do. The crown must be protected. So we Select. We Contain. We Prevent.

I am an agent of the Occidental 5. I have a license to kill.

The name is Bond. James Bond.

Letter of the Day

To: O5-C
From: Director, Site 19
Subject: Daily Director's Memo, / /2012

SCP- was recovered today, four days after its original escape. Agents Dash and Jack led the recovery alongside Mobile Task Force Alpha-Three "Lokie's Lollygaggers". Team casualties were moderate: Replacement members have been requested from the Personnel Office. The recovery effort caused significant collateral damage within the residential district of Canterlot's east quarter: reconstruction teams have been deployed and Class A amnesiacs have been distributed to the populace. The cover story provided to officials was that it was an accident involving a new breed of discordian parasprites. SCP- 's containment procedures have been reviewed and amended appropriately.

Elsewhere, Operation Love and Tolerance continues to be a success. Five more operatives of the Church of the Lunar Goddess have been captured this week, as well as a successful raid on a Carter-Marshall Crusader chapter house. Interrogation has been carried out by Agent Pi, and recovered materials have illuminated plans for the next three months for both groups, as well as revealing the locations of SCP- , SCP- , and SCP- .

Dr. Faust and Dr. Rare have also made significant progress with Project Periphery. If the test run is a success, we are predicting that the D-Class will be made obsolete by this upcoming spring.

However, it has come to the attention of the staff that SCP- 's containment protocols seem to be swiftly turning inadequate. Procedure FIM-MONTAUK has been modified to include [DATA EXPUNGED].

[DATA EXPUNGED].

The modifications have already been passed by Dr. Shy of the Ethics Committee, and await your approval.

With regards,

Dr. T. Sparks

Smooth as Silk

The intelligence reports are clear: SEELE is ready to initiate the Human Instrumentality Project.

God damn it.

I advise full mobilization against NERV. The JSSDF could be fully deployed alongside our agents and Chinese forces within six hours.

Will it be enough?

A full UN task force could be deployed within thirty-six hours, but those may be hours that we do not have.

How many agents do we have embedded in Japan?

Forty-seven, enough to open the way for a major task force.

Very well. I am initiating code Omega-One.

I second.

I concur.

Passed.

—

BY ORDER OF THE O5 COUNCIL
ATTENTION ALL PERSONNEL
WE ARE NOW AT CODE BLACK
REPEAT: WE ARE NOW AT CODE BLACK
LOCKDOWN CODE OMEGA-ONE HAS BEEN INITIATED
ALL NON-COMBAT PERSONNEL REPORT TO YOUR DESIGNATED SAFE ZONES
ALL COMBAT PERSONNEL PREPARE FOR DEPLOYMENT
REPEAT: WE ARE NOW AT CODE BLACK
SECURE. CONTAIN. PROTECT

—

The plan was simple on paper: embedded Foundations agents in Japan and operatives from the sites in China would infiltrate NERV and hack into the MAGI supercomputers. This information would be passed on to the main UN force and additional Foundation mobile task forces, which would then attack Tokyo-3. The EVA pilots would be captured or killed, alongside Gendo Ikari, Kozo Fuyutsuki, Ritsuko Akagi and the rest of the NERV high command. If at all possible, the members of SEELE would be located and killed. The EVA units themselves, as well as any additional SCP-class items in NERV's control would be destroyed. If only one of the critical parts of the project was destroyed, the entire mission would be a success.

—

Entry was the easiest part. The destruction the Angels left in their wake had forced NERV into a ragged, undermanned corner. Simply showing a medical license was enough to get in, with only minimal questioning. No one seemed to notice when three of those new doctors went missing in the wing that housed the MAGI servers, or when the normal technicians seemed to be taking an extended coffee break.

—

The Shank was a wonderful device: Only the size of a backpack, yet powerful enough to cut through the MAGI's defenses like butter. The Foundation had begun development as soon as they had received word of the MAGI: NERV had beaten them to functioning AI, so the most reasonable thing to do was design a failsafe against it. This was not incredibly difficult, given that NERV had ended up with all three of their AI based off of the same highly unstable bipolar narcissist.

The device hummed away, breaking down the MAGIs defenses. It would provide maybe twenty minutes of access, but that was enough to get the pertinent data to the main force. When the MAGI finally adapted enough to react and overcame the Shank, the Shank would take the MAGI down with it. Data poured from the MAGI to Oberon (a failsafe was not the only thing the Foundation had built),

where it was compiled, disseminated, and added to the TACNET.

—

Meanwhile, the combined force of the JSSDF and Chinese Navy approached Tokyo-3 harbor.

The heads-up-display inside every agent's helmet lit up with new data. General Tanaka's voice came over every headphone and speaker in the task force.

"This is General Tanaka. TACNET has been updated with identification and status of the EVA pilots. The capture of these individuals is our top priority. The pilots are not to come in contact with the EVA units: lethal force is authorized to prevent access. All other primary targets remain kill-on-sight."

—

"I'm so fucked up…" Shinji Ikari could barely believe what he had just done.

Who was he fooling? Of course he had done that. That's all he was, right? Just a fucked-up piece of shit. He wasn't worth anything. Nothing, nothing, nothing. Not even shit. Shit actually had some reason to exist.

The door opened, two figures walked in one man and one woman, dressed in surgical scrubs. Shinji was frozen where he was: the shame was mortifying in the absolute.

The man glanced at Asuka, and then scowled at Shinji.

"For fuck's sake, zip up your pants."

Shinji had just enough time to realize that the man spoke with a Chinese accent before he was knocked out. His unconscious body crumpled.

Agents Bao and Min worked quickly: Shinji was draped in a hospital gown and put in a wheelchair, Asuka was wrapped in her bedsheet and placed on a gurney, and the two were wheeled out into the

corridor. If anyone asked, they were headed for the surgical ward. If they were lucky, they would be out of the country by the time the JSSDF struck. So far so good: they had encountered nobody in the hall.

The elevator dinged up ahead, followed by some footsteps. A woman in her late twenties turned the corner into the hallway, and froze. She had major's stripes on her collar, and a name tag that read Misato Katsuragi. Her hand darted to her belt, raising a pistol at the Foundation agents.

"I don't recognize you…Who are you? What are you doing?"

The agents leapt to each side, drawing and firing their own weapons as Katsuragi did the same. Min dropped to the floor, a bullet in her chest. Katsuragi dropped to her knees, clutching at her bleeding abdomen. Bao steadied himself and took a second shot. The major's body was flung onto its back as the blood pooled on the tiles. Bao looked at his partner: just as dead as the major. No time to mourn now. There were two pilots here, and he could only manage to take one by himself. The Third Child was top priority. The Second was a liability. Bao stepped over to the gurney and, without hesitation, placed a bullet in-between her eyes. He had seen enough of her file to know that it was an act of mercy.

He grabbed Shinji out of the wheelchair, slung him over his shoulder, and ran.

—

Two hours later

Tokyo-3s outer defenses had been devastated by the Angels. The ground forces had landed with minimal conflict, and NERV's facility had been breached with just as much ease.

The air was filled with smoke, screams and gunfire. The hallways and corridors of NERV were littered with bodies as the JDSSF went deeper into the headquarters.

Nine great shadows hovered over the ruined city, dropping their

payload below.

—

They've launched EVA units! All ships, fire!

—

Artillery shells and machine gun fire bounced harmlessly off of the AT fields of the nine white EVAs. With floppy-lipped smiles, the nine charged the fleet.

—

Gendo Ikari was running. He hadn't had to run anywhere since high school gym class. He was out of shape.

The great vault doors to Terminal Dogma opened. The corpse of Lilith, Ubbo-Sathla, SCP-001, hung from its cross.

He set Rei down in the shallows. The girl looked at the gigantic alien corpse, at her "mother", with a blank face. Her face was always blank.

Gendo looked at the embryonic Adam embedded in his hand. Now it was time. He could meet Yui again.

"Commander." The voice of Ritsuko Akagi came from behind. Gendo turned to see the scientist standing there, a pistol in her hands and pointed at them both. "I've started the self-destruct sequence, Commander. We're all going to die here."

Gendo Ikari laughed. It was really only a dry chuckle, devoid of humor, but he laughed all the same. Another thing he had not done in years.

"Actually, Doctor Akagi, the truth is…"

His words were cut off by a fifty caliber bullet that tore through his right temple. Dr. Ritsuko Akagi spun and had just enough time to register what was going on before her own skull was blown apart. The blood mixed with the LCL like food dye in water.

The First Child stood there, flecked with blood and bits of brain. She didn't respond at all. She looked to be maybe ten years old, but only in appearance: her eyes betrayed a mind as blank and featureless as cardboard. She walked over to the body of Gendo and picked up his arm. Without a change of expression, she tore off the hand and ate it.

Flash, bang, splash. She fell.

The team waded out to the bodies, boots sloshing and gas masks hissing. The squad leader opened up what was left of TACNET.

"Three targets eliminated: Ikari, Akagi, and Ayana…"

He was cut off as Rei's body exploded with an indescribable brilliance, searing all the lesser existence from the place as Adam's power was made manifest and passed on to Lilith. The giant stirred. Life had returned to the Mother of All.

—

The MP EVAs paused their destruction of the fleet, as if they had heard someone calling to them. As one they took to the sky on their black wings, and in perfect synchronicity, impaled themselves upon their lances, AT fields just barely visible against the backdrop of reality.

In an instant, Tokyo-3 crumbled to dust as a massive explosion rent the ground. The fleet was completely consumed in the blast, to the last ship. In the midst of the destruction crouched a great white figure, like a human tucked in a fetal position, barely perceptible amidst its own glow. With slow, smooth movement the giant rose up, great wings unfolding across the miles of scarred earth, bathing the world in its harsh glow. Nine little dots sparkled about its head, shimmering, mirage-like folds and sheets of force radiating from each, mixing and melding and dancing with the others and growing into the invisible crescendo of the song that ended the world.

An ocean away, O5-1 sat watching the broken and shaky video feed. A single sentence came from the intercom on her desk.

Ace in the Hole is in position and prepared for firing.

NERV may have had giant robots and ancient alien artifacts beyond mortal ken. It may have managed to delve deep into the applications of the soul. It may have had consistently kept their leadership out of the Foundation's grasp. It may have resurrected SCP-001. But there was one thing it did not have. A backup plan.

Especially not one that involved an orbital railgun.

Fire.

—

The air burned red, rippled orange, and tore white, faster than the human eye could record.

The Lance of Longinus hit Lilith at .15 c.

In an instant, everything within one hundred and fifty miles was gone.

There was silence.

—

OPERATION NERVE PINCH COMPLETE
STATUS: SUCCESS
LOCKDOWN CODE OMEGA-ONE RETRACTED.
CODE BLACK HAS BEEN RETRACTED.
WE ARE NOW AT CODE YELLOW.
REPEAT: WE ARE NOW AT CODE YELLOW.
RECONSCRUCTION PROCEDURES ALPHA THROUGH DELTA INITIATED.
SECURE. CONTAIN. PROTECT.

—

Shinji woke up. He was greeted by a hospital ceiling. It wasn't his ceiling, he knew that much. His ceiling was a different color.

He lay there for a long time, not doing anything, not thinking

anything. He just wanted to fade away. Just to be gone. And the world wouldn't let him. His father didn't let him. Misato didn't let him, NERV didn't let him, and now after all that, he still couldn't go. Someone else wouldn't let him.

He just wanted to be alone, that was all. That's all he wanted. No one else cared, so neither did he. Everyone else could just die.

The room was smaller than the one he had been used to, and it was a softer white than the harsh blue-white of NERV's medical bay. There was a little TV on the wall, and a bedside table, and a nice potted plant, and a privacy curtain (pulled back) and a painting of some cats.

After some time, the door to the room opened. A nurse walked in and placed a plastic tray across Shinj's lap-board. There was toast with butter and jam, and some scrambled eggs, a glass of orange juice and a glass of milk.

Shinji didn't touch the food. The toast went cold. The milk went warm. Time passed.

The door opened again. This time a balding man walked into the room. He was wearing a white button up shirt and a pink tie, and holding a clipboard in one hand.

"Good morning, Shinji." His Japanese was stilted and his pronunciation was horrendous. Most likely he was reciting from a machine translation.

Shinji didn't respond.

"Shinji, can you hear me?"

"I speak English," Shinji murmured.

The man smiled. It was a kind smile.

"Oh, well that's good. My name is Dr. Glass. It's nice to meet you." He pulled a chair up next to the hospital bed and sat down.

This is Always a Horrible Idea

“HELLO, HELLO…DR. CAPTOR IS THIS THING ON?”

“ye2, iit’2 on.”

“WHATEVER. A-HEM. WELCOME ALL TO THE FIRST ANNUAL INTER-SESSION FOUNDATION SUMMER BARBEQUE. THE SENIOR STAFF HERE AT TROLL SITE 19 EXTEND A WARM WELCOME TO OUR HUMAN CO-WORKERS… "

“get on wwith it!”

Dr. Vantas shot a glare that could have welded a door shut.

“…EXTEND A WARM WELCOME TO OUR HUMAN CO-WORKERS FROM BETA SESSION SITE 19. WE HOPE THAT THIS PARTNERSHIP BECOMES EVER FRUITFUL IN THE …"

“Yeah, get on with it!” Dr. Bright shouted from the back of the crowd.

“…FRUITFUL IN THE…”

“i could wwrite a better speech wwhile cut in half!”

“…FUTURE…"

“I didn’t hop a universe to listen to you babble! Get to the food!” Bright now had at least three female troll staff surrounding him.

Dr. Vantas said nothing this time. Something snapped behind his yellow eyes. A finger was extended, quivering with rage at the troll with the purple highlight.

“TEN SWEEPS I’VE WORKED WITH THIS DOUCHE. TEN. FUCKING. SWEEPS. SOMEONE, PLEASE TAKE HIM OFF MY HANDS. I WILL PAY YOU.”

There was a short, very awkward silence.

“YOU KNOW WHAT? FUCK IT. ENOUGH WITH THE FUCKING CARDS.” Vantas tossed his stack of index cards to the side. “GO AND STUFF YOUR PROTEIN CHUTES WITH SOME SHITTY GRILLED MEAT PRODUCTS, YOU USELESS BULGELICKING ASSHOLES.”

—

“Comrade, you are built like brick wall. Fine specimen of motherland.” Strelnikov had already downed two roast beef sandwiches and three glasses of vodka. Security Chief Equius paused to look at the already drunk Russian.

“D —> Yes, I am rather…STRONG”

“We test.” Strelnikov rolled up his sleeve and put his elbow on the table. “I am thinking that you may become surprised, my grey comrade.” The troll smiled with broken teeth and sat down across from the agent. He was already sweating.

“D —> Best of three, I presume”

“And a shot for each loss.”

—

“wwhy not”

“Oh, well let’s see here.” Rights counted on her fingers. "One, you’re a gigantic prick. Two, this is the third time you’ve hit on me today, and three, you are, to put it gently, goddamn creepy.”

Dr. Ampora’s lower lip quivered as Rights walked away. Dr. Peixes patted him on the shoulder.

“T)(ere, t)(ere, you'll find someone eventually.”

“nope nope nope nope from this moment on i am done i wwill be forevver alone”

“You’re a reel wuss, you know t)(at?”

—

Gears never wanted anything beyond bread and water. A seat was unnecessary, even. He preferred to stand and watch.

“d0ct0r gears i presume”

He looked to see an android with ram’s horns standing next to him.

“You are correct.”

“im d0ct0r medig0 mark ii”

“Good evening, Dr. Medigo.”

The two stood there without talking for several minutes.

“It appears that you are not partaking in this get-together,” Gears said at last.

“it’s a bit b0ring but its 0kay I guess”

“So it is.”

—

“So that’s what the buckets are for. Very interesting, Doctor Maryam, please, do go on.” Bright smiled.

—

“UGH. THIS HAPPENS EVERY FUCKING TIME.” Dr. Vantas sat down across from Clef.

“Being surrounded by a bunch of assholes who can barely do their job is part of the job,” Clef said, licking sauce off of his fingers.

"PREACH IT, BROTHER.”

“You know, I think we could really make that staff exchange program you mentioned last e-mail work. Hey, Crow, come on, take a seat.”

Crow padded over and hopped up onto the bench. Vantas looked like he was about to say something for a moment, and then thought better of it.

“I was saying how a staff exchange program could work wonders for both of us.”

“If the O5 board would approve it, I’d be the first one on the list.”

“IF THEY DON’T CLEAR IT, I’LL DO IT ANYWAY. ANYTHING TO GET AWAY FROM THESE IDIOTS. JUST MAKE SURE YOUR PEOPLE READ THE GODDAMN FINE PRINT AND KNOW THAT WE DON’T REALLY CARE IF THEY LOSE LIMBS, OR ORGANS, OR LIFE.”

“I’m sure that can be worked out,” Crow said.

“:33 < oh there you are karkitty!”

Vantas’ head hit the table with significant force. Dr. Leijon sat down next to him, bearing a very large, very rare steak on her plate and a cat sleeping on her shoulder.

“I TOLD YOU NOT TO CALL ME THAT AT WORK.” He didn’t lift his head.

“:33 < aw, someone woke up on the wrong side of the recupurracoon this morning.”

Clef and Gears exchanged that glance men have that says “Yup, this guy’s whipped.”

—

There was no cheering over at the bocce game. Or any talking at all, actually.

Agent Yoric, Dr. Nitram, and Dr. Makara were the only remaining players. They all had one ball left. And they were all tied exactly equal to the queen.

The tension could be cut with a spoon.

As Dr. Makara had so eloquently put it, “bOcCe Is sErIoUs MoThErFuCkInG BuSiNeSs, MoThErFuCkEr."

—

“And that’s why we never let 447 touch a dead body.”

“FASCINATING. HAVE YOU EVER CONSIDERED…" The second half of the sentence was drowned out by a massive explosion. Charging through the smoke was a humanoid… thing, with a black carapace, a harlequin hat, wings tentacles, and a sword. It was riding 682. Following close behind was the figure of a troll wearing a bright orange sweatshirt with a sun on it, laughing maniacally. She had lassoed 682 with a length of cable and was now being dragged around on roller skates.

“You’ll never catch me alive, Redglare! Neveeeeeeeer!!!!!!!!” She called out to the picnic area.

“TH4T 1S FL4GR4NTLY 4G41NST PROTOCOL! 1 W1LL H4V3 YOUR 4SS D3MOT3D FOR TH1S, S3RK3T!” Dr. Pyrope leapt up from her table and began to chase the lizard, troll, and Jack off into the distance, waving her cane wildly.

There were some more explosions and collapsing buildings.

“WELL THEN.” Vantas nodded to Clef and Crow. “IF YOU WILL EXCUSE ME FOR A MOMENT, GENTLEMEN.”

He dropped to his knees and screamed, shaking his fists at the moons above. The volume was terrifying.

“VRIIIIIIIISSSSSSKAAAAAAAAAAAAA!”

Incident Report KAF-09

Personnel Involved: Agent S , Agent F

Date: / /

Location: , Austria

Description: Following up on reports of anomalous activity in the area, Agents S and F were dispatched to the town of , Austria. Upon arrival, it became apparent that a local resident (, formerly a traveling salesman) had spontaneously transformed into a large, unidentified organism resembling an insect. The subject has a hard, though not impenetrable exoskeleton and displays anatomical segmentation similar to that of an arthropod. Notably, the subject appears to have retained most of the cognitive capacity and memories of his previous human form. The subject is capable of vocalizing, however his vocalizations have thus far been impossible to translate into recognizable speech; it is theorized the subject no longer possesses the necessary oral and laryngeal structure to produce human speech. An apple is lodged into the dorsal portion of the subjects exoskeleton (upon investigation, determined to be the result of a violent incident with the subject's father), causing it significant ailment. Researchers are working to determine whether or nor the apple can be removed without causing further injury.

The subject's family and several other witnesses have been dosed with class B amnesiacs. The organism is currently under containment, awaiting classification. The mechanism by which its metamorphosis occurred has yet to be determined.

Death and the Doctors Hub

Death is not the greatest of evils: rather, it is to wish to die when one cannot.

Sophocles

> In the beginning, there was death. Then, and forever after. As creation's most ancient of beings, there are very few things the Brothers Death do not entirely understand.
>
> Oddly enough, one such thing are their own creations.
>
> Born from mass grave at a time of plague, the Children of the Barrow forever owe their allegiance to Death, they who gave them life.
>
> Born from conflict and into conflict, the Children of the Barrow seek always to create a world without it. A world where they would no longer be needed.
>
> Born with skill in medicine and healing, the Children of the Barrow name themselves plague doctors, a name fitting for more than one reason. For each plague they cure, another is brought forth from their very existence.
>
> The Children of the Barrow wish only to heal, but the Brothers Death may have other plans for them.
>
> As does life.

Mainline tales (written by Dmatix):

1. Three Short Scenes About Death
2. Therapy
3. Painless
4. Surgery
5. **`Pathology`** *(coming soon)*

- Special thanks to SunnyClockwork for providing the wonderful art for this page

Three Short Scenes About Death

The smell of rot was in the air.

As the afternoon sun began its descent, the footsteps of the approaching stranger fell upon the quiet village streets as poison leeches into an unguarded well. The muddy road never touched his immaculate black boots and the hem of his long robe was as clean as a starless night as he made his way towards his destination. The small hill that overlooked the village and the cottage that stood on its top were his goal.

At the foot of the hill crouched an elderly hound. His eyes were clouded and the hairs on his muzzle were white, but still he rose to greet the stranger, his long tail wagging back and forth furiously. The stranger stopped and reached a gloved hand to pet the old dog's head, his fingers gently scratching behind the hound's ears, causing it to whimper happily. The old dog rolled on his back, and the stranger gave his belly similar attention. The hound yelped like a young pup at that. The stranger laughed, and if anyone else was there to hear it, they'd likely have noted how unlikely it was to hear that sound coming from that cold, pale face.

From the hill above came a wail. A young woman came rushing out of the cottage, her face ruddy with tears. An older man came after her, visage drawn with pain, to gently lay a hand on her shoulder. The woman turned to him and buried her face in his shoulder, weeping loudly. The older man combed his fingers through her hair, obviously holding back tears of his own. At the bottom of the hill the hound looked up worriedly, but the attentions of the stranger soon swayed it back into complacency. As for the stranger himself, he observed the scene impassively, cold silvery eyes passing over woman and man and cottage as if all of those were less than the dried leaves that covered the surrounding countryside. He made no hails, nor did he move to ascend to the top of the hill.

Some time later, a third man emerged from the cottage. His outfit

was that of a country physician, though his pale Ibis-bird mask belied this impression. He spoke briefly to the older man, nodded to the young woman, then returned inside. Moments later he emerged once more, this time carrying a large bundle in both hands. Seeing it, the woman wailed again, running back into the cottage and slamming the door behind her. The older man shook his head, said something to the physician, and the two shook hands. The older man followed the woman inside, while the physician, bundle in hands, began to make his way down from the hill and onto the muddy road below. While all this occurred, the stranger never lifted his eyes from the hound, who was now dozing in the sun next to his feet. Long fingers kneaded the hound's hindquarters, where an old hunting wound left a large scar.

As the physician stepped unto the road his eyes fell upon the stranger. He stopped mid-step, bundle clutched tightly in his hands.

"She is not for you, Youngest. A deal was made."

The stranger gave the hound one last pat and turned to face the physician. Eyes like frosted glass measured the masked man.

"A deal? I recall no such thing, Diagnostician."

The physician grasped the bundle more tightly yet. "You gave us leave, damn you! You gave us leave!"

The stranger cackled, this sound lacking all the joy of his earlier laugh. He straightened, and in his full height he loomed over the physician like an oak over a stalk of grass. "Be wary of making assumptions, insect. Remember your place. Remember by whose power your rotten form remains on this earth."

The physician looked up defiantly for a moment, than all resistance seemed to leave him. Something within him crumpled, and he dropped his bundle to the earth.

"Have her then. You always get yours in the end, don't you?"

The stranger laughed once more, and a silvery harvest sickle appeared from the folds of his dark robe. He raised the instrument to

the air and the physician closed his eyes, unable to watch. The very air was parted in two as the sickle descended to the ground… to hover above the head of the old hound, whose labored breathing slowed… then stopped. A silvery thread unwound itself from the elderly dog and curled around the sickle like early morning fog, and the air was momentarily filled with the sound of the proud braying of a hound in his full glory, filled with the thrill of the hunt.

The physician stared as the stranger stashed the sickle back in his robes and turned to leave.

"The hound… you came all this way for a dog?"

The stranger half-turned and looked up to the early autumn sky, towards the slowly setting sun.

"I have told not to make assumptions, did I not?"

The physician didn't know what to say. So he said nothing. He bent down to pick his fallen bundle. As he rose again, the stranger was gone, leaving only the scent of rotting snow and dead leaves behind him. And a comment.

"I happen to like dogs."

One, sniper.

The warrior gaped at his own shattered corpse. His face, adorned with the newly formed beard he had been so proud about, now sported a rather ugly hole dead in its center. His brothers in arms didn't even stop to arrange his body in a more dignified pose, so it remained splayed on the dirt where it fell, its one remaining eye staring blindly at the desert sky.

This can't be happening…

An explosion in the distance. Screams.

Seven. Improvised demolition charge. Total eight.

Flies were already beginning to gather around the warrior's body.

Tiny insects buzzed around spilled brain matter, relishing the unexpected feast. The warrior, horrified, tried to wave them away but they did not appear to notice him. It was almost as if he was not there at all. As if that body was all that was left of him. But that clearly wasn't true, was it? He was here!

This wasn't what was promised…

To his horror, the warrior found that he no longer felt anything when he looked at the meat that was formerly him. He made no further move to swat away the flies that began buzzing about the ruin of his face, nor did he scream when a battered SUV crushed it carelessly below its wheels as it rushed away from the battlefield, carrying wounded that appeared to be in little better shape than his corpse.

Twenty five, series of anti-tank missile attacks. Total-thirty three.

The warrior now became aware of the droning, somehow metallic voice. But where did it come from, where-

Forty-three, ambush, small arms fire. Total seventy-six.

And there it was, towering directly above the warrior as if it was always there. A gargantuan armored shape that eclipsed the sun, a behemoth comprised of broken arms and shattered walls. War personified. Terror incarnate. Pain and desolation made manifest.

One hundred forty-four. Air strike. Total two hundred and ten. Greetings, warrior.

The atrocity's voice scarcely seemed like it could come from such a monstrous figure. It was smooth, calm and cultured, the voice of an elder preacher or a respectable general. The warrior found himself strangely drawn to it even as the creature's appearance repulsed and terrified him. Stuck between fleeing the creature and approaching it, the warrior stood his ground, staring at it with undisguised trepidation.

One. Sudden heart failure. Hrm. Total two hundred and eleven. You seem oddly yourself, warrior. Awareness lingers in you yet. Unusual.

When the warrior made no reply, the creature continued, eyes like

massive laser sights burrowing into the warrior like a trench shovel.

Come now, you needn't fear me. There is very little left to fear, really.

"I… what is happening to me."

Something in the creature's rough features moved. The warrior could almost imagine it was grinning. *Why, the inevitable, of course. You are done.*

"But… this isn't how things were supposed to go. This wasn't supposed to happen!"

Hrhmhmm. This was the only thing that was ever supposed to happen to you.

The warrior found himself screaming. "Do not mock me! I wasn't promised this! There was to be glory, and justice, and the reformation of proper order, I was-"

Twenty. Trap hole. Total two hundred and thirty-one. And who, warrior, made such promises to you?

"The prophets! The scripture! My mother and father, the preachers, my teachers and friends!"

Hah. There is your problem then. Unreliable sources. Such a shame. But not really. Hrmmhahhm.

The warrior's screams now bore the distinct edge of panic. "Silence! I do not believe you, it is not over! It is a test, yes, a simple test, that is all! You are a demon sent to torment me, to try my faith! But I will not let you, no no no, I will not-"

The warrior voice faltered as the massive figure turned away from him. Around them, the sounds of battle began to weaken and dwindle, and the world was losing something of its… color. The sun was setting, the warrior thought, though he did not dare look at it to find out of it was true. He feared he would find the sky empty.

Are you quite done, warrior? For I am. The others are all collected. It

is time to go.

And indeed, the warrior was suddenly surrounded by his life-long fellows. And his generations-old enemies. None seem to pay any attention to him as they strode towards the creature with unfaltering unity, marching to the beat of a drum the warrior could only barely hear.

"Where… where are we going?"

The figure turned to him once more. Its mangled iron expression was impenetrable.

Elsewhere, warrior. To a place where you will be a warrior no more. Follow. Or not. It is all the same to me.

The figure was marching away, the warrior's former fellows forming a snaking troop behind it.

What could he do but follow?

Jeser, the Prince of Many Faces, was sweating profusely.

He despised everything about his current situation. He despised the massive, tasteless hall his master chose as his throne room. He despised the horrendously uncomfortable iron chair he was forced to sit on. He despised the way the air managed to somehow feel both too humid and too dry, too hot and too frosty. He despised the pathetic simpering noises his master's consorts and concubines made with each cruel pull of the chains the master held in his massive, gnarled fists. He despised the fact that it was not his hands to hold the chains.

Most of all, he despised his master.

The all-powerful Crimson Monarch. The Prince of Many Faces was a proud god. Once the ruler of two dozen worlds, his to dominate and to do all he desired with. Then came the Crimson Monarch, and then came his countless legions. His worlds were conquered.

This was not the reason he so hated his master.

The Prince was wiser than many of his fellows. He realized from the start that no good would come from resisting such power. So he relented, made the conquest easy and relatively bloodless. And he had made himself useful, very useful indeed. With time, he rose to a position unrivaled by any god in the Monarch's court. Though he lost his dozen worlds, hundreds were now open to him. Though his power was no longer absolute, as the Monarch's right hand man he could have any pleasure he desired, and could inflict any sort of pain on any being he wished. The Crimson Monarch could be a generous lord.

And yet, the Prince of Many Faces despised his master. For forcing him to be here today.

"He will be here soon."

His master's voice was like the chittering of a billion infinitesimal insects, shifting and swirling and constantly moving. It was neither high nor low nor cacophonous nor methodical. It simply was.

"Are you certain, my king? He might not come this year." The Prince offered weakly.

"He comes always. He shall be here."

"Your might grows with each passing moment, great one. Surely, even he has learned to fear you by now. He would be a fool not to."

His master made no reply to that. His massive form dominated the hall, dwarfing the Prince's own usually imposing figure into insignificance. And yet, the usual all-conquering arrogance was gone from the master's voice. To be replaced with something… different. The Prince did not dare contemplate what that something was. Such thoughts were high treason.

They continued to wait. With each passing minute, the Prince watched his master and could feel own his dread intensifying. Why did the Monarch insist he'd be here? What possible purpose was there to subject him to such… has he not been loyal, or at least as loyal as the likes of him were expected to be? Had he not-

A shadow fell on the pale giant-bone floor of the great hall. The Prince saw his master shift restlessly in his throne, gnarled chitinous hands gripping slave chains tighter and tighter. The naked men, women and others at the other end twisted in agony, but the Monarch paid them no heed. His gaze was focused only on the shifting shadow, which grew longer with each passing moment. Then-

Insect.

The Prince instinctively recoiled in his seat. Where there was only shadow moments earlier stood a figure. Its legs were as wide and tall as men, as great trees, as towers. Its hands were gloved in silk, in mail, in empty vacuum. It wore a robe of purest ivory, of deepest azure, of dusky flesh. Its shoulder were shrouded in mist, somehow disappearing into the darkness of the hall's ceiling, though clearly it could not be that tall…

"All-Death. You come once more."

The Prince had to grudgingly admire the calmness in his master's voice. He did not think he could muster the same. The Crimson Monarch rose from his throne, his magnificent and terrifying figure unfolding into its full glory. The Prince was surprised to see how unimpressive it suddenly appeared.

It is the day. Today, Harak, son of the Third Brood, is the day of your birth.

The Monarch's true name. He dared speak it. So the rumors were true. For a moment, the Monarch's visage was lit with fury. Then he mastered himself, and spoke once more, calmly.

"Today, All-Death, is the day of my birth. Today is the day I began my ascension."

The day of your birth. The day you took your first victims. Your brood brothers still scream for you in my halls.

"They shall scream far more loudly when your halls are mine. I shall make sure of it."

For the mist-shrouded ceiling came an awful sound. Merry laughter, as light and guileless as a child's, filled with joy.

Ah, earthworm. You burrow in your dirt, you eat the other tiny creatures that live in it and think yourself the master of all creation.

His master visibly bristled at that. With a sudden yank, he pulled at his slave chains savagely, bringing one of his screaming consorts to his feet. The Monarch grabbed the helpless man with one enormous fist and effortlessly smashed his throat. The man had no time to scream.

"Earthworm, you say? How droll. See how easily I master your domain. See with what grace I deliver more and many into your dank halls."

For a time, the figure did not move. The master dropped the consort's lifeless body to the floor, where he was gathered by his weeping fellows. The Prince said nothing, looked at nothing. He only wished to be away from here, back at his games, back at-

Indeed. Harak, son of the Third Brood. No other has delivered so many into my halls. Such I shall give you. You have filled them to the bursting.

His master seemed to straighten at that, as if the All-Death was his own master and he but an apprentice, awaiting praise. It was an odd sight.

Consider this, when the day comes you to join them. For me to take you to them.

And just as fast, his master deflated, all strength seemingly leaving his body. The Prince has never before seen him thus.

This is my gift to you, on the day of your birth, insect. I bid you contemplate on it. Until next year.

And the figure was gone. The Prince gaped at the empty space it was in only moments ago, and then at his master, who sunk back to his throne like a dying man. He was actually shivering, by creation!

Why did he want the Prince to witness all of this? What was the point of it all?

The Crimson Monarch let out a soft breath, and turned his gaze to the Prince.

"I did it so you remember. Conspire against me, and all shall be yours. My worlds, my servants, my power. The fear of all creation. Dominion over all."

"And this."

Hub

Therapy

The tip of the knife was plunged into his ear.

It was an odd sensation. Sure, there was pain, incredible, exquisite agony, but that stopped at the surface of things. Below was the sensation of cool steel severing skin and sinew, and the sudden warmness of leaking blood stood at such sharp contrast to the metal. Below even that was the deeper understanding that a vital part of him was being destroyed, that he was somehow forever… compromised. Never to be whole again.

All these feelings. All these stark impressions. He couldn't help but find them fascinating, even as he wreathed and squirmed against his bonds.

"Do you see what I meant now? Do you understand?"

The stranger loomed above him, her masked face half hidden in shadows. The long beak of her mask hovered slightly above his forehead, threatening to poke out his eye if she leaned any closer.

"Gah!"

The stranger raised a gloved hand to her chin and rubbed it thoughtfully. "Not quiet yet, I see. Not to worry, we'll get there yet. Hold steady now."

With that, she plunged a second blade into his other ear. This one was serrated, and he could feel each of its each teeth massaging his auditory canal as it slid towards his eardrum. Again there was pain, and again he could sense something beneath it. Something… else. A lesson?

As he considered this, he screamed some more. Some things could simply not be avoided.

"Do you see now? Do you understand now?" There was a hint of imploring in the stranger's voice, the very slightest tremor in her voice.

"The pain..!"

"Yes! Yes, the pain! What does it tell you, beloved? What does it mean to you?"

He could feel hot tears streaming down his lacerated cheeks. Those had endured the woman's treatment earlier. The salt stung as wetness dripped over barely scabbed wounds.

"Tears! No no no, not tears! This teaches us nothing! This means nothing! Completely within established parameters, utterly normal! No cure, no cure!" The woman was now pacing around the dim chamber, obviously vastly irritated. He wished he could help her, wished he could take the hurt from her voice. But all he could do was to bemoan his own. It was shameful.

"We were so close! So close! All of this, all of it for nothing!"

With that, the woman returned to the chair he was tied to and carefully drew out both blades from his ears. He was surprised he could still hear her with all of the damage. His vision was dimming as pain threaten to overwhelm his senses utterly.

"You sleep now. We'll continue tomorrow. Knives obviously inefficient, should've known, should've known. Too hung up on traditions, was not thinking clearly. My fault, my fault. You sleep now."

Darkness swallowed him, and relief from the pain. Why did he find it so… disappointing?

He did not know.

> Session Note #1213-A-55
>
> Today's experiments have been an utter failure. Beginning to fear I am losing my touch, and perhaps more than that. Must retain grip on what I am. Believed

> old ways will reinforce this, was mistaken. Must attempt something new tomorrow, must advance, not retreat. Must not become like Surgeon. To lose identity and meaning, to find enjoyment in what should only be necessity. It is good that they have taken him, locked him up like the animal he now is. Lost all awareness of what he is doing and why, believes he has succeeded without understanding in what. "He is the cure", Hah! His conduct shames us all. To dabble with the dead… no, must not think of this further. Only the work matters, yes, only my labor.
>
> Must not forget this lesson, yes. Tomorrow shall be something new. This one will be cured.

"Wake up, wake up! Time to try again now."

Cold water splashed against his face, and he awoke with a startled gasp.

"Yesterday was a failure. My fault. Something different now, different. Hold still."

The masked woman was there again, holding some sort of vice in her gloved hands. He did not struggle as she inserted his head into it. He was strangely giddy, almost excited. He did not know why.

"Good, good. Improvement, no squirming. Very proud. Open mouth now."

He did, felt her inserting something into it. He could not see what it was, but he felt it slide down his throat. It was dry and chalky, almost like a big pill.

He could feel something was wrong right away. His eyes began to burn and tear, his skin was itching terribly, but the very worst of it was his throat and stomach. They felt as dry as ancient bone, as if they have never sensed the touch of water. He tried to scream, but his vocal cords were like dried leather straps, unresponsive and useless.

"Dehumidifying, new technique. Very modern, very modern." She was leaning close to him again, peering closely into rapidly drying eyeballs. "What do you feel?"

"Nngh, frngh!"

"No, no talk. Not important, I can see myself. Focus on sensation, see through it, see below it. Focus."

He tried. This pain was nothing like what he experienced yesterday, nor any of the countless days before it. Though the pain the blades inflicted was a layered thing, it simply could not compare. This agony rang in every cell of his body, the desperate need for moisture radiating like the sun's heat through every tissue. He could imagine individual cells drying out and dying, could almost smell his skin dissolving into coarse powder. Such sensations!

"Excellent! You are close now, very close now!"

Yes, she was right! He have never experienced such a thing before! His awareness of his own body increased to level he has never even imagined possible. Everything was pain, and he was everything! The world itself was crumbling around him, reality torn away and mulched and refined. All of existence shared his agony at this very moment, and so he was one with it, one with all. The world was his! All of it was worth it, all of it was worth it! Just like he was promised, like-

His body collapsed on itself. With no moisture at all left in it, he crumbled into a pile of desiccated skin and empty, crumbling organs. His last impression was that of the masked woman reached for him in dismay, desperately trying to stabilize his dying form. He tried to reach for her, to tell her that everything was alright. To thank her for all she did for him. But his mouth no longer worked, and his tongue was a black, shriveled thing in it. It was too late for that. He was going away now. The world was drifting away from him, all sensation and pain leaving with it. He hated to see it go.

As he died, his only regret was that he was never able to tell her what she did for him.

Session Note #1213-A-56

Lost patient 1213 today. Unfortunate side-effect of new therapy, could not be avoided. Prior to death, patient showed promising signs of deepened understanding, though the rapid degeneration of his speech capabilities prevents me from making a more accurate assessment. New dehumidifying treatment possess necessary depth of sensation, but may prove too rapidly lethal to be viable. Must attempt again with next patient, this time without attempting the knives first. Possibly weakened patient 1213 too much prior to last experiment. Must learn to avoid old habits, attempted knives too many times, inefficient. Must learn to control more primal urges, that is the way to madness. Must not become like Surgeon, must not go too far away, must not believe in my own righteousness. Retain purpose.

Still, today was progress, must not regret progress. Patient 1213 showed advanced signs of positive mental assimilation towards end of treatment, another positive sign. All effort goes towards the cure. Through pain, understanding. Through understanding, peace. Through peace, healing and enlightenment. I must always remember what I am, and why I am here for. Do not let guilt consume me. Do not become like Surgeon and find relish in my work. Work only for understanding, peace, healing, enlightenment. Remember that I am Therapist.

Remember that I must make them become the cure.

Hub

Painless

"So you can cure me?"

The doctor rubbed his forehead then rearranged his heavy plastic spectacles. They were supposed to compensate for his missing mask, but he found that all they really did was remind him of its absence.

"I'm sorry, perhaps I did not explain myself correctly. As I said before, I cannot cure you, of pain or of anything else."

"But…"

The woman sitting on the other side of his desk was in a pitiful state. Her skin, which might have once been a healthy light brown, was now pale and sallow, hanging loosely over protruding bones. Her dark eyes were clouded with pain of many different varieties. She set slumped in the comfortable armchair the doctor reserved for his patients, as if trying to appear smaller than she really was. Despite its being a hot summer day, she wore a heavy, long-sleeved blouse. The doctor didn't need to roll up those sleeves to tell why.

"That does not mean I can't do anything to help you. I do require, however, that you understand the nature of the treatment you will receive."

"Um… okay?"

They never understood when he first explained it to them. The doctor did not blame them, for he wasn't truly sure he understood himself.

"Pain… is chronic. Not just yours, but everyone's. It is a symptom of human existence, something all must endure simply because they are."

He could tell he wasn't getting through to her. Her eyes were darting around his small office, noticeably lingering on the high shelves containing his medical supplies. A glint of desire sparked in the woman's otherwise dead eyes. She was barely paying attention to him at all now. He sighed and pressed on regardless.

"Humanity exists in a constant state of conflict. Nation against nation, religion against religion, person against person. It has always been thus, and always will be. Not only that, we are at a constant struggle with ourselves. 'Am I good enough? 'Is this the way I should be?' 'Why does my body look this way?' 'Why must I always suffer?'. As long as we live, we can never be at peace. It is antithetical to our very nature."

"Uh huh… I think I get it, yeah."

"I'm telling you all of this because you must understand what my treatment entails. I will have no unwilling or uninformed patients. I have seen where that leads."

And he had. Stark images sparked to life in his mind, livid with shame. A brother, dissecting and making puppets of dead and living alike. A sister, delivering pain and calling it healing. Another who… no.

He will not be like them.

"I will not cure you. Do not for a second imagine that I will. What I can do, however, is put your pain to sleep."

For the first time, he had her full attention.

"You… you can do that?"

"It is about the only thing I can do for you. I can take your pain, and bury it within you. I will take every possible cause for it- past, present and future, and I will suffocate them. They will still be there, but you will no longer have any capacity to sense them."

"I won't feel anything?"

He could sense the hesitation in her voice. Good. Perhaps he could

persuade her to forgo this yet.

"You will feel nothing, and I mean this in the very broadest of terms. The treatment must be most comprehensive if it is to be successful. To bury pain, I must also bury everything else that is… you. Permanently."

Something filled the woman's dark, empty eyes, and for a moment the doctor believed he had succeeded in turning her away. But then he realized that it wasn't fear he saw there. It was surrender.

"Do it."

"Are you quite certain? I am not sure you fully understan-"

"I understand. I said do it."

In face of such determination, what else could he do?

The woman laid strapped to the bed in his operating theater, the filthy rags she came into his office with replaced with clean medical scrubs. The chamber was bright and as clean as the scrubs, and empty but for the doctor and his patient.

"Are you sure the straps are necessary?" she asked.

"Quite certain, I am afraid. Even if you are willing, your body may attempt to reject what I am about to do to you. If it resists me, it may compromise the procedure. I must have no interruptions."

"Okay. Are you going to start then?"

"I shall. I need only my tools."

With that, the doctor left the woman's side and strode to the large cabinet at the other side of the room. From its top shelf he took a long plastic tray, which he began to fill. First came a series of delicate steel scalpels, arranged by decreasing size. After them were twice as many syringes, the smallest the size of the doctor's fingernail, the largest as long as his index finger. The liquids within them were of the doctor's own making, and precious beyond measure. Last came an electrical device, a small metal sphere

connected to a number of electrodes. With the tray held in both hands, he returned to the woman.

"Are you prepared to begin then? It is not too late to change your mind."

"I told you before, I'm ready. This is what I want."

"Very well. Applying preliminary anesthetic agent… now."

Said agent was an ordinary one, meant only to numb the senses. The woman's breath grew shallow as she drifted into gentle unconsciousness. She almost seemed peaceful for a moment, until the doctor took a closer look at her lined face. There were far too many marks on it for a person so young. For a moment, he wished he had his brother to tell him what each of them meant. This was always the Diagnostician's specialization, not his. But his brother was long gone, vanished into parts unknown. His own knowledge would have to do.

Where to begin…

The doctor passed a gloved finger over the woman's forehead. The long line there seemed older than most of the others, and more pronounced. He closed his eyes for a moment. A memory line. Yes, those would be a reasonable place to begin. He will move chronologically. The doctor took one of his smaller syringes and gently used it to pierce the woman's skin near the line. Almost immediately it began to shimmer in a faint blueish hue.

"Application successful. Proceeding to erase," he said to no one.

With that, he drew the second largest of his scalpels and carefully began to cut a line surrounding the line. As he did so, he could sense the residue of the memory which made this mark. Loud screaming, smashing glass, the sound of a child weeping, a terribly pronounced sting of pain followed by a longer, duller ache that never seemed to go away. The doctor felt no remorse at all as he buried the woman's parents forever, sentencing her memories of them to the deepest, darkest refuse pile her mind possessed.

The twin lines at the sides of her mouth were a more ambiguous prospect. Two people were hidden in them, similar and not at the same time. One was tall, fair, charming. He moved with the confident grace of a fencer and his eyes were the steel of his weapon. There was love of sorts there, somewhere, but as his scalpel did its work the doctor could sense its corruption. It was a fleeting thing, and terribly one-sided. Its mark was erased.

The line on the other side of the mouth belonged to a man as well. Or rather, to the prospect of a man. For a moment the doctor could almost imagine he saw the woman's belly swell, could hear the heartbeats of a child within. But no. It never did happen. The man's last memento died before it was born, and with it died something in the woman too. She had buried it, alone, telling no one. So too did the doctor bury it now.

The hours passed, and so did the memories. One by one the doctor buried them away, erasing the marks of a lifetime from the woman's face, if not from her soul. Her haggard visage seemed almost peaceful now. Almost young. The doctor was momentarily temped to leave things at that. She had a chance at a new life now, free from the scars of a past she did not deserve. He could leave things at that.

But not with a clean conscience. Cleansed of her past she might be, but she was still human. All the future held for her were more scars, more of the same. He had to go further. All the way.

With a sigh, the doctor drew the second largest of his syringes. He had worked hard and sacrificed much to obtain the gently bubbling liquid it held. While it was still in its syringe it was clear as water, but when the doctor injected it into the back of the woman's neck, the skin surrounding it turned as black as tar. This stain began to rapidly spread, to prepare her for what the doctor knew had to be done.

Scalpels in hand, he began removing her identity.

He began with what he deemed simplest, or at least, with what the woman had the least of. Ideology and faith went first. With some of his patients, the process of removing such things could be an arduous and time consuming affair, but it appeared the sort of life

the woman had led left her very little time to worry about them. To banish them was a trifling victory. With those also went what passed for an education, her malnourished sense of curiosity, and the long-desiccated corpse of her aspirations.

The doctor couldn't help but note the lack of resistance on the woman's part. This was not unheard of, but it was a rarity. Her life must truly have been… no. He would consider this no further. If anything, this was confirmation he was doing the right thing.

He persevered, moving more difficult things. He could not remove her intellect entirely, for she would need some to continue to function, but he removed as much as he would dare. He knew its burden too well not to. Hers was a sharp thing, even as abused as it was, and the doctor had to be very careful in his cutting. Following that came other parts of her identity- her taste in food and fashion, the scents she enjoyed and those she despised, her secret love of classical music, her odd patriotism and her unexplained hatred of the color green. As the cuts went deeper, so did the things he removed. Her gender identity, her sexual preferences, her perception of morality. More hours of labor and a dozen empty syringes later, and nothing was left from what was once the woman's inner world. She was a blank slate now, only as human as her body made her.

That too needed fixing. At one point, the doctor deemed what came before sufficient to the prevention of all future pain. He had learned differently, however. People did not need to know anything about a person's inner world to hate them. To hurt them. For her to be truly free, the last step of the procedure had to be completed. The doctor removed the small electrical device from the plastic tray and connected its electrodes to the woman's thin arms.

He then began erasing her body.

The device hummed as he drew away the color in her skin, in her hair, in her eyes. The humming intensified as he drew out the shape of her nose, of her legs, of her hair. Bones crunched and twisted as he standardized her height and weight and shape to what he deemed least intrusive (he had yet to perfect this part of the procedure), and finally he rearranged her insides as well, removing

those organs that might mark her as belonging to one sex or the other. The machine hummed and buzzed as he took away everything she once was and any potential she might have had. As he removed her humanity, bit by bit by bit.

When he was done, he woke it up. The creature which now rose from the surgical bed was of a height with the doctor. Its skin was a vaguely shiny grey, its eyes the same. Its body was all straight lines and right angles, as precise as if measured by a ruler. Its mouth was a thin line, which opened as the creature quizzically viewed its surrounding, then the doctor.

"Hello."

"How do you feel?"

"You…?"

The doctor resisted the urge to pull his hair. "You. The entity you perceive yourself to be."

"I… I…"

"Yes, you. You are you." They often needed this explanation following the process. An unfortunate side-effect.

"I… feel nothing. I… am nothing."

"Yes."

"I… feel no pain."

"No."

"I… am cured."

Damnation. Damnation! Not this again!

"You are not cured! I have simply buried your pain, don't you understand?"

"I am cured. You have cured me."

"No, you imbecile creature, no! I did nothing, nothing!"

"You have cured me. You are the cure. You are the cure."

The same litany. After every single procedure they always said the same thing. It was intolerable, it was inexcusable.

"No… no!"

"You are the cure, doctor."

"NO!" screamed the Anesthesiologist, as the creature who was once a woman tried to embrace him. "NO!"

"Thank you."

A scream died in his throat. Suddenly powerless, he allowed the creature to wrap its arm around him. They were cold.

"I am not the cure. There is no cure. I am but a humble physician."

Hub

Surgery

How long has it been since he had flesh under his fingers?

Too long, that much was certain. This cell was small, too small by far. He did not much mind being alone, that was not the issue. He had long since pulled out from himself those parts which required company. No, what bothered him was that he had nothing at all to do. His jailers would come and speak to him from time to time, certainly, but if he ever even suggested that he may improve them by means of his craft, they'd get all in a huff and leave. Silly, ignorant creatures, all of them. But what else could be expected of them? Truly, it was not their fault. They were simply very ill. A shame they would not let him cure them.

Well, there wasn't much he could do about it at the moment. Might as well return to his work. He laid down on his narrow bunk and covered himself with his robe. He was especially proud of the robe. His jailers asked about it multiple times, but whenever he tried to explain it to them, he could tell they didn't believe him. What was so odd about a robe grafted from your own skin? Wasn't that what skin was for in the first place? But all they did was moan and complain about how it wasn't possible, how no one could remove so much skin from himself and still live, that no one even had that much skin in the first place. Showed what they knew. Was he not a professional? It was so difficult getting people to show the proper respect nowadays.

His mind was wandering again. What was he doing? Ah, yes.

With long, well-trained fingers he began digging into his abdomen. The flesh there was yielding, properly porous, neatly organized. Now, where did he leave his bone saw? Oh yes, the liver cavity. Reach about over there and… ah, there it was. Hrm, the thing was getting dull, and he had no idea where he was going to get a new one. Never mind that for now, he reminded himself. Next, the scalpels. The long ones were stashed within the bones of his pelvis,

and he had a devil of a time getting them out of there. He really needed to find a better place for them, but his body only had so much room, and any size-increasing modification were bound to be too easily noticed in his current surrounding. Perhaps a second cranial compartment? Something to consider after he was finished with this procedure.

He was forgetting something, he was certain of that. But what was it?

He dug out his dwindling supply of adhesives from within his left eye socket. This required the temporary removal of the eye, which did not make the task any easier. Still, when it was done, he had all he required to continue. Spreading his robe more evenly on his body and positioning the hem of it to support his neck, he began the operation proper.

This one was going to be difficult. In order to reach that part of his brain that he wished to remove today, he'd have to bypass some rather essential segments. Failure to do so may result in severe harm to his memory, which would obviously be catastrophic, considering he had no access to his old fallback brain anymore. Not that he would switch to that one anyway- he had modified this new one over a period of at least three decades, and he was not about to let all that work go to waste. No, he would simply need to be very careful, and that was all there was to it.

"When it comes to a lady whose merit is not sound, but who makes you sniff and bray like a hound…" he hummed to himself as he used the bone saw to slowly remove the top of his skull. He wasn't quite sure where he learned that little ditty, but it soothed him. He hummed on as he laid the saw to the side and brushed off the bone dust from his shoulders.

"Kindness and beauty will do you no good…" He reached for his long scalpel and maneuvered it around to that part of his brain he hated.

"It will not matter if you're polite or rude…" Carefully, he dislodged it from the surrounding brain matter, hoping that his incisions were precise enough. It would be good to have a mirror.

"If success is what you wish, and to gain good health…" He finished with the scalpel and grabbed his tweezers, which he previously retrieved from a pocket of empty flesh around his ankles.

"All you need to show her is a good bit of wealth!" A righteous pluck, and he was done. He stopped himself for a moment. What did he feel?

He considered the notion of color. Did he have any preference? He remembered he was always oddly fond of yellow, and despised orange with all of his heart. Strange, was it not? The two were so very similar to one another, after all. There was no sense in it, none at all. He remembered the day he finally found his solution. When he finally realized the source of his problems, of all of their problems. This senseless preference, and all that was similar to them… those were the key. So, did he still like yellow?

"Yellow… yellow… I…"

"I don't care about yellow! Aha…ahahaha!"

Capital! He had done it! It was gone! Another wretched part of him cleansed, another remnant of the life he once possessed removed for all time! He was about to rise and perform a merry jig, but then remembered the top half of his skull was still missing, and reconsidered. He carefully replaced it and applied the remnants of his adhesives to it, making sure to also reapply it to the seams that firmly attached his mask to his face. It would not do for it to come off. Not ever.

Do not get distracted, he reminded himself. Gathering his wits, he sat down and considered the new composition of his brain. What new insights did the removal of the offending sentiment allow him? First, he should revise the conclusion he had already reached, to figure out if those were still sound. Yes…

So, what did he know about life?

That it needed curing. This was his first conclusion, the foundation of all that came after, and it remained as solid as ever. His siblings, fools that they were, thought him mad for this realization. They were

created to preserve life, they claimed. But they were wrong. He knew the truth. He figured it out all by himself. Hehehe.

Life was a burden on those who carried its loathsome spark upon their souls. A bundle of contradicting impulses, cruel desires and nonsensical emotions. Life was an ever-multiplying beast, and in his profession, such creatures had only one name. A surgeon he was, *the* Surgeon he was, and he was the one to figure out what life was, what it was really all about.

It was so obvious, he thought as he caressed the skin grafts that connected his face to his long-beaked mask with slim, delicate fingers. Life was a cancer. Life murdered the soul.

It was his responsibility, as a medical professional and a moral being, to excise it.

He remembered his first operation of the type. His patients screamed and moaned, for the Anesthesiologist was not there to assist him, as he cured them from their mortal coil. The suffering was lamentable, but necessary, for once they died, their true soul was revealed. This was what made him confident of the righteousness of his cause. Once they rose again, cured and whole, all they desired was to help their fellows reach the same… enlightenment. The soul, he found, not only desired death for itself, but for the world as well.

To see the dead emancipate the living… that made it all worth it. All the mockery, all the hatred and loathing, all his solitude.

He was the c-

He was not alone anymore. Two figures stood in his bare cell, staring down at him where he laid. The first was tall, gaunt, dark and pale. He knew him well.

"Lord."

"Surgeon. It has been too long."

The Surgeon did not understand. "Too long? We are never apart, Lord. I am the instrument of your will. I am with you always."

His lord said nothing, only smiled. The Surgeon turned his gaze to the other figure, a short, stooped man who refused to look at him directly. Even without his mask, the Surgeon knew who he was.

"Brother Diagnostician."

"You are no brother of mine, beast." The man turned to his lord. "Let's get this over with."

His lord nodded, then turned to the Surgeon once more. "I have a task for you, most loyal servant. Your expertise is required."

"What… what do you desire, Lord? What can I do for one so mighty?"

The Small Death grinned, showing teeth like a row of tombstones.

"Why, dear Surgeon, I have a world for you to cure."

Hub

December 24th, 2011 Hub

14th Annual Site-1

Christmas Eve

Hosted by: *Researc*

NOTE: Due to the events that transpired during last y
visiting the Keter wing. This isn't optimal, but we're sup
Christmas tears. - *J*

= *Song L*

Pg. 1 - We Wish You A I

~By Dr. Gera

Pg. 2 - I Saw Mommy Ki

~By Researcher

Pg. 4 - Navarro Save

~By ***TwistedG***

Pg. 5 - SCP-682 Roasting

~By Agent Sm

Pg. 6 - Set Up Thine

~By ***FortuneFavo***

Pg. 7 - Deck The Halls With

~By Dr. Jecte

Pg. 8 - No One Shou

~By ***Jacob Con***

Pg. 9 - Oh Holy

~By Dr. Brigh

Pg. 10 - I Hope That I Get

~By ***Roget***

Pg. 12 - The Lost

~By ***Crayn***

Pg. 13 - The Nor

~By ***Doctor Cim***

Pg. 15 - Too Drunk

~By ***LurkD***

Pg. 16 - *Die Hard* M

~By Agent McC

Pg. 18 - Reconc

~By ***djkakt***

Navarro Saves Christmas

Lackluster lights twinkled within one of Site 19's various staff lounges. They were a dull affair, nothing but a sequence of blinking yellow lights strung up around the edges of the ceiling. A single, tiny tree sat upon the counter in all of its rubber glory. Which was to say very little glory at all. Researchers and security staff lounged, as people were wont to do in lounges, and despite the fact it was Christmas Eve that was all they were doing.

The Foundation was not particularly keen on holidays, simply because they often meant personnel wanted time off. It didn't help that the holiday involved a possibly deity that may have suffered a severe case of being murdered some decades ago, if their 'friends' at the Global Occult Coalition were to be believed. Which, considering their inability to break something as simple as a chair, was unlikely. But this particular holiday brought about a certain cheer in many of the personnel. And so, for morale, the Foundation had dispensed trifling amounts of holiday cheer throughout their facilities. Not enough to really liven up the place, and the personnel still had their respective responsibilities to tend to, but enough that they didn't feel the need to complain much.

This did not sit well with one Daniel Navarro, Foundation field agent and anomalous art specialist, so he took it upon himself to remedy his peers' situation of poor holiday funding. With a fake beard strapped to his coarse chin, a Santa hat jammed over his head, and a grin slapped across his face he sauntered into the room with a red sack slung over one shoulder.

The assembled personnel eyed him groggily, some having to squint at the bright red against the dull grey walls. They were those who lived on site, or had foolishly spent their vacation days already. Trapped within the site's concrete halls, they were unable to bring in their own decorations due to storage ordinances. And now they were at the mercy of Navarro, and the bundle of goodies he toted.

Navarro surveyed those before him for a familiar face. Gregg Collins gave a vague sort of wave before returning to his glass of eggnog, content to sit and muse nothings to himself. Sitting in one of the various armchairs was an olive-skinned man wearing a tacky sweater and an unsure smile. Navarro had worked with him several times before, but could never remember his name. Likely because the man couldn't remember himself. And then there was Jane Weiss, of Theta-90. She knew Navarro well enough to try to avoid his gaze and little enough to think that would actually work.

From his bag of merriment he withdrew a cluster of multicolored lights. The fact that they glowed without being plugged in drew interest from the others in the room. He handed the bundle to Weiss, who stared at the lights as if they were a parcel of something illegal. Which was accurate, as they broke the laws of physics. And the Foundation was quite fond of said laws, and no doubt looked down upon relieving the anomalous objects storage rooms of their contents.

But boredom was a powerful thing. It fastened itself around Weiss' neck, and the looming holiday potentiality weighed down on her shoulders. She looked up at Navarro, whose eyes glittered with the reflective colors of the lights in his hands. Weiss sighed and took them from Navarro. She recruited one of the researchers, and together they replaced the yellow lights with their more diverse brethren.

And with that, the others lifted themselves from their seats and gathered around Navarro and his sack of wonder to collect more items to thicken the Christmas atmosphere. The amnesiac acquired a tin of cookies and nestled into his seat without regard for the others. Collins was pulled from his chair by a younger researcher, and together the two of them gathered up drinks and cups.

One or two glanced at the camera swiveling in the upper corner of the room. Navarro simply smiled and shook his head, the fluff ball at the end of his hat swinging around like a yuletide wrecking ball. Bribery came cheap this time of year. As if to prove this, one of the various security personnel slid a CD player and accompanying from the bag.

Hats and eggnog were dispensed, and when enough people were suitably hatted and mustachioed he moved over to an empty corner of the room. After jostling the sack around he set its mouth against the floor and lifted, revealing the green plastic of a tree support stand. As the bag lifted it spit out more and more tree, until Navarro had to stand on his toes and even then the tree was bending over. It snapped to attention when it was completely out, still quivering with dew.

With a certain degree of reverence Navarro plucked out the final item. It was a glass ball with a coiled metal base, the latter tinted green with spray paint. Inside the ball was a small ball of nuclear fire, pinpricks of excess energy escaping in something akin to sunbeams. The miniature star held all the energy of its larger counterparts, yet paradoxically lacked their heat and brightness. The others decorated the tree with lights and glass balls and other assorted ornaments to the sound of caroling while Navarro shoved a chair close to the tree. Once the tree was fully decorated, Navarro used the chair as a footstool to slide the coil around the top of the tree.

The room now aglow in warm, wholly unnatural light, the group eased back into their seats. Drunk on their renewed Christmas spirits, and/or more mundane spirits depending on which eggnog they partook in, they reveled in the merry tranquility. Some broke into song, others gorged on the various tins of food extracted from Navarro's magic bag.

Once midnight rolled past a few broke away from the crowd to retire early, and eventually Navarro felt compelled to join them. He waved off those remaining and reminded the sober ones which storage unit the items were to be returned to. He hung on the door frame and let out a quick but heartfelt message before departing to his room.

"Merry Christmas, everyone!"

No One Should Be Alone

`Researcher Conwell` sat alone at his desk. The sound of his typing filled the silence that otherwise engulfed the lab. With a large yawn, he took the opportunity to check the clock. It was 7:48 PM, December 24th, 2011.

The door to the lab then opened, the sound of Christmas music flooding the room as an old bearded man with a walnut cane, a Santa hat, and what might possibly have been the world's tackiest Christmas sweater stormed in. This man was the well-respected senior researcher **`Dr. Zachary Johnson.`**

"Ho ho ho," Johnson said with a sheepish grin. He placed a small mp3 player that was blasting Christmas tunes on one of the lab benches.

"They let you visit Dr. Collins dressed like that?" Conwell asked. He rubbed his right temple as he chuckled.

"Got to keep poor Gregg's spirits up somehow," Johnson jovially replied, "Besides, if I don't reach the point where the higher ups are worried that I've become infected with some anomalous Christmas virus, I'm just not spirited enough."

"You certainly would have fooled me," Conwell said with a small smile. He then turned back to his work, stopping his typing only when his superior cleared his throat.

"Jacob," he said as he checked his watch, "it is now 7:50 PM on Christmas Eve. You have been working on those documents since before I left here to visit Harold, three hours ago. I think it's time for you to join me in the break room for a coffee."

Conwell shrugged and pointed to his work. Johnson would have none of it.

“Son,” Johnson said as he tapped his cane on the ground, “if you turn me down I will hit you with this cane until you leave my lab. Humor an old soul and join me for a Christmas coffee break.”

Conwell immediately held up his hands in surrender. Without another word he closed his laptop and began to make his way towards the door. Johnson gave a nod of approval as he watched his assistant step into the hall. He then grabbed his mp3 player and shut off the lights. The two men made their way towards the cafeteria in relative silence, save the Christmas songs coming from Johnson’s person.

“So Jacob,” Johnson began, “why are you here tonight. You got last Christmas Eve off. Surely a young man like you has somewhere else to be on Christmas.”

“My folks and I fell out of touch after I started with the Foundation,” Conwell replied. “They think I’m working on a research ship for Stuart, Cameron, and Pauling Labs, so they don’t really expect me home for the holidays.”

“I see,” Johnson nodded, “so what changed last year?”

Conwell sighed and shook his head. This caused Johnson to stop and smirk.

“Girlfriend?” he asked.

“It’s more of an on-again-off-again kind of thing, but yeah,” Conwell said with a half-hearted chuckle. “She was busy tonight, so I felt I’d be more productive here.”

“Such is life,” Johnson shrugged. The two men continued their walk.

Before long, they found themselves within the break room. What was normally drab and sterile had been recently done up in a more seasonal flair. Johnson quietly offered Conwell a seat and began to prepare a fresh pot of coffee.

“If you don’t mind me asking, Dr. Johnson,” Conwell began, “what about you? Is there a Mrs. Johnson missing you tonight?”

“I’m afraid not,” Johnson said as he finished setting up the coffee machine. He then moved on to rummaging through the fridge. “Shelly passed away almost twenty years ago. I usually spend the holiday with my daughter, Jessica, and the grandkids. This year, however, they are going to visit the son-in-law’s family. I guess you and I are two peas in a pod after all.”

Johnson emerged from the fridge with several Tupperware containers. Before Conwell had a chance to ask questions, his superior was already preparing two plates. The containers were filled with most of the fixings of a rudimentary Christmas dinner.

“Jessica prepared this spread for me earlier,” Johnson said as he placed the plates in the microwave. “As you can see, it’s far more than enough for me to consume alone. Even if I could eat it all, I’d rather not.”

Conwell opened his mouth to protest, but remained silent when Johnson held out his hand for him to stop. After a few minutes, Johnson removed the plates from the microwave and placed them on the table with a warm smile. Conwell returned with a small smile of his own and gratefully accepted the plate.

The two men then ate in silence. Conwell nodding as he relished the taste of the makeshift Christmas meal. Johnson’s daughter was apparently a very, very skilled cook. After they had both finished Johnson set about disposing of the paper plates.

“So, Jacob,” Johnson began, “you’d agree with me if I told you no one should be alone on Christmas, would you not?”

“I suppose I’d be a hypocrite at this point if I said no,” Conwell said with a chuckle, “why?”

“Do you think you’d be up for one more task?” Johnson asked with a small smile.

“What did you have in mind?”

“And so… and so I said… I said, Karlyle, if that was true we wouldn’t

need to send in an MTF, I could just have my wife handle the job!" Johnson said as he tried to contain himself. Ultimately he failed, resulting in him and the other occupants of the room broke out into a fit of laughter.

Conwell was now standing in the corner of a Site-19 humanoid containment cell. Dr. Johnson sat at the nearby desk, facing the room's occupant, a middle aged man known as **Dr. Harold Thompson.** Conwell had never met him before, but to his understanding he was a former colleague of Dr. Johnson's who had the great misfortune of acquiring the ability to turn all living organic matter he touched into solid marble. Johnson had pulled a few strings and managed to get a "psychological health visit" scheduled for that evening. The last two hours had been spent with the three of them joking as Dr. Johnson and Dr. Thompson matched wits over a game of chess. Unfortunately, Dr. Johnson had recently made the winning move, signaling that their time together was drawing to a close.

"Check mate, old friend," Johnson said with a sad smile.

"You got me again, Zach," Harold replied.

The two men then began placing the pieces back in the box.

"Before you go, I have a small gift for you in the top drawer of my desk. I'd get it myself, but as I'm sure you know, I have to remain on the bed when I have visitors…" Harold added as he put away the last of the pieces. "I hope you don't mind that I didn't have a chance to have it properly wrapped…"

Johnson gave a nod of acknowledgement, and slowly opened the drawer. His mouth hung open in awe as he slowly removed what appeared to be a small marble sculpture of a bird.

"That's one of the products of Dr. Freemont's last round of testing. She said I could keep it. I thought you might like it," Harold said with a sad smile. He then gave Conwell an apologetic glance, "I'm afraid I didn't have chance to prepare something for you, I didn't know we'd have this opportunity to meet…"

“Oh, don’t mind that Harold,” Johnson said with a hearty chuckle, “Jacob’s just here for the ride. This is very beautiful, though. Thank you very much.”

“Guess I have some use after all…” Harold mumbled under his breath, his eyes glancing at his gloved hands, then back to his friend.

“I have something for you as well,” Johnson said as he slowly got to his feet. Without a sound he silently placed his mp3 player on the table, and pressed play. “Your son sent it to me this morning.”

“Hey, Dr. Johnson” said the voice in the recording. It sounded like a man roughly Conwell's age. “Here are some of the people from the neighborhood. Have a very merry Christmas!”

Several more voices then joined the first as they began to sing “Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire.” Conwell watched as Harold sat straight up, his eyes unblinking as he kept his gaze firmly on the mp3 player. Johnson then quietly signaled for the two of them to leave. Before they exited the cell, both Conwell and Johnson looked back at their friend. A small trail of tears ran down his face as he remained motionless, taking in the sound of the music.

“No one should be alone on Christmas, Jacob,” Johnson said quietly as the two of them stepped into the adjoining observation room. “Don’t you agree?”

Conwell gave a nod in agreement.

“Merry Christmas, Jacob,” the elderly researcher said as he slowly began to walk away, “You have yourself a nice evening.”

“Merry Christmas, Dr. Johnson,” Conwell replied with a smile of admiration, “You too.”

I Hope That I Get Old Before I Die

Dr. Ralph Roget knocked on the door, shave-and-a-haircut style. It was the way he always knocked when he was a kid, coming with Mom to see the grandparents. It was also the only way for the now-retired Director Gillespie to recognize who was at the door, and come answer it.

She did answer it, a moment after his thought finished. A small old woman, a bit withered in her body, but she still had the kind face that he could remember smiling down as her arms lifted him up. Shirley Gillespie's face lit up as she saw her grandson on her doorstep.

"Oh, my goodness! It's so lovely to see you… please, please, come in… you've gotten so tall!" She tittered joyfully, lightly pulling on Ralph's arm to escort him into the room. The main apartment was small and plain, with a single antennae-box television set, an overstuffed armchair, and a little table beside it. In the corner, there was a small fake Christmas tree. Ralph's eyes lingered on the tree.

"Your grandfather and I picked it up yesterday morning. It's lovely, isn't it? Bob says he's going to decorate it soon."

Ralph sighed. The home had put the tree up in her room, like every other room. It was a cheap plastic tree, without any decoration, and it looked like the leaves were actually AstroTurf. He smiled at his grandmother, and nodded. "It's very nice. Did you pick it out?"

"Yes, yes…" She looked into his face for a moment, smiling. "You're getting so tall, dear. You'll have to stand by Bob when he gets back home."

"I will, Director." He smiled at her. She used to become so annoyed when he called her 'Director'. She'd always go on about how she'd retired to get away from stuffy formality, and she wanted to just be grandma from then on. Now? She just smiled and nodded, with a cheery disconnect from his words.

"How's work been going? Are you still friends with David?" She picked an ancient tray of cookies, and placed them on the ground in between them.

"No. He doesn't work at Site-77 any longer, and I haven't heard from him in awhile." Ralph didn't know who David was. He'd never known a David. In all likeliness, if he ever knew a David, Director Gillespie would likely never know about it.

"That's a shame. He was a polite boy." Director Gillespie looked towards where her last room had a window. "Did you see the tree?"

"Yes, I did."

Director Gillespie looked back to Ralph. "Why, you've gotten so tall! I'll have to compare you to Bob when he gets home."

"Grandpa's not coming home, Director." Ralph kept his eyes locked on where the window was. He left his grandmothers face out of his sight.

"Oh… well, at least he's doing well," said Director Gillespie, talking to nobody in particular.

"… I should be going. It's been nice seeing you."

Director Gillespie smiled at him. "Well, it's been lovely having you down! Bob and I both loved seeing you, and I'll tell him you left when he comes home."

"You'll tell him how much I've grown, right?" Ralph smiled at her.

"Grown?" She looked at him, her smile stopped in space.

Dr. Roget stood up, and turned away from her. "I'll see you soon, grandma."

His grandmother smiled at him, the recognition in her eyes fading. "Goodbye…"

Dr. Roget stepped out of the apartment, walked out of the building, out of the complex, and got into his car. Sitting in the seat, he

sighed.

He pulled out of the snowy driveway of the Soft Community Plantations retirement home, and back into the night.

The Lost Shepherd

December 24th, 2011

5:14:06 PM

Daniel Horatio Aeslinger, Psy. D. stood with his back to the room, facing the window. Outside all was quiet and dark, mostly dark. The single point of light in the room behind him only made the outside world seem more desolate.

On the desk, spread out in what would to the average observer look like a total mess, but was in fact a highly sophisticated method of organization that only he understood, lay eleven personnel files that didn't exist. They looked unobtrusive enough; simple manila folders with neat handwriting on the tab denoting their subjects. Eleven of them, and he had to work through them all. He'd been at it for the last six hours, reading, making notes, comparing those notes with those in the dossiers, written by his predecessors. One of them had asked for a profile on eleven of the twelve others, the twelfth one having gone to Bjornsen for some reason. And now he was weary, his hand ached and his brain was alight.

As he stood there, watching the dark calm, the first snowflakes began dropping. It was the one thing that could get him sentimental, snow. It brought back memories of his childhood, of misshapen snowmen and fortresses diligently made over the course of weeks.

What a way to spend Christmas eve.

7:03:51 PM

He'd noticed a pattern in the files. Each of the employees portrayed in these documents was a well-adjusted, but not *too* well-adjusted person. Each of them had some small quirks, except for #6, whose quirk seemed to be that they were quirkless. Each of the people

portrayed had an exemplary track record within The Foundation, having risen to power by simply doing their job better and more efficiently than their erstwhile colleagues. He didn't buy it for one second. All of the files before him had been fabricated, but he couldn't for the life of him think of a good reason why they would be this *badly* fabricated.

He leant back in the rickety chair he'd found in this office. Its usual occupant was probably busy having a ball at the Site's annual Christmas party. Closing his eyes he tried to walk through all possible scenarios that would leave him here, in a spare office on Christmas eve reading what amounted to fictional biographies of people that officially didn't exist. And didn't want to exist.

In the end the only reason he could think of was that they wanted to see how long it took him to see through the whole thing. But why then give Bjornsen the last one? Or was it perhaps a case of a pawn being reminded of their nature? Have someone do something useless just to remind them they can be made to do anything, even if it doesn't make sense?

He'd never be on the O5 council, that was for sure.

8:56:29 PM

As the windows caked up with snow, the only sound in the sparsely decorated office was the haphazard snoring of a middle-aged man drooling on the folders under his bearded cheek.

9:33:11 PM

Daniel awoke with a snort, causing him to profusely apologize to no one in particular. Several files were now impossible to return to records, but he figured they hadn't come from there in the first place anyway. When the courier came in the morning, he'd explain. He doubted the courier would care. Switching on the computer in front of him, he prepared to write up his final reports on those twelve people in charge of what was undoubtedly the biggest conspiracy in the history of mankind. As it was booting up, he stepped outside into the hallway.

When he'd started, he'd had a thermos of coffee with him. Coffee that he knew tasted like coffee, in stark contrast to the concentrated monkey's armpit juice they called coffee here. But that thermos had been empty for the last three hours, and his body was craving caffeine. Standing outside of the small room, he looked left and then right, trying to remember how he'd come in and whether or not he'd seen one of the Site's coffee machines. He thought he had, two lefts and a right from where he stood. As the computer behind him merrily bleeped its way through its awakening, Aeslinger closed and locked the office's door behind him and went on a personal quest.

10:02:43 PM

It had not, in fact, been two lefts and a right. As the amount of both lefts and rights had now jumped to the double digits, he was fairly sure that he was as far from the office he needed to return to as he was from a cup of decent coffee.

10:48:13 PM

He was now thoroughly lost and still caffeineless. He didn't recognize any part of the building he was in, and as he'd only received the key card to the one particular office he'd been working in until a little more than an hour ago, he couldn't look outside for potential landmarks. That is, if he'd be able to see them through the snow outside. He found a small bench standing against a nondescript off-white wall and sat down with his head in his hands. He had a good GPS tracker on his company phone, but that required him not to abandon it next to a booting computer, which he of course had done. He sighed and counted the emergency lights on in this hallway. It came to seven to the left of him and nineteen to the right of him. Nineteen minus seven was twelve. What a coincidence. He leant back too sharply and hit his head on the wall. Muttering, he nursed the back of his head.

Not to worry, he was going to get back to that office. Somehow.

11:54:26 PM

Daniel Horatio Aeslinger was oblivious to the muted sounds of

laughter and music making their ways through the miles of corridors. One leg dangled awkwardly down from the bench on which he lay, the other was stretched out on top of it. His jacket had been folded up and placed underneath his head, and his hands were folded across his belly. The steady rise and fall of his chest made it very clear he was not, in fact, going to get back to that office today. Perhaps on Christmas Day, and with help, but for now he would stay put. It didn't matter, the work wasn't due until the 27th.

In the office several feet to his right a computer patiently waited for one Daniel Horatio Aeslinger to input his credentials. It had nothing better to do on Christmas eve.

Reconciliation

The weather at Site 81 during the winter was typically a mix of cold and wet, with minor variations taking cues from there. Any given day it could be overcast and just above freezing, where the falling rain would feel like it was fine to ignore the rules about how cold water can get without turning into a solid, and the next day it would be sunny and ten below. Most of the more pleasant weather usually didn't show up until January, with December being left the "cold and miserable" and February being given the "cold and oh my god the ice".

Demeanor could not have been higher during these dreadful winter months, though, because the senior staff at Site 81 was particularly keen on embracing the Christmas spirit. The long, stark hallways were draped with a menagerie of multicolored lights and tinsel hangings, and the common spaces were littered with frosted evergreens (no doubt pulled mysteriously from a local farm under the cover of night, much to the confusion of the tree farmer in question).

Yes, the spirit of the season was strong at Site 81, and was strengthened specifically by the bombastic frivolity of one Director Karlyle Aktus, the merriest seventy-five year old in the entire Foundation. The old man had donned a Santa getup at the stroke of midnight on November 30th, and hadn't taken it off yet. Despite this strange aversion to changing clothes, those who had the courage to draw near to the doctor maintained that he still somehow smelled of peppermint, instead of old socks. This was seen as a particular blessing.

The month had flown by under a deluge of end-of-the-year containment and finance and casualty reports, and before you could say "ho-ho-holy shit" it was Christmas Eve. Much of the non-priority site staff had left to see their families during the short leave they were allowed at the year's end, and most of whom remained were

so caught up in their projects they had forgotten what year it was.

There was a small group of researchers left that, despite the comparative safety of their project, were tasked with overseeing and maintaining the object throughout the evening. The object in question was a box wrapped in red paper and tied with a golden bow, that would only open at midnight Christmas morning, and would either release a harmless gift or an XK-Class "End of the World" scenario. The streak of non-end-of-the-world-scenario openings had grown to forty-five years the Christmas prior, and there was doubt that the object would do anything at all this year. Regardless, the containment procedures were strict, and nobody wanted to face the Disciplinary Committee on Christmas after causing an entropic violation.

The four of them sat staring at the box, idly taking notes or poking at their tablets. Jordan was the team leader, the dark-skinned young man from Ghana. Beside him was Hank, the forty-four year old retired air traffic controller, and beside him Myra, the daughter of some Site 19 higher up. Rounding out the bunch was Kevin, the eternal nerd, who continued to pound away at his keyboard, frantically pumping as much information regarding the box in front of them into the Foundation database as he could before the big moment. They were all relatively silent, until Hank spoke up to voice his concerns during the eleventh hour of their vigil.

"This fucking sucks," he said, crossing his arms. "They're having Christmas breakfast in the G-Wing cafeteria. We're watching a box."

Jenna nodded and tucked a strand of brown hair behind her ear. "Wouldn't this be a terrible place to be if this thing caused an XK, too? Why are we here?"

Jordan shrugged. "You'll need to talk to," he looked down at his case files, "Dr. I. P. Freeley, the original author of the containment procedures."

Hank raised an eyebrow. "I. P. Freeley?"

"Yeah, see, right here, I. P. Free- ah, fuck."

Jenna snorted, and then turned back to her tablet to idly peck away at some game while the clock pittered along in the background.

"Cheer up, guys," came a voice from the back of the room. "Think of all of the people we're helping by maintaining our courageous watch over this most heinous-"

"Shut the fuck up, Kevin," said Hank, sharply. "We get it, the box is a big deal."

They collectively rolled their eyes as Kevin praised himself on his demeanor, and quickly sunk back into the silence that they had so recently tried to pull away from. Another minute ticked by, and then an hour, and suddenly it was twenty-one hundred hours. The home stretch was before them, but-

"God, this is taking forever," Hank interrupted.

Suddenly, the room was filled with the sound of bells. Small bells, large bells, shrill bells and deep bells, all manner of metallic percussive instrument. They jumped to attention and turned to see what the ruckus was all about, and found themselves staring down the tallest, baldest, most eager looking Santa Claus they had ever seen in their entire lives.

"D-Director, a pleasure to see you," Jordan stammered out. "What are you doing down here? Shouldn't you be-"

"Nonsense, Jordan," Aktus said as he strode merrily across the room. "Why, it is Christmas Eve, is it not? What better place to be than alongside you lot?" He hefted a bag over his shoulder and tossed it onto a lab bench near them. "And look here at this, would not you see? A gift from the workers over in Wing G!"

Jenna coughed. "Why are you talking like-"

Santa Aktus patted her heartily on the back. "No time now for questions, you dear sweet young thing. The time is now for stories from home that I bring!"

He plopped down on a bench, close enough that they could almost see through his customary dark sunglasses to whatever mysterious

orbs lay behind them. The sight even brought Kevin to a standstill, who scooted over to join in the event. "Now, where was I? Oh yes! A holiday tale, one of my brothers and a holiday grail."

Hank nudged Jordan in the side. "Is he going to keep doing this, or?"

Director Aktus laughed. "No, no, none of that. This story is not even about a grail, I just could not think for the life of me of another word that rhymed with tale." He shook his head and laughed. "I would not be a good rapper, I fear."

He adjusted slightly, reaching into a back pocket for a small flask. The old man took a drink, inhaled sharply, and sighed. "Not exactly where we were planning on spending Christmas Eve, yes?" He took account of their reactions. "No, I did not think so. Better to be home spending time with family, of course."

"When I was young, I was assigned to a project with the Foundation in Bulgaria, near my homeland. It was a cold winter, bitter, and I was working on a highly classified project. My younger brothers, they were both with additional projects in and around Bulgaria as well, but their priority levels were not so high. I had taken the project because of the promise of a promotion. The Foundation was more lax about family visits then, but this project would put me away from my loved ones either way. For the sake of my career, I took the position."

"I got the news that my father had passed away from my youngest brother, Jeremiah, while I was on duty. He had been struck by a stray bullet during a shootout in my hometown and bled out on the street. Both of my brothers had left to run to his side at the hospital before he finally left this world, but I stayed at my post."

"My mother, she was wracked with grief, and my brothers were there to comfort her, but I remained in that bunker. When she stumbled into the street the next month in a drunken stupor, calling out for my father, and was struck by a car, my brothers attended her funeral. I stayed at my post."

He closed his eyes. Jenna had not been watching him, but she did

now, and noticed tears running down his cheeks. "But that was then, my friends, and those were different times. Harder times, in my country, and I am grateful that I was given the opportunity to get away. The Foundation undoubtedly saved my life, and yet… I would have liked to have been there for them. I was very much obsessed with the research, and my duty with the Foundation, and protecting the world that- that I did not take care to protect those closest to me."

Aktus leaned forward, taking a breath. "We are told when we join the Foundation that we are giving up everything in order to save the world. We are told that nothing is sacred except securing, containing, and protecting. We are told that nothing is more important." He shook his head. "But that is a lie. Your families are more important. Your friends are more important. If the world ends tonight, would you like your last thought to be that you spent your final moments in this lab?"

He stood up. "Go home, friends. Be with your families tonight. If the world ends, I want you to spend it with them."

They resisted, at first, but eventually the director won them over. One by one, they moved towards the exit, wishing the old doctor a Merry Christmas, and disappeared down the long hallway. Kevin was last, his arms full of notes, but Karlyle waved him off, smiling. He, too, left the room, and then there was just the director.

The air was quiet and still within the dark lab, and Karlyle stood, wrapped within it, staring at the box. He heard the door behind him swing open, but he did not move. He saw a shadow moving towards him, but he did not breathe. He heard the breathing of another man, and he lowered his head. Neither of them said anything as the last few minutes ticked by, and finally Karlyle shuddered.

"…do you think it will be her, this year? Is that why you've come?"

Neither of them spoke, neither of them moved. Karlyle didn't need to see a clock to know it was time. The air warmed slightly, and the golden bow began to sizzle. It sparked and hissed and finally there was nothing left but the box beneath it. The lid shook slightly, and

slid off to the side. The room was silent again, and Karlyle moved forward. He looked down, his face beneath his dark glasses soaked with memories, and caught his breath.

He wavered for a moment as he stared into the box, his body swaying slowly. He reached out, as if to grab something, but his hand hung in mid-air and stopped. He smiled. He turned around to face the men behind him.

"Will you… will you walk with me, Joshua? At least for now?"

They said nothing. He nodded in recognition, and began walking. They followed him, out of the lab and into the long hallway.

A short time later, Director Aktus emerged into the courtyard at Site-81. The snow was falling, as it had been falling all night, slowly and quietly. The world was still. Karlyle took a deep breath, filling his lungs with the cold Indiana air.

He began to turn, but hesitated. "It's been a long time, since…" He trailed off, praying for a word, a touch, anything from them. "After mother passed, I… I was wrong. I should have come back, should have been there." He sucked in air. "I haven't seen either of you, I thought that you- they told me that you…"

He breathed out, and saw another figure move across the courtyard to him, holding a thermos. Karlyle smiled, and reached out his hand.

"Good morning, Jordan."

The young researcher took his hand and shook it, and then placed in it a mug of a hot beverage. "Merry Christmas, Director. I thought on your offer, but my family is many thousands of miles away. I'm afraid you'll have to do with me, tonight."

Karlyle laughed, and took the drink. "I think that will be just fine, Jordan, thank you. You can note an all clear in your case report for the object, as well. No hostile activity detected."

Jordan laughed as well, and together they walked back into the building. As they moved towards the door, Jordan turned to him.

"Who were you talking to, Director?"

Karlyle paused for a moment and looked over his shoulder. A single pair of footsteps were slowly collecting snow in the light of the moon, and the courtyard was empty. He closed his eyes and nodded.

"Nobody, Jordan. Just an old man talking to himself."

Later they were seen drinking and throwing darts in Aktus' office, and prank calling the senior staff at Site-19. Aktus made a note to never spackle the holes in his walls that resulted from their activity that night.

Deep below Site-81, in a secure bunker, a red box sat open on the floor.

Within it was a photograph of a family,

three sons and their parents,
together on their last Christmas.
They were smiling.

On the back of the photograph,
a single line of handwritten text:
Sleep in heavenly peace.

Woe is me! for I am as when they have gathered the summer fruits, as the grapegleanings of the vintage: there is no cluster to eat: my soul desired the firstripe fruit.

The good man is perished out of the earth: and there is none upright among men: they all lie in wait for blood; they hunt every man his brother with a net.

That they may do evil with both hands earnestly, the prince asketh, and the judge asketh for a reward; and the great man, he uttereth his mischievous desire: so they wrap it up.

The best of them is as a brier: the most upright is sharper than a thorn hedge: the day of thy watchmen and thy visitation cometh; now shall be their perplexity.

Trust ye not in a friend, put ye not confidence in a guide: keep the doors of thy mouth from her that lieth in thy bosom.

For the son dishonoureth the father, the daughter riseth up against her mother, the daughter in law against her mother in law; a man's enemies are the men of his own house.

Therefore I will look unto the LORD; I will wait for the God of my salvation: my God will hear me.

- **Micah 7:1-7**

Dixieland Nightmare Magic

by **Kate McTiriss**

- **SCP-001**
- **SCP-2072** - Prime Ministerial Pet Cemetery
- **SCP-2558** - Horseshoe Beach First Baptist Church (Relocated)
- **SCP-2172** - This Light Never Turns Green
- **SCP-2930** - Cross City City City City Hall
- **SCP-2272** - Ellis Canastota, P, Pensacola Blue Wahoos
- **SCP-2972** - Somebody Else's Parking Lot In Sebastopol
- **Kate McTiriss's Personnel File**

1. Fault Lines - They intend to fuck causality right in the ass.
2. Going Straight To Hell In A Lincoln Continental - Some people are like pinballs.
3. Operation Cannery Row: Document 2013§451A3 - The things we leave behind.
4. I Double E - The first taste is free.
5. *The Hyacinth Hymnal* - Bad religion via shortwave.
6. Seven Vignettes From The Life Of Mackenzie Lee-Crook - Multilocational nightmare magic.
7. Operation Cannery Row: Excerpts from the Foundation's Regional Print Media Archive
8. An Overview of Foundation Journals Published in May 2017, So You Can Remember How Fucking Lucky We Were Then

by other authors

- **The One Thousand Deaths of Pastor Lewis Robinson: The Ethics of Repeatedly Drowning Baptists** by **Dr. Cimmerian**
- The Ballad of Region 352 by **Zolgamax**

These tales are not posted in chronological order. Open the collapsible for a chronological listing.

+ Chronological listing

1. **January 1971** - Creation/discovery of **SCP-2558**
2. **1977** - Discovery of **SCP-2072**

3. **19** - Creation/discovery of **SCP-2172**
4. Vignettes 1, 2, 3, and 4
5. **2011** - Discovery of **SCP-2972**
6. I Double E
7. Vignettes 5 and 6
8. **January 2013** - Operation Cannery Row: Document 2013§451A3
9. **August 2014** - **Kate McTiriss's Personnel File**, **SCP-2072**, **SCP-2558**, **SCP-2172**, **SCCP-2930**, **SCP-2272**, **SCP-2972**
10. Fault Lines
11. Going Straight To Hell In A Lincoln Continental
12. *The Hyacinth Hymnal*
13. Vignette 7
14. Operation Cannery Row: Excerpts from the Foundation's Regional Print Media Archive
15. An Overview of Foundation Journals Published in May 2017, So You Can Remember How Fucking Lucky We Were Then

Fault Lines

Quinine's bitter, sugar's sweet! The music blared. It was the only way she could stay alert in the early mornings.

Regional Director Kate McTiriss drummed her fingers on the desk, whiny lo-fi music playing out of her laptop speakers. She pushed the button on the radio again.

"Outpost 2072, you're late for the sunrise check-in. Do you copy?"

She heard only static and acoustic guitar. "Jeff, you can't pull this shit, it's 6:21, you're almost half an hour late for check-in." Director McTiriss sighed and paused her music, stepping out of her office into the bullpen, three tired agents monitoring news wires from all across North Florida. "Heads up, guys, we're heading to Micanopy. Jeff's not radioing in." They looked relieved to have something to do. Solowski downed the last of his coffee and slipped on his windbreaker. He asked, "Permission to shoot him myself if we get there and he's asleep?"

"Provisionally granted. I'm driving. Houghton, let Atlanta know we've got a potential containment compromise on a Safe-class. Perez, get on the database on your phone and tell me if there's been any news relevant to SCP-2072 recently."

They barreled down 441, through the early-morning prairie. The sun hadn't been up long enough to burn off the thick fog, lending the well-worn horizon more mystery than it deserved, considering how many times this exact car full of these exact agents had made this exact trip.

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The doors on their Crown Vic closed with a satisfying slam that echoed through the woods. The pet cemetery that doubled as SCP-2072 was off a long dirt pathway, tucked deep in the timber by

the Marion County line. The four defenders of fucking nowhere that made up Local Mobile Task Force 352-Lamedh — “Stump Knockers,” to their friends — tentatively edged their way towards the outpost. Houghton and Perez, guns drawn and tall frames crouched, flanked McTiriss and Solowski, carrying briefcases full of provisional containment supplies. Kate’s eyes darted from grave to grave. This place was unsettling even when there wasn’t a thick layer of fog.

As they approached the one-window temporary office Jeff Pink sat in for 12 hours a day, they saw the security camera mounted on it shot to pieces. Kate heard Solowski mutter under his breath. “Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.” She gestured with two fingers towards the door, put her shirtsleeve around her hand (so as to not disturb any prints) and twisted the knob.

When someone gets shot in the head in the movies, they get this perfect little circular hole and slump down. *Christ-like, really, like a personal stigmata for the frontal lobe*, Kate thought. Maybe it was just on her mind because she was clutching her rosary. Because in real life, there’s no pretty little hole. Field Agent Jeff Pink’s head was torn open. Brain and blood pooled on the ground, wall behind him splattered with viscera, mouth hanging open in an unrecognizable howl. Kate McTiriss felt that familiar bitterness in the back of her mouth, stomach flipping over. No matter how many times she saw this, it didn’t change. “Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.”

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Kate radioed into Atlanta first, voice wavering more than she’d like. This was the first staff death since she took over the force. “We’ve had a Safe-class containment incursion, region 352, SCP-2072. Containment re-established but the info is out, scramble task forces near Montenegro with a focus on protecting 2072-Named individuals.” Next was Jacksonville for backup. “352-Zayin, send all free agents to Micanopy, we’ve had a 2072 breach and an agent killed.”

There wasn’t a soul still around. Whoever did this got in, got what they wanted and booked it straight back to Hell. The tarps covering the 23 graves that seemed to predict every Prime Minister of Montenegro were still there, but the presence of amateur knots

instead of Foundation-standard constrictors betrayed the purpose of the incursion. Solowski summed it up best. “Some Montenegrins are gonna try and fuck causality right in the ass.”

The question was when. The answer was coming sooner than the under-staffed and under-rested agents of 352-Lamedh were quite ready for. McTiriss felt another lurch in her stomach, but this one wasn’t nerves. It felt like all the air in her lungs was trying to escape and throw a Goddamn party on the way out. Her ears popped. Orientation told her about this feeling. It’s the feeling of nearby space folding in on itself. Or as her old boss put it, “It’s like Einstein and Rosen teaming up to gangbang you, Kate. It’s the feeling of your day getting a lot less fun.”

Not that this day was any fun to start with.

The four people standing lost their balance, stumbling with sudden vertigo. The air cracked like a whip and the sound rustled through the surrounding woods. The ground beneath one of the graves began to collapse, like the dirt was falling through a funnel. A hole, a perfect rectangle, formed in the ground, light pouring out of it. The pressure in everyone’s ears disappeared, they could stand up straight again. Kate approached the hole. She saw the image through it, light wood and large desks tilted at a strange angle. A figure was standing, clutching his heart, blocking her view. He fell backwards in the image and straight through the hole. Four North Florida agents stared at the suit-wearing corpse of a member of the Montenegrin parliament, slumped pathetically in the leaves.

“What in the name of the ever-loving holy fucking mother.” She could hear screams in the room through the grave. A gunshot rang out, more screams. Kate turned to her men and gestured towards the hole with two fingers. They jumped in.

Going Straight To Hell In A Lincoln Continental

< Fault Lines | ***DNM*** | Operation Cannery Row: Document 2013§451A3 >

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McTiriss, Solowski, Houghton and Perez stumbled, but landed on their feet. The ninety-degree shift in gravity upon jumping through the gravesite hole wasn't pleasant, but 'unpleasant' was a fine working baseline for this day, all things considered. They were standing on the floor of the Parliament of Montenegro in…*whatever the capital of Montenegro was,* Kate thought. Men and women in suits and ties surrounded them, looking terrified and slack-jawed. A man in a jacket with a patch on the sleeve lay dead on the ground about twenty feet off from where LMTF 352-Lamedh emerged, looking like he shot himself. Standard murder-suicide, except the victim fell through a hole into a pet cemetery five thousand miles away.

Kate crouched down and opened up her briefcase, switching on the signal jammer and putting in her earpeace, activating the emergency Foundation radio connection. She was on the line with International, and nobody else in this building had any contact with the outside world. She spoke softly into the mic, crowd still staring at her and her three compatriots in confusion, "International, this is LMTF 352-Lamedh, Director McTiriss speaking. I'm in the capital of Montenegro establishing preliminary containment on a spacial anomaly. Stand by for details, engaging in crowd control. Do you copy?" A crackly voice, barely making it through the jammer, responded. "Site-19 here. We copy." She grabbed the fake badge she needed from the case and stood tall. Showtime.

"Hello, folks, Interpol agent Kate McTiriss here." She flashed the badge. "We're the rapid response team. You are not in any danger, our manner of entrance was authorized by the European Commission in 1998. I understand all of you have just witnessed

something very upsetting. We're here to discover the facts and ensure justice is served, so I'll need everyone to remain calm and remain in the building." Rapid-fire, authoritative bullshit, Kate thought. It's how you go from press director to run a Task Force. Unlike usual, the crowd didn't seem to be buying it, though. Most of them looked at her, confused and scared as ever. Her arms dropped to her sides as she realized her mistake with a sigh.

"Okay, right. I need someone that speaks English to translate what I just said for everyone that doesn't." A young man in glasses, college-age and wearing a truly awful clip-on tie, stepped forward meekly. Kate acknowledged him with a nod. "Uh, I'm Ludovik Miani, legislative assistant." He shook her hand, his palms sweaty. "Okay, super. Ludovik, tell the people what I just said." He nodded and turned to the assembled Parliament. She thought back to her old boss again. *Sometimes, Kate, you've gotta put your faith in local resources, even if they're miles from ideal.* She stepped away from the kid, back to her team.

Perez was clapping. "Great showing, Kate, me and the six other people here that could understand it really dug the speech."

She looked at him, wishing a glare could set his stupid grinning face alight. "Shut the fuck up, Oren. Titus, go back through and take pictures of the body. Come back with the unredacted list of SCP-2072 graves and a spare sidearm from the squad car, I'm feeling underarmed."

"Playing field agent, cute. If you ever actually get around to shooting a guy I'm sure you'll never shut up about it."

She hoped her grimace at that wasn't as visible as it felt. She shook off the memory. "I need everyone to cut the backtalk. Three people are dead and *I* am in charge here, fuckos." Titus Solowski, his anchor tattoo peeking out from under his sleeve, hopped back through the hole in the floor. Kate put her finger back up to the earpiece to work out a containment plan with International.

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"Forty-eight people, looks like." Static for a few seconds in return.

This is where the decisions the Ethics Committee wrung their hands about later were made. Three guys in a room in Site-19 were thinking on the number forty-eight, deciding the value of that many lives. Kate knew about International. Forty-eight was nothing compared to keeping the veil on.

The Einstein-Rosen bridge was stable, displaying no abnormal radiation and a constant safe reality level. The other graves from 2072 were blank, coffins empty, Solowski had informed her. This thing was neutralized, all the magic was gone from the place. The only problem, then, was these forty-eight Montenegrins that saw a man shoot their Prime Minister, shoot himself, and saw four deeply underprepared Americans jump out of a grave-shaped hole in the ground seconds after. The building had to go, International said.

The crackling stopped. “Your call, Director. We’ve got the 747 circling if you give the go order.”

They pussied out. Kate bunched up her fists. *Of course they did.* They had an autopiloted 747 circling the fucking Parliament, ready to bring down the building, the witnesses, *and* set up the easiest cover story in the world. People always bought terror.

But she had to say “go.” She had to be the one to kill forty-eight innocent people for the Greater Good. She drew in a breath, closed her eyes, and rocked back on her heels.

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EIGHT YEARS EARLIER

It was an unseasonably cold morning in the District. Kate McTiriss, Press Attaché for the FBI, woke up well before sunrise with her fiancée in her arms and tears welling in her eyes. She’d cooked a nice dinner for Anne the night before, and the taste of the good red wine stuck in her mouth. This was her last chance to tell her, to say ‘fuck you’ to the whole thing and put her life before work for once and for good.

But she fucked up. And she had to make it right. She kissed Anne on the head and left their bed for the last time. She broke down as

she stepped out, putting on her blazer like battle armor.

Hours later, she was driving the senior environmental reporter for the Washington Post out to the Arlington suburbs. She'd been playing whistleblower with him for years, feeding him just the right lies to keep the media off of the things the UIU dealt with that the people couldn't know about. But she gave him too much. He was close to figuring it out, and he needed to go. It was Kate's fault, so she had to do the honors. She served the Bureau well, so they'd set her up with a gig with a partner org out in the middle of nowhere. All she had to do was kill Greg Ionnas and the UIU would fake her death and whisk her off to Florida, of all fucking places. They stepped out of the car in front of the warehouse, Greg with his camera around his neck. He thought he was here to take the photos that would make his career.

Kate drew in a breath, closed her eyes, and rocked back on her heels. She felt her gun holstered to her hip. She exhaled.

She led the man inside.

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She exhaled.

Kate walked up to Houghton and the kid, Ludovik, translating his questions. "We're going back through, Houghton. Ludovik, we'll be back in three minutes. Keep everyone here." She handed him the gun Solowski brought her. *Miles from ideal, Kate.*

She brought her guys back through the hole and put her hand to her ear. "Consider this your go order."

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< Fault Lines | ***DNM*** | Operation Cannery Row: Document 2013§451A3 >

Operation Cannery Row: Document 2013§451A3

< Going Straight To Hell In A Lincoln Continental | ***DNM*** | I Double E >

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OPERATION CANNERY ROW

Keeping Our Friends Close, Whether They Like It Or Not

As part of our continued effort to ensure our partners in SUSEOCT *(Southern United States Extranormal Organization Cooperation Treaty)* are maintaining integrity and the safety and security of the American populace are protected, the FBI's UIU maintains information regarding our operational partners in the extranormal containment sphere. Our efforts to monitor the SCP Foundation comprise *Operation Cannery Row*.

The following documents were recovered from the body of Foundation Agent John "Jallit" O'June, found dead with severe burns and apparent stab wounds on January 3, 2013 after a conflict with the Order of the Hyacinth in Cross City, Fla. O'June's remains were first discovered by a UIU agent embedded in the Dixie County Sheriff's Office. O'June's possessions and remains were returned to the SCP Foundation in accordance with SUSEOCT. Copies of available documents were retained, reproduced below. Few readable pages remain.

"LMTF-352-ל Site Responsibility Overview"

"Region 352-ל Hume Readings: 0700 January 3, 2014"

+ [TOP SECRET CLEARANCE AUTH REQUIRED]

Original document, return to SCP Foundation pending clearance

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< Going Straight To Hell In A Lincoln Continental | ***DNM*** | I Double E >

I Double E

< Operation Cannery Row: Document 2013§451A3 | ***DNM*** | *The Hyacinth Hymnal* >
- | - | -

> *I am the rose of Sharon, and the lily of the valleys.*
> *As the lily among thorns, so is my love among the daughters.*
> - **Song of Solomon 2:1-2**

Mackenzie put out her cigarette, the warm July air sticking to her skin. The smell of fresh rain and honeysuckle filled the air. She liked doing this with a bit of a buzz. Made it easier to not overthink. Kate was hanging back, only halfway out the door to the balcony. Mackenzie could tell she was nervous.

“What do you Foundation people call it?” Mackenzie pulled the dried flower out of its cloth bag, one of the many supplies laid out on the wicker table.

“I-double-E. Intentional Extranormal Effort,” Kate said. She took a few tentative steps forward.

“You guys are adorable, you know that? It’s just magic. It’s been around longer than your group or mine, and it’ll be around long after both of ‘em are gone.” She tossed the box of long matches, underhand, to Kate, who caught them with both hands. “Light one.”

Kate, hands shaking a bit, ran the matchhead futilely along the side of the box a couple of times. Mackenzie turned away. She closed one eye and spun the flower in her fingers in front of her face, aligning the stamens just right with the breeze, like her grandmother taught her. With her bright lipstick, natural hair close-cropped, and black boots, Mackenzie-Lee Crook was the opposite of the straight-laced Kate McTiriss, who even on her rare off days wore button-ups,

blazers and slacks in the Florida summer heat.

The first night she'd stayed over at Kate's apartment, Mackenzie was unable to stop herself from storming out of the bathroom to chastise Kate for keeping her meager makeup collection in there. *The humidity ruins the eyeshadow, has nobody ever told you that?* Six months since that night, they were the picture of the uneasy détente the Foundation and Marshall, Carter and Dark had achieved in the American South.

The two groups were figuring out how to coexist in a strange world. So were the two women standing in the humid air, facing the thick and tangled woods. The new Press Coordinator for the Foundation in North Florida handed the Tallahassee Governor's Club's top auctioneer of anomalous objects a spluttering match. Mackenzie gave Kate a slight smile and a small nod, trying to reassure her. They both took a moment to breathe. She brought the match to the dried bluebell, and it caught in an instant.

"So what are you doing now?" Kate bit one of the nails on her left hand, or what was left of a nail. *All nerves, that girl.*

Mackenzie held the flower stem as steady as possible as the smoke rose from it. "Finding the leyline." Kate opened her mouth to ask what exactly that was, but was interrupted by the air above Mackenzie catching fire. From nothing, a narrow line of blazing flame, suspended in the air, sweet smoke pouring upwards into the night sky. Mackenzie jumped a bit with excitement. "Got it!" She turned to the table and put out the flower in the bowl of salted water. She made a quick sign of the cross and muttered a thankful prayer under her breath, and picked up her favorite knife, sliding out the blade. During all of this, Kate was staring up, awestruck, as the flames in the air settled into glowing lights, like a line of fireflies, shifting and pulsing.

Mackenzie studied the shifting lights. "I knew your place was special. Look at this, it's uninterrupted! Beautiful."

"Yeah…" They both stared. Kate tore her gaze from the leyline and fixed her eyes on her partner. "What's with the knife?"

She smiled at the directness of the question. “There’s magic — bits and pieces of cracked reality. The things you contain, the things we sell. Those are concentrated. But the magic is everywhere in this part of the world. It’s like…blood. And these are the veins, running through everything. And you don’t harness it by waving a wand and saying some words. You make a cut to get at blood.” Mackenzie raised the point of the blade to the string of floating lights and, with one decisive motion, sliced downward and dropped the blade. Kate heard a sound like deep wind chimes echoing in the back of her mind. Her heart raced as — *stardust,* that’s the only way she could describe it, *stardust* poured from the wounded sky into Mackenzie’s cupped hand, thick like honey.

The girl in the boots turned to the girl in the blazer, pure unreality shimmering in her hands. “Are you ready?” Mackenzie stepped up to her. “You can say no, it’s okay.”

Kate’s heart was beating so loud she could hear it. The wind chimes were louder, too. But she wanted to see what the other side — the Everything Under Everything – what it looked like. What Mackenzie saw in her nightly prayers outside. Kate, wide-eyed, nodded.

Mackenzie dipped two fingers into the pooled magic, letting the rest spill to the ground. She slid her fingers across her lips and they gleamed and crackled with power. They closed their eyes and leaned in.

They kissed under the Florida moonlight, and Kate felt the world catch flame around her.

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< Operation Cannery Row: Document 2013§451A3 | ***DNM*** | The Hyacinth Hymnal >

The Hyacinth Hymnal

< I Double E | ***DNM*** | Seven Vignettes From The Life Of Mackenzie Lee-Crook >
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SCP Foundation Audio Database
File 98A07 - Excerpts from the *Hyacinth Hymnal*, 2012–13.
A shortwave radio broadcast believed to be sourced to the Order of the Hyacinth (Cross City, Fla.), operating since 1978 at the latest. While the station typically broadcasts only tones and numbers,[1] occasional songs, Biblical readings and conversations have been broadcast on the station. All broadcasts from 20 and 201 consistently featured one voice, Person of Interest-35223. POI-35223 has not been identified, and the station has not broadcast since the final excerpt presented here.

Download file.

Transcript

Excerpt 1 - "Daffodils Yellow And Hyacinths Blue" (0:00–0:56)

A hymn of unknown composition.

POI-35233: You ready?

Bass guitar and slide guitar are played. POI-35233 and U

POI-35233 and UNKNOWN:
    Daffodils yellow and hyacinths blue
    Good Lord, good Lord, I’m coming home to you
    Balance me, fellow, with innocence true
    Good Lord, good Lord, I’m coming home to you

    It has not been an easy ride, born on the shore
    Good Lord, good Lord, show me that white door
    And if my spirit doth misguide, I am not done for
    Good Lord, good Lord, show me that white door

    Daffodils yellow and hyacinths blue
    Good Lord, good Lord, I’m coming home to you
    Balance me, fellow, with innocence true
    Good Lord, good Lord, I’m coming home to you

Excerpt 2 - "Lord, You Have Come To The Lakeshore" (0:58–2:20)

Takes many lines from a hymn by Cesareo Gabarain, though the music shares no resemblance.

A fiddle is played. POI-35233 sings.

POI-35233:
    Lord, you have come to the lakeshore
    Looking neither for wealthy nor wise ones
    You only asked me to follow humbly.

    [UNINTELLIGIBLE]

    Lord, with your eyes you have searched me,
    Kindly smiling, have spoken my name
    Now my boat's left on the shoreline behind me;
    By your side I will seek other seas

    You know so well my possessions

My boat carries no gold and no weapons
But nets and fishes -- my daily labor
You need my hands, full of caring

Through my labors to give others rest,
And constant love that keeps on loving
You, who have fished other oceans
Ever longed-for by souls who are waiting

My loving friend, as thus you call me.

Excerpt 3 - Reading of Micah 7:1-7 (2:22–3:22)

A fiddle is played. POI-35233 speaks.

POI-35233:
Woe is me! for I am as when they have gathered the s
fruits, as the grapegleanings of the vintage: there
cluster to eat: my soul desired the firstripe fruit.

The good man is perished out of the earth: and there
upright among men: they all lie in wait for blood; t
every man his brother with a net.

That they may do evil with both hands earnestly, the
asketh, and the judge asketh for a reward; and the g
he uttereth his mischievous desire: so they wrap it

The best of them is as a brier: the most upright is
than a thorn hedge: the day of thy watchmen and thy
cometh; now shall be their perplexity.

Trust ye not in a friend, put ye not confidence in a
keep the doors of thy mouth from her that lieth in t

For the son dishonoureth the father, the daughter ri
against her mother, the daughter in law against her

law; a man's enemies are the men of his own house.

Therefore I will look unto the LORD; I will wait for
of my salvation: my God will hear me.

Excerpt 4 - "Here And Heaven" (3:30–4:59)

Written by bluegrass artist Chris Thile in 2011.

A banjo is played. POI-35233 and UNKNOWN sing.

POI-35233 and UNKNOWN:
With a hammer and nails and a fear of failure we
are building a shed
Between here and heaven between the wait and the
wedding for as long as we both shall be dead
to the world beyond the boys and the girls trying
to keep us calm
We can practice our lines 'til we're deaf and blind
to ourselves to each other where it's

Fall not winter spring not summer cool not cold
And it's warm not hot have we all forgotten that
we're getting old

With an arrow and bow and some seeds left to sow
we are staking our claim
On ground so fertile we forget who we've hurt along
the way and reach out for a strange hand
to hold someone strong but not bold enough to
tear down the wall
'Cause we ain't lost enough to find the stars ain't
crossed why align them why fall hard
not soft into

Fall not winter spring not summer cool not cold
Where it's warm not hot has everyone forgotten that
we're getting old

Excerpt 5 - Reading of Psalm 40 (5:02–6:58)

POI-35233 speaks. Periodic gunshots are heard.

POI-35233:

I waited patiently for the Lord; and he inclined unt
heard my cry.

He brought me up also out of an horrible pit, out of
clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established m

And he hath put a new song in my mouth, even praise
God: many shall see it, and fear, and shall trust in

Blessed is that man that maketh the Lord his trust,
respecteth not the proud, nor such as turn aside to

Many, O Lord my God, are thy wonderful works which t
done, and thy thoughts which are to us-ward: they ca
reckoned up in order unto thee: if I would declare a
of them, they are more than can be numbered.

Sacrifice and offering thou didst not desire; mine e
thou opened: burnt offering and sin offering hast th
required.

Then said I, Lo, I come: in the volume of the book i
written of me,

I delight to do thy will, O my God: yea, thy law is
heart.

I have preached righteousness in the great congregat
have not refrained my lips, O Lord, thou knowest.

I have not hid thy righteousness within my heart; I
declared thy faithfulness and thy salvation: I have

concealed thy lovingkindness and thy truth from the
congregation.

Withhold not thou thy tender mercies from me, O Lord
lovingkindness and thy truth continually preserve me

For innumerable evils have compassed me about: mine
have taken hold upon me, so that I am not able to lo
they are more than the hairs of mine head: therefore
faileth me.

Be pleased, O Lord, to deliver me: O Lord, make hast
me.

Let them be ashamed and confounded together that see
soul to destroy it; let them be driven backward and
shame that wish me evil.

Let them be desolate for a reward of their shame tha
me,

POI-35233 pauses. Heavy breathing is heard.

Let all those that seek thee rejoice and be glad in
such as love thy salvation say continually, The Lord
magnified.

But I am poor and needy; yet the Lord thinketh upon
art my help and my deliverer; make no tarrying, O my

The sound of a gun being loaded. Broadcast ends.

-|-|-

< I Double E | ***DNM*** | Seven Vignettes From The Life Of Mackenzie Lee-Crook >

Footnotes
1. Per the Conet Policy, all known shortwave numbers stations have been automatically logged in Foundation databases since 1998.

Seven Vignettes From The Life Of Mackenzie Lee-Crook

< The Hyacinth Hymnal | ***DNM*** | Operation Cannery Row: Excerpts from the Foundation Regional Print Media Archive >

- | - | -

1. Visions Of Sugared Pastry Cooked Up In Clarified Butter

The smell of sweet tea steeping gave the whole house a syrupy, calming fragrance. Grandma's was always full of the kind of senses that stuck in your head for days, that you took back into the real world with you. The smell of the sweet tea and the sound of wind chimes kept Mackenzie from crying when she felt alone. None of the people at school knew about this. They were all so far away from this place in the Laurel Hill woods.

Here, she rolled dice of hewn stone to predict the weather. Here, she drank fresh-squeezed lemonade that sparked and popped with the flavor of electricity. Here, she tossed written prayers into the fire and read answers in the smoke and ash. They were all the same prayer, really. To leave the world of the mundane, the world of her parents and her grades and getting pushed over on the playground, to leave it behind. To live in *this* world, glimpsing the Everything Under Everything and taking over the little well-decorated downstairs shop. There, her Grandma — frail and old but with a fire in her eyes and a collection of hats to make any churchgoer jealous — entertained Governors, foreigners, executives, pouring tumblers of bourbon with single fat ice cubes. They were there for her collection, "the finest of magic objects in the whole South," she always said.

Some British men showed up more than once. Almost a dozen times over the summer, they came, holed up in the shop for hours of talks.

Mackenzie spent those days alone, rolling her dice, thinking about the things to come.

> *"This contract is an agreement between* ***Florence Crook****,* ***The Marshall, Carter & Dark Acquisitions, Imports and Exports Corporation - New York Branch*** *(hereafter referred to as* Marshall, Carter & Dark*) and* ***The Seven Society****."*

2. Don't Expect Them To Thank Or Forgive You

Why in the name of Hell am I here? was all Mackenzie could think to herself, leaned against the wall, punch in hand, as some horrible Beastie Boys song blared over the too-loud speakers. She made the critical error of not wearing waterproof mascara, but she wasn't expecting it to hurt so bad to look at Lisa, hair done up, makeup perfect, dancing raucously with the Clemson-bound senior quarterback.

She wasn't expecting to spend her senior prom thinking only of the past, but the memories wouldn't let her be, they hadn't since she went away. The first secret hand-holding under the table at lunch. The long afternoons Mackenzie spent helping Lisa fill her Lisa Frank notebook with spells, incantations, and sketches. The scandalous rush of kissing the cheer captain behind the risers on some starry Friday night after a Bulldogs game.

The good memories always came with company. Her sudden disappearance at winter break. The night Mackenzie drove the three miles to her house in the cold December night and threw pebbles at Lisa's window. The hope when she showed her face in the window, the feeling of it coming crashing back to earth when she whispered, shuddering. *"My father. He knows. About everything. He read my notebook, Mac."*

No more phone calls. No more kisses beneath the bleachers. No more interwoven spells and locked hands.

Just her. Walking out of the hall alone, after watching her first love

kiss the prom king. Thank God for graduation.

> *"Under the terms of this agreement, after the death or retirement of Florence Crook, her grand-daughter **Mackenzie-Lee Crook** will assume responsibility for Acquisitions, Imports and Exports (as defined in §A¶12) for the Seven Society in Florida."*

3. The Fellowship Of Hell

Mackenzie's roommate came back to the dorm, still groggy from her morning class. She stepped into the room and her sleepy eyes, for a moment, didn't perceive the difference. But she snapped into attention when she saw the bottom bunk was stripped bare. Mackenzie's half of the closet was cleared out, and her desk was bare but for a handwritten note. She picked it up. "Dropped out. Sorry."

> **Poem For My Grandmother On The Occasion Of Her Death** *by ML-C*
>
> *It was two weeks before your ninety-forth Birthday and*
> *You "slipped the surly bonds of earth and touched the face of God"*
> *(As they say)*
>
> *Peggy Noonan didn't know a lot of things, and one was that*
> *you already had.*
>
> *That in the hawthorn-breaks on your tiring-house The Holy Ghost rushed in to*
> *finish your work.*
>
> *But even Godlike reason and capability*
> *can't quite beat a Crook when there's*
> *work to be done.*

4. (Both Of Us Do)

After months of asking her to get a drink after every meeting of the Southern United States Extranormal Organization Cooperation Treaty Enactment Task Force (because you couldn't get more than three Foundation and U.S. government people in a room without a long acronym spontaneously appearing), Mackenzie was mostly doing it for the running gag at this point. So when the relatively cute Foundation press officer said "yes," it caused a nontrivial amount of surprise.

When she actually showed up at The Bull (and on time, even), it was an even bigger one. After three or four gin fizzes, though, nothing in the world was capable of surprising her, she figured. They walked out in the muggy Gainesville night, laughing and leaning on each other for support. When they got to Kate's door, she got a look in her eyes Mackenzie couldn't recognize.

"Listen, I," the anxious Kate, with the stammering and the wavering voice, was back, "this was tremendous, you're really special. I'm engaged." Mackenzie narrowed her eyes and almost wanted to laugh. I guess there was still a way to surprise her. Kate continued. "I mean…I was. Years ago. Anne. She thinks I'm dead. Fuck, I don't even know why I'm telling you this, it's not —"

Mackenzie put her pointer finger to Kate's lips and stared right in at her eyes. She gave the girl whose doorstep she was standing on a long kiss, feeling the warm hum of the alcohol, hearing the sound of crickets. She pulled away after ages.

"We've all lost people, Kate. You don't get into this game we're in without something being a bit fucked up with your story." Kate smirked, a bit sadly, at that. Mackenzie laughed. "So, am I coming in or not?"

5. I Double E, Con't

When she opened her eyes, everything was blurry. Trusses and towers of light, pure and white, surrounded them. They were the only things visible in the buzzing dark. Kate was feeling falling-down drunk, like her thoughts worked but her limbs weren't quite on the same page, moving slowly and then all at once. She stumbled and

Mackenzie held her up for support.

"Where the hell are we?" Kate asked, slurring.

"The Everything Under Everything. Points of light. Come with me." She seemed totally unaffected by the disorienting surroundings. "There's stuff here you can't quite see yet. But you can see the exits. This is how my people get around."

Kate looked up, questioningly. "Marshall, Carter and Dark?" Mackenzie made a derisive noise with her breath. "No, not those morons. *My people*, of which you are one, now, if you'd like to be. When you're walking outside and there's a breeze that lasts just a second, rustling the leaves with surprising force, you know that thing?"

"Yeah."

"Someone's traveling via leyline, right through you. Here. Hold tight." Mackenzie felt Kate complying with her request as she pulled her into one of the pillars of light. Blinded for a second, they blinked their eyes and saw a full moon reflected on the waters of the Gulf. The two of them could see the glowing line of fireflies, floating out over the water into the horizon.

Kate collapsed into the sand, exhausted. Mackenzie sat down to hold her there. "Welcome to Horseshoe Beach. I used to go here all the time as a little girl. That leyline goes straight over the water to Panacea."

Kate's eyes flashed with recognition at the phrase. "There used to be a church here." Mackenzie nodded in recognition. "Yeah, there was. My people did some foul, evil things before figuring out the right way to go."

"Mac…Who are your people, exactly?" There was a hint of fear in Kate's voice.

"Do you love me, Kate?"

"Of course. Every day."

"Will you, no matter what?"

"Yes." Silence for a few seconds. "Who are your people?"

"The Order of the Hyacinth." The words floated in the air. Kate closed her eyes and leaned into Mackenzie's embrace, listening to her heart racing. They sat, no sound but the lapping of the waves, for a very long time.

6. Excerpt From The Enigma Variations Demo Tape

Download file

7. We Are Cursed

Glass broke with another bullet, raining over the heads of the two women crouched below it. Mackenzie finished reciting her verse into the radio. "Thou art my help and my deliverer; make no tarrying, O my God." If she was going to die, she was going to die broadcasting the word of the Lord, for Christ's sake.

Kate, bruise on her face and a tear in her suit-jacket sleeve, pistol almost empty, whispered frantically to her. "Hey, not that I don't appreciate the poetry of the fucking shortwave suicide note but you are all sorts of fucking magic. I am not going to die in Goddamn ass-fucking Dixie County. Find a fucking leyline and let's teleport out of here."

"I need a dried flower, an hour of time, and leylines aren't every—"

More gunshots. A scream. Who knows how many they had left. "I love you, Mac, and I need you to improvise. Quickly."

Mackenzie, eyes wide, searched around the shack they were holed up in. Her eyes settled back on her partner.

"And I love you, Kate, but you really can't pull off a pocketsquare."

She yanked the stupid floral-patterned cloth out of Kate's jacket pocket. *The spirits better be feeling generous today,* Mackenzie thought, flicking open her lighter. The fabric caught flame, smoke making waves, finding nothing.

Kate looked on the verge of tears. "No line?"

"No." Mackenzie had never tried what she was about to try. But as the noise of assault rifles got closer, now was not the time for precedent. "But I'm improvising." She grabbed Kate's hand and looked at her. "Think very intently about somewhere very safe. Also, I'm very sorry for what I'm about to do."

She pressed Kate's hand right into the heart of the flame. She screamed. Everything went white.

They snapped back into reality with an ear-piercingly loud crack and fell in a heap on hardwood floor. They were inside a house. Snow was piled outside the window. They were far away from Florida. The two of them were covered in cuts, like they'd jumped through a window. Kate's hand looked horrible. But the look on her face was worse.

"Oh god. Oh god. Mackenzie, I didn't have time to think, I didn't mean to —"

Mackenzie didn't have to ask what she meant. Because a woman was descending the stairs, looking at Kate like she was seeing a ghost.

All the breath went out from Kate's body. "Anne."

Operation Cannery Row: Excerpts from the Foundation's Regional Print Media Archive

< Seven Vignettes From The Life Of Mackenzie Lee-Crook | ***DNM*** | An Overview of Foundation Journals Published in May 2017, So You Can Remember How Fucking Lucky We Were Then >

- | - | -

OPERATION CANNERY ROW

Keeping Our Friends Close, Whether They Like It Or Not

As part of our continued effort to ensure our partners in SUSEOCT *(Southern United States Extranormal Organization Cooperation Treaty)* are maintaining integrity and the safety and security of the American populace are protected, the FBI's UIU maintains information regarding our operational partners in the extranormal containment sphere. Our efforts to monitor the SCP Foundation comprise *Operation Cannery Row*.

The following documents were recovered from Unusual Incident 24,122 (UI-24122), in which a filing cabinet originally located in Foundation Regional Headquarters in Gainesville, Fla. spontaneously appeared in a UIU facility in Omaha, Neb. on Aug 14, 20 . The filing cabinet contained a portion of the Foundation's Regional Print Media Archive, containing newspaper clippings, advertisements, flyers and other print media the Foundation confiscated, censored or otherwise removed from public view in North Florida. The filing cabinet and most of its contents were heavily damaged in the Unusual Incident, leaving only 558 documents at least

partially readable.

Excerpts of File

Download Complete File (PDF, 3.7 GB)

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< Seven Vignettes From The Life Of Mackenzie Lee-Crook | ***DNM*** | An Overview of Foundation Journals Published in May 2017, So You Can Remember How Fucking Lucky We Were Then >

An Overview of Foundation Journals Published in May 2017, So You Can Remember How Fucking Lucky We Were Then

< Operation Cannery Row: Excerpts from the Foundation's Regional Print Media Archive | ***DNM***

- | - | -

From: **Titus Solowski** *(fpcs.dleif.253|ikswolost#fpcs.dleif.253|ikswolost)*
Subject: **An Overview of Foundation Journals Published in May 2017, So You Can Remember How Fucking Lucky We Were Then**
Date: **May 18, 2022 2:10 PM EST**
To: **Layla Houghton** *(fpcs.dleif.253|nothguohl#fpcs.dleif.253|nothguohl)*

Hey Layla. Montenegro is lovely this time of year. 64 and sunny right now. Since we're both doing a lot of sitting around on our asses waiting for our various Chosen Ones to appear again, I thought I'd look back at what we were doing just five years ago, before Kate and our pal **`Thaummy`** fucked everything up. Look at all this trivial shit we got to care about before it all went south.

I had an article in this one! It was about using radioactive tracer particles in **`2972`** and **`2830`** to see if we could hunt down Penrose. Not necessary these days, obviously. Haven't seen him since he did us a favor with that pastor a few years back.

Back issues upon back issues of this one and nothing before last year mentioned Thaumiel. We kept this shit under wraps for way too long. Once she started visiting

us, elevating our backwater Task Force to the forefront of the global Foundation mission, we should've had our best folks working on the Aleph problem. Now half the world knows. Christ.

Hey, you're in that Narf thing's range! Spotted anything with that? I know a lot of low-priority skips are slipping through the cracks with the crisis.

I hope this gets through to you. I know even email is starting to get patchy thanks to the fucking Aleph Screwjob. Shortwave with everyone listening just isn't the same. I love you so damn much. Don't let the Northwest rain get you down.

—Titus

From: **Layla Houghton** *(fpcs.dleif.253|nothguohl#fpcs.dleif.253|nothguohl)*
Subject: **Re: An Overview of Foundation Journals Published in May 2017, So You Can Remember How Fucking Lucky We Were Then**
Date: **May 18, 2022 7:59 PM EST**
To: **Titus Solowski** *(fpcs.dleif.253|ikswolost#fpcs.dleif.253|ikswolost)*

You're probably gonna want to try plaintext. I'm guessing the PDFs you sent weren't supposed to look like this?

Until IT gets that DNS routing thing that doesn't send stuff right through the middle of NA and the center of the Aleph…situation…it's best to just avoid complex information.

And I miss you too, Titus. Though, of course, if Thaumiel really is done talking to us and the pencil-pushers are right, physical distance is probably a few years away from not mattering. Or something.

Of course, it's hard to tell you the exact implications of the Aleph force, since **072** is bringing up the old cover-story scary campfire tale schlock instead of the collected research on my terminal. If anyone over there can get the latest updates from the committee, send them our way? Lot of time for reading while we're on McTiriss stakeout. She knows how to take her damn time, that one.

- your Layla

From: **Layla Houghton** *(fpcs.dleif.253|nothguohl#fpcs.dleif.253|nothguohl)*
Subject: **Re: Re: An Overview of Foundation Journals Published in May 2017, So You Can Remember How Fucking Lucky We Were Then**
Date: **May 19, 2022 11:01 AM EST**
To: **Titus Solowski** *(fpcs.dleif.253|ikswolost#fpcs.dleif.253|ikswolost)*

Never mind. Thaumiel just told me it's all…She said we're in a simulated timeline she was using to test a solution to the Aleph problem. She said she didn't know what would happen to us when she put it away or if we were real.

She said she was sorry. She cried. She went away.

So. Love you, babe.

In the Aleph Room, in 2017, Mary Nakayama closed the emails and filed another branching path of probability as a dead end, a doomed universe. Another course of action that wouldn't work. Another splinter future she was using to test a fix.

It's been years. Years of secrecy. Of tentative tests, manipulating whole pocket worlds. Stuck in this **fucking room**. Trying to stop the terror she's about to cause.

"I didn't mean to break it," she says, to no one. "I just wanted to keep everyone safe."

She's been sitting at this replica of her old desk, peering into possible futures and seeing disaster in every one[123456], since she ascended. "Ascended." She was a manic 27-year-old who saw a hole in the universe and decided to use it for herself instead of doing the right thing and sending it up. Now she was paralyzed with power. Stuck in this place that contains all places, thinking about what to do.

It was time to stop waiting. It was time to stop hiding.

She stood up and looked at the confines of the room. An office with no windows that shifted and moved to show her whatever information she needed. A terminal that only told her the ways things would go wrong.

A prison for a stupid girl who thought she could play God, she thought. *I need help.*

On May 18, 2017, Mary Nakayama left her prison.

This is what happened next.

After this I looked, and there before me was a door standing open in heaven. And the voice I had first heard speaking to me like a trumpet said, “Come up here, and I will show you what must take place after this.”

At once I was in the Spirit, and there before me was a throne in heaven with someone sitting on it.

And the one who sat there had the appearance of jasper and ruby. A rainbow that shone like an emerald encircled the throne.

- **Revelation 4:1-3 (NIV)**

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< Operation Cannery Row: Excerpts from the Foundation's Regional

Footnotes

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The Ballad of Region 352

The following document was recovered from the field journal of LMTF 352-Dalet agent Isaac Allred-Smith during a routine documentation audit. At the request of Regional Director Kate McTiriss, it has been reproduced below "for the general amusement of Foundation staff." Agent Allred-Smith has declined to comment.

Show transcript

"The Ballad of Region 352"

Fire don't seem quite right tonight
Can't hear it crackle and pop.
Got a new red light glowing over the town;
It ain't never gonna stop.

Not sure just what I'm doing
Or where I'm s'posed to be.
Foundation says, and I guess it's true,
It's the perfect place for me.

Oh, Dixieland Nightmare Magic
Just a little bit funny, just a little bit tragic.
If small-town politics interest you,
We've got an opening here in three-fifty-two.

Got a call in from the town today
Said Pastor Lewis died.
But the cemetery's full of ministers
Guess we'll see him on the other side.

Walked to Cross City City City City Hall
Felt just like a dream.
Think I'll try my hand playin' baseball
There's an opening on the team.

Oh, Dixieland Nightmare Magic
Just a little bit funny, just a little bit tragic.
If small-town politics interest you,
We've got an opening here in three-fifty-two.

Got Baptists and Catholics by the score,
Got anomalies knockin' on our door,
Got a church that's crawling the ocean floor,
Got a passive-aggressive holy war.

Oh, Dixieland Nightmare Magic
Just a little bit funny, just a little bit tragic.
If small-town politics interest you,
We've got an opening here in three-fifty-two.

Doctors of the Church Hub

It was said that in ancient times, as it is today, that there were a great many expunged that walked the world - not all creatures of flesh and blood, but machines, objects, places, even words and ideas, that knew not the laws of man nor God and caused great ruination and confusion wherever they roamed. To protect all men, believer and heathen alike, the Ancient Temple was founded, to secure, contain, and protect those terrors that threatened the safety of all.

But this, the saints say, was the sin of the Ancients; not that they did not fear what might come to pass if they were careless, but that they feared it too much. For they kept the secrets of the expunged to themselves, saying to themselves 'Man is a timid and superstitious animal; if he knows that these things exist, he will be consumed by terror and chaos will reign around the world. Let us do our work in secret, then, and let none learn of these things, that they may live unafraid.'

But no secret can be kept forever; and in time, many others learned that the expunged existed, and rather than being fearful, they became covetous of the Ancient Temple, and created their own heathen temples, seeking to make and take such things for themselves. And from this conflict arose the Great Breach; and when the masses of the expunged found themselves loosed at once upon the world, a world which knew not that such things could exist and stood against them like a leaf stands against the hurricane, then no stone was left atop another.

And when the flames had passed, those priests of the Ancient Temple who yet lived saw a world that would

never again be as it had been before. And they said to themselves, 'What shall we do now? Mankind has no chance to regain what he has lost if the knowledge of how to combat the expunged dies with us. How can we few ever undo such a great calamity?'

And they saw the Lord Bright approach them; and a great commotion arose through the crowd, for they thought Him dead. And the Lord spoke with a great voice, and He said; 'Shut the fuck up for ten seconds and I'll tell you.'

-Everett 1:1-9

Doctors of the Church Tales:

- **A Canticle For Bright**
- **By One Iota**
- **Quid Est Non Scitum**
- **Though I Walk Through The Valley**
- **Placere Non Trinus**
- **Deus Vult**
- Indwelling of Bright
- **The Lord Judge**

Indwelling of Bright

Besides the Monasteries of the Holy Foundations and the towns of civilians, the villages of the D-Caste formed the remainder of civilised land. Surrounded by the walled garrisons manned by the Omega Guards, D-Caste men and women lived and bred within their villages.

At the outskirts of the D-Caste village of Gock, four D-Castlings were engaged in a folk game. Three of them were children and they stared intently at the fourth, a teenager close to adulthood. The fourth D-Castling was relatively carefree, watching his three friends intently as they struggled not to blink. But in the end, it was inevitable.

The D-Castling on the furthest left blinked; his eyes made a quick sweep downwards. The fourth D-Castling noticed it, and quickly arm-locked the blinker. The other two D-Castlings did not bother to carry on, and similarly blinked.

"Second Boy D-37428353 has lost again!" The fourth D-Castling declared, his left arm still gripping onto Second Boy D-37428353's head.

"Boy D-48572946, let go of me already!" Second Boy D-37428353 pleaded to the eldest of the lot.

"Yeah, you're so big." Another D-Castling chimed in.

"That's why I get to play the Expunged! If you cannot handle me, they will really expunge you castlings." Boy D-48572946 retorted, finally letting go of Second Boy D-37428353.

"Ca-castlings… y-you're also a castling!" Second Boy D-37428353 protested.

"Not for long. I'm scheduled to be designated tonight!" Boy

D-48572946 reminded his peers.

"Castlings, stop taking the Holy Procedures in vain! The Omega Guards have warned you for this already!" a cracked voice yelled furiously.

The three younger D-Castlings cowered behind the most senior among them, Boy D-48572946. A middle-aged D-Caste woman of stocky stature was carrying a basketful of vegetables and some tree bark.

"Mom, we're only preparing for our future service to the Holy Foundation!" Boy D-48572946 shouted towards his distant mother, D-83756246.

"If you kids got time to ape Holy Procedures, help out in the harvest!" D-83756246 grumbled.

"Mom, is that all from the harvest?" Boy D-48572946 asked, pointing at the basket, "And tree bark again?"

"The Holy Foundation needs more sustenance. We'll make do with all that can be allotted to us." D-83756246 said, "And son, come with me. A last chance to speak before tonight."

Boy D-48572946 parted with his friends and walked off with his mother.

"Ah, I can't wait to get out of here. There must be plenty at the Monasteries," Boy D-48572946 remarked. "The food is getting littler by the seasons, and there is the edict that prohibit us from culling our numbers after that incident last winter."

"Son, you know not of the Holy Foundation's ways. Our starvation is the Holy Foundation's love towards us, the D-Caste."

"But we are sinners, mom. We descended from sinners."

D-83756246 paused for a moment and contemplated. She then prepared to utter her response to that.

The hours went by, and it was nighttime in Gock. At the centre of the village, the Orientation Rite was underway. All D-Castes in the village were gathered, singing their folk hymns and dancing the ancient dances of their ancestors. Two D-Caste women tended to a fire, where multiple branding irons were left to be heated up. Occasionally, the women would hurl books to fuel the fire, as it was customary of Gock to use paper to maintain the fire. All the adult D-Castes were in tattered orange jumpsuits, with torn short sleeves and opened at the chest. The Castlings donned a random assortment of loincloths and rags that covered whatever the individual deemed fit.

A platoon of Omega Guards stood at the periphery, with their short swords and crossbows on hand. More Omega Guards stood watch from the battlements of their garrison, viewing the situation from telescopes and their archers on standby. The D-Castes paid the Omega Guards no mind, enjoying themselves without a care.

The crowd of D-Castes surrounded a dais protruding from the ground, and an elderly D-Caste woman in the same tattered orange jumpsuit surveyed the crowd of fellow villagers with eagle-like eyes. To her fellow villagers, she was their spiritual leader. She lived long and represented great wisdom, or whatever the Holy Foundation allowed her to have. She did have a designation, but villagers called her 'Elder' out of respect. The Omega Guards stationed there did not care about what the D-Caste called one of their own, as long they fulfilled the Holy Foundation's directives.

In due time, the Elder judged that all were accounted for. She stepped down from her dais and took out a scroll from the sash that held her robes together.

"SHUT THE **FUCK UP!**" The Elder yelled, and the village full of D-Castes halted their merrymaking. The eyes of the D-Castes were on the Elder, who uttered the words from the **`Nameless Pastor's Orientation to the D-Caste`**.

"Grace to the Lord Bright and all His Saints and Prophets." The Elder continued, "We are gathered here to celebrate the designation of our Castlings. For those Castlings are now men and women. All that is left is to be designated as men and women."

The Elder's voice grew louder. Meanwhile, the D-Caste women took out the branding irons from the flames and walked towards the dais.

"A designation to make our Castlings men and women, and they will assume the responsibility of men and women! The responsibility to cleanse our lineages of our forefathers' sins! The sins of our ancestors' heathenry! The heathenry of which we redeem ourselves through our labour!"

"The responsibility to cleanse our lineages of our forefathers' sins! The sins of our ancestors' heathenry! The heathenry of which we redeem ourselves through our labour!" The other D-Castes repeated the mantra of their people, a mantra spake of since their ancestors' repentance and submission to the Holy Foundation.

As the villagers' chants died down, the Elder began reading the contents of her scroll.

"Only one Castling for this night! 18 years ago, a male was born to D-48572946 and D-83756246. Tonight, Boy D-48572946 will be designated. No longer will he be a boy of his father. For he shall become a man. Boy D-48572946, step up and claim your designation."

Boy D-48572946 walked up toward the dais, wearing only a loincloth. The crowd of villagers cheered him on, as he laid down on the dais, face-up and spreadeagled. The D-Caste women held the branding irons above his chest and right forearm.

"Boy D-48572946, do you accept the responsibility of a man and take on the same duty as your father, and his father before him, in service to the Holy Foundation?" asked the Elder.

"Yes, Elder." replied Boy D-48572946.

"So be it. In the name of the Lord Bright, designate the D-Caste!" The Elder declared.

The two robed D-Caste women quickly lowered their branding irons; the white-hot metal made contact with his flesh. Boy D-48572946 let out a pain-filled yell, which was drowned out in the cacophony of

cheers and applause from the D-Castes. The child's mother — D-83756246 — only covered her mouth at the necessary act, eyes downcast. The Omega Guards remained firm at their station, having seen the oft-repeated Rite many times.

The Elder gave a signal to the two D-Caste women, and they lifted the branding irons. Steam shot from the man's flesh, leaving identical darkened marks on his right wrist and chest. It would henceforth be his designation. No longer was he a boy of another D-Caste, for he would be a D-Caste in his own right. The following designation was branded onto him:

> D-34029132

"Henceforth, in the name of the Lord Bright, D-34029132 has been designated!" The Elder declared solemnly.

"D-34029132!" The crowd chanted.

The newly-anointed D-34029123 stood up from the dais and observed his fellow villagers cheering on in congratulations. The Elder draped an orange jumpsuit over D-34029132, and he quickly donned the marker of his adulthood. All this time, the Omega Guards looked on with unchanging faces.

"SHUT THE **FUCK UP!**" The Elder yelled again to call for attention, "The Holy Foundation has called for the D-Caste to perform a Trial of Service. The D-Caste who are descendants of sinners and heathens! The D-Caste who must repent for their ancestors' sins and heathenry! The D-Caste who support the Holy Foundation with their body!"

"The D-Castes who are descendants of sinners and heathens! The D-Castes who must repent for their ancestors' sins and heathenry! The D-Castes who will support the Holy Foundation with their bodies!" The crowd of D-Castes repeated the Elder's words, like sheep to a shepherd.

"Who answers the call of the Holy Foundation?" asked the Elder, "The Holy Foundation seeks only one D-Caste from our village."

D-34029132, who was still beside the dais, raised his hand without thought. Some within the crowd let out breaths of relief at the newly-recognised adult's unusual initiative. Teardrops trickled from the eyes of his mother, D-83756246. The Omega Guards marched forward, with D-Castes stepping back reverently before their social betters. D-34029132 smiled at the Omega Guards and walked away under their escort.

Many seasons after, D-34029132 remained in his Trial of Service where he lived out his days in the Overwatch Cathedral. The last leg of his final task was underway, and his body was prepared for it. As per the Holy Doctors' decree, D-34029132 had fasted for countless days until he was but a shell of a man. All of his teeth, fingernails and toenails had been pulled out as well. That was the protocol and mercy of the Holy Doctors, for many succumbed to temptations and culled themselves. For a D-Caste to cull oneself or fellow D-Castes without the approval of the Holy Doctors is a sin.

But D-34029132 was calm, for he was so close to seeing his dearest wish fulfilled. As the Omega Guards tied him down with great chains, a Cardinal Doctor spoke to him.

"Do you know why you have been brought here today, D-34029132?"

"Yes, my lord." As he spoke, the D-Caste recalled one of his mother's last words to him, now but a distant memory:

"Yes, we are sinners. But Lord Bright loves us as well. In the Holy Procedures Lord Bright personally passed down, only the D-Castes may be indwelled by Him."

Dr Gears Storytime Entries

Introduction

In many ways, I question my entry here. To even attempt to put myself in the same realm of Black Fedora and Josef K seems like a terrible sacrilege. Still, I have been told that my little chat stories have merit as creepypasta, so in the spirit of greater entertainment, I now post them here for your enjoyment.

Reentry

Swimmer

The Vault

Influenza

Meteor

Late Night

Peeled

Knives

Jaywalk

Devotion

Feverish

Cold

Alone

Mice

Elevator

Potty

Life Saver

Bloody

Mad Love

Sa Jin (Photo)

Breaker 1-9

Delia

Climber

Shy

Occasionally, I get ambitions and write something above and beyond short creepypasta. Here are stories that slip over in to the "short story" realm. Longer, but I hope still worth the price of admission.

Stitches

Love/Hate

Reentry

Everything was screaming. The dials, the readouts, everything was screaming, but he noticed none of it. What he noticed was the heat. He was burning. Not on fire, but inside, burning with a searing heat that was cooking him inside out. What's more, the tiny capsule was so sealed, so perfectly fitted, he couldn't even twist or writhe to burn in a new position. The radio squawked and squealed twice before going silent, the tiny plate starting to warp as the shoddy, overwhelmed heat shield continued to buckle under the reentry force, the flames licking white and golden past his tiny porthole.

Still, the heat was not what filled the man with fear, what made him afraid of not only his immediate and untimely demise, but what may possibly be waiting beyond it. The baking flames did not form a total wall over the tiny porthole fixed over his sweating, softening face. They divided in the middle, blocked by the hard, sharp point of a chin.

The face watched him, staring, vague suggestions of limbs holding to the sides of the window. The face watched, even with no eyes, no mouth, the blank, vapid nothing still so hellishly suggestive. It watched, smiling a nothing smile as the tiny bit of grit burned up in the thin, searing atmosphere…

and its breath fogged to frost on the burning, bubbling window.

Swimmer

The water was cool, if a bit murky. The lake was the color of tea, owing to its past as a logging route. Great banks of long tree trunks would bob and sink, staining the lake. At least, that's what the boy's grandpa said. He dove off the dock, slipping into the cool water as easy as an otter, his sunburned skin drinking in the cooling water.

The lake was very deep, and quickly he was over the vast, deep edges, paddling softly with the easy grace attainable only by the happy few who know the width and depth of summer break. He turned over to his back, the murky, tea-colored haze buoying him up on billows of cool water. He flicked his hands with a careless annoyance as he skirted a patch of loosed seaweed, sending it bobbing away. He watched the clouds, listening to the empty hum of the lake in his ears.

He slowly noticed more patches floating about him, and bobbed to vertical, wincing as his feet kicked and brushed the slippery, brown strands of weed. The strands twitched and clutched with their soggy strength, and he sighed as he started to plot a course out of the muck.

Deep below, the twitching strands stirred the muck they were rooted so deeply in. The mud puffed… then bulged, rising softly in a great mound. Then it opened eyes, great sludgy orbs the size of cars. It slowly rose, freeing its gnashing maw, and drifted up to see what its feelers had found.

The Vault

The door was heavy, and old, but still strong. It sealed the passage tight, blocking even light from around its edges. The hall was claustrophobic, and in near total darkness but for the dim, drooling light from the far-off stair. He beat on the door again, feeling the thick reverberation bounce through its solid core. He could try and pick the lock, or bash it in, but that was not the way. Not their way, never. Respect was always foremost, even at the utmost end of need.

He folded back on his haunches, his sigh turning the dust on the long-abandoned floor. He looked back, at the dim stair, and considered again just going back, letting it go. He thought this way for a long time, then stood with a new, more burning resolve. He went and knocked again… and again… and again. He hammered on the door. He beat on the door. He slammed his fists over and over, thundering against its mocking, ageless weight. He beat his fists until they split, spilling blood that looked like deeper, slicker smears of darkness onto the unrelenting wood. He threw himself against it, biting, clawing, gouging at the wood like something rabid and in pain.

Finally, he slowed, then stopped, pulling away from the blank wood with an almost sheepish slink. He folded back up again, letting the split, reeking flesh stop pulsing and start to knit over. He turned the black, pulsing mass that gave him sight to the door again, split tongues lolling as he chastised himself for his reckless, misplaced hatred. They had gone, those many, and hidden deep in their vaults. This may be the last, the very last flake of rotten flesh left of their abandoned body. Their endless impatience had called to them for correction, so…they had come. Man had hidden deep in their vaults, their short-sightedness leaving them no retreat, no escape.

Now they waited, delaying their final lessons with every futile breath… But to worry and to lose one's temper was not the way of

the People. He resolved that, once ages had turned the door to dust, he would show them the folly of hope.

One eon at a time.

Influenza

I've been sick for days now. That bubbling nausea that fills your throat, makes you feel as if you're about to throw up every time you burp or so much as breathe out your mouth. Holding the toilet, resting my head on the cool, cool porcelain, I really question why in the hell I don't make myself throw up and just get it over with. It's just not something I can do…thinking of forcefully gagging myself…ugh, it's almost worse then I feel now. Almost.

Suddenly it hits me, and this is it, this is IT. I feel that slick, sour spit coat my throat, my belly tightening up as I push my head over the bowl and spit. For a split second before I explode, I realize this thing has not been cleaned in a while. Then I vomit. Hard. Mucus-rich and acidic, it pours out in a hard, jetting stream from my mouth and nose, burning my nasal passages like fire. It hits so hard, it feels like it should be coming out my eyes, too.

I vomit again, and again, the third time bringing up just some thin, reeking slime, and I gasp a bit, getting my breath back before the next wave. I pitch forward again, eyes tearing as they squeeze shut, and I feel another hot jet of filth pour out. Opening my eyes, it seems…different. A tarry black, and there are…things bobbing in it. I don't have time to look too hard, before two more hard retches double me over the bowl. These are more pinkish, and I can definitely see some kind of meat in these. Hamburger, maybe…

More vomit, more oddness. I don't remember eating any kind of jelly, especially cherry. It's starting to hurt, a deep spike each time. God, how much can a person throw up? When did I eat noodles that long…or that big? The goo in it is getting thicker too, and pink… starting to feel at least a little better. Ugh…when did I eat a balloon? My belly is feeling better now, really light. Jesus…whatever that was is floating still…almost looks like it's pulsing, or beating…going to have to move to the sink, toilet's almost full. Feeling better now… hungry, actually. Very hungry. Starving. Ravenous.

I feel so empty.

Meteor

The oil smoke rose as if it would never stop. Boiling from the massive hole in both the earth and the pipeline, it had blotted out the sun hours ago, and still showed no sign of stopping. As Tyler suited up to go down and inspect the damage, he mused for the hundredth time since the accident that his was truly a blessed life. Not in the arctic for more then a month, and after a disastrous incident in Texas preceding that transfer, he suddenly gets reports of an explosion on the line. Then he's told that it's not just an explosion, but a *meteor* has impacted the line. His superiors were still trying to determine the exact probability of that event when he'd left to check the damage.

Sucking on the canned, stale air and slowly easing his way down the safety line to the bottom of the hole, he shook his head. The goddamn pump control workman had been both drunk and asleep, and had let the line belch oil for nearly six minutes before someone had finally booted in the door and manually shut down the line. What's more, the crater hadn't overflown, which meant the hell-rock had popped into another line of some kind, or a natural cave…or god forbid, some kind of underground river. Tyler winced, already feeling the ax on his neck, made of lost profits, damages, bad press, and the need for a scapegoat.

The heat steadily rose as he got closer to the bottom, and by the time he released the security cable and stood, he was sweating in his containment suit. The thick, sludgy oil was nearly up to his knees, a black pond with a huge, round bulge in its center. He stumbled forward, pulled by the vague current of the oil as it slowly oozed away in to…whatever it was under the big rock. He approached slowly, judging the rock to be nearly ten feet tall under its coat of oil and sludge. Oddly rounded, it looked like a massive, lumpy eight ball. That he was now positioned directly behind it was an irony that Tyler refused to appreciate.

Leaning closer, the oil smoke oddly not as dense this close to the bottom, he tried to spot where the oil was flowing out. He put one suited arm down into the murk, careful to keep his mask clear of the ooze, and felt the unmistakable suction…but not down. The oil was being pulled up…into the meteor. He moved his hand a bit closer to the massive stone, thinking it was some vague trick of the current, when he finally noticed where most of the smoke was coming from. The billowing, black column of smoke wasn't issuing from the oil… but from the top of the stone. Four great holes were belching the fumes to the sky from inside the stony orb. As he watched, mystified, he saw one the holes quiver, then slowly flex shut for several seconds, before reopening with a fresh blast of smog and grime.

“What in the name…” he started to whisper, before quickly changing to an inarticulate shriek of pain and surprise. His hand was trapped. Tyler's entire world was now defined by this fact. Something hard, and sharp, and crushing was clamped over his hand, and he could not get it free. There was a sudden pause in both the exhaust of smoke and the slurping of oil as the stony mass seemed to savor this new, more substantial feed. Then, it sucked. Hard.

Tyler's last coherent thought vanished as he felt the flesh of his hand being pulled free like a used latex glove.

Late Night

It had been dark for hours, and it was starting to get to him. Sitting at the computer, he'd caught himself glancing more and more times at the nearby window, the space beyond so dark it acted like a weak mirror. He hated having big, black open spaces near him. Childish, he knew, but knowing that didn't lessen the fear of walking past an open, dark doorway in a dimly lit hall. Which was probably part of why he was still up. He clicked off the page he was on and rubbed his eyes. The worst was, as it got darker, every site he browsed seem to take on a slightly sinister edge. Even the bright, garish social network sites seemed to be tools to help illustrate that, even with 184 friends, you are still alone, in the dark.

He leaned back in the chair, sighing as he noticed someone or something walk by the window. Instinctively, his eyes flicked to the computer screen, checking for any incriminating tabs. Probably a deer or something, they did live…he paused, suddenly looking around as if seeing the room for the first time, rocking to his feet hard enough to shake the computer desk.
The thing had had a face.
He was on the second floor.
And the face was back.

In the few seconds he watched, it was the absences that struck the strongest. No nose. No hair. No ears. No lower jaw. The additions were equally horrific, with the teeth, the too-long neck, the vertical mouth and yawning eyes, but it was the missing things that stuck the hardest. He sat, feeling drugged, hypnotized, even as the spidery, too-wide fist rose and pulled back.

The glass exploded in, the sharp slashing pain breaking the spell, but the thing was already there. It grabbed, the skin feeling electric and slimy-cool like a reptile, the last coherent sensation he experienced. The rest were Impressionist: Pulling. Pressure. Tearing. Liquid sliding. Sudden numbness. He finally passed out as

his ribs were being worked slowly and methodically free. Idly, he wondered why it was tossing them in to the hall.

Peeled

The TV was blaring sex and violence, but all she could think about was her damn bubbling arm. She picked at it idly, once again cursing herself for forgetting the sun screen over the weekend. It'd been such a good chance to get Adam to notice her, but she'd just ended up burned and humiliated. She'd been offered some sunblock, but Tammy had been there, snickering some comment involving the term “Casper the virgin ghost”, so she'd rejected it, saying she wanted to work on her tan. Now, if she were any more red, she'd be mistaken for a radish. She picked at the onion-skin flakes on her arms, trying to ignore the odd texture of the bubbled skin.

She kept flipping between channels, trying to ignore the burning itch on her arms, face and body, all of which served to keep the memory of her humiliation crystal clear. She picked at her arm idly, trying to find a rerun of something she hadn't seen, all the while brushing off the liquid and peeled flesh from her arms

wait…liquid?

She looked at her arms, and felt her throat grow paralyzed around a scream. She was bathing in blood. It ran from great, flapping rents in her skin, the flesh peeled and pulled free in thin strips and shallow patches. As she tried to recoil, she saw a flash of bone. She skidded and fell from the couch, the jostling causing the peeled wounds to stretch more. Oddly numb, the rifts continued to ooze blood freely as she scrambled to her feet, starting to hyperventilate. She tried to press the peeled, red flesh back in to the wounds, but they just lolled free with a fresh splash of blood.

She walked gingerly, trying to ease her way across the floor, but every motion seemed to cause the peeling to extend more. She brushed her arm, trying to see the bleeding rents more clearly, and strangled around a scream as a palm-sized patch of flesh pulled and flopped free, blood glistening on the newly freed muscle. She

moaned, hands rising to her face…only to feel it shift like a cheap, ill-fitting mask, the burning, itching pain rising more and more as she started to peel…

Hours later, she hooked a finger under her eyelid, mad pain compelling her to rid herself of the last, traitorous patch of skin.

Knives

He'd never really understood knives and the odd obsession some people had with them. Just little scraps of metal, sharpened and placed in a handle, a knife wasn't all that amazing. He admitted that, yes, for the most part they were given a somewhat overlooked position in life, but placed in the hands of someone with a violent disposition, or faced with an unhappy and carnivorous creature, they could take on near mythic qualities. What's more, they often weren't all that useful in those situations…truly an overrated and undeserving tool.

Take, for example, this young woman. Even in the dark of the basement, where a flashlight or even a match would be much more useful, she brandished the knife as if it could somehow make up for her blindness. Crawling and sobbing, she held the knife out, waving it like a feeler as she pawed for the stairs. He chuckled, watching. Truly an overrated tool. Even if she'd seen a target, what could she do with it really? She shrieked briefly, almost tumbling in to the hole he'd bored in to the basement with.

She'd even come down the stairs with the skinny little blade, the silly thing. He'd tried to be quiet, but the cat had raised a yowling that summoned the girl a bit early. She'd found the body about the same moment he'd bitten out the light bulb, quickly skittering to slam the door before she'd made it up, the sudden darkness tumbling her silly, ill-equipped head back down to the floor. He watched, hooked in to the ceiling, as she flailed about helplessly. His eyes started to glaze with anticipation, the vertical slit of a maw trembling with amusement as he slowly started to lower down, hook by hook.

He'd show her the folly of such inadequate little tools such as knives. He fell beside her, the lower eyepads recording her shock. He'd show her how much better a natural tool is. He readied the knives he was born with.

All six of them.

Jaywalk

There is a way to live well beyond your appointed time. You need a car, preferably something late-model, with a strong body. Newer cars tend to be too light and not do enough damage. Next, you need to find a candidate. It has to be a pedestrian, and it's best to pick younger people, as they have more time left, but not always. You'll have to watch them, if it's late just drive slow and pretend to be lost, but if you have to, make a second sweep by going around the block. You have to do this on a black asphalt road with a clear yellow line. You can ONLY hit a candidate that does at least one of the following,:

Crosses directly across the road at a run, without looking around.
Walks for more than eight feet on the road itself without touching the sidewalk or curb.
Stops walking or sits on the yellow line for more than three seconds.
Trips or falls on any pothole or uneven surface in the road and bleeds because of the fall.
Drops a personal item (key chain, phone, etc.) that shatters, with all the pieces remaining between the yellow line and the sidewalk.

If a candidate does any of these, it's an indicator that they are temporally detached from their “time”. If you hit and kill them with your car before they reach the next cross street, you can swap your time for theirs. If you were going to die tomorrow, but hit a valid candidate who won't die for eight years, you now have their remaining time instead of yours. It's unclear what happens to the candidate's soul, but it's probably not good.

There's a group, mostly old folks, who do this all the time. The founder says he's over two hundred years old, and he looks it. The name is like White Sunrise or something similar. They had a web page for a while, but it appears to be gone now. I remember browsing the forums once, and the name George Russell Weller was being discussed. He apparently screwed up an attempt, and

was being kicked out.

Just be careful out there. I've noticed a lot of older folks skimming around suburbs lately, watching kids rather closely. Stay on the sidewalk, and keep your head down.

Devotion

Your love is cheap. No, really, it is. You say you love, and that you are devoted, that you'd do anything…but what do you do, actually? Candy, flowers, nights out, those are general actions, not expressions of true, devotional love. Look to the Church for real love. The giving of the self, the sacrifice of the physical for the eternal ethereal of love. Sex is just an analog, a tease for that final, eternal leap. That's how I show my love. I show it by taking that which I love with me.

What?

You are just a cut-and-dried little bureaucrat, aren't you? She was not a “target of opportunity” or anything of the sort, and I'll thank you not to speak about Carol that way. Yes, we didn't know each other long, but tell me you haven't fallen in love after a couple days too? I wasn't really expecting to fall for her, it just…happened. Very organic, really. So I invited her over, everything was going great, we were kissing, and I asked to wait a minute while I got something. Everyone gets a little nervous on the cusp of a expression of love, but her hysterics when she saw the knife were a little over the top, I think.

…No, no I don't see anything wrong. She expressed her love for me, with her words, actions…how could I express anything less? How could I do less than express the fullest extent of my love for her? It's not as if I killed her, or anyone, for God's sake!

What do you mean?

No, you deluded simpleton, it's not a perversion. If you cook something, you alter its flavor, the…character, so to speak. Why would I or anyone dilute or distort such a direct, sacred act as the sharing of love with something to vulgar and de-humanizing as cooking. Carol has the taste of nettle flowers and bright, sharp pennies. Cooking would just hide such things. Each part a subtle

variation on the theme…the chest a symphony of textures, the tongue a dense, springing delight, those smooth, delicate fingers…

Alright…ALRIGHT, I'm stopping…sit back down…

…Yes, it's love for each of them. Humanity is not built for monogamy, and I don't feel that restriction is healthy. Each of the beautiful, devoted women you stole from me I love as deeply and truly as any man alive. I spend a fortune on them, with IV drips, bandages, treatments…look at them, not a sore, bruise or laceration on them that was not precisely necessary. As I come to love them, more and more, I take more and more of them to me, but I NEVER let it go too far. Murder is the ultimate sin, and to do so to a loved one…it's unthinkable. They come to see the true, deep joy of giving and love as I do, in time. Molly actually offered her foot to me, weeping tears of joy to give it to me.

So I consume the love and flesh of those I adore? How am I so different from you, except for the purity of expression? How can you call me a psychopath, a pervert, when…

What?

Who? Oh…you…you mean Helen…

Well…I'm human. I mean, I have faults, the same as everyone. I mean…haven't you seen a women and gotten a bit more…*frisky* than normal?

I mean…really…why do you need limbs, when you have Love?

Feverish

The sweat slid in rivers as he burned. Inches from the fan blades, the pounding breeze doing next to nothing to relieve the searing fire in his flesh. Sick for the last two days, Adam's fever had only started to soar over last night, and now he felt as if water would boil in his mouth. Leaning back, he rubbed his temples, trying to decide whether going to bed was worth having to feel his own burning fever-heat reflected back at him by the pillows.

He felt hot and almost pliant, like almost-baked dough. His throat was also a red, burning lump in his neck, with an opening that felt to be the size of a pin prick. Every time he moved, he could feel twitching, shivering shocks jolt down his limbs to swollen, creaking joints. Told to say hydrated, he had a tall glass of icy water next to him. It could have been on the moon, for all the good it did him, as every time he tried to take in anything more substantial then air, he felt like choking.

He tried to take another swallow of water, but his raw throat seemed to clamp shut the second it touched the cool liquid, causing him to gag. He rose, tossing the cup aside, and stumbled in to the kitchen with the vaguely formed thought of getting something hot to drink instead. As he turned to the stove, he saw the place on the wall were he had leaned coming in. He blinked, his overheated brain trying to process what he was seeing.

There was a bloody hand print on the wall, dripping slowly.

He looked down to see his shirt spotted with blood. His pants, his hair, everything was spotted and dripping blood. He started to stumble back out of the kitchen, unable to scream for help around his raw throat, but everyone was gone anyway, run to the store for fresh medicine. He moaned, feeling sharp, shocking pain rocket through his joints with each movement, sending him to his knees. As he looked, a clear fluid started to replace the blood welling from his skin. Then his finger sagged.

It just…flopped, like a wilting flower, the knuckles reversing as easily as if it'd been made of dough. Adam started panting, gently trying to push his finger back up, but it sagged more, then started to drip through his fingers like overheated play dough. He moaned, trying to rise, but found himself stuck. He looked down to see his legs starting to puddle around him, flowing in a glaze of bloody and clear fluid. He watched, barely able to breathe, as a toenail floated out of his shoe.

He groaned, trying to pitch his sagging, flowing body forward, but landed on the floor with a sickening splat. He felt his face start to flow, the soft tissues pooling in to the carpet, his vision starting to distort and blur as his eyes spread like two brown-yolked eggs on to the carpet. As he felt his gums and skull start to sag and mush like old, rotting pumpkins, his one consolation was that, finally, he didn't feel like he was burning anymore.

Alone

Have you ever been Alone? Not just alone for a bit while others are out, or feeling rather isolated at the end of a relationship, but Alone. That special Alone that you feel at 1:25 in the morning, when the whole world is asleep. Nobody to call, no real place to go, even the depths of the Internet unable to turn up even a passing conversation. You suddenly realize how isolated you really, truly are.

The house is louder and quieter at the same time. You'll catch yourself turning on things just to have light, noise, something to fill the space, and sometimes that can work. At least, for a while. Still, that gnawing feeling of Alone keeps creeping in. You could even consider calling someone you know to be asleep, just to hear the sound of another voice. After a while, you'll start getting more…alert.

It's the first over-the-shoulder glance that brings it to the forefront. You'll feel stupid for doing it…but you can't stop it. Maybe you even justify it by looking at something to the side of you…but you're really craning around though your peripheral vision, trying to see what's behind. It's so stupid…but it's that itchy spot in your back that does it, you just keep having the weird urge to look behind you.

Keep doing it.

They only take prey when they're Alone. For some reason, eyes scare them.

Maybe because they don't have any.

Mice

We have such a mouse problem. What's worse, they're stupid. Your average mouse has the common decency to stay hidden 90% of the time, you just find nibbled items and mouse crap. Our mice just wander around, it seems. Step in to the kitchen, and one's running like hell for the stove gap, like he had no idea anyone was in the house. In the bathroom, and one's frozen on the edge of the tub with an “oh shit” look. I run five traps, and get at least one a night, high score is a solid five. Either a testament to my trapping skill, or (more likely) additional evidence of dumb mice.

It was very late, and I'd gotten up to lay down my baby daughter, who had woken up doing her “nobody loves me in the entire world” cry. Again. I was stumbling back to bed, navigating more by memory and that sleepy sixth-sense you get in the dark, when I heard a clacking sound. Our house creaks and groans like a clipper ship, but this was odd. A sort of rhythmic clicking: Clack…clack…clack… clack…

If you've ever used a glue trap before, you already know the sound. It's less common with the standard wood-and-spring traps. It's the sound of a mouse that is stuck and/or crippled, and trying to get away. For about ten seconds I seriously considered just ignoring it and going to bed, but knowing my luck my wife would get up for a drink, step on it, and lose her shit for the rest of the night. So I followed the noise to the kitchen, still only half awake, and clicked on the light. It wasn't a mouse.

Jesus CHRIST it wasn't a mouse.

It had gotten nailed by the stove. It looked like it hadn't even been trying to get the peanut butter, just crawling (Walking? Running?) by the trap and set it off. It'd crawled about thirteen feet in the general direction of the laundry room. I just stood there, dumb with sleep, watching it crawl. The arms were toothpick skinny, ending in little squirming masses that looked like pinworms. Below those were

rows of the same little tentacles, and the legs looked boneless, but they might have been broken. The trap had snapped over the things back, and the metal was sunk in deep. Some kind of clear liquid was oozing around it and leaving a tiny trail.

I think it had a tail, or it might have been three legs. The lower body was wrecked, and just looked like a torn fleshy skirt. The head. The head was disk-shaped and had this kind of random spattering of little back dots on top. They looked like spider eyes. Underneath was the mouth, it looked like an upside-down “Y”. It had a kind of greasy looking fur all over except for the head. The clacking came when it tried to crawl. It would reach out and pull, but the trap would catch on something in its back, lift up, then fall. The thing couldn't have been much bigger then a kitten.

I didn't know what to do. I just…froze, kinda. Some people can stomp a mouse, easy as swatting a fly. My dad can. I can't. I just…I can't, and I couldn't then. I just watched it, assuming I was dreaming or something. I thought maybe I could try and grab it and throw it outside or something, but if it bit me or touched me, I'm pretty sure I would lose it. I thought again of whacking it with something, or stomping it, or something, but I just watched it. Finally I grabbed a broom and just kind of…brushed it over to the trash area.

It just wallowed there, on its side. I'm pretty sure it didn't know what was going on. Anyway, I pushed the trash can in front of it and went back to bed. It seems retarded now, but at the time it just seemed like what I could do. I figured I'd just deal with it in the morning. I was pretty sure I was still half dreaming, and that it was just a screwed-up mouse that I wasn't seeing right. I laid in bed for about an hour, then got up to go look at the thing again.

It was gone, and the basement door was open a crack. I was honestly relieved, I didn't have to deal with it now. Then, I thought of stepping on it in the dark, or slipping down the steps, and sighed. So, I opened the door and pulled on the light over the steps. The light is pretty crappy, and to light the actual basement you have to go downstairs to get to the switch, so I could only really see the steps and a couple feet in to the basement. There was a little trail of that clear stuff down the steps.

There's a wall with a vent right at the bottom of the steps on the left side. The grating is an old cast-iron job that's probably been there since the house was built. The grating gaps are very wide. The trap was sitting right beside it. Hanging above the trap was the little thing. Holding it up was the head of a bigger version. All I saw was the head, but it's probably the size of a average cat. Disk head the size of my fist, eye-spots a lot bigger and blacker. It was holding the little dead thing by the neck. Like a mama cat. It stared at me a second, or maybe it was just the light. Then the head sort of…narrowed, and it slipped in to the vent with the dead thing.

I didn't get back to sleep. The ice machine went on as I was walking around the house, and I screamed like I'd been shot. My wife woke up in a panic, told her I had a bad dream. I get those. The next day, I booked a hotel for a couple days, called off work, and lit at least two bug bombs off in every room of the house. Six in the basement, and even rolled two in to the vent. The house smelled like chemicals for days, but by god the mice were dead as shit. I never told my wife. I'm not even sure what I saw, really, it was late and I was very, very tired.

The problem is, the cat got hurt yesterday. We got her just a little bit after that night, much to my wife's delight. She brought the cat to me yesterday, crying, her hands bloody. The vet says she must have gotten in to something, or fell somehow. She was cut all over. She was all dusty when we brought her in, and the vet said she'd probably got in to a closet or vent somehow and gotten hurt. I looked in on her when the vet was fixing her up. The cuts looked like little “Y” shapes.

I don't know what to think. She could have gotten hurt on anything, anywhere. Maybe she was chasing a stupid mouse that was too dumb to hide well. Or one that was too scared to hide in or behind anything. One whose territory had already been taken. There's been nibbled things around the house lately, and my wife says she hears mice in the attic. I pretend I don't. I don't dare set a trap.

I really don't want to know.

Elevator

He was lost in hell. Or as hell, one of the two. He'd kicked and screamed to get here, and now he just wanted it to be over. Two days of computer and technology stuff, in a nice big hotel, with lots of food and drink. His girlfriend had been less than thrilled, to say the least, but he'd prevailed with a minimum of tears. It all seemed like such a good idea at the time. Now, he felt shell-shocked. Too many people, everything so expensive, rude and snide jerks everywhere, and the growing, acidic tension between him and his girlfriend was starting to come to a head.

He'd managed to drag her down to look at cell phones, but he'd run into an ex-girlfriend running a seminar registration table. She'd sort of cornered him, immediately pouring out her heart, how sorry she was, how much she missed him. By the time he'd gotten away, his girlfriend was well gone, only the aura of her rage hanging behind. He searched, demoralized, but she hadn't even returned to the room. He'd had to narrowly dodge the Ex a couple more times, reminding himself easily of why he left her to begin with. At least their car was still in the lot.

Slithering through the crush of people, he wormed out to the relative calm of the lobby. He just wanted to rest, to let the clock spin to the end of this nightmare, even if he knew it'd lose him position in the great argument to come. The elevators were packed tight, a hefty and unruly line pressed against them, and he sighed, looking around for stairs. He spotted a small, dingy set of elevator doors set against the far wall just as his Ex spotted him across the lobby. He dived for the call button like a drowning man.

The doors hummed, his foot tapping in a panic. If she caught him in a enclosed space, things could go badly quickly. The door bonged, and the tarnished steel door slid half-way open before stopping with a jerk. He slipped in, just as his Ex cleared the crush of people, the door shuddering shut on her disappointed face. He sighed, leaning

against the back wall, then wrinkled his nose at the sudden smell. He looked, and quickly recoiled from the wall. The metal booth was filthy, sticky with urine and something melted, the floor stained and scuffed, some mass of soft, filthy material making a small pile in the corner.

The booth was small. Very small. Barely big enough for one, let alone two. He looked to the door, and had a sudden flutter of panic. There were no buttons. No up, no down, no numbers, no emergency stop. Nothing. He felt a click and a hum, the car starting to rattle its way up, the flutter of panic growing as he contemplated being trapped here, but lost it almost instantly as the car stopped again. This had to be some kind of service elevator or something, which went to every floor in sequence. He had no idea if such a thing existed, but for him, now, it did. He'd just get off, apologize, and hike to the room.

For several seconds the door stayed closed, eating at his slim ledge of calm. Finally, one door shuddered a quarter of the way open, revealing a dark hall. He pressed hard, pushing through the slim gap just as someone emerged from the dark. He seemed tired, haggard, and totally ignored his half-stated apologies. The pale man shoved in the the elevator he'd just left, quickly disappearing behind the shivering door. As he watched the man leave, he saw no call buttons of any kind on the door frame. He sighed, looking around, the gloom illuminated by just a few bare bulbs strung along the ceiling. The walls, floor, everything seemed to be made of a dark, crumbling brick, slightly moist and…

Wait. What?

He'd gone up, not down. This sure as hell looked like a basement room, with the damp bricks, the uneven floor, the walls chipped and missing bricks in places, the…what the hell. The short hall ended in what looked like a “T” junction. The left side seemed to have a handrail, so that was probably stairs. There was a bulge in the brick on the left-hand wall, just before the junction, as if they'd bricked around a large pipe, and for some reason it scared the hell out of him. He started, nearly on tip-toe, sneaking silently down the dim hall. He reached the stairs without incident, no hisses or arms or anything leaping from the dark to tear him to bits, and grabbed the

slightly pitted handrail. He was three steps up before he heard the chuff.

It was the sound a sick dog makes. Phlegmy and echoing through a snout. He turned slightly, not wanting to at all but feeling compelled to do so. Opposite the stairs, down the other junction, a thing shivered. It was low and squat, about the size of a person laying down. It had four short, oozing legs, massive back eyes, and sawblade teeth. It looked like a partially-skinned possum, frizzy hair around large patched of black, rotten-looking muscle. It started to lurch up to the stairs, seeming to be in a great deal of pain, but still very fast. He flew up the creaking stairs, not realizing he was screaming for almost a half hour.

He ran. Insanely, he ran, up and up and up, trying halls at random, finding locked doors, bare rooms full of teeth, pulpy floors with large patches of rot, all sending him back to the stairs with hoarse screams, always the thing just behind him, leaving a dripping trail of slime and blood. He beat at the walls of the stairwell, clawing, watching as the bricks bled just as much as his cracked fingernails. A hallway choked with lines that felt like tendon ended in a flat mass of hard jelly the color of a cataract. He ran, and ran, voice gone, only a drip of blood from shredded vocal cords, stumbling and crawling like a drunk.

Lurching up, he found the ceiling of the stairwell, the stairs smashed against the wall as if the ceiling had suddenly slammed in against them. He turned silently in to the nearest hall, too numb to rejoice or despair, feeling the floor sag and wobble under his feet, glancing in a open doorway to see a massive mound of flesh that seemed to be absorbing smaller ones, barely noticing as a brick fell loose from the ceiling, clouting him on the back and letting loose a slow waterfall of pus from the now open gap. He stumbled, feet sludgy in the floor, half-swimming along to the vague light at the end of the hall.

He looked up, focusing dim eyes on a window to life. Grass blew in a night breeze around a packed parking lot, a hotel lit up like a tower of salvation behind it, people walking to and from cars, laughing happily. He flailed, crawling, croaking bloody yelps as he reached, straining, fingers stretching as a flabby, oozing paw sank hard into

his back, the flesh instantly turning black and flaking at the rotten touch. He screamed then, the ragged, broken howl of a deer with a wolf in its throat, the chuffing muzzle starting to search through the flabby bags and soggy tubes of its catch for sweetbreads.

The janitor sighed, edging up on the reeking mess. These goddamn kids, no respect at all, just wandering wherever they please. This says “staff only” on the fucking door, yet look there. He scowled, looking down at the pile of bloody vomit and shit. Honestly, what the fucking hell? Still, not his business to deal with the punks, just clean up after them. He did so, swearing all the while, hoping whoever did this was having a fucking hell of a bad time. The janitor scowled at the now mostly clean floor, pushing his bucket along to the stupid service stairs. They really needed to put a fucking elevator down here, but who cares about the wants of one old man? He shook his head, hearing the sounds of pounding and screams far off, some wild party or another to clean up tomorrow.

Fucking kids.

Potty

He woke up, momentarily confused as to where he was, and what was beside him. Shaking his head, he made out the softly breathing form of his wife, and on the other side the small, pale outline of his son. He stood, all of three years old, holding a small blanket and fidgeting slightly. His father rolled to his side, looking at the small boy, managing a sleepy smile.

“Hey big boy.”
“I need to use potty.”

He sighed, laying back down. This had been going on too long. Finally potty trained (mostly), the boy had the odd quirk of not wanting to be alone in the bathroom. Ever. His wife kept saying it was harmless, but it still seemed odd.

“Bubba, you can just go use the potty.”
The little boy shook his head with all the seriousness a three year old can muster.
“Need daddy. Come with me.”

He closed his eyes, breathing slowly. He had to be up in three hours, still had to find something for lunch…he was tired, deeply tired. He looked back at his son, whispering in the dark.

“Little boy, you need to go use that potty now. It's-”
“But I need-”
“No buts, go in there, use the potty and go back to bed now. Do you understand?”
The little boy nodded slowly, sniffling and stepping slowly from the bedroom.

He lay back, trying to recover sleep, nearly there when his wife mumbled sleepily “muhp. Wha was that?”. He sighed, closing his eyes harder. “It was just the boy, he needed to go potty”.

She sat up a bit, looking to him. “You didn't go with him?”
“No, I didn't. He's too big to still be doing this, there's no reason.”
“He just gets nervous, you know that. He's still just a little boy.”

He sighed hard, sinking in to the bed slightly, knowing what was coming next. Never mind he had to work, or was tired, or hadn't been able to get to bed until late, or-

“can you go check on him?”
“…”
“Please go check on him.”
“Mrrr…ok, hold on.”

He slid from the bed, the air in the house icy compared to the bed. He stumbled, wedging open the barest slit of one eye, in the hopes of making the dive back to sleep easier. He walked slowly, navigating more by memory and some kind of sixth sleep-sense then any kind of light. He brushed the hallway walls, working down to the dark bathroom doorway, where

Wait. Dark?

The boy wouldn't so much as think about entering any kind of dark room. Even a thick blanket over his head was enough to worry him. Why would he leave the light off? As he got closer, the smell hit him like a fist. He sighed, rubbing his eye. Yeah, there we go…the light burned out, and he missed the potty, or got so scared he just went in his pants…throw him in the tub, maybe? God, he had to be up in like…two hours now, may as well just stay-

The bathroom was a nightmare.

Even in the dim half-light, he could see the walls, floor, ceiling… everything was splattered and oozing with…something. He coughed, gagging slightly on the reeking stink. It smelled like shit, yes, but also something rotten, fermented…and something sharp as well. He reached for the light switch, fumbling through a clump of cold, damp grime to flick the switch. The light was dimmed by the spray of reeking slime, but it showed the bathroom well enough. Everything was coated in gray-black ooze, much of it looking like shit, but some was much less identifiable. He looked around, in

shock, trying to somehow piece out what happened when he heard the clunk.

He nearly screamed at the sudden sound, recoiling back in to the hall. He stared in to the room, blinking dumbly in to the sudden silence. Then, again…thunk. The toilet seat flicked up, maybe a inch, and clunked back down. Like it was being bumped from underneath. From inside the bowl. He stared, watching it sit still for a few beats, then bump up again. Somewhere, his brain was chanting “where is my son” over and over, but it seemed remote, distant. Like a dream, he walked across the room, feeling the skin of oily slime ooze between his toes as he stood over the toilet and bent over to open it, feeling oddly resigned.

The bowl was empty of water, with only a thick caking of foul grime and what looked like blood sticking to the porcelain. At the bottom, where the water drained, there was a small, pink forearm ending in a small, pink hand. It was reaching up, grasping in the air, trying to reach anything.

It was missing two fingers, the ragged stumps bleeding thinly.

It was his son's hand.

He fell forward, yelping a inarticulate cry of shock, and grabbed the small hand. It flexed, gripping tight, the sound of soft thumping from deeper in the pipes. He stared, holding that small hand, swallowing and trying to say something, managing only a croaking sound. Suddenly, his son's broken, torn hand clenched down hard, and ripped away, vanishing down the pipe with a scrape. There was a sound from the pipe, it was unclear, but he would swear that it was a wailed “daddy” until his dying day.

He fell to the ground, sitting and staring in to the toilet like a drunk, the reeking, befouled bathroom a million miles away. He started down the empty, blank drain of the bowl, unable to even think of a curse, a question, anything to carve some kind of sense out of this.

He was still there, staring, when his wife rose to check on him.

Bloody

“Dude, I am WONDEROUSLY high.” he giggled, holding the phone to his ear with no small amount of effort. He walked across the basement, turning up the music, letting the beat pulse in time with the other, internal pulse he was feeling. Thank god his parents were gone, he really wasn't sure how he could deal with them right now. He flopped on to the couch, giggling again, legs hanging over the end of the couch.

“Yeah, Scott was over a hour or so ago, he had some bomb shit man. I was playing Brawl, and I swear to god it was like mario and pikachu were on my floor fighting!” he giggled again, rubbing his slightly numb face. He wiped his hand on the couch, laughing again.

“Oh hell yes, i'm not working tomorrow, get the hell over…” he trailed off, looking at the couch. A vaguely hand-shaped blotch of blood was smeared on the ratty fabric. He blinked, staring at it, then touched his face. He pulled it away bloody, staring stupidly at it for several seconds.

“uh, dude, I gotta go man, I'm bleeding somewhere…no, it's fine, just…I'll call you back, ok?” He hung up the phone, still looking at his bloody hand. He tossed it to the floor, nearly running to the bathroom. He looked in the mirror as he washed his hand, trying to find where in the hell he'd cut himself. The whole side of his face was streaked with blood now, and he washed and wiped it off, trying hard to keep calm.

He eventually found a tiny wound near his hairline, still dribbling blood. “Fuck, man…” he whispered, trying to get a good look at it and stay steady on his feet. It was as he started looking for a band-aid that he saw the drops of blood splattered over the sink. He wondered if it was from his head again…no, he'd cleaned those up, and…he suddenly looked down at his fingers, feeling a warm wetness over them.

It was like he'd caught a ball of razor blades.

He started hyperventilating, looking at his hands as they oozed blood from dozens of tiny cuts, an icy sobriety slamming down on him like a hammer. He grabbed the towel, trying to calm down, stammering to himself “go call the doctor, just call the doctor” over and over like a mantra. He felt blood drool down his face, wicking in to his eye with a salty sting, and felt his slippery grip on control weaken more.

He grabbed up the phone in a panic, blood making it as slippery as soap. He tried again and again to touch the dial button, used the screen, but the blood made it impossible, making him eventually toss the phone away with a hissed “Fuck!” and a panicked moan. He looked at his hands, feeling dizzy, from blood loss or blind fear, he didn't know. He looked at his slick red arms, eyes going wide.

Tiny cuts were crawling up his arms like ants.

He started breathing too fast, too loud, like a pulsing scream as invisible razors seemed to be sliding along his arms, leaving a dotted line of blood. He couldn't feel the cuts, just feel the blood pour and pulse. He started screaming, turning around, shaking his arms, trying to make it stop, or find the source, or something. He ran upstairs, blood dripping and smearing the walls as he fell, screaming for help, of the doctor, or anybody as he ran outside in to the icy night air.

He ran, all the houses dark, pounding on a neighbors door and crying for help, moaning as he felt blood start to weep and pour hotly along his chest. He started crying, eyes getting hazy with blood, as he looked for something, someone to help. Suddely, he heard a noise, a deep rumble…a car engine. The park across the street…

He could see headlights.

He ran, screaming, feeling the cuts open up rivers of blood along his legs, his back, his lips…he gagged as his mouth welled up with coppery blood. He ran, and ran, watching the headlights grow bigger, seeing the shape of a parked van swim up through the darkness. He cried and yelled, waving his arms, half-blind and dizzy,

feeling more floaty and light headed by the second.

He didn't even see the river until he'd hit the water.

Unknown body recovered from park

Police recovered a body from Island Park early this morning. The corpse was spotted by a early-morning jogger, lodged in a drainage pipe. Due to the recent rains, the river was very high and fast-flowing, and it appears that the body suffered grievous damage from rocks and wood during its travel. Police are currently trying to determine the identity of the body, and to ascertain whether accident or foul play led to the body entering the river. The extreme damage, however, is complicating both these goals. Persons having any information regarding this incident are encourage to contact the police.

Mad Love

Have you ever loved someone?

Not that family love, or devotion…but real, blind love. I don't think people know how dangerous real, true love is. Love will make you do great things, but it can also make you do terrible, terrible things. You'll lie, cheat, steal, sell out your best friend, your family… yourself, all for the hope, just the hope, that it will make the object of your love happy. Just the hope.

I met her after high school. I'd known her during, but never got up the gumption to ask her out. One day, we both happened to be visiting the same friends…we got talking…there it was. It was like a fever. I felt sick with love, that kind of warm self-destructive burn that you get in the grip of a sickness. It's unpleasant, yes…but comforting, too. It took me three months to say I loved her. I think she knew from the first second I saw her. I kissed her for the first time after helping her take out her trash. Or, rather, she kissed me. I felt like I'd been hit by a bus, and I wanted it to happen again.

Do you always mean what you say, when you talk to your loved ones? Honestly, do you? Think about it. How often do you say “I love you” to fill up space. How often do you say “we'll always be together” more to quiet fears than as a deep expression of caring. I told her I would do anything for her, that I would give everything I had to be with her, always. We'd just made love the first time, on her mother's living room floor, while watching Nosferatu, of all things. I've still never seen the end of that movie.

I meant it, when I said it. I felt it, like swallowing a small stone, a weight inside me. I would do anything for her.

We'd moved out, gotten an apartment…then her mother got sick. She had to be admitted…needed an expensive treatment. My love was nearly catatonic with worry. We were hysterically poor. I told her that I'd get the money, somehow. I'd work all I could, do odd jobs,

and make her mom ok. I worked two jobs on the week, three on the weekend. Went on three hours of sleep, then one, then none. I felt dead inside, a hollow whistling in my soul where sleep and exhaustion waited to claw me in to a pit…yet on I went. Shambling, broken, eyes black and puffy, I got the money. The moment I handed it to her, I fell to the ground, gave myself a mild concussion, and slept for three days.

She started to worry about me, more and more. Said I worked too much, too hard. It felt like a knife in the eardrum to let her down, dry-shaving with a rusted nail was preferable to failing her. She asked me, begged me to stop…but I saw in her eyes her love. She knew why I did it, pushed too much, so hard. Despite her fear, she accepted this sacrifice of myself. If bills ate up the food budget, I would not eat for weeks, until we were recovered. If we lacked for gas, or the car broke down, I would walk to wherever was needed, never mind the wind, cold, rain…pain.

I was walking when I got hit by the car. I think she'll never totally forgive herself for that. I was exhausted, dead on my feet, but walking quickly to work, when I didn't see a sign…or someone ignored it. I only realized my mistake when the grill collapsed four ribs. By the time I really digested the situation, I was dead, neck shattered and twisted, limbs replaced with lead.

All I could hear, or see, was her, laying naked on her scratchy carpet, tears in her eyes, listening to me tell her that I would always love her, be with her, do anything for her.

That I would never leave her alone.

I don't know how I got home. I fell a lot, leaving abstract snow angels in my wake. I stopped bleeding a little bit before home, the gore solidifying on my skin in the cold. My bones crackled and ground like a box of gravel, but I kept on, gritting my teeth until they cracked. She was, I think, understandably horrified when I fell in the doorway, landing like a frozen slab of meat. Which, I guess, I was. We had a rough few days. She kept wanting me to go to the doctor, and I kept telling her I don't think that would help. When she felt for my pulse, she finally stopped asking.

It took forever to figure things out. We got my bones and such in to more or less alright shape…called in to work, took all my vacation time, trying to think. Looking back, it was horribly simple, but it's not like you get a manual. I told her what I thought, and she was…upset, to say the least. I talked her around to it, over time. She wouldn't look me in the eye when I left, though.

It never gets easier. My flesh was ruined, but my will remains. Still, will can't knit together bone, or zip up skin. It hurts so much, every time. The…failing bits, the rotten ones, are…pushed out. If I'm lucky, it's just like throwing up or having diarrhea. More often, everything just…presses out through the skin, before it heals. You'd be amazed how much the body breaks down, when it can't just heal. Still, seeing her smile…knowing that I can keep my promise another day, another week…it makes it alright. Barely.

So, you understand that, when I do this, it's not because I'm some greedy monster. It's not a…hunger, or anything, it's just what I have to do, to keep going. Keep my promise. I don't even taste the flesh, it's just…neutral, like solid water or something. I am sorry, really…if there was another way, I'd be doing it. But…it has to be human, and alive. I've tried all the other ways, and it doesn't work. Please, just…don't cry, I'm a sucker for crying, and if you start, then I'll start, and my tears are…bitter, and taste wretched. I'll try and make it quick, sorry for talking so much…I know the rope must hurt.

I just…don't get out much anymore…just work and home. I love her so much, it's so great…but…this is my only real time alone, you know? I can see you love someone too…so you know. You'd be in my place too, if that's what it took. I promised her, and I'll keep that promise forever. Your body will help me keep that promise. I'll try and make it fast.

Love makes us all monsters, eventually.

Try and go limp, or it'll hurt more when I bite muscle.

Sa Jin Photo

I was stationed overseas for four years, helping shore up the American military presence in South Korea. You hear horror stories about it, about people being shot randomly, the squalid conditions, but it really wasn't all that bad. Still, it's another world, without a doubt. The culture is so…different. Values, ideals, it all feels topsy-turvy. You get adjusted, but it takes time. Early in my tour, I was sitting telling a few buddies about my “adventures” about town. I'd mentioned passing what looked like a old house, with about ten or twenty little girls lounging or playing around the front, and asked if it was a orphanage, or just one very productive family.

Everyone goggled at me, then burst in to laughter. They said it wasn't anything close to that. It was a brothel. They said that, most often it was more boys than girls, and that some people would pay a great, great deal for them. What's more, none of the locals would dare touch them, as most had some kind of bug or another. Most didn't live much past twenty, if that. I was kind of taken aback…it's one of those things you hear about, but never really see. One guy, Jason, got up and went to his bunk for a minute, then came back with a old picture.

He said that, years ago, on his first tour, his captain had wanted to “show him the sights”, after getting his entire squad rip-roaring drunk. They hit several dive bars and strip joints, he said it was kind of a blur. Anyway, they ended up in front of a whore house that had several…underage workers. The squad, very drunk and high, were egging on him and one of the other new guys named David to go inside. The owner was actually out on a balcony, waving and grinning. The kids looked much less then excited.

Jason freaked out, ended up basically balling up in an alley, head spinning, belly heaving, and trying to tune out his squad teasing him. David, however, went in. He didn't see it, but everyone said he could barely walk, the owner almost dragged him in. American money is

very, very welcome, even more so when the holder of it is too wasted to know if any gets stolen. They waited for a while, but ended up basically drifting off as people started to sober up, got sick, or attempted to get trashed again. They left David inside, and Jason curled up against a cold brick wall.

He woke up there in the morning, feeling insanely sick and sore as hell. He ended up pucking his guts out right against the wall, re-tasting the rank local brew. He stumbled out in to the street, feeling around in his gear bag and being shocked that nothing was stolen. He ended up bumbling out to the front of the same whorehouse they sent David in to. It was all closed up, and looked almost abandoned, but he could see some movement inside, still. Jason said it actually scared him, but he felt so sick he ended up basically falling on to a set of steps to just let his hangover try to lessen.

It was while he was sitting that the girl came out. She was young, maybe…ten or so. She was wearing a old, ratty dress, one of those big floor-length things. She was also covered in grime and blood. She just came out, stumbling down the steps, a blank look on her face, walking like a sleepwalker. Jason stared, but it was like she was invisible, nobody else even looked at her, just walked around her like she wasn't there when she stumbled out in to the street. Her eyes were big and glassy, dark, her hair was oily and plastered to her face. And not one person so much as looked down.

Jason said he was on the edge of freaking out, but everyone acting so…casual about the whole thing actually helped keep him on a even keel. He did dig in his pack, producing a camera he'd meant to use for taking pictures to send home, and got ready to snap a picture. He to this day says he doesn't really understand why. Maybe he thought he could show it to the police, or something… maybe just the morbid interest people have in the horrific that makes people slow down at car crashes. Who knows.

He was aiming the camera when the worms came.

He says they were worms, but they could have been anything. Thick, gooey ropes of…something, fleshy and rippling, suddenly jetted from her mouth and from under her dress. She looked around, looking almost…embarrassed, hands flexing helplessly in the air as

these white tubes of flesh started to coil and writhe on the ground, pouring from her body like vomit in a seeming endless line. She was in the middle of a sidewalk, on a busy day, with two massive worms erupting out of her mouth and from…somewhere under her dress.

And not one person seemed to care.

Some people actually looked at her now, but…it was like they were seeing a bird in the street, or a windblown sheet of paper. Nobody cared, not one. These…things came out of her as she hunched up like an animal, these huge worms slithering along the sidewalk and starting to slip down a filthy drain, and nobody could be bothered to care. Jason said he didn't even remember snapping the picture, he just stood there, horrified, stunned silent.

After about…two minutes, three men in what looked like police uniforms came, and the crowd thinned out fast. Two grabbed the girl, who started thrashing around, silently, drops of grime and bits of slime from the worms splattering around. The third man stomped on the worms until they split, then started screaming at Jason while the other two men dragged the girl and the stubs of the worms off and down the street. He got in a ton of trouble, his captain was discharged…David was listed AWOL.

Thinking back, he now knows the men who grabbed her weren't police, military, paramedics…he can't place their uniforms with any local services. He said he's never found the whorehouse she came out of, even after looking for several weeks. Asking the locals gets blank stares or people who assume you're fucking around. He let me keep the picture…not really sure why I wanted it. He ended up getting shot by some guy in a bar a few years after he told me all this.

I still wonder what the hell is going on in this picture.

Breaker 1 9

I don't know if this is really a creepy story, but it scared the shit out of me at the time.

Four years ago, I was going through training for over-the-road trucking. We were out in Oregon, getting my night hours in. My trainer told me to be careful, because this stretch of road was long, boring, and empty. We gassed up, and he said to just put the cruise on, because without it you'd creep up to 70 or 80, and feel like you were doing 40. This was around…one, two in the morning, and pretty soon my trainer was in a half-doze next to me, with me fighting off the same.

There was NOTHING on this road. Flat, straight, with some trees about ten yards off to each side, it was like being on another planet. I didn't see another car for nearly a hour. My trainer would pry an eye open to check my speed and make sure I hadn't hit anything important from time to time, but I was pretty much alone. I didn't mind, really, but the radio didn't even really come in, and I'd forgotten to put my CDs in the cab. Even a mildly creepy road can get boring after a while.

I was getting ready to nudge my trainer awake when I saw something by the road. It was a long ways off, and I thought it might be a deer or something. I started slowing down, checking the sides, trying to see if there were any more. A big rig can hit a deer without a ton of problems, but it's a holy mess, and can be a bitch to fix if they crack something important. As we got closer, I saw it wasn't a deer, it was a person.

It was late, and I was tired, but I got a general impression of short hair, slightly ratty clothes, a general slump, like she was tired. She was just standing by the road. We'd helped out break-downs before, but I didn't remember seeing any cars off to the side on the way in. She might have broke down farther up, and was walking back…what a shitty stretch of road to get stuck on. I started slowing down, when

suddenly my trainer spoke up, totally lucid.

“The fuck are you slowing down for?”

I jumped, told him to look, someone was in trouble or something, still slowing down. My trainer looked, looked back at me, and got up. If you've ever been in a semi cab, you know that, while no resort suite, they have a fair amount of room. He stood next to me, grabbed the wheel, and pushed his foot down on the accelerator. I was more then a little confused, he looked really weird, and had basically taken control of the truck from me, which he hadn't done like this since my first couple days of training. What's more, he was putting us up to around 70 in a 55.

I started yelling, and he just told me to shut up, gogogo, keep going. I almost screamed when I looked up again. The girl had walked from the side to the middle of our lane. I started swearing at my instructor, telling him we're going to kill that girl, almost hit him a couple times, just freaking the hell out, and he wouldn't say anything to me, just kept staring out the window. I did scream when I looked out and saw the girl standing about ten yards in front of our grill. She looked tired. I closed my eyes and just balled up in the seat.

And then…nothing. No crunch, no bang, no skidding and screaming. I looked, and we were still rolling. My trainer was back in his seat, and I had to grab the wheel before we started to drift. I looked back, and saw the girl standing in the exact same place, staring at us as we drove on. I looked at my instructor as he was settling back in to his seat. He looked at me through one eye, and sighed.

“Sometimes, she waves.”

I was so shaken, by the time I started asking questions, he was already asleep. Finished my training a week or two later, and didn't really see him again. Been on the road for a few years now, and haven't had more then the normal amount of problems. As I think of it, I don't remember the name of the road we were on, or if I ever knew it, really. I think about it, now and then. You hear stories, sometimes. I wonder what would have happened if I'd stopped. Or if she'd waved to me. Or what happened to make a well-seasoned trucker do almost 40 over the limit down an empty stretch of nothing

road.

Sometimes, late, I think I see her. Overtired, mind wandering, but still.

She's not waved yet.

Delia

TRANSCRIPT BEGINS 11:00:00

You a doctor or something?

No, a student, actually.

Never had much business with doctors. Doris took sick once, went to the doctor. Jabbed her fulla holes, sent her home with some pills, didn't fix a goddamn thing.

Well, as I said, I'm not a doctor, at least not yet. I'm a research student, and I happened on your daughter's case in one of the university medical files.

Eh? You mean Delia? Goddamn, must have some long memories there.

**laughs* I suppose that's right. She was a unique case, and those sorts of things tend to stick with people. I just wanted to get a little more information.*

Don't know what I can tell you that I didn't already. Delia came back from the woodpile one day, said she didn't feel good. She's normally healthy as a horse, so I took it to heart. Let her lie down a bit, but it didn't do any good. Got paler and paler, sicker and sicker. Doris got more and more scared, by the fourth day she almost dragged me and her to town to see the doctor.

Did they give any diagnosis?

Well, they hemmed and hawed over her for a while, but didn't come up with anything, just bounced us to the university hospital, see if they could figure it out. Fat lot of good that did. She kept fadin' and fadin' each hour. She…she stopped breathin' for a while. Few hours, I think, the doctors were ready to give up, but then she sat up again,

finally. Gave us all a fright.

They say you removed her after that? The notes say they were concerned about a strain of rabies or something similar, weren't you concerned?

My baby girl was up and around again, and I didn't want those fellas pawin' over her anymore. They didn't know, and I didn't care to let them fiddle around until they did. Oh, hell, might as well let you hear it from the horses mouth, right? DORIS. DORIS! BRING DELIA DOWNSTAIRS!

Wait, your daughter's still here?

The hell else would she be? I know things are different in the city, but here, family is still important. She's my girl, and I love her. It's hard, some days. At first it was bad, she'd snap at anyone, but I think it was all the proddin' and pokin' she took. She gentled down after a few months, and we take care of her.

How…old is your daughter now?

Well, she's about forty now, and a little worse for wear, but she's still my girl. The hardest part was figurin' out what she needed after that. Took ages, and she got worse and worse, but old Parkins helped us figure it out, god rest his soul. Gotten harder lately, but…ah, here's my girl now.

What…oh my god.

It's been hard, yeah, but we get by. We always get by, always have. Now, boy, you settle down now, ease down, I don't wanna make this hard. Boy, you- BOY!

**inarticulate noises*
**three gunshots*

Goddammit boy, I told you to ease down. I wish it wasn't this way, but it is. She needs it, not sure why, but she's my girl. Family still means something here boy, means more then life or death itself. She gets dry like that now, doesn't get around much, but she's still my Delia. Her muscles have gotten all tight and such, so we gotta

chop everything up, like makin' pemmican, but raw. You ease down now boy, just let it take ya, it'll be over…

Harold, she's gettin' excited, might wanna move off a bit before she hurts you or herself

Alright, let her go Doris, she can't hurt him none now. Least she's still got her teeth.

**inarticulate, moist sounds*

recording and photograph recovered from small bundle of personal effects, believed to belong to missing research student Paul . Investigation is still ongoing.

Climber

He felt as if his lungs were going to crystallize, the ragged, frozen air scraping over the long-dried membranes like trying to breathe an aerosol brillo pad. He swung back, waving a moment before burying the pick into the sheer ice wall with a muffled oath of anger and victory. In the end, the climber knew it was his own fault. Refusing to take the easy, known route, wanting to explore the more remote parts of the range…which was all well and good until he'd run in to the sheer, glossy-smooth edge of a glacier.

He cursed, setting another pin and stretching up for another foothold in the sheer ice. The snow had closed in shortly after he'd started the climb, and now he was in a bubble of fog and pouring snow. He'd guessed the cliff face had been about two, maybe three hundred feet tall from the ground, but it felt like that distance had passed hours ago. Glaring up through frost-rimed goggles, he kept climbing, pushing up, and up…always higher, always more cliff face to go.

He'd tried to circle around, but found more of the same, a set of icy cliffs set in staggered sequence, with snow-choked valleys between, long since rendered impassable. Beyond them was a massive valley, with a set of peaks and rises the climber had never seen before, or even heard mentioned. He grinned, teeth gritted behind the ice-stiffed scarf, at how the others would be spitting blood, knowing that he'd been the first, for once. First to find, first to climb…hell, it was rather remote, maybe he could even get a peak named after him.

Lost in imagined vengeance, he swung his pick through open air and nearly lost his footing, having abruptly reached the top of the cliff. He stared out across a wide, perfectly flat plane, watching in a mute daze as his brain tried to process the sight, before releasing a ragged woop and scrambling up over the edge to stand on the cliff top. As if finally capitulating to his dogged ambition, the storm

started to clear, and he was able to peer down the dizzying, sheer wall of the cliff he'd scaled. From here, it did look more like four hundred feet at least, as sheer and empty as a painted-over mirror. He spun back, hollering out his victory to the open air. The cries died slowly on his lips as the clouds lifted more, and his current position became more clear.

He stood at the top of a massive pillar, at least four hundred feet in height, ending in a sloping plateau less then fifty feet in width. The wind had long since torn the snow from this high peak, and left it a bare, ribbed mass of ice. He peered around more, confused, wondering what strange twist of nature to raise such a peak on the edge of a glacier. More puzzling, it didn't appear to be a one-time fluke. Three other, nearly identical shards of ice jutted up in a neat row, the sloped tops quickly dropping into another sheer, if not so glossy-smooth, set of cliff faces. The climber's eye followed the cliffs…the snowy roll of hills…the oddly humped-up masses of peaks and valleys in the base of this massive geologic dish. He stared, then looked again, following the lines…then suddenly shouted, instantly cramming his hands over his mouth, before starting a nearly suicidal decent down the cliff, ending in a forced march back to town that cost four toes, a finger, and partial use of one of his lungs.

He never climbed again, retiring from the sport without a word. He became a phantom, a cautionary tale of a man broken by the mountain. He spoke to few, and even fewer about what happened on that last climb. Only one man ever got more than monosyllables or a frozen stare from the broken climber. He was young, and fascinated by the tales of the old mountaineers, of the Sherpa's frightened whispers of gods dwelling in the high peaks. He plied the old, broken climber with drink, until finally he related the story of the frozen cliff. His eyes grew wide, speaking of the odd, massive caves he'd seen…the sudden, roaring crash as a massive rift opened on an isolated hill, growing wider and wider, swallowing a small mountain of snow. He gripped the young man, hissing his revulsion as he'd been forced to flee, forced to climb back down that vile cliff once more, never to return.

“Not a drop of ice, not a bit of it. Too soft, by half. Too yielding to the

pick, boy…”

“It was a fingernail.”

Stitches

It's amazing how death changes a person. That's not to say the person themselves (even though it's safe to say they do undergo a profound change), but who they are to you, and how they stand in your memory. Evil men can become saints and vice versa the moment they give up their last breath. Paul was neither, yet he's still…changed, with his passing. Then again, this all might be invalid, as I'm more and more certain that Paul is not actually dead. Just the Paul that I knew.

But I'm getting ahead of myself. I…am pretty much nobody. I work in an office of a company you would know if I told you the name of it. I'm single, female, thirty-five, and have pretty much peaked out in my life's achievements. If it weren't for Paul, I'd probably have passed by life unnoticed, with no great change of character after death's call. I've always wished for some kind of…excitement in life. Now that I have it, I'd give anything I have to make it go away.

Paul was a fellow cube-slave, a office worker of zero ambition and even less presence. He was short, slightly overweight, had a nervous laugh, and slowly advancing (receding?) baldness. I think he was around thirty or forty, but I couldn't be sure, and he always seemed to have a slight…agelessness about him. As if he was born in suit and tie, already fortified with a head full of PowerPoint and team meeting schedules. You could probably pass him a hundred times a day, and wouldn't be able to recall the color of his limited hair at gunpoint.

We were office friends, the special kind of hazy, organic relationship that develops around those who are somewhat trapped together, but don't want to commit to actual friendship. We worked and went to lunch in the same area, so we ended up bumping into each other enough to force some kind of rapport. I think he also had a crush on me, which was flattering. I'm not pretty, so any attention is at least a bit of a ego stroke, even if the giver is about as plain as tofu.

We would talk, sit at the same table at lunch, walk to our cars, all very easy and non-committal. He told me about his dog, his interest in movies, various tv shows. I'd tell him about my two cats, my rather insane mother, and my ongoing car problems. He was painfully lonely, and I think I may have been one of the few friends of any persuasion he had, if not the only one. I felt very humanitarian… instead of donating a dollar a day to Africa, I was donating time to Paul.

Looking back, it started with the dream. Paul was sitting at the lunch table, and had a massive bandage around his arm. He'd been even more closed off then normal for the last few days, and had even missed the day before, which was very odd. The worst thing was, almost nobody had noticed. One coworker, who sat a few desks down from Paul, actually said “Who's Paul?” when I mentioned his absence. I felt a twitch of actual, genuine concern when I sat down across from him.

My first question was about his arm, but he passed it off as nothing, saying he just had an accident. After a little prodding, I got him to tell me what had happened. Paul said he'd been sleeping badly. Always prone to fits of insomnia, he said that lately it had been worse. He'd wake up from strange dreams, panting, and find the bed soaked with sweat. He said he also had the weird feeling that someone had been in the room just moments ago. By the time he'd gone and checked all the doors and windows, he couldn't get to sleep again. He'd laughed then, saying the joke would be on the thief, that he'd probably end up losing money anyway.

I laughed too. Paul could be funny, and smart, and almost charming at times, but it always got buried in a big, smothering wave of gray blandness. He didn't seem bland then. He looked…nervous. He blinked, looking around, then leaned in a bit. He smiled nervously, and said what had happened was rather embarrassing. In the middle of the night, he'd woken up from a horrible dream, and found himself unable to move. He said it was like a weight on his chest, pinning him down. He'd also seen something across the room. He paused, seeming to decide whether or not to go on, then sighed and shook his head. He said that there was a thing standing in the

doorway to the hall. He said it looked like it had a cloak, but it seemed to move like it was alive, and its head was like a insect, long and narrow, with a cluster of eyes on each side.

I looked at him, dumbfounded. Here was a man whose greatest imaginative moment was suggesting a blue background on the monthly expense pie chart instead of white. He must have seen my shock, because Paul laughed again, loudly, causing a few people to turn. He waved his good hand, saying for me to relax. He said it was sleep paralysis, uncommon but not unnatural. Paul said when you sleep, your body sort of “switches off” to keep you from flailing around and hurting yourself. Sometimes, if you wake up suddenly, your body stays in that mode, and you feel pinned. He said you can even have very, very vivid dreams when you're like this, which explains what he called the bug-monk.

I asked him if this happened to him a lot, but he said no, not since he was little. He went on, saying that he thinks he blacked out for a moment, or went back to sleep, because he woke up again with a sudden, sharp pain in his chest. He'd shouted, tried to get up, missed the edge of the bed, and managed to bash his arm off the edge of the nightstand, giving himself a nasty bruise and gash. I prodded him about seeing a doctor, but he said no, he's just wrapped it with some gauze and medical tape and gone back to bed. Lunch had wrapped up by then, so he'd gotten up, nodding apologetically, and quietly gone back to his cube. I sat for a bit, looking at my untouched lunch, and just thought.

Work kept me busy for the next few weeks, and I didn't see much of Paul except for the once-weekly carpool and an occasional wave in the hall. Whats more, one of my idiotic cats had gotten out and went missing for several days, so I was very preoccupied. I say that, now…but really, I wasn't. What Paul had said was so…weird, so out of character, that I just wasn't able to process it. So, I didn't. Have I not said that Paul was insanely easy to forget? Looking back, I see now what I should have seen…his weight loss, the baggy eyes, unkempt hair…

It was a Friday, and I had been working late. I don't mind the office at night when I'm engrossed, but as soon as I lift my head, I realize how very…empty things seem. Unless you've been in a huge office

after hours, there's no good way to describe it. It's like there's an… energy. Something stuck to the walls, the desks, all the hustle, bustle and human exertion leaves a…residue. I'm wandering. It's enough to say that, when Paul came up behind me and said hi, I nearly screamed.

I spun around to say hi, and I literally gasped. He looked like a shadow of himself. He'd lost weight, but in all the wrong places, and his skin looked baggy and poorly fitted. His eyes were red and hollow, and when he smiled, his gums looked raw. He seemed to be wheezing a bit, as if he'd jogged a short space and was catching his breath. I blinked and shook my head, trying to recover, and offered him a seat. When he sat, his joints cracked and popped like a box of corn flaked being stomped.

I asked if he was all right, but he just stared at the floor like he didn't hear me. I asked again, and he slowly shook his head. He said he hadn't been feeling well, and wheezed out a slow, painful sigh. I started to ask if it was something bad, but Paul waved it off, saying it was probably just a flu. I just watched him, stunned. He must have lost forty pounds, and his clothes fit him like a sack. He suddenly looked me in the eye, a rare feat for Paul, and asked if I remembered about his dream. It took me a minute to remember what he was talking about, and seeing me think, he started to rise, saying “I shouldn't have come”. I put a hand on his arm, telling him to stop…and I felt the ridges on his arm.

I pulled my hand away, stammering something, but Paul looked down and sighed. He sat back down, and put his head in his hands. He said he was sorry for saying anything, but that he really didn't have anyone to talk to. He started to ramble, waving his hands and speaking with a tone that was equal parts hopeless, tired, and hysterical. Paul said that there was something wrong with him. He said it was the dream, that he didn't think it was actually a dream. He'd found little pinpricks all over his body the day after the dream, and he'd peed blood. I started to ask if he'd been checked for cancer, but he kept on as if I wasn't there.

He said he'd felt something, inside. Something not right. He got up and started to pace, going out to the hall and back in to my cube, rambling. He said something about growth, and something trying to

take over. Mid-way through his monologue, he stopped, cried for about thirty seconds, then started back as if nothing happened. I was starting to get very afraid. Paul always seemed like someone prone to depression, and I was scared that he'd had a breakdown or something. For a moment, I saw my face on the news with the word “Missing:” underneath. He suddenly shouted, saying he wasn't going to let it out, and rolled up his sleeve, saying he'd found a way to fix it.

I stared and had to put my hand over my mouth to keep from screaming. His arm was a horror show. A deep, winding gash stretched from his wrist to his elbow along the underside of his arm, looking nearly a quarter inch wide in places. Blood was crusted all around it, and what looked like…pus, or some other fluid. What was worst, though, was the stitches. He'd taken some kind of heavy gauge thread and stitched the cut shut. It was a bad job, the stitching jumping around randomly, in places pulling the skin into tight, painful angles. I looked up at him, horrified, and he pulled his sleeve back down, turning away. He said “I shouldn't have come” again, then rushed out of my cube and down the hall. I should have done something…but I just got my things and left.

Paul wasn't at work the next day. I felt sick. I was pretty sure I'd just witnessed the end result of a suicide attempt, but I had no idea what to do. I thought about trying to get help, but I couldn't think of who to call, and it felt…inappropriate. I hardly knew him, and it didn't feel right. I was sure he'd get help, or…something. I justified myself not calling a thousand ways, and when I heard, finally, that he'd called in sick, I just moved on, filing it under someone else's problem. I wish I could say that I did everything I could, that I tried my best, but I didn't. I just…moved on. It was so unsettling, and weird, and just… wrong, that I just pushed it away.

It was nearly two weeks later that I finally checked. He had stopped calling in, and the carpool just cruised past his house. It looked bad. The lawn was unmowed, the car just sitting in the driveway, several newspapers on the porch. I asked around work, but the very few people who even knew who Paul was had no real idea about him. They just shrugged and assumed he was sick. I went each day with

visions of him dead in the bathtub, or coming in and shooting everyone. It was when I drove by and saw his door hanging open that I finally did something.

I was heading home, and as I went past Paul's house, I saw the front door hanging open. It was late, and it was just standing, wide open. I slowed down, looking, and I saw one of his shoes sitting on the porch. Like he'd run out of it, or kicked it off. I sat, looking, and almost before I decided to, I pulled in to his driveway. I sat in the car, gripping the wheel, looking at the door. If he was fine, it'd be a monstrous invasion of privacy…for all I knew he had a girl in there, and had slipped off his shoe in a mad bout of passion. He might have just been hot, and was letting the house cool off. There might be a robber inside, and dropped his shoe on the way out with a load.

I had the window down, and the evening was very quiet, just a few insects buzzing. I was just about to put the car back in gear when I heard the sound. It was a short, sharp sound, like someone yelling after banging their shin. I looked to the open doorway, listening, and after a few seconds it happened again. I rummaged in my purse, grabbed out a little can of mace I'd gotten from my mother, and started over to the house before I could really think about what I was doing. By the time I decided this was a terrible idea, I was already through the doorway, mace in hand.

It was dark inside. I mean pitch black. The only real light was from the doorway, the streetlights leaking in to the living room. The smell hit me first, and as my eyes adjusted, I saw why. Old, half-eaten food was out everywhere, balanced on plates and the arms of furniture. Craning my neck a bit, I could see in to the kitchen, and the fridge door was hanging open, the light burned out or broken, more dead food rotting there as well. I heard the sound again, louder, and it seemed to come from the back of the house. I started to thread my way to the hall, trying not to be afraid.

Mid-way down the hall, I looked in to what seemed to be a office. Papers were tossed everywhere, and the little window on the wall was…black. I looked in a bit more, then stepped back. A garbage bag had been taped over the glass. Looking back in to the living room, I could see all the windows had been covered. I tried the light

switch, but nothing happened. All the lights and windows were useless. I started to shake, softly, and called “Paul?”. There was nothing for a bit, then start sudden yelp again. It was coming from the next door in the hall.

I inched down more, screaming at myself inside to just run, just leave. But, I felt responsible. I was the only person who could have helped him, and now, if he was hurt, or sick…or worse, it was my fault. I had to try something. I started to push on the door, but jumped back as I heard a sudden, deep, muffled moaning from behind it. It kept on, sounding like someone sobbing in to a pillow, sounding so hopeless and lost. I slowly pushed open the door, and stepped in to what I now saw was the bathroom. The curtain was pulled down, and lay on the floor. In the shower, naked, with the door open, was Paul.

He was curled in the corner, blood smeared on the floors and walls. His body looked as if he'd been attacked with a machete. Deep, gaping cuts and sores stood out all over. Pieces of flesh looked as if they'd been torn or lopped off, and his skin looked…thin and sagging. His feet were misshapen, and it looked as if his spine had somehow swollen and twisted in his back. When he moved, everything flexed and opened, but only let out tiny trickles of blood and yellowed pus.

He was stitched shut. Every cut and sore had some kind of thread trying to close it. String, yarn, twine, shoelaces, even wire, all of it was stitched in to his skin. It had grown over or ripped free in places, and the threads were all sodden and dripping with ooze and blood. From each of the cuts, too, there seemed to be some kind of… growth coming out. Stiff hair-like things, or hard, sharp, black points. From a deep gash on his back a long, thin patch of what looked like red plastic hung, flapping with each movement. His skull looked broken and twisted. His ears and eyes had been sewn shut. His nostrils were closed with thick, dripping bands of copper wire. He howled that muffled, moaning cry again, and as I looked at his face, I saw why.

Paul was forcing a sharpened shoelace through his lips.

I screamed, and I fell back against the wall, watching him lace his

mouth shut, and I threw my mace at him. I was hysterical, scrambling along the floor. I looked back once, and saw him lean back, his mouth sealed shut. His lips were moving, as if his tongue was trying to push through them. I ran outside, knocking over his coffee table on the way, and threw up in his yard. I got in my car, peeled out, and called 911 when I was six blocks away.

Paul is dead, in the eyes of the law. I was investigated for a while, but he was labeled a suicide and quietly buried. Nobody came to claim the body. I didn't go to the funeral. I took a week off from work, and got pumped for information as soon as I got back. I didn't really say anything. I drifted in a haze, just trying to forget. But I can't. I never will.

You see, there's a issue with Paul's death. It was never made public, but they never actually recovered a body. Yes, they recovered a great deal of tissue and flesh from Paul's house, but not nearly enough to make up a corpse. It was mostly skin, some fat, a little muscle, nothing more. I was discounted mainly because I had a alibi, and that I'm not strong enough to skin and butcher a fully grown man. Whatever happened to Paul didn't end when the police charged in.

I don't know what happened to him. I've read about insect physiology, and watched science fiction, but I still will not even attempt to explain. Paul is dead. However, I don't think that means as much as it should. When I'm finished with this, I'm going to go take a shower, go to bed, and polish off a full bottle of both vodka and Vicodin.

Last night, I woke in the dark, groggy and feeling drugged. I looked to my window, and saw a shape there for a few seconds. It moved away, but I saw it. Narrow head. Wide black eyes.

But it still has Paul's face.

Love Hate

The house was dead when he came home. No lights, no noise, even a little chilly in the early spring dusk. Pete Kothkis stood in the entryway, peering in to the house with a slightly confused smile. Maybe they dipped out to the store for a bit and just didn't say anything? No, he'd had the car…her mom, maybe? He shook his head, tossing his bag on the couch, snapping on lights and looking in the kitchen and hall in a half-hearted search.

Not that he minded the silence, it was refreshing from the normal buzz when he came home, but it was unexpected. No Amanda trying to pick up, with a kiss by the door. No Christian bopping about underfoot, or Jamie bouncing and shrieking for a hug. He leaned in to the fridge, fishing out a pop and snatching up a bag of chips before slumping back in to the couch. It'd been a long bloody day.

Pete watched the TV without seeing, munching absently as he considered what to do. Really, he should put some time in on his report, but it was honestly nothing that wouldn't keep until later in the week. The new position was proving both more and significantly less demanding then his old one. More quality, less quantity, in a way, but that was honestly how Pete liked it. Not so rushed, taking time-

His hip suddenly pulsed with the beat of some forgotten pop song.

He fumbled for the ringing device, having to stretch out to get the pants pocket unfolded enough to fish the phone free. He saw the smiling face of his wife from the screen, and grinned, tapping it on.

“Hey babe, where are you guys? I was just about to call.”

“Oh, so you're home already?”

Pete chuckled, tucking the phone against his neck and rising to slowly walk and pace around the room. She'd always ribbed him about it, but he could never just sit on the phone and talk, it felt…

odd. “Yeah, I figured you were with your mom or something, going-”

“I'm…not with mom, Pete.”

“-with…what? Who then?” He stopped, stock still. Something in her tone, in the tiny sigh she'd given put him immediately on edge.

“…It's not important, Pete. I…oh god. I'm sorry, Pete. I can't…I just can't do this anymore.”

He moved his hand uselessly in the air, seeming to try and pull understanding from vapor. “Can't do what? Amanda, I don't…I'm not following here, what's going on?” Even as he asked, a sick, sticky realization was trying to crawl in to his awareness.

She continued almost as if he hasn't spoken. “I know you try, Pete, and you're great, and you love the kids…but…Pete, it's not enough. You don't make the time for me, for us, you work so much, and you never get back until late. It's been going on six months since you touched me like you used to. I can't just live on memory and life support. I'm a human woman, Pete, not a plant you can just water from time to time and call it good.” The anger was seeping in to her voice, making it quick and sharp.

He glared at the wall, breathing deep and slow, biting back venom. “Are you joking me. I work for US. I work to keep US alive and afloat. You think I like coming home in time to basically put the kids to bed, too exhausted to do much of anything? Shockingly, I don't. I don't get what the hell you're revved up about, but I think we need to talk about this, face to face at the very least.”

There was a sob in her voice now, along with the rage. Lordy. “NO! No more talking, and discussing, and working things out. You're not going to change, I know better now. I thought I loved you, and I think I do, but I can't…my heart is bleeding out to you, Pete, and nothing coming back. It's like I'm pouring my feelings in to a sieve, and it all just runs away. Did you really care about me, Pete, or was I just a fun time that got out of hand? You wanted me so bad you had to go and marry me to seal the deal? Was that it?”

Her voice was laced with bile and festered anger, yet he still stared,

blank, at the wall. His voice, however, simmering and tight, betrayed that bland mask. “Why is all this happening now? You could have TOLD me this, I ask you what the hell is wrong almost daily! You just keep letting it simmer and simmer, and then explode on me like it's somehow my fault you won't talk? I don't know what you're thinking, but we need to at LEAST talk this out face to face.”

“No, no, no, no more talking, or letting you put your sticky fingers in my head. I…I've found someone else, Pete.” His heart dropped like a stone in a frozen lake, even the sickly expectation of it hadn't helped. She kept on through his silence. “He loves me, Pete, truly, and the kids, too. You took six years of my life, Pete. You bled me out for all I had, and didn't give me anything, anything-”

“Amanda, where are my children.” It was barely a question. He knew, but had to hope. He was willing to ignore the unfairness, the one-sided, petulant whining if this one, single question was different from his expectation. He started walking again, slowly.

“Pete…I can't leave them there, with you. You…you're not even there, Pete. You wouldn't even be able to put them on the bus in the morning. You're a picture to them, and not much more. They're safe, and will be until the trial, but I'm not letting you see them, Pete. I can't…I can't trust you anymore. You've hurt me too much, I just…” She dissolved in to sobs, gasping in to the phone.

The sudden, explosive laughter brought those sobs up short.

“Hurt you? Oh wow…me, hurting you? Honey bunny, I don't think you understand that term.”

“I…Pete?”

“You have not clue at all what I gave up for you, what it took every day to be the very best husband and father I could be, do you? I mean…wow.” He loosed another gale of laughter, shaking his head and starting to walk down the hall. “This…wow. Baby, I'm stunned, really I am, I don't mean to laugh, I just…you have no fucking clue, do you? At all?”

“This…this is what I'm talking about, Pete, these games you play…

it's not healthy, it-”

“Dearheart, I don't think you have a clue. Listen, babe, I hate to yank you out of the speech I'm sure you've been mentally reviewing for weeks when you insisted everything was fine, but I have a question for you, if you'll indulge me.” He tucked the phone against his neck again, swinging open the basement door and starting down the steps.

“…don't talk down to me like that, Pete, I'm not goin-”

“You will listen to every word I have to say.”

He could almost hear her freeze and stare at the phone. He smiled a easy, empty smile, tasting her confusion over airwaves. Now, finally, maybe she was understanding that the situation had changed.

“P-Pete, you're-”

“When we got together babe, I loved you more then anything in the entire world. I mean anything, and I don't think you ever fully got that, not all the way. Then, when we had kids…well, I hate to admit it, but they took the forefront. Harsh, I know, but I think that's how it's supposed to be, even if you seem to think my every waking moment should be in devotion to you.”

“That is NOT what-”

“ANYWAY. I gave up a lot for you, the smoking, the swearing, all those goodies, but I don't think you fully understand the…sacrifice I made to be with you.” He crossed the basement, the gloom of the bare bulbs showing just enough to move the old bookcase safely, sliding it along the dusty floor. Have to sweep down here, sometime. “Do you remember, way back when we first got together, there was that thing in the news about…oh, what was it, the red ghost, or the red phantom or something?”

Silence stretched across the phone line.

“Still there babe?”

“…yes.”

“Oh good. Remember, you had me walk you home those few times because there was a murder a couple towns over? Always homes, never any real struggle, nothing broken in to, so they were thinking that this phantom was snatching people on the street and making them drive home with him? You were so scared, and I'm sorry I laughed, but I mean…it was cute, really.”

“P-Pete…what are…”

He reached low, listening to her breathing turning ragged as he fished out the loose bricks. Was this other fella right there, offering moral support, or did she excuse herself to rip his heart out in private? Kids probably not with her, maybe mom? No…Kathy, probably. Worth a stop, at least. “Some things are automatic, babe. You don't think, it's just…needed, and you do it. Washing hands, tying shoes, automatic. It takes no thought at all to do, but a ocean of focus not to. Every single day, every one, I made the choice not to be automatic. Because I loved you, I chose not to.”

Pete grinned, pulling the duffel bag from the wall with a uneven clank. He fished inside, pulling the thick, smooth curve of the linoleum knife free and tapping the point. “I'm…I can't believe you would do this. And take the kids, no less. Wow. I just…do you get it now baby? Do you understand what I'm telling you now? Is it sinking in?”

Her breath was coming too fast, sobs choking in “Oh god…oh my god…I…I'm gonna call the cops, Pete, Y-you aren't…I won't…I won't let you do…oh god, Pete…”

“Call 'em babe, please. Please. I'll be gone, but I want you to feel good baby, I want this to be easy for you now. You know me lovey… remember, you kept commenting how I fit in anywhere, I can talk to anyone? I have that open, trusting face people love, people really love to listen to me. Trust me. Believe me.” His smile was honest amusement as he pulled up his shirt and secured the harness, dropping the knives, needles and other helpful bits to their places. “Didn't you ever wonder why they stopped right around when we got together? And you decided to just toss me to the wind, like nothing. Garbage. Wow.”

“Pete, keep a-a-away from me, I…oh god, Pete, don't, you're scaring me, please…”

“Honey-bunny, you don't understand that term. You're going to be checking under your bed for me. I've never felt such a whipsnap of devotion…as much as I loved you, it's gone to the same amount in the polar opposite direction. I don't think you could just pass it off as 'April fools' anymore, even. I'm still trying to wrap my head around how you could do this.” He shook his head in disappointment, adjusting it as he took a practice throw with a knife. Rusty, need to practice. Still, like a bicycle, never really forget.

She was just sobbing now, blubbering something threatening, maybe.

“I'm going to get rolling baby, let you call the cops and such, maybe get a quickie from your new boy, just to take the edge off, right? You know why they called it the phantom? Because a couple witnesses said they saw him, and he looked so white it had to be a ghost, or a mask. Ain't that a scream.” He laughed, hefting up the bag, forgoing the normal gloves and mask that was normally required. Just a gentleman on the way to the gym, officer. “I would have let you go. You hurt me, but I would have let you go…but you had to try and take the whole pie, snatch it all from me. Don't worry babe, the kiddle-biddles won't ever know any more than you tell them.”

More moaning and crying now, something about keeping away from the kids, maybe.

“Sweetheart, you may love them enough to steal them, but I love them enough to kill for them. See you in a couple weeks, babe. Tell your new boy I said hi…or, you know what, never mind. I'll tell him myself.”

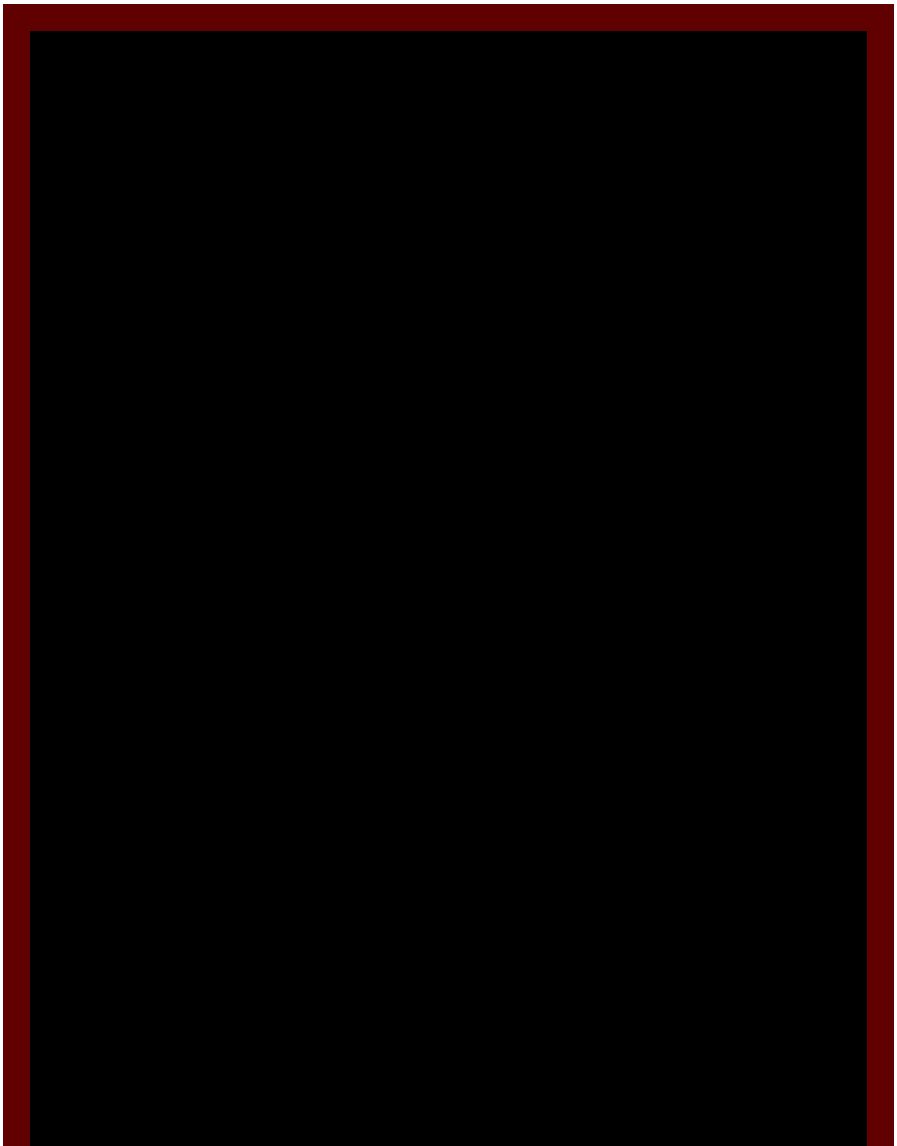
He hung up, then crushed the phone against the wall even as it chimed again, slamming it over and over in blank-faced rage, leaving the splintered heap on the floor. He locked up, unplugged the power strips behind the TV and computer, and stepped out on the porch, heading for the car.

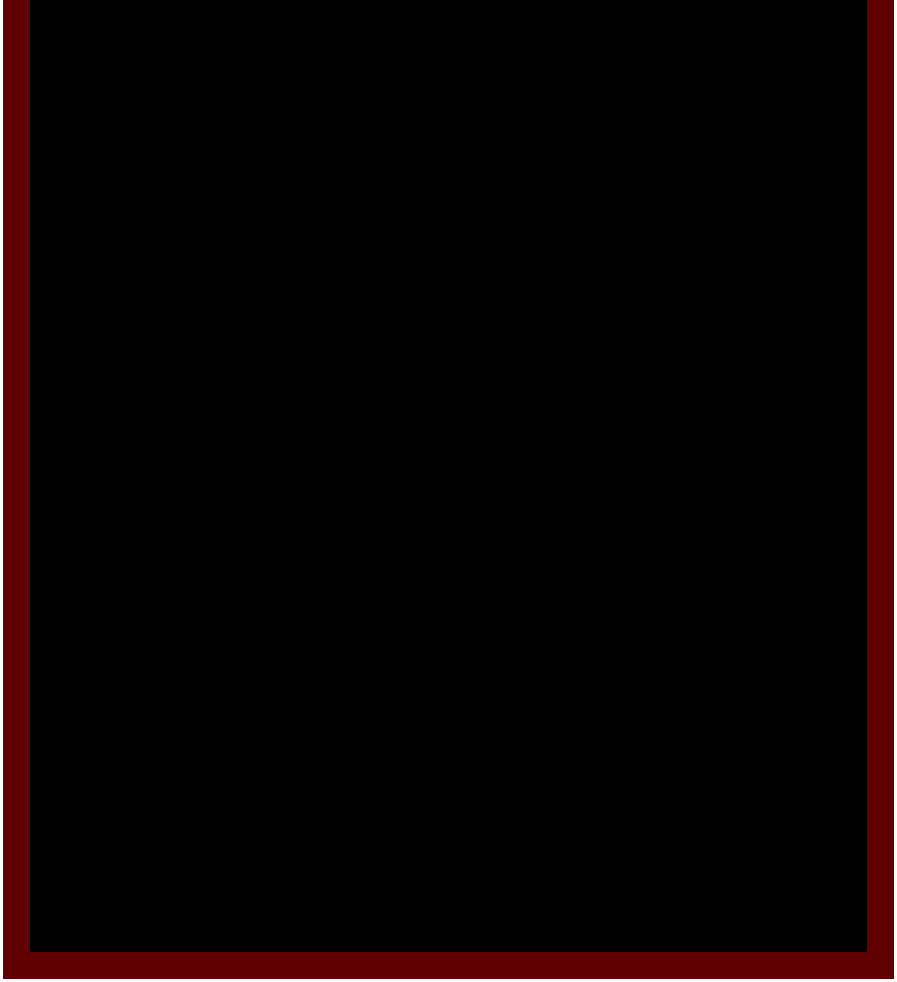
The Red Ghost inhaled the night.

Dread & Circuses Hub

Banner Art by Zhange

"All the World loves a Clown." ~ Cole Porter





Opening Acts:

1. **Herman Fuller Can Shove It Up His Ass** ~ *"You're going to want to insert it rectally."*
2. **Clown Breeding 101 with Prof. Richard C Normus** ~ *"My Grampie once turned a kid inside out, I shit you not."*
3. **Upside-Down Cake** ~ *"I can't tell you how much pleasure it gives me to finally see your face the right way up after all these years."*
4. **A Real Humdinger** ~ *"Tom, if I didn't know better I'd swear*

that someone up there has it out for me."

Headlining:

Act I

1. **Former Assets** ~ *"You're not afraid of clowns, are you?"*
2. **Fuller Than Full!** ~ *"He let out one final scream, and then popped like a balloon."*
3. **Fuller's Fantastic Fun-lover's Funhouse** ~ *"Fun-lovers? That's what you call those… milking creatures, right?"*
4. **Your Call Is Important To Us** ~ *"OH GOD, IT'S NOT A DRILL! I REPEAT, THIS IS NOT A DRILL! EVERYBODY PANIC!"*
5. **She Remembered Me** ~ *"Sing once again with me, our strange duet."*
6. **Freaky Commodities II: Freak Harder** ~ *"I…may have left a Sarkist and a Mekhanite together in the same room."*
7. **There Are No Strings On Me** ~ *"Are you out of your mind? Do you know who you've got? Icky will send the whole Circus after you to get her back!"*

Interlude I

1. **So They Called Him Darke** ~ *"He immersed himself in the Darkness, sustained himself on the Darkness, empowered himself with the Darkness."*

Act II

1. **A Scip Or A Star?** ~ *"Coarse, irritating, gets everywhere."*
2. **Dark And Disquieting** ~ *"Lolly didn't respond immediately, being transfixed by the sight of a bird wizard battling self-cannibalizing ethereal snakes."*
3. **City of Wonder™** ~ *"Lesbians are family friendly now. There's like a whole show on Cartoon Network about space lesbians. It's awesome."*
4. **The Sea Slug and the Showman** ~ *"He stood in the spotlight, proud as can be in his top hat and red-tailed coat, the most preposterously verbose and verbosely preposterous*

poppycock rolling off his tongue as he presented each new marvel."

5. **Freaks, Friends and Fiends** ~ *“Not even the weirdest part of my day.”*
6. **Let's Get This Show On The Road!** ~ *"Can I get a Frapaccthulhu? Extra whipped cream, extra drizzle, extra existential horror? I can handle it, I'm a Clown."* **By `RecursiveRecursion`!**
7. **A Circus Come To Not** ~ *"Eat Lemon Meringue you son of a bitch!”*

Interlude II

1. **Undead, Insane and Fully Loaded** ~ *"Trust me, you want weapons that put the fear of the Big Boss into your enemies' hearts. You want them to go 'oh my god we're all going to die' because they are and it's common courtesy to let them know that."*

Act III

1. **A Vale of Tears** ~ *“In the words of another interdimensional traveller, ‘don’t think about it’.”*

Special Attractions: `0`. The Warrior And The... Clown?

1. **...And I'm the Star!** ~ *"I'm a motivated worker, most of the time, and I don't mind getting my hands dirty. Anymore, anyways."* **By `DarkStuff`!**

Sideshows:

1. **`Saccharina Sweet's Sensationally Sublime Sugar Babies!`** ~ *"They love alliteration at the Circus."*
2. **`Lil' Lollipop's Little Lollipops!`** ~ *"There's a sucker born every minute."*
3. **`The Marvellously Macabre Mechanical Marionette Matinee!`** ~ *"If I ever get free, I'll be hellbent, on making them*

my merry merry marionettes!"

4. **Papa's Precociously Provocative Pickl'd Punkz!** ~ *"Does a mind-controlled, fusion powered mech-suit count as reasonable?"*
5. **The Menagerie of Mayhem's Mind-bending Mewling Monstrosities!** ~ *"I only got scratched… twenty-something times? And that was when they liked me."* **By RecursiveRecursion!**
6. **The Sumerian Sorcerer's Sadistically Satanic Saddle!** ~ *"In its active state, living horses (Equus caballus) react with panic upon becoming aware of SCP-3886's presence."* **By Ember16!**

Promotional Materials:

1. **Herman Fuller Presents: Icky the Magic Clown** ~ *"I decided at a young age that I wasn't going to let fear stop me from being who I am."*
2. **Herman Fuller Presents: The Amazing Zoltan** ~ *"Anyway, he comes into the shop wanting us to make him a philosopher's stone out of molasses."*
3. **Herman Fuller Presents: The Skeleton Dance** ~ *"For as long as the preternatural performing arts have existed, men have reanimated the dead for entertainment."* **By PeppersGhost!**
4. **Herman Fuller Presents: Nixie the Nereid** ~ *"My sisters and I are Mermaids. Not nereids, not sirens, not sea nymphs; Mermaids!"*
5. **Herman Fuller Presents: The Dread Behemoth** ~ *"It was sheer chance I was there that day - I had an appointment with my haberdasher about expanding the storage capacity in my top hat - but what good fortune it was!"*

Thanks to our Sponsors:

Marshall, Carter & Dark

1. **'Osteotronic Cubes' (VXY33/F7RQ3/9XAD1)** ~ *"I named mine Sans, like from Undertale, and now he's gone.*

You owe me for pain and suffering!"

2. **'The Dark Web' (DKE79/O2RG5/4JLW6)** ~ *"It really goes to show that good ethics is good business."*
3. **'Kaiju Caviar' (OCN39/T5FG6/7HJL2)** ~ *"Nonetheless, I must state frankly that I consider eating the eggs of a sea monster frivolity to the point of insanity."*
4. **Micky D's** ~ *"Carter, I am not manipulating the global economy to drive McDonald's out of business just because they share our initials."*
5. **Text Message in a Bottle** ~ *"Lolly, before we go any further I'm going to need you to turn the caplocks off. I'm reading everything you're typing in H'rasm'Kal's voice."*
6. **'Fidget Winners' (FDG43/W1NR3/5SLA2)** ~ *"As for the show itself; I nearly died and lost every damn bet I made, but that was the best damn freak fight I've ever seen."*

Doctor Wondertainment

1. **Vend-a-Friend** ~ *"My suitcase was at my feet because I didn't trust leaving it alone; if anyone were to see my stuffies, watercolors, and risperdal I'd feel terribly judged."* **By DarkStuff!**

The Utterly Bazaar

1. **Utter Depravity** ~ *"The catacombs were a perfect abode for a noble such as himself; vast, ostentatious, dark, and amply stocked with the preserved remains of peasants to feast upon."*

The main reason I created this series was to finish what PeppersGhost started. He briefly mentioned a female Ringmaster in **SCP-2094**, with the clear intention of setting up a further narrative that was never followed up on. PeppersGhost did have an overall arc he intended to tell with Herman Fuller, but this arc was left incomplete. In private e-mails with PeppersGhost he informed me of his overall plan for the Circus, and with his continued input I hope to complete it myself to the best of my ability.

Why do this? Well, I like the Circus partially because in some ways

it's the exact opposite of the Foundation. When The Administrator found his first anomaly, he decided it was something to be locked up and kept secret forever. When Herman Fuller found his, he decided to pitch a tent and charge admission. My ideology towards the anomalous is actually closer to that of the Serpent's Hand's than it is to the Foundation's. Not everything anomalous is dangerous, and the Foundation's policy of locking every anomaly up 'just in case' is both immoral and to Humanity's detriment. One of my favourite SCPs is **8900-EX** because it illustrates the Foundation's edict of preserving the status quo, even if changing the status quo would be a good thing. The Circus is a place where people can see actual magic, and where anomalous people have more freedom than they would in containment.

I also have a fondness for the early days of the Foundation; whacky senior staff, insane cross testing, etc. The Circus gives me a venue to write in that style that would otherwise not be acceptable.

I will do my best to continue the story PeppersGhost started, and maybe one day the tale of Herman Fuller's Circus of the Disquieting will be known in its entirety.

Current Contributors:

- **DarkStuff** , author of the **Vend-a-Friend** Arc
- **RecursiveRecursion** , author of **SCP-3718** and Let's Get This Show On The Road!
- **PeppersGhost** , Creator of Herman Fuller and author of **The Skeleton Dance**
- **Ember16** , author of **SCP-3886**
- **DrChandra** , Canon Founder and author of everything else.

I am proud to announce that Dread & Circuses is officially a Canon. If you're interested in contributing to Dread & Circuses and need feedback on anything just send a message to **DrChandra**. Fanart is also welcomed.

For a more general sense of how to write for Dread and Circuses, I would like to quote the GoI page on tv tropes:

"**Circus of Fear:** Zig-Zagged. When the sadistic Fuller was in charge, the circus fully embraced this trope to the point of Card-Carrying Villain. In the post-Fuller era, while the circus's ethics are grey at best and it still lives up to the disquieting part of its name, it seems to have shifted significantly toward a Ragtag Bunch of Misfits just trying to make a living and show people a Creepy Awesome time."

Remember that. The Circus may be morally ambiguous and creepy as hell, but at its core it's a community of anomalies just trying to survive and find solidarity with each other. The Circus is Family, and Family stays together.

You should definitely read SCP-2094 since that's more or less the 'zig-zag' point. Motormouth provided a positive perspective on the Circus that is very different from PeppersGhost's four previous Circus scips.

Ideally, you should also read this entire series if you're going to write for it, but at the very least make sure you've read a tale that features the characters you're writing about. As with other Canons, everything should be relatively consistent.

Though my depiction of MC&D in this Canon is heavily inspired by Wills and Ways as well as Bloodbaths, Dread & Circuses does not share a continuity with Randomini's Acidverse. It does, however, dip into the S&C Plastics, War on all Fronts and Ship in a Bottle canons.

As for adding entries to this hub, keep in mind that tales are ordered chronologically, not by posting, and that any tale set before Former Assets should go under Opening Acts, with tales set after that going under Headlining. Stand-alone tales should work fine on either of these, however, if you're planning on a series that doesn't neatly fit into either Opening Acts or Headlining, put them under Special Attractions. SCPs are arranged numerically under Sideshows. Anything else can be by posting order for now, but I may change that at some point.

Main Characters:

- **Icky** - The Current Ringmaster of the Circus. Like most Clowns, she's energetic to the point of hypomania. Normally extremely happy, but can become psychotically enraged if anyone she cares about is put in danger.
- **Manny** - Also known as the Man with the Upside-Down Face. Originally Herman's thug, but slowly accrued power over decades until they were *de facto* partners, a role now shared with Icky. He mostly handles things behind the scenes. He's also responsible for the Circus's pretermemetic defences (see below).
- **Lolly** - Her full stage name is Li'l Lollipop. She's Icky's lover, assistant, and *de facto* second in command. Even for a Clown, she's excessively energetic, friendly and happy. Loves Icky and the Circus more than anyone, and is fiercely loyal to both (I'd also like to make it clear that despite her childish persona she is physically and chronologically an adult, as some readers were uncertain about this).
- **Victor Chan** - A young MC&D rep from the Hong Kong office, and was assigned the Circus as a client. Relatively inexperienced and still uncomfortable with the anomalous, he functions as a 'straight-man' and audience surrogate.

Also, here they are as buns

by **SunnyClockwork**

The Attractions of the Circus include, but are not limited to:

- **The Big Top** (Currently run by Icky, puts on feature-length performances of the Circus's best acts each afternoon and evening)
- **The Den of Freaks** (Self-explanatory)
- **The Menagerie of Mayhem** (Displays and houses fantastic anomalous beasts, like Bubblegum the Alcoholic Elephant)
- **The Hall of Humans Extraordinaire** (Gary and Zoltan work here, as did Icky prior to becoming a Clown)
- **The Petting Zoo** (small, for kids, home of the Obama Llama)
- **The Fun-lover's Funhouse** (Fun-lovers are kept in here when not needed. Going in unescorted or wandering off from the tour group is ill-advised)

- **The Mermaid Exhibit** (This was actually the first anomalous attraction Herman ever built for the Circus, featuring a reanimated Fiji Mermaid he stole from P.T. Barnum. It's housed various aquatic themed attractions over the years, such as the (fraudulent) heart of the Dread Behemoth, but at present its main attraction is a small pod of genuine Mermaids, led by Nixie)
- A midway featuring rides, games, and concession stands.
- Numerous tents for individual acts, like Virtuoso.

Ancillary sites within the Circus include:

- **The Ringmaster's Tent** (Icky, Manny and sometimes others will use this as an office)
- **The Kaleidoscope** (The Circus's method of anomalous transport, capable of creating Ways on demand into nearly any door in the Multiverse)
- **Clown Alley** (a single trailer modified into a hyperdimensional orthotope, capable of comfortably housing the Circus's entire Clown population)
- **Dormitory Trailers** (train-car sized trailers divided into either eight single sized or four double sized sleeping compartments with a shared washroom. Top talent receives private trailers, while non-performers often have to double up inside single compartments)
- **The Cookhouse** (prepares and serves meals buffet-style to Circus staff)
- Trailers for storage, transport, and support (laundry, infirmary, etc.)

`Clowns are funny...`:

- **Original Clowns:** Lovecraftian reality-benders from another plane of existence that took near-human form to join Herman Fuller's Circus(they were bored). Eugene and Pius are the foremost examples.
- **Converted/Turned Clowns:** Humans converted into Clowns. They're a little more normal looking and a little less temperamental but otherwise the same as the Originals. Icky and Lolly are both examples of Turned Clowns.
- **Bred Clowns:** Created by Dick C. Normus using biological

material from both Originals and Turned Clowns. These Clowns have very specific and very extreme traits, and are typically less intelligent than other Clowns. Mr. Noodles is a Bred Clown. As a side-effect of being gestated in Fun-lovers, they produce their own Milk, and therefore require milking or they'll literally explode. Orignal and Turned Clowns must drink Clown's Milk to survive, and only require milking if they overindulge.
- **Not Clowns:** Professional clowns, some anomalous and some not, who have nothing to do with True Clowns. Motormouth and Jester the Goblin were both professional clowns who were Not Clowns.

Other Nouns:

- **Pretermemetics** - Information which is selectively memetic or anti-memetic depending on the nature of the recipients or circumstances. The Circus itself is pretermemetic, being nigh imperceptible to its enemies while simultaneously drawing in customers from miles around. Most customers typically only remember what they experienced as dreams or illusions.
- **The Utterly Bazaar** - An inter-dimensional marketplace, first appearing in the Acidverse tale Jam Jars. Circus members visit it regularly.
- **The Library and the Serpent's Hand** - If you've been on the site for any length of time you know about these two. Circus members visit the Library often, both for books and to meet with contacts in the Serpent's Hand.
- **Iris Dark** - I poached her from the Acidverse as well. Dread Iris is Percival Darke's heir, proxy, and apprentice. She's a tech genius who's also dabbling in ancient black magic. Due to the Circus's recent agreement to allow MC&D to use the Kaleidoscope on a limited basis, Percy sends her through it on assignments now and then.

If you're aware of any adaptations, fanworks, what-have-you that aren't on this list, feel free to edit them in.

- TheeSherm has done a reading of **`Your Call Is Important To Us`**. I'm quite impressed that he was able to

do so many voices and keep them all straight.

- **SCP-3440** has an entry on tv tropes, and the events of Dread & Circuses appear to be referenced under the **GoI page** as well.
- And, as previously mentioned, **them as buns** by **SunnyClockwork**.

Got questions? Ask them here or in the comments section, and I'll do my best to answer.

Herman Fuller Can Shove It Up His Ass

SLOTH'S PIT, 1970

The Bottomless Pit wasn't **Jeffrey Hubble's** usual watering hole. Its clientele was mostly comprised of tourists, truckers and other passers-through. Locals seldom ventured there, and when they did it was usually for less than respectable reasons.

Jeffrey was grateful for the bitter February cold that allowed him to conceal his identity under heavy clothes without suspicion. Nevertheless, he had waited until after dark until heading to the disreputable dive, parking several blocks away and cutting through alleys to make sure he wasn't seen.

When he stepped inside he left his scarf in place, scanning the entire room for anyone he knew. Squinting in the dim light and thick cigarette smoke, he recognized no one but the barkeep, a barkeep who knew how much his customers valued their privacy and could be trusted not to snitch.

Satisfied with his anonymity, he made his way to the back booth. He had been told two men would be waiting for him there, one tall and skinny and the other tall and muscular. The booth was occupied by two men, but there was also a young woman with them, and his contact had made no mention of that. Jeffrey took another look around the bar, just to make sure that these were the people he was supposed to meet with. The larger man whistled sharply at him and waved him over.

Jeffrey swallowed nervously and sat down to join them. There were four pints of ale already on the table.

“We ordered for you; hope that’s alright,” the larger man said, his tone making it clear it made very little difference whether it was alright or not. Jeffrey’s eyes widened as he was now able to see that this Man had an Upside-Down Face.

“Of course it’s alright. Why wouldn’t it be?” the slender man asked rhetorically, raising the pint glass and taking an exaggerated sniff. “This is some fine brew. I don’t believe I’ve ever had pumpkin ale before. Made from local produce, from your own farm if I’m not mistaken, Mr. Hubble.”

Jeffrey sighed and pulled down his scarf.

“Yeah, that’s me. I don’t suppose you’d be inclined to tell me who you are?” he asked.

“No, we would -”

“Herman P. Fuller, of Herman Fuller’s Circus of the Disquieting, the greatest show in the all the worlds! A pleasure to make your acquaintance,” the second man replied enthusiastically. The Man with the Upside-Down Face shook his head. “This is my bodyguard, Manfred Mannington Mandarino Mansfield.”

“We’re partners, and that’s not my name.”

“And the striking young lady beside him is -”

“Herman, if you introduce me as Leslie Van Dyke one more time I swear to god -” she said.

“**Veronica**. Her name is Veronica,” Fuller said. “She's nobody, don't worry about her. I know you were only expecting two of us, but when Veronica heard we were heading to *The Bottomless Pit* she insisted on tagging along.”

“Sinning Jessie is supposed to hang out here. I’ve never been with a tulpa before, and I’m hoping she and I can go bumper to bumper,” Veronica said as she sipped her ale. “Hubble, how does this whole tulpa thing work anyway? Will just thinking about her attract her attention or do I have to say her name three times or something?”

“I… listen, I don’t want to be rude, but I was hoping we could just make our little swap and then be on my way,” Hubble replied.

“Oh yes, of course. Who are we to say no to a Karcist?” Herman asked with a smug smile.

“I’m not a Karcist!” Jeffrey whispered, grateful for the ambient drone of conversation, hum of the furnace and blare of the jukebox that made it nigh impossible for anyone to overhear them. “I’m not even a Sarkic anymore, not really. You can't tell anyone about me, ever! Neo-Sarkics don’t take kindly to apostates.”

“And how exactly did a small town, Midwestern farmer end up becoming a Neo-Sarkic?” the Man with the Upside-Down Face asked.

“Does that matter?”

“For what you’re asking, you bet it matters. We didn’t come here to get fleeced, and if your story doesn’t add up we’re walking.”

“If you really need to know, I came down with lung cancer a while back. Being from Sloth’s Pit, I knew magic was real, so I figured there had to be some kind of magic out there that could cure me. My search eventually led me to the Wanderer’s Library, and from there I was able to locate a Flesh Carver. I begged him to cure me, promised him anything if he would. He asked that I pledge my soul to Ion.”

“Hmmm. Sarkics aren’t known for being evangelical. I’m pretty sure they disown kids born into Sarkicism more often than they let in outsiders,” the Man with the Upside-Down Face said. “What made you special?”

“Apparently, the guy had been looking for an apprentice for some time to help him with his work. My botanical skills and my knowledge of the supernatural made me a decent candidate for Flesh Carving, and my desperation made me easy to control. He cured me, and in exchange, I was to serve as his apprentice for seven years. After that he would have sponsored my entrance into his House as an Orin, but… Neo-Sarkics are really weird. Most people agree that

they're evil, but everyone can agree they're weird. I declined his offer and came back to Sloth's Pit. Now I have a wife and kids -"

"My condolences," Herman said.

"- and I just want to put all this weird Sarkic stuff behind me and have a normal life with them. I've removed all my grafts, reversed all my mutations, and pulled this little bastard out of my guts."

He reached into his coat and pulled out a glass mason jar, inside of which was a coiled white worm. Herman immediately grabbed the jar and held it up for inspection.

"That's what you wanted right? An *Akuloth*, His Sacred White Worm. It can cure any illness and boost regenerative abilities, enough to let you live forever if you're skilled enough. It can also produce mutagenic enzymes, but unless you're a Karcist I wouldn't recommend that."

"And you just plain don't want it anymore?" Veronica asked sceptically.

"I need to sever all ties with my Sarkic past. I am burning that bridge forever."

"Is that so?" Herman asked. "Then what, pray tell, is that?"

Herman nodded over to a bulletin board across from them. Among its many posted items was a newspaper clipping of Jeffrey, along with his son and daughter, standing proudly next to an enormous pumpkin.

"Biggest pumpkin in the whole county, literally broke the scale, yadda yadda yadda. Are you telling me you grew that with nothing more than good old American hard work?"

Jeffrey groaned.

"Okay, maybe I'm still using a little granola Sarkicism to boost my crop yields, but I have completely renounced Neo-Sarkicism. I'm dedicated to being a good husband and father now, so yeah, I'm providing my family with the best life I can give them, but I don't

want anything more to do with worms or tentacles or turning people's bodies into actual temples!"

"Manny, what do you think?" Fuller asked.

The Man with the Upside-Down Face stared intently at Jeffrey for a moment, so much so that he couldn't shake the feeling the Man was prodding into his very soul.

"I think he's telling the truth. The worm's probably genuine," the Man replied. "I still don't think this is a good idea."

"That's why I'm the boss and you're a Freak I let out of the Den to intimidate people," Fuller said, examining the jar with intense interest. "So what's the deal with this thing, Hubble? Do I just swallow it or -"

"Oh no. It takes too long to work its way down, you'd suffocate. You're going to want to insert it rectally."

Herman and the Man with the Upside-Down Face looked at him in disbelief, while Veronica burst out into laughter.

"Veronica, you shut your mouth this instant!" Herman ordered. "Hubble, that's not what Neo-Sarkics do, is it?"

"No, they do a big ritual and cut an incision into the torso and let the worm crawl in," Jeffrey replied. "But they're pretentious assholes. Why go through all that when -"

"When you already *have* a pretentious asshole!" Veronica laughed.

"Veronica, I said shut your mouth!"

"Listen, it's up to you. If you want to cut a big enough hole into your torso for this thing to wiggle in and then wait for it to heal you, that's your business. All I know is that if I had had a choice, I would have just let it in through my butt."

"And how did you go about removing this little guy?" Manny asked.

"Rectally. I passed it like it was a tapeworm," Jeffrey replied. "It's a

slimy fella, so it's already lubricated. Honestly, it will be painless."

"And once it's in, it will just work its magic?" Herman asked.

"Well no, if you let it it will gorge itself on your blood and grow like a tumour. You need to have enough mastery over your own body to limit its food supply, send it hormonal signals and whatnot. You can do that, can't you? I was told you had studied Sarkicism."

"I've studied a little bit of everything my good man. I can shepherd flesh and craft clockwork with the best of them. Why, when I was a boy -"

"Don't get started on that, otherwise we'll be here all night," Manny objected. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a velvet case, opening it to reveal a pocket watch adorned with Mekhanite symbols. "This is what we're offering in exchange. It's pure beryllium-bronze and was designed, hand-crafted and blessed by a Mekhanite Priest. It's intended to ward against Sarkic spiritual attacks, but if you keep it on your person long enough it should cleanse you of any lingering Sarkic forces. Not even the most powerful clairvoyant will be able to tell you used to be a Flesh Carver."

Jeffrey gingerly accepted the case and picked up the watch by its chain to examine it. It was a thing of exquisite beauty, clearly crafted with both love and skill. He opened it to see that its glass face proudly exposed its inner workings, ticking away as faithfully as their craftsman.

"Huh. It burns a little. I guess that means it's holy. Frankly, I deserve worse," he said.

"We have a deal then?" Herman asked with a hopeful, crooked smile.

"I just want to make it clear that the deal is final, and if anything goes wrong with that worm I'm not responsible for it. It worked fine inside of me for years so if you can't control it that's all on you."

"Yes, yes, buyer beware. Don't you worry about me, son," Herman

said with a dismissive wave of his hand.

“We have a deal then,” Jeffrey nodded, pocketing the case inside of his coat. “Thanks for the ale, fellas.”

Picking up his pint, he left for the other side of the bar.

“A broken wind-up toy in exchange for eternal life,” Herman chuckled. “Am I the world’s greatest con artist or what?”

“You’re something, Fuller,” Veronica said with a roll of her eyes. “Oh, that’s her! That redhead at the bar, it’s Jessie. Wish me luck, guys.”

Fuller gave her an absent nod, his attention focused on his recently acquired prize.

“What do you think Manny? Should I insert it… the way he said to?”

“Not until after a few more rounds of ale.”

“… Agreed.”

Several days later, an anemic and delirious Herman Fuller lay in his bed with an obscenely bloated stomach.

“Bernie I don’t know what you’re so upset about it’s not like she needs all four paws,” he mumbled.

Manny and Veronica stood over him, staring down at him with disgust.

“Traded a priceless Mekhanite artifact for an intestinal parasite. World’s greatest con artist indeed,” Manny said with a sad shake of his head.

“How can they expect us to return books on time when the Library’s outside of Time?” Fuller raved. “It’s a scam!”

“Should we help him?” Veronica asked.

“Percy, why won’t you let me have it on credit? You know I’m good

for it.”

“We’ll probably regret it, but yeah,” Manny said. “Come on, help me get him to Tinkles.”

Manny lifted him up and stood on his right to support him, while Veronica stood to his left.

“Dear Lord, I seem to have sprouted two extra heads. One of them’s upside-down!” Herman complained.

“Just try to stay calm Fuller, we’ll get you fixed up in no time,” Manny assured him.

“Hey, I can watch Tinkles pull the snake out of his butt, right?” Veronica asked with a devious smile.

“We’ll let everyone watch,” Manny smirked back.

| **Dread & Circuses Hub** | **Clown Breeding 101 with Prof. Richard C Normus »**

Clown Breeding 101 with Prof. Richard C. Normus

« **Herman Fuller Can Shove It Up His Ass** | **Dread & Circuses Hub** | **Upside-Down Cake** »

"Jesus Christ, look at the lot'a'ya. I've seen some pretty fucked up freaks in my day but you cocksuckers take the upside down cake. Alright, alright, calm down, I didn't mean anything by it; just that you're ugly is all. Oh don't be a bunch of pussies! You've been called a lot worse things than ugly and you know it! But, I digress.

"Mr. Fuller here has recently brought me onto his staff and asked that I take a moment of my highly valuable time to introduce myself to you and explain what it is I'll be doing. The name's Dick: Dick C. Normus and…

"Yes, that's my real name, and it's a hell of a lot more dignified than whatever clown moniker you ended up with. Am I wrong? What's your name big nose? Tinkles? Yeah, that's what I thought. Oh, I beg your pardon, 'Doctor' Tinkles. That just makes it more ridiculous you ass hat.

"Anyway, you can call me Dicksy and I'll call you whatever the fuck I feel like considering most of you are essentially indentured servants. I'll be…oh my fuck, I already told you it's my real name! Why would I lie? Stop your damn snickering! You all have the maturity of a bunch of grade school dropouts because surprise surprise, that's what you are, excepting of course the esteemed Doctor Tinkles. You know, getting a PhD at a clown college kind of proves you're an idiot, which is the opposite of what you want a PhD to do.

"Moving on to the matter of why I'm here; none of you are good enough. Okay, okay, pipe down. I said pipe down. SHUT UP! All I mean is that Mr. Fuller here has standards, and that you freaks aren't living up to them. No, no, don't worry, none of you are being kicked out or axed yet. It will take years to make enough replacements for everyone. Mr. Fuller has hired me to make

designer freaks, and I'm eyeballing you Clowns in particular. I've got a lot of ideas of what I can do with you sad sacks of shit.

"Now you may be wondering, 'what are my credentials to play god so glibly', though not as well articulated because you're all dumb as stumps. Well you see, I come from a long line of Child Breakers, or *Comprachicos*, as they say in Spanish. What's a Child Breaker you ask? I know none of you said anything, I was being rhetorical! As I was saying, you start by taking a child. Maybe some starving street urchin who's never had anyone to look after them, maybe a brat that's so spoilt rotten they have no idea what suffering really is. It don't really matter, but once you pick a kid you break every bone in their body, beat them within an inch of their life, and you set the bones and flesh to heal the way you want them to, add a little anomalous something-something, rinse and repeat as necessary until you got yourself a bona fide freak. Then you take the worthless, broken shell of a person and shove them out on stage to be leered and gawked at by complete strangers so that they will know they're not Human anymore, that they'll never be loved or accepted by society again, and their only hope to keep their wretched lives is to keep exhibiting themselves for your personal profit. Now that's comedy!

"But, that was the old way of doing things. As fun as it was, it has limitations. A person can only be mutilated so much before they can't take no more and they kick the bucket on you, though you'd be surprised at how much the body can take. My Grampie once turned a kid inside out, I shit you not. What are you throwing up for? It wasn't disgusting, it was a work of art you philistine! Don't worry if it makes you queasy, because that's all in the past. Breeding a freak so that they grow up into a monster to begin with allows for much more radical modifications than breaking a normal kid.

"I've got some ideas for creating some truly horrific abominations, and that's what I need you Clowns for. Mr. Fuller tells me he picked up the first of you whilst he was traipsing across the Multiverse, and as amazing as your talents are you require certain…interventions to be made show ready. Those interventions don't always work so sometimes you go all Pennywise on the audience. Yeah, Pennywise, that's what I said. Pennywise is the clown from IT you

numbskull. IT by Stephen King. Oh you guys are just fucking with me now. How can literally no one here have heard of IT?

"Never mind. It's not important. Not important. What's important is that you originals can sometimes be quite the liability, so Fuller tells me he let you start experimenting on runaways to see if you could convert Humans into Clowns. That's pretty fucked up, though I'm obviously in no position to judge.

"For the sake of comparison, let's just take a look at a converted Clown. One of you stand up. Yeah, you. Well hello nurse! What's your name sweetheart? Icky? Is that supposed to be ironic because you're the only Clown here that's fuckable? What, it's a compliment. You know, unlike your fine self my name is not a misnomer. Trust me, it's enormous. Don't believe me, just take a look at this tent I'm pitching. That's only at half-mast. You don't think this is real? If you want I'll whip it out in front of everyone and…

"Yes Mr. Fuller, I apologize. I've gone off topic. Returning to the matter of…what were we talking about? Comparative clowning, right. Honestly, so much blood goes into my cock it's a damn miracle I don't pass out. Any who, you'll note how a converted Clown such as Icky retains a much more Human appearance relative to the original Clowns. Though this may come with the benefit of a more manageable temper, as far as Mr. Fuller and I are concerned it's still a step in the wrong direction. We want Clowns that are even more amazing than the originals, without any of the violence, and while we're at it a hell of a lot dumber. I know I said you guys was dumb, but you're still too smart for your own good, you know? I'm thinking something closer to a dog's intelligence level would be great. Smart enough to learn tricks, but too dumb to bitch about Mr. Fuller's, shall we say, Victorian-era management style.

"How am I going to create such perfect freaks of nature you ask? Two words; selective breeding.

"What's with all the blank faces; no one ever explained the birds and the bees to you? It's real simple; you take a mommy and a daddy that each has traits you like and get them to mate. You do the same thing with the offspring you like and cull the rejects, or if you're the sentimental type you can neuter them and send 'em off to a good

home. After a few generations you got yourself a bona fide pedigree. Pedigree Clowns, how does that sound? Fancy, right?

"Aw, there you go again. What the hell are you talking about, you have rights and dignity? Dignity? You're delusional or you've never seen yourself in a mirror. You're Clowns for fuck sakes! You don't have dignity! You have giant shoes and tiny cars, but not dignity! Mr. Fuller, do these losers or any of the other schmucks you own have rights and/or dignity? No? Didn't think so.

"But you can all cool your jets, because that's not how I'm going to do it with you anyway. It takes too goddamn long. No no no, I have something a little more sophisticated in mind. I know this is a dumb question before I ask it, but do any of you know what iterated embryo selection is? Nobody? What about you Doctor Tinkles, did that Ivy League education of yours not cover designer babies? I have in my possession some rather advanced reprogenetic paratechnology that was generously, and unknowingly, donated by the fine folks at Prometheus Labs. With this equipment I can make a bunch of test tube babies, read their genomes and pick the ones I want, then turn their stem cells into sex cells and make a whole new generation of embryos. The old generation goes in the trash, and you start all over.

"I'll be using your fun-lovers as brood mares for the final product. What, would you rather I use your own lady clowns, cause I don't use real dames for breeding no more. It's too much of a goddamn nightmare getting the babies away from them. I've even had a few run off on me, and what I'm making here is far too valuable to risk losing. Fun-lovers are the best option, trust me. They don't give a shit about their kids once they pop out, they're not going to leave the Circus, and best of all they produce plenty of Milk. I wish to God it came out of tits instead of…*that*, but otherwise they're perfect.

"This method is at least a hundred times faster than traditional selective breeding, and I will be able to accomplish **truly amazing things**. This Circus will be unrecognizable when I'm done with it. And yet, I can already see that I have some detractors. What, you have a moral objection to what I'm doing? You're all a bunch of bible thumpers all of a sudden? You're a horde of unholy eyesores! Your god hates you!

"I don't have the right to use your genetic material without your consent? We've already established that you don't have rights! I have Fuller's consent, that's all I fucking need! You got a problem with that, feel free to grab your bindle and hit the road. Give my regards to the Skippy Foundation or, god help you, those goddamn global occult nazi bastards. Any takers? Hmmm? That's what I thought.

"Look, it ain't that bad. For now all you have to do is spit in a tube and once I go over your DNA and other records I'll get those of you with the traits I'm looking for to hand over your sex cells. Gents get to jerk off into a cup, ladies get a dose of synthetic hormones and a giant needle shoved up their cooch. Ain't that just the way of the world though?

"What are you taking about? What do you mean that's not how it works with Clowns? I…uh-huh, really? Look, whatever. I obviously need to brush on my Clown biology, but rest assured that when the time comes I will be collecting the required biological materials via the appropriate method. It's not something I'm looking forward too, except maybe for you Sticky Icky.

"Yes Mr. Fuller, I realize that's not what you pay me for. I'm not going to mangle your merchandise I just…You're going to have Tinkles do the actual collecting? Is that top hat cutting off the circulation to your brain? He's a fucking Clown! I'm the expert here you sorry excuse for a Ringling Brothers themed birthday party, and if I say any part of this operation requires me to handle it personally than I…Fuller, tell your body guard to sit back down. Tell him to sit down. Just hold on one second there buddy I was just…hey! Get your filthy mitts off me you upside down faced goon! Put me down! Oh, I'm glad we're taking this outside, you don't scare me! I've taken down bigger maroons then you. Do you all hear that! I ain't scared of none of you freaks! Fuck you, you can't treat me like this!

"I'M RICHARD CUNNILINGUS NORMUS!"

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Upside-Down Cake

« **Clown Breeding 101 with Prof. Richard C. Normus** | **Dread & Circuses Hub** | **A Real Humdinger** »

“So how about this: we set it up like it’s a normal daredevil routine, with a guy on a motorcycle jumping over an audience member, and I’m the plant in the audience. He flies off the ramp, but he doesn’t have enough speed. He’s going to crash into me! I scream, the audience screams, everyone screams! Then, at the last second, I open wide and swallow him whole! W’d’ya think?”

`Motormouth` was in the breakroom of Clown Alley, the little trailer outside the Big Top that housed the Circus’s entire Clown population. Of course, it was only little on the outside. The Clowns had converted the trailer into an orthotope, giving them plenty of hyperdimensional living space. Most of the other Circus Folk found the place impossible to navigate, but for some reason, Motormouth had always had a head for it.

“Barney, your act is dangerous enough when someone’s holding your mouth open. It’s too risky for you to open up at the last second,” Icky, the Clown Troupe Leader, counselled him.

“But that’s what people want; the danger!” he insisted. "The jaw-dropping spectacle of a death-defying act!"

“It’s only a death-defying act if you don’t actually die,” Eugene said as he put a tiny olive on a comically large sandwich he had spent the last several minutes preparing. “I doubt Herman would want to risk it, given how many people we’ve lost lately. Dicksy, Stretchy, and Madam Rezarta all nabbed by the Essie P. Plus Masky, Ken and…I don't know, their other goon just went AWOL, so God knows where they are.”

“Don’t forget Virtuoso,” Icky added solemnly, staring sadly into her glass of Milk.

“I wouldn’t Icky,” Eugene said sympathetically, sitting next to Motormouth and setting his sandwich on the table.

“Hey, thanks buddy,” Motormouth said as he quickly placed the whole sandwich into his mouth and into his second stomach. Eugene glared at him in cold rage for several seconds before the Freak started laughing. “I’m just kidding!”

He reached into his mouth and retrieved the sandwich, completely intact, and placed it back on its plate.

Eugene hardly seemed appeased.

“You disgust me,” he said with a sad shake of his head.

“I thought Clowns only ate candy.”

“I put honey mustard on it!”

The three of them all covered their ears as the staticy screech of the Circus's antiquated PA system crackled through the air.

“ATTENTION! ALL HERMAN FULLER EMPLOYEES ARE TO REPORT TO THE RINGMASTER’S TENT IMMEDIATELY FOR A VERY IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT!” Herman Fuller’s voice boomed from all around them. “I REPEAT, ALL EMPLOYEES REPORT TO THE RINGMASTER’S TENT AT ONCE! NO EXCEPTIONS!”

“He does not sound happy,” Icky murmured anxiously. “Come on guys, we don’t want to be late. He might set us on fire.”

Eugene hastily scribbled a note reading *‘Eugene’s – Touch it and face my fury!’* and placed it on his sandwich, and followed the other two outside.

They saw everyone had taken Herman’s announcement seriously, as a large crowd had already assembled in front of the Ringmaster’s tent. A small stage had been erected, with a drawn curtain concealing what was no doubt an unwelcome surprise. Everyone seemed to be ill at ease, with a few furitive murmurs being the only sound to break the ominous quiet. Motormouth ducked off to join the

other Freaks, whereas Icky took her place at the front of the Clowns.

“Any of you know what this is about?” she asked.

“Must be something big to call everyone out,” Pius replied. “That’s rarely something good.”

“It’s never anything good. Name one time it was good,” Eugene said.

“Well…there was the time he introduced us to Dicksy.”

“How was that good? Dicksy was a jerk who treated us like chattel!”

“But then we got to see Manny beat him up. That wasn’t too bad.”

The mention of the Man with the Upside-Down Face caused Icky to notice that he was nowhere to be seen.

“Where is Manny?” she asked.

Before anyone could answer, Herman Fuller strode onto the stage, and none dared to utter even the slightest peep. The tall, skinny, beanpole of a man looked unusually forlorn, his head hung low and a handkerchief tightly clutched in his hand.

“Friends, I’m afraid I have some terrible news,” he said, dabbing his crocodile tears with the handkerchief. “Last night, my Freewheelers – my sweet, innocent, helpless little Freewheelers – were murdered!”

The crowd remained deathly silent. Everyone hated the Freewheelers, the animal-doll-tricycle things Herman had used to spy on and torment them, but they feared how they might be punished for this new act of rebellion.

“Don’t worry, I didn’t call you here to point fingers. I know *exactly* who’s responsible. I called you here because I have known for some time now that the Freewheelers were no longer adequate for protecting our Family, and so I set to work on developing replacements for them. Now seems as a good a time for their debut as ever, so without further adieu, I give you the Penny Farthings!”

The curtains to the Ringmaster's tent flew open and out rode a procession of two dozen penny farthing bicycles, mounted by ghastly creatures. Each rider looked like a human circulatory system made from twisted, rusted wires. Their arms were long enough to touch the ground, and their gangly necks were too weak to support their heads upright so instead they just drooped.

The crowd murmured in fear and shock as the Penny Farthings formed a perimeter around them, fencing them in.

"We can all sleep a little easier now knowing that we have the Penny Farthings to protect us from enemies from without, and within."

He pulled open the curtain behind him, revealing the Man with the Upside-Down Face hanging upside down by his ankles, his arms bound and his mouth gagged.

"Who's strung up now?" he asked him with a smugly satisfied grin.

"Manny!" Yume screamed in horror, the flowers of her hair instantly wilting. "Herman, let him go!"

"Speak out of turn again child and I'll throw you to the Clowns!" Herman threatened. Yume immediately hushed. She glanced over to the Clowns, expecting them to be licking their chops, but instead they looked just as uncertain and horrified as everyone else. Herman turned back to Manny and smiled.

"Well old friend, I can't tell you how much pleasure it gives me to finally see your face the right way up after all these years. Oh, we've had our good times, it's true, but what you've done is quite unforgivable, and what sort of leader would I be to let such a senseless and wanton crime go unpunished?"

"But you can't kill him!" Yume screamed, tears pooling in her eyes.

"Oh my dear, sweet Yume. I'm not going to kill him; all of you are," he said with a wicked smile. "I snuck into the cookhouse this morning and placed a little bit of **Cotton Candy** into the oatmeal."

"Oh no. Oh no no no no no," Yume wept, as she and everyone else realized what was about to happen.

“Oh yes. Mr. Brenneman, play Upside-Down Cake!” Herman ordered.

Over on the Cotton Candy kiosk, a disfigured Tom Brenneman proudly displayed the paper roll of mesmerizing music for the self-playing calliope. No one other than Herman knew for sure what the Cotton Candy wrapped around their nervous systems would make them do when it heard the song 'Upside-Down Cake', and Icky had no intention of finding out. Acting almost on instinct, she drew out her deck of trick cards. All fifty-four cards were engulfed in a red aura and went flying towards Tom. Fortunately for him Icky was merciful and they did no mortal damage, but the paper roll was destroyed beyond any hope of use.

She immediately called the cards back to her and held them around herself in a defensive perimeter as she crouched in preparation for the inevitable attack.

“Icky!” Herman screamed, sounding genuinely shocked. “How could you? How could you?”

“Fuller, there’s no reason this has to go any further. Just let Manny go. You know how vital he is. There is no Circus without Manny.”

“Is that so? In case you’ve forgotten, it’s Herman Fuller’s Circus of the Disquieting! I feed you, clothe you, house you, protect you from the Essie P and the Geo Sea and the Insurgent Sea and this is how you repay me!”

“You burned Virtuoso alive you son of a bitch!” she spat at him. Herman shook his head sadly.

“It would truly be a shame to lose such a lovely and talented performer as yourself, but if that’s how you feel…first Clown to bring me her heart is the new Troupe Leader!”

Herman seemed to expect the Clowns to jump on her like she was made out of candy, but not one of them budged.

“None of you? None of you! After all I’ve done for you!”

“You let that bastard Dicksy breed us like animals!” Doctor Tinkles

yelled.

“You put us all in danger by trying to steal from Emcee D!” Motormouth cried.

“You left Pius and me to rot in an abandoned hub with a feral Fun-lover!” Eugene howled.

“Well, in my defence, you never finished telling me how you got away from there!” Herman countered. “It was a little disappointing, to be honest.”

“We are sick of your bullshit Herman!” Icky declared. “We’re not going to let you kill us, or mind control us, or bully us with these abominations of yours anymore!”

The entire Circus cheered in support.

“I’m giving you one chance Fuller! Let Manny go, or I kill you.”

Herman glared down at her with utter contempt, and she knew this wasn’t going to end peacefully.

“Penny Farthings, have at them!” he ordered.

A green fire flared up inside the chest of each Penny Farthing, smoke and flame wafting out of every opening. They howled as if in maddening pain, and began assaulting the crowd in a wild frenzy.

“Clowns, take them down! Jam their spokes” Icky shouted, throwing her cards at each rusted monstrosity’s enormous front wheel. “Freaks, get Manny free! Alfie, unleash the Fun-lovers!”

All obeyed her orders without fail. The Clowns, so often viewed by the Freaks and Carnies as otherworldly monsters, rushed to put themselves between the Penny Farthings and the innocent. Though they were dealt many blows, they did not cry or bleed, but instead only squeaked like chew toys. This clearly both frustrated and confused their attackers. The Clowns grabbed whatever was at hand and shoved it between the Penny Farthing’s spokes, sending them toppling over. This didn’t stop them, however, as they still clawed their way along the ground, lashing out at anyone within

reach of their distended and mangled limbs.

Seeing that her cards were having minimal effect on the creatures, Icky grabbed a sledgehammer. Normally used for driving tent spikes into the ground, she put the tool to work smashing the toppled cyclists into scrap metal, and the others soon followed her example.

Motormouth reached down his throat and pulled out his submachine gun. He unleashed a hail of bullets upon Fuller, only for him to catch them all in his teeth and spit them back at the crowd like he was a human Gatling gun. Once he had exhausted his ammo, the Freaks stormed the stage, ready to tear him limb from limb. Herman whistled, calling one of the Penny Farthings to him. He leapt onto its back and rode it into the Den of Freaks. He came out only seconds later, wielding a cutlass (one of many swords reserved for swallowing, throwing, and for sticking into the human pincushion), ready to cull down rebels like he was reaping wheat. Some of the Freaks ran after him anyway, while others rushed to help Manny, slicing through the bonds with whatever they could find.

“Manny? Manny are you okay?” Yume asked as she removed the gag from his mouth.

“Fire up the Kaleidoscope, dial up a Door to the Darkness,” he replied as he rose to his feet. “He’s getting the slowest death possible!”

Alfie zigged and zagged through the chaos, ducking attacks and dodging friendly fire until he reached the Funhouse. Throwing open the emergency exit, he shouted “It’s a mutiny! We’re taking down Fuller!”

He was grabbed from behind by a Penny Farthing, the metal of its hands piercing through his clothes and into his skin. The creature hoisted him into the air, its rusted hand poised to rip his heart out of his chest, when a familiar noise came from the Funhouse.

“Wowwee! Wowwee!” Mortimer screamed as he came flying out of the exit. He shape-shifted into an enormous pink gorilla in a bow tie and tore the rider from its mount. He grabbed it by its arm and began beating it against the ground in a rabid orgy of violence.

“Mortimer, do be careful not to hit anyone, won’t you?” Ripley asked as she and Bailey strode out of the Funhouse in their tall, humanoid forms. She stuck out her leg and toppled a Penny Farthing as it whizzed by. “Since this is a mutiny, should we assume pirate forms?”

“That’s a little predictable, don’t you think?” Bailey asked. The Penny Farthing Mortimer had dismounted escaped his grasp and launched itself at Bailey. Bailey grabbed its head and crushed it in his hand. “Come now Mortimer, you can’t be so careless with your playthings.”

“I’da’champ! I’da’champ!” he chanted as he bashed another Penny Farthing into pieces.

“Well, he seems to have these brutes under control. What do you suppose we should do?” Bailey asked.

“I could unleash the Kraken,” Ripley suggested.

“That’s complete overkill.”

“You always say that.”

“Because it’s always true! You clearly just want to unleash the Kraken so that you can shout ‘Unleash the Kraken!’. Do you honestly think there’s any situation where unleashing the Kraken would solve more problems than it would cause?”

“I don’t know because we’ve never let it out. Frankly, your assumption that it would automatically be a disaster is prejudiced against colossal mythical sea creatures. For all you know the Kraken could be great at conflict resolution…”

Their conversation was briefly interrupted due to Ripley being decapitated by a passing Herman Fuller.

“A cutlass? I guess we ended up going with a pirate theme after all,” Bailey remarked. “Ripley dear, are you alright?”

“Quite.”

Mortimer chased after Herman in a fury, tearing up the ground with

his fists as he went. Herman granted his Penny Farthing additional speed as he tore through the fairgrounds, trying to find Icky in the chaos. He thought that if he killed her then maybe, just maybe, he could quell this rebellion. Her, Manny, and anyone else who had dared to speak out against him. Once they were strung up in the Matinee, everyone would know the price for betraying Herman Fuller. Who then would choose to defy him if it meant an eternal living death?

There, in the centre of the battle, he saw her. Surrounded by Clowns and Freaks alike, they were destroying the last of his Penny Farthings. Pushing his mount even harder, Fuller raced towards her. So focused was he upon his quarry, that he didn't see the Man with the Upside-Down Face accost him from the side, ramming a tent pole through the spokes of his Penny Farthing's front wheel. Herman was thrown through the air in a high arc, his sword still in hand, ready to impale whoever got between him and the ground.

"Eugene, open him wide!" Icky shouted as she grabbed the inside of Motormouth's right cheek. Eugene grabbed the left, and together they pulled his mouth open nearly 10 feet.

Herman flew right down his gullet and into his second stomach.

"And the crowd goes wild!" Motormouth shouted, raising his arms in triumph. Indeed, the crowd burst into victorious cheering at the sight of Herman's defeat.

"You got him?" Manny asked as he rushed to meet them, having successfully destroyed the last Penny Farthing.

"Manny," Icky hugged him tightly, with several of the others joining in.

"We'll celebrate later. This isn't finished yet," he said.

"Yeah, this is not a long-term solution," Motormouth agreed. "I know my stomach can take a lot of punishment, but I'm worried than any second he might come bursting out of me like an alien."

"The Kaleidoscope is spun up Manny," Yume said.

“Where are you sending him?” Icky asked.

“The Darkness.”

Icky smiled, and nodded in agreement.

The four of them ran to the Kaleidoscope, where a Door was already waiting. Unlike the usual Doors, which were bright white and smokey and filled with calliope music, this one led only to a black abyss.

“On three,” Manny said. “One, two, three!”

He and Icky stretched open Motormouth’s piehole and on cue he regurgitated Herman Fuller straight into the **`Darkness between Dimensions`**. As he screamed in rage his top hat fell off his head, landing upon the floor.

“Good Riddance,” Manny said grimly.

“Get your damn hands off me you Freaks!” Tom shouted as Eugene and Pius dragged him towards the Kaleidoscope.

“What do you want to do with him, Manny?” Eugene asked. Manny chuckled and placed a hand on Tom’s shoulder.

“Tom, Tom, Tom, Tom, Tom. You just can’t get 'a head', now can you? Yeah, toss him in with Fuller.”

“What? No, wait! Manny, I’m sorry! Please, no! No!”

With one good toss, he was lost to the Darkness.

Icky sat herself down on the Kaleidoscope's steps, burying her head in her hands, overwhelmed by the enormity of what had just happened.

“Guys, give us a minute to talk, alright?” Manny asked.

“Sure thing,” Motormouth nodded. As he, Yume and the two Clowns gave them some privacy, Manny knelt down and picked up Fuller’s top hat.

“Thank you,” he said, sitting beside her. “For a minute there, I really thought I was going to be eaten alive by my own Freaks.”

“I couldn’t let him do it. Not just because of what I said about this Circus needing you either. You’re my oldest friend here. You’re my best friend. You’re the closest thing to family I have now. I…well, I guess you knew that.”

“I don’t always understand what I see in people’s minds. When I was a kid, I loved Herman like a father, and I thought he loved me like a son. I was wrong.”

“Well, I love you like a brother. I hope that’s what you see when you look at me.”

“It is,” he nodded with a warm smile.

Icky let a long, exasperated sigh.

“I can’t believe all of that really happened. Manny, what are we going to do? We can’t close the Circus.”

“We won’t, don’t worry. Herman didn’t do anything but bark orders, spend money, and kill people. I can run this Circus fine without him. Better even.”

“Does that mean you’re going to be the Ringmaster?”

Manny chuckled at the suggestion.

“No, I don’t think I have the face for it. The Ringmaster should be a little easier on the eyes; someone who’s a good performer, and a good leader.”

He placed the top hat upon her head.

“You can’t be serious.”

“Why not? You’ve been here almost forty years, you know this Circus inside and out. The Clowns love you, and anyone else who’s not afraid of Clowns loves you. I love you. It’s basically the same as being the Troupe Leader, just for the whole Circus.”

“So…how would that work? What would you be?”

“I’d be the Man with the Upside-Down Face, same as always. We can hammer out the details later, but for the most part I’d run back of house, you’d run front of house, and we’d have to come to an agreement on anything else. We can split the Circus’s profits fifty/fifty. How’s that sound?”

Icky thought for a moment.

“I don’t want to run things like Fuller did. If we do this, we do this right. From now on this is a proper, respectable business. No more indentured workers, no more corporal punishment, no more murders. We stop treating this place like a prison and start treating it like a home.”

“That’s how it should have been from the start,” Manny nodded. “We have a deal then?”

“…Do we still call it Herman Fuller’s Circus of the Disquieting?”

“Well, his name is on literally everything. Awful as he was, this place wouldn’t exist without him. I’m willing to let him have his legacy.”

“I can live with that,” Icky nodded. “So, what sounds better? Ringmaster or Ringmistress?”

“I’d go with Ringmaster, just because I know how much it would irk Fuller to have that title taken from him.”

“Ringmaster it is,” she smiled, hoping to her feet. “Come on, let’s tell everyone that Herman’s gone forever!”

She dashed out of the tent, but before Manny followed her he paused at the Door they had thrown Fuller through. He thought about the Darkness, thought about everything he knew about Fuller, thought about everything he didn’t know about Fuller, and knew that he wasn't really gone forever.

"Well, long enough at least," he said to himself with a smirk. He shut the Kaleidoscope down, and went to celebrate with the others.

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A Real Humdinger

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Tom screamed as he was swallowed up by the Darkness. The Darkness was absolute, utterly devoid of so much as a single photon of light. He felt like he was falling, but not really. It was more like the feeling of a hypnagogic jerk, only instead of lasting for an instant, this sensation went on without end. He could not tell up from down, nor could he tell if the air around him was hot or cold, tumultuous or still. Was there even air at all?

He was disoriented to the point of delirium, unable to remember where he was or how he had gotten there. Was he even really anywhere at all, or was he merely blind and mad like an ancient god?

Desperate to regain any semblance of sanity, he ordered himself to focus on the last thing he could remember.

Clowns. Disgusting, monstrous Clowns had thrown him into the Kaleidoscope on the orders of the Man with the Upside-Down Face, for no other reason than that he had chosen to side with…

And then he remembered he wasn't alone.

"Oh my god, Fuller? Fuller! FULLER!"

.

..

…

"…What is it Tom?"

"Fuller? Oh my god. Fuller, where are we?"

"**The Darkness Between Dimensions**. A very pretentious name for a place that's almost literally nothing. It is utter void, lacking any native substance whatsoever. Here there is no matter, no energy, and very nearly no reality at all."

"What do you mean there's nothing? We're not suffocating, so there's air, isn't there?"

"No Tom, there's just no entropy. We're perpetual motion machines in here, with no need of air, food, water or sleep. Space itself here is thick enough to carry our voices, and we could even move through it if we tried."

"You mean we're going to be living like this, in the Darkness, with nothing, forever?"

"Oh, that we should be so lucky. No Tom, you see we're the realest things in this place, and nature abhors a vacuum. Our reality will slowly dissipate out into the infinite void, leaving us to gradually fade to nothing. After three years or so we'll have lost enough of ourselves that we won't even be able to survive in the real world, but unfortunately it will take much, much longer than that for us to lose enough consciousness to achieve anything remotely approaching death."

"Oh my god!"

"Fret not Tom, fret not, for there is hope! We just need to find a Humdinger!"

"A what?"

"It's not called the Darkness Between Dimensions for nought. We're surrounded by parallel realities, and occasionally they bump into each other. When they do they create waves through the Darkness that you can hear as a humming sound. All we got to do is get ourselves to the epicentre of the collision and we can slip out into one of those realities."

"How do you know all this?"

"A little bird told me. Actually, **he was a man-sized humanoid**

crow, but he knew everything there was to know about the Multiverse. Met him in the Library when I was still allowed in, but no time for that now! Now we must listen, listen for the humming sound of our liberation."

…

"I don't hear any -"

"I said listen Tom!"

…

"Damn."

"Do we just wait for a Humdinger or -"

"No! We have no time to waste. We must search for one. It will be in the direction that reality is strongest."

"And which way is that?"

"That way!"

"…I can't see which way you're pointing."

"When we get back to the Circus we're going to kill Manny right?"

"Oh yes Tom, he's going straight to **The Matinee** this time. Icky too."

"Her and all the other revolting Clowns!"

"A great bloody purge, the likes of which travelling carnivals seldom see! All of my enemies will be strung up on stage, their cold, dancing, bodies a warning to all who may think of defying Herman Fuller! Of course, if we dispose of that much talent, we'll have to get replacement acts."

"I suppose that's true."

"Fortunately I know just the place where we can score some awe-

inspiring anomalies, a place that has prided itself for nearly a century on collecting and containing all that most ferocious and fantastical creatures that haunt this world."

"Wait, you're not talking about…"

"That's right Tom, the Essie P! But I'm not talking about pocketing a few magic doodads like those pansies at the Emcee D do, no sir! I'm going straight for the big ticket items! The Golden Oldies! All the Essie P's worst kept secrets under my Big Top, their most cantankerous Keters drawing in the anomalous community from far and wide. We'll start with Able. Everyone loves Able!"

"Actually, I think he's a little ridiculous -"

"- The second Son of Adam murdered by his own kin, resurrected by the savage Daevites to slaughter their victims. When the curse of Cain denied Able his vengeance he went completely mad! Desperate to slake his need for revenge, he murders all before him! Will you be next?"

"…Is that really what happened?"

"It doesn't matter Tom, it's just a pitch to draw in the crowds."

"But how do you plan to control Able?"

"**`Cotton Candy`**."

…

"Sir, I think this plan might be a little over-ambitious."

"Oh, I'm just getting started Tom. For the Menagerie, we'll get none other than Summer's Exile. Gaoler's Hubris, The Lost Dragon, Old… Scaly."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

"682 Tom. 682. An Elder God of yore cast out of Paradise for crimes best left unsaid, his agony only overshadowed by his hatred for all living things. For only five Fuller Fun-bucks, you can hack and slash

at him to your heart's content. Watch with awe as his flesh morphs and grows anew!"

"You're going to have guests physically attacking one of the most infamous anomalies in the Foundation's possession? I really don't think you've thought this -"

"- And for the main event, we'll get the *creme de la creme*, the cream of the crop, the most horrendous, most abominable, most despicable monstrosity ever to disgrace this fair earth with its foul visage: **`Doctor Spanko`**!"

"…Sir, you've lost your mind, haven't you?"

"Just you wait Tom, the new goretastic Circus will completely outshine anything we've ever done before."

"Whatever you say. Also, you pronounced it *kee-ter* earlier. It's actually supposed to be pronounced *ket-ter*."

"…Shut up Tom."

"I think we're going in circles."

"How could you possibly know that? There's literally nothing here. We're in a void of infinite darkness!"

"Some infinities are greater than others Tom, and this particular patch of infinite darkness feels strangely familiar. I think we're back where we started."

"You're the one leading us! Said we were moving in the direction that felt the most real! That's where the Humdingers are, you said!"

"Well our entry point is still the realest place within a thousand miles, so obviously I got turned around. We'll need to work out some sort of system to make sure this doesn't happen again."

"I'm open to suggestions."

"Here's what we'll do. I got some money on me, and I'll leave it here,

making this the richest part of the void. My highly sophisticated palate will be able to sense that this is the well-to-do Darkness, and we'll know to move in the opposite direction towards the, well I suppose the polite term is up-and-coming regions. How does that sound?"

"Like utter nonsense, but I can't think of anything else. Go ahead, leave some money here."

"…I'm sorry, did I actually just say I was going to throw away money? I really am losing my marbles."

"I'm so tired. I thought you said we don't need to sleep."

"We don't. Keep moving."

"But just because we don't have to sleep doesn't mean we can't, right? I want to try sleeping."

"Why?"

"Because maybe I'll dream and actually be able to see something. Maybe I'll just wake up feeling refreshed. Maybe you'd stop rambling about the economic stratification of an empty void if you got some sleep!"

"…Alright, let's try it."

…

"How do we do this? We can't lie down, there's no such thing as up in this place."

"Just let your body go limp Tom, like you're floating in a pool."

"Okay, just gotta go limp. Gotta relax. Goodnight Fuller."

"Goodnight Tom."

…

"You asleep Fuller?"

“No Tom.”

“How long do you think we’ve been floating here?”

“Two months.”

“What!?”

“I’m kidding, I have no idea. Let’s try a memetic sleep aid. Hush-a-by baby -”

“That’s a lullaby.”

“…I didn’t say it was anomalously memetic.”

“I spy with my little eye, something that starts with A.”

“Abyssal darkness, unmatched by even the darkest depths of any chasm upon the Earth.”

“Yes. I spy with my little eye, something that starts with B.”

“Blackness, a blackness so pervasive and suffocating you forget what light ever looked like.”

“Right. I spy with my little eye, something that starts with C.”

“Complete and utter void, vacant of any semblance of life, light or hope.”

“…Fuller, I don’t think this game is actually helping with morale.”

“Would you rather play punch buggy?”

“…I spy with my little eye…”

“Percy! Percy, I know you can hear me you arrogant bastard!”

“Who are you yelling yet?”

“Percival Darke. He’s a friend of mine. At least we were friends until

he and his business partners betrayed me and started hunting us like animals, when I had done them no wrong!"

"Sir, you tried to steal the soul-sucker."

"Absolutely no wrong! Where was I? Oh yes, Percival. You see Tom, Percy's an odd duck, even by our standards. He's a Wanderer, like myself, only he's been at it for centuries longer. Oh, he's found himself some strange voodoo, I tell you. Powerful voodoo!"

"…Voodoo?"

"He knows about the Darkness, he can see the future so he knows I'm here, and he's just leaving me to rot! Goddammit, Percy open a Door and get me out of here! I can picture him Tom, sitting in that fancy sanctum of his in between worlds, all dignified and mysterious in his throne of a study chair while he just spews out all his most arcane secrets to that latest brat of his! You'd better not be telling her any lies about me, Percy! I put you front and center when I opened the Matinee you ingrate! When I reopen it, you're not even invited!"

"Sir, ranting at Percival Darke isn't going to get us out of here."

"You're right Tom…Marshall, you half-dead sack of shit! Where do you get off putting a bounty on my head just for trying to borrow your precious little soul-sucker? When I get back to the Light you're dead, do you hear me!"

"He doesn't sir."

"I know."

"Fuller, do you know why I stayed with the Circus after being viciously assaulted by a pack of Clowns?"

"Because if you ran out on your contract I would have sent Stretchy to drag you back by your small intestines?"

"No. It was because of Eliza. I thought that after she saw what they had done to me, after she saw how cruel and wicked the Circus was

-”

“Thank you.”

“- she would agree to let me take her away. But she didn’t. She didn’t want anything to do with me after that. Everyone around the Circus was saying that I had tried to kidnap poor, helpless Eliza and that Manny and the others were heroes. She never stood up for me, she just fell in line to keep the peace. I was a pariah. But I knew you and Manny hated each other, and that it was only a matter of time before you tried to get rid of him. I thought that if Manny was gone Eliza wouldn’t need to pretend to support him and that we could be together again. Now, he’s probably the Ringmaster and I’m wandering through eternal darkness, all because I was too stupid to leave when I had the chance.”

…

“Did I ever tell you that Stretchy and Masky were supposed to be the first of my own knock-off line of Little Misters? They were originally Mr. Stretch and Mr. Mask, but then this rock’em sock’em robot shows up to the Circus screaming ‘LITTLE MISTERS IS THE INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY OF DOCTOR WONDERTAINMENT’, so I had to ease off.”

“…Herman, were you listening to anything I said?”

“Yeah, you stayed with the Circus because you wanted a girlfriend who could provide oral sex but for whom you would be under no obligation to reciprocate. I don’t blame you.”

…

“Thanks for listening.”

“It’s *ket-ter*!”

“It’s *kee-ter*!”

“*Ket-ter*!”

“*Kee-ter*!”

“Ket-ter is closer to how it’s pronounced in Hebrew. Consult a Rabbinic Alchemist!”

“That my friend is what’s known as an etymological fallacy. If the original pronunciation of a word is the only correct one, then we’re all butchering the English language!”

“If you dropped the *–er* the word would clearly be pronounced with a short e sound, therefore it’s *ket-ter*!”

“The *–er* isn’t a suffix though since *ket* isn’t a word by itself, ergo that argument is a load of baloney!”

“All you’re doing is offering counterarguments! Give me one reason why it should be pronounced *kee-ter*?”

“Because Keter Keter, Euclid eater, Essie caught her, couldn’t keep her!”

…

“Well, I have no counterargument for that, so I guess you win.”

“Fuller, I think I’m going insane.”

“Good. I was starting to get lonely.”

“I see a little blinking red light in the distance. I’m crazy, right? Tell me I’m crazy.”

“You’re as mad as a march hare mating in a mound of molasses.”

“So you don’t see it?”

“I didn’t say that. Doesn’t mean you’re not crazy.”

“So, you do see it?”

“Do I see a blinking red light? No. I see a red light that fades in and out. Not the same thing.”

“So it is something?”

“Undoubtedly.”

“What do you think it is?”

“Ever hear of an Anglerfish Tom?”

“I have. You, you think that light is bait?”

“The bait of a most horrific beastie, a thousand years old if it's a day! It’s survived in the Darkness by luring in hapless prey with the only light they’ve seen in years, only to gobble them whole and leech them of their reality to sustain itself!”

“What should we do?”

“We fight it Tom. We wrestle it into submission, tame it, and then ride it through the Darkness to freedom!”

…

“Yeah, I’m going to run away as fast as I can.”

“So am I, but I was hoping you’d buy that so I could get a head start while it was eating you.”

“Overture, curtains, lights!

This is it, the night of nights!

No more rehearsing, or nursing the part

We know every card by heart!

Overture, curtains, lights!

This is it, we’ll hit the heights!

And oh what heights we’ll hit!

On with the show, this is it!”

…

“That’s the theme song from the Bugs Bunny show.”

“…DAMMIT!”

“Tom, would you please stop humming. I’m trying to think.”

“I’m not humming, I thought you were humming.”

“But if you’re not…The Humdinger! We’re close Tom! It’s a little more than a mile out! Can you see it?”

“Yes, I see it! I can actually see something! It’s like a sunrise!”

“Quickly Tom! Towards the light! Towards the sound! Towards freedom!”

“It’s getting louder!”

“Not just louder, but realer! Feel the waves crash over you!”

“I feel real again! Solid! It’s so bright!”

“That’s the Light of Reality Tom! We’re getting out!”

“We’re free!”

With a sudden flash, Tom Brenneman and Herman Fuller escaped from the Darkness between Dimensions and back into their native multiverse. Tom was missing some random chunks of flesh, whereas Herman had used what reality bending he possessed to sacrifice himself in a more controlled manner and was thus almost a full foot shorter than he had been before.

Though they were hardly unscathed, they were alive and free, and were overwhelmed with joy…until they realized they had been deposited smack in the middle of the City of Adytum, surrounded by Karcists and Kiraaks so horrifically transmogrified few would recognize them as human. All was shrouded by a sickly yellow mist,

but they could see enough to gather that they had interrupted some sacrosanct ceremony, and that their Sarkic hosts were as baffled as they were livid.

“Tom, if I didn’t know better I’d swear that someone up there has it out for me.”

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Former Assets

« **A Real Humdinger** | **Dread & Circuses Hub** | **Fuller Than Full!** »

“You’re not afraid of clowns, are you?”

When Victor had been interviewed for a sales rep with MC&D, they had asked him a lot of unusual questions, but for some reason that one had always stuck out as the most non-sequitur. Now he was wondering if they wouldn’t have hired him if he had said yes, or just not have sent him here.

As he looked upon the numerous striped tents of *Herman Fuller’s Circus of the Disquieting*, he tried to figure out exactly what it was that was making him so uneasy. Upon casual inspection, nothing was out of the ordinary. The glances he managed to steal of the freaks or the clowns or the attractions as the Circus was set up were never enough for him to explicitly identify anything wrong, but yet he couldn’t shake the feeling that they were all deeply abhorrent somehow.

Maybe it was just the pitch black cotton candy. Everyone knows cotton candy is supposed to be bright pink, baby blue, or maybe snow white on occasion, but never pitch black. Especially not such a deep, abyssal pitch black that looked like darkness incarnate on a stick. And why was the calliope playing when they weren’t open to customers yet? Something about a calliope being played just for the sake of it seemed so unwholesome.

“You Victor?”

Victor turned his head at the mention of his name. A few yards away from him was a large, muscular man with a moustache, bowler hat and of course…

My God, how is that even possible? Does his throat pass through his brain?

“Yes, I am indeed. Victor Chan, from Marshall, Carter, & Dark’s Hong Kong Office,” he greeted, masking his horror at the man’s disfigurement as best he could. He did not wish to offend him as Victor was himself a fairly small and slight man, and was painfully aware that his five-figure Italian suit only signified softness in this place. “I spoke with a Mr. Gorham over the phone and he said I was to meet with a gentleman by the name of Manny. Am I correct in assuming that you are him?”

“Never been mistaken for someone else yet,” the Man with the Upside-Down Face replied dryly. “What’s this about Emcee D? You got something to sell me, you want another private show?”

“I actually have a proposition I would like to discuss with you regarding some of your former assets that are currently being held by the SCP Foundation,” Victor replied. Manny groaned and muttered something under his breath. It might have been ‘Icky’. “I apologize if I’ve said anything to upset you, but I was led to believe you may have an interest in reobtaining some of these assets.”

“You, ah, you’re going to want to talk to our Ringmaster Veronica. I run back-of-house around here. She runs front-of-house. I have a feeling she’s the one behind this,” he grumbled. “Follow me, we’ll see if she’s in her tent.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Victor stuck as closely behind Manny as he could, not wanting to get lost in the candy coloured labyrinth. As they moved further into the Circus the sickly sweet scent of cotton candy became so overwhelming Victor needed to cover his nose and mouth with a neckerchief. Amidst the unceasing drone of conversation that surrounded them, Victor swore that some of the voices he heard didn't sound Human. Though he had yet to see any animals, he could hear their various calls ringing through the air. Some didn't sound like any creature he was familiar with, and all of them either sounded monstrously vicious or pitifully forlorn. The calliope was still the worst of all. The music felt almost invasive, insidious somehow, as though it was trying to lull him into letting his guard down so that it could do with him as it pleased.

As he surveyed his strange surroundings, he noticed Herman Fuller's name over and over again, over every tent, booth, kiosk and caravan. This struck him as curious as Manny had said the Ringmaster was a woman.

If Victor was in a more mundane line of work he would have simply assumed that Herman was the late founder of the Circus, but if Herman was anything like his own employers it seemed unlikely that he was dead.

"Will Mr. Fuller need to sign off on any deal we might come to?" he coughed through his neckerchief, deciding it would be best to do his due diligence. The mere mention of the name caused a cold glower to spread across Manny's inverted face.

"No."

Victor didn't dare to press the issue any further.

Manny led him into a red and gold striped tent, where he saw two Clowns. One was hideously deformed, a lanky giant with an elongated face, ashen grey skin, and long pointed nose. His eyeless sockets were inky black, as were his oversized lips. The thing smiled at him, revealing a perfect set of dazzling white teeth.

The other Clown was bouncing on a miniature trampoline and laughing uncontrollably. She looked to be a young woman, though her smooth white face made it impossible to tell for sure. She was dressed in mismatched striped stockings and a frilly purple dress, and her auburn hair was held up in twin pigtails that had been curled like ribbons. She was adorned with a red Glasgow smile, a red nose, and sharp red lines through her eyes. Victor wondered if maybe she was just an ordinary human in makeup.

“Lolly!” Manny shouted to get her attention. She somersaulted through the air and landed in her black platform shoes.

“Ta da!” she exclaimed proudly, beaming a smile. He could see now that she had the same perfect, impossibly white teeth as the other.

She was one of them.

“Where’s Veronica?” Manny asked.

“In the Menagerie of Mayhem. The Pink Elephant got into the grownup juice and now it’s having hallucinations about people,” the Clown snickered.

“I’ll go get her. Lolly, would you be so kind as to entertain our guest until we get back?”

“Of course!” she said excitedly, rushing up to shake his hand. “Hi! My name’s Lollipop, but you can call me Lolly. Are you running away to join the Circus?”

“No Lolly, he’s just here on business. His name’s Victor, and he’s a salesman with Emcee D.”

“That sounds like a boring job. You should run away to join the Circus. We have so much fun here, and I never even get in trouble because I’m Icky’s favourite.” She stuck her tongue out tauntingly at Manny.

“Don’t worry kid, I’ll be back before you know it,” Manny told Victor, giving him a sympathetic pat on the pack. “And don’t mind the big guy. He’s just her babysitter.”

“I’m not allowed to be unsupervised,” she smiled mischievously. Manny left the tent, leaving Victor alone with the two Clowns. “Why do you look so scared? Honestly, Mr. Noodles would never hurt anyone. I know we Clowns can look a little strange, but that doesn’t mean we’re monsters.”

“No, of course not, I just…I’m just nervous. I’m a little out of my element,” Victor said, forcing an uncomfortable laugh. “I don’t usually do, ah…field work? If that’s what you call this.”

“Why don’t you sit down, relax?” Lolly offered, and led him to a large wooden desk on the west side of the tent. She opened a mini bar and pulled out what looked like a traditional milk bottle filled with some viscous black liquid. She sat down beside him and popped off the cap. “Sorry, I just need a fix before we go any further.”

She took a swig from the bottle, and a spasm threw her back against

the chair. She cried out in apparent ecstasy and was left breathing heavily as she tried to regain her composure.

“Are you alright?” Victor asked.

“Oh yeah. I’m impossibly happy, literally. When Humdrums drink this stuff their *serosomething* levels get so high they have a heart attack.”

She smiled at him, her teeth dripping black with the strange liquid. “I’d find that sad if I could stay away from this stuff long enough to feel anything but bliss. You could still have some cotton candy though. I bet you’ve never gotten high off calliope music before, have you?”

“I’m afraid I’ll have to pass. I am here on business, after all,” he declined as politely as he could. Just the smell of the cotton candy was making his teeth hurt.

Lolly took a more modest sip from the bottle, then passed it to Mr. Noodles.

“Have you ever been to our Circus before?” she asked. Victor just shook his head. “I could give you a tour if you want after your meeting. This place, it’s just, it’s magic. It’s really magic! The people, the rides, the games, the prizes, even the food is magic! It’s a sanctuary of magic in a shittingly mundane world. When I first saw this place I knew I could never go back to the real world, and I never did.”

“Go back? You mean you weren’t always…as you are now?”

“Uh-uh,” she shook her head. “When I was a little girl I was perfectly ordinary. My mom was a cunt and I had a miserable childhood, so when the Circus came to town I took all the money from her purse and had the best day of my life! That was the day I met Icky. She saved me, like she’s saved a bunch of kids, but I was special; maybe because I came to her. She was so beautiful and powerful and wonderful and amazing I couldn’t help but love her. Wait ’til you see her, you’ll love her too. She’s a magician you know; a real magician with real magic, and I’m her lovely and beloved assistant.”

“When you…”

“And her playmate,” she added with a naughty smile.

“When you say that she rescued you, you mean she made you perform for the Circus?”

“Not just perform, but she turned me into a Clown! Mr. Noodles here was born a Clown, but I got turned, which is why I’m not as special looking as some of the other Clowns. Icky thinks I’m pretty though. I was so worried that she wouldn't let me stay because I wasn't special like everyone else here, but she asked me if I liked Clowns and I said that I loved Clowns because, duh, everyone loves Clowns and she said I could be a Clown! Oh, do you like candy?"

"I, yes?"

"Well, we Clowns need so much sugar that our diet is basically all candy. That's why we get these special chompers so that our teeth don't rot out on us. I never even brush my teeth. I hated the dentist when I was little, and thanks to Icky I never have to go to one again! Doesn't that make you want to be a Clown?"

"I…don't mind dentists too terribly, actually. At least, not compared to some things," he replied. "Ms. Lollipop…"

"Lolly," she insisted.

"Alright, Lolly, am I understanding you correctly when you say you were a runaway child that Icky subjected to anomalous modifications for the sake of becoming a circus act?" he asked, failing to completely mask the horror in his voice.

"…and I get to eat all the candy I want," she said through her eerily serene smile. "Honestly, it was the best thing that ever happened to me. I love performing. Every time I'm in that ring I get to delight and amaze hundreds of people. I get to show them that there really is such a thing as magic, which is the most uplifting thing anyone could ever do for anyone. You couldn't make me give that up. Icky rescued me from a horrifically mundane life, and I'll always love her for that."

“And she’s rescued others, as well?”

“Well she makes us feel like family, but Manny’s usually the one who brings ’em in. Every few months or so it seems. They’re not safe out there, Freaks in a world of Humdrums, so we bring them here where they’re safe and loved and get to be Circus stars!”

“I’m sure it’s a great privilege,” Victor said, reminding himself that it was no worse than some of the things MC&D did. "But if you wanted to leave, could you?"

"As a Clown I literally can't live without Milk, so leaving would be a death sentence."

"I see," Victor nodded. "Is there any way you could not be a Clown again?"

"No offence, but I'd rather die from Milk deprivation than be normal again," she replied. "Humdrums can't do stuff like this."

She pulled out a pack of balloons, and inflated one with a single breath. She tied it off effortlessly, and when she let it go it floated like it was inflated with helium instead of air. She filled up several more in rapid succession and then began juggling them. Going both up and down, they seemed to defy physics, floating or falling however she desired as if following a constantly changing invisible track. The balloons appeared to have a life of their own, an effect that was only enhanced by their giggling.

"That is impressive," Victor complimented. “I hope they pay you well."

“We get paid in scrip. It’s easier that way since we travel to so many different countries in so many alternate realities, there’s just too many types of currencies to keep straight,” Lolly replied, having no difficulty with juggling and talking at the same time. “It’s a little bit of a hassle to redeem it for real cash if we ever want to go off site, but I like it anyway. It makes this place feel like it’s its own little country, and I’m the princess."

One of the balloons did escape from her grasp and floated over near

Mr. Noodles. He popped it with his finger, and it screamed like someone being murdered, scattering confetti across the tent. All the other balloons fell dead silent.

Victor's expression twisted into one of confused horror.

"Oh don't mind that. That's just like when steam escapes from a lobster's shell when you toss them in boiling water," Lolly claimed, letting the balloons float away freely. "Balloons don't have souls. Believe me, I know. One time, we needed this Elder God thing's permission to enter his dimension or whatever, and he demanded a sacrifice. He got so cranky when I tried to give him balloons, so I'm pretty sure if anyone would know if something has a soul, it's a soul-eating Elder God. We ended up going to another dimension with more reasonable lot fees, and they got to see me ride my unicycle upside down.

“I don't want to talk about otherworldly demons though. It's kind of a downer. I wanna talk about fun stuff. You sell magic stuff for Emcee D right? What’s the coolest magical thing you’ve ever sold?”

"I'm afraid I'm not allowed to divulge information about our wares to anyone that's not a potential customer."

"I'm a potential customer. Just because I use a piggy bank instead of a real bank doesn't mean my money's any less good."

"I…have no argument for that. I do happen to have a catalogue with me," he said, opening his briefcase. "I guess it can't hurt for you to look at it, as long as you promise to give it to Manny or the Ringmaster."

"Cross my heart, hope to die, stick a needle in my eye," she swore dutifully before eagerly snatching the catalogue. "Wow, this is a lot fancier looking than Wondertainment's catalogue."

"There is a section for Wondertainment's products that we carry, starting on page 33, however a great many of our offerings are handcrafted by some of the most skilled anartists known to…"

"120 bucks for a bubblebath bonbon! Are you nuts?"

"We are Wondertainment's exclusive distributors for that product, so without any competition the market value is rather high."

"We give better stuff than this away for prizes. People actually pay over a hundred dollars for one piece of magic candy?"

"Well as you yourself said, magic's depressingly hard to come by outside of your, *lovely*, circus. Our clients are normally more than willing to pay our prices."

"You know, Icky got me Ragamuffin from Emcee D," she said as she casually flipped through the slender catalogue.

"…Ragamuffin?"

"Oh my god! You have to meet my dolly!" she shouted excitedly, throwing the catalogue on the desk and running over to what appeared to be a Tim Burtonesque dollhouse and pulled out a purple haired rag doll with button eyes dressed in a similar manner to herself.

“This is my dolly Ragamuffin. She’s a magic dolly and a lot of bad things could have happened to her if she had ended up in the hands of the Essie P or any of the other bad people who kill or lock up freaks,” she said as she sat back down beside him. “That’s why she’s normally very shy around strangers and just acts like an ordinary doll, but she’s not. It’s a bit of a shame because I’d like to do some acts with her, but I love her the way she is. Icky got her for me. I had come here with nothing but the clothes on my back and some cash in my pocket, and she said a girl needed a doll, and I deserved the most special dolly she could find. Her contact at Emcee D was who she called to get me that doll.

“I know you probably didn’t care about giving her a loving home and would have sold her to whoever offered first, but I’m grateful that you were the ones that found her since you’re probably the only group out there that would have sold her in the first place.

“My point is, even though you charge way too much for candy, I'm glad we're business partners. Ragamuffin, don’t you agree?” She held the doll to her ear as if it was whispering to her. Victor would

have been a little unnerved by a grown woman pretending to talk to a doll, but was more unnerved by the indistinct murmurs that seemed to emanate from the toy. “Ragamuffin says that your people treated her very well and she’s very thankful that she ended up with me in the Circus instead of being experimented on at the Essie P, but she’s still too shy to talk to you.”

“Another time perhaps,” Victor smiled. He became aware that voices were approaching the tent.

“Manny, if you won’t get rid of the elephant then we’ll have to stop having booze on site because no matter what we do she always gets into it,” he heard a woman say.

“I’ll send the damn thing to AA if I have to, but so long as she brings in more than she costs, she stays,” he heard Manny reply. “After all, she…

“Don’t say it!”

“…works for peanuts.”

The woman sighed, and then walked into the tent alongside Manny. She was quite obviously the Ringmaster, dressed in a long-tailed red velvet coat and tall high heeled boots. She wore a top hat upon her long black hair, though for some reason it reminded Victor more of a magician’s hat than a Ringmaster’s. Her skin was the same porcelain white as the Clowns’, but her elaborate violet makeup was closer to *Cirque du Soleil* than the Ringling Bros. aesthetic the rest of the Circus seemed to follow. Victor also couldn’t help but note that she had a very pronounced, almost cartoonish hourglass figure. He glanced over at Mr. Noodles and his numerous exaggerated features, and figured they had both been shaped the way they were for the enjoyment of others.

“Icky!” Lolly cried excitedly, leaping from her chair and throwing herself into the Ringmaster’s arms.

“Easy there little Lollipop. I see someone’s had her serving of Milk for the day. Good girl,” she praised her. “How’s our guest?”

“He’s still a little bit nervous, but that’s to be expected for a Humdrum. He’s really nice though. Come say hello."

“There he is, straight from the Deathless Merchant of London,” the Ringmaster said as she approached her desk.

“I’ve been told never to call him that, but yes, I am from Marshall, Carter, & Dark,” Victor said, standing up to shake her hand. The Ringmaster instead grabbed his face and seemed to inspect him, a manic gleam in her bright purple eyes. She smiled, her perfect white teeth confirming that she was indeed a Clown.

“Excellent. Very pretty. I see your bosses got the memo that I like ’em young. So much cuter than that old fart from the London Office. What’s his name, *Bourgeois*?”

“Burgess,” Manny replied.

“Close enough,” the Ringmaster shrugged.

“Icky, I think you’re scaring him,” Lolly said.

“You’re right. I’m sorry,” the Ringmaster said, releasing Victor from her unnaturally strong clutches. “I should be more professional. You may address me as Ms. Ringmaster, young man. That sounds very professional, I think. Of course, when you hear people talking about Icky they’re talking me. Icky the Magic Clown was my act before I was the Ringmaster. And of course, Manny here insists on calling me Veronica, my boring Humdrum name. I don’t know why. Do I look normal to you?”

“Don’t go asking questions that are liable to start a fight,” Manny objected. “We’re both busy and you called this boy here for a reason, so let’s get to it.”

“You’re right. Sit back down young man,” the Ringmaster said. Victor quickly obliged, and the Ringmaster sat across from him. She poured herself a tumbler of Milk from the bottle and drank it in one gulp, shouting and slamming her palm on the desktop. She poured herself a second glass, but proceeded to sip it normally. Lolly sat herself on the Ringmaster’s lap, placing her arm over her shoulder

like she was visiting Santa Claus. Manny stood to their right, while Mr. Noodles stood right behind Victor, ready to intervene should he start any funny business with his employers.

“Whenever you’re ready,” the Ringmaster said. Victor began fumbling with his briefcase and pulled out a manila folder.

“As per your request, I have compiled a dossier containing the SCP files of all your Circus’s former assets that, to our knowledge, are currently being held by the SCP Foundation,” he said, sliding the folder over to her. “If there are any there you would like to retrieve, our contacts within the Foundation can provide additional intelligence regarding the containment facilities and personnel or arrange for security system failures. The price for our assistance will be that during your recovery operation you also retrieve for us an SCP object of our choosing from that same facility.”

“We are not antagonizing the Essie P!” Manny growled through his teeth.

“Yeah, I don’t like the Essie P. They’re mean,” Lolly said. “They lock up freaks just for being freaks. That’s not right. Clowns are meant to make people happy, and I can't do that if they lock me up.”

“You have nothing to worry about darling,” the Ringmaster claimed. “With the Kaleidoscope, we can travel through any door we want, and with Emcee D’s operatives we won’t even have to worry about being caught on camera. They’ll never know it was us, especially since we’ll be stealing something else while we’re at it. Perfect prestidigitation, which as a magician I’m pretty good at.”

“I know what you’re doing,” Manny claimed. “You think that if you spring a freak or two from the Essie P and bring them home the rest of the freaks will love you as much as the Clowns do, and then you won’t need me anymore to keep them in line.”

“Manny, I’m not Herman,” the Ringmaster assured him. “I’m not trying to get rid of you. You’ve been with the Circus longer than anyone; you know it better than anyone. This Circus couldn’t exist without you, and no one here wants it to, especially me. Herman may not have meant it when he said that the Circus was family, but I

do. You're my family Manny, along with everyone else here, and that's why I want to do this. Sure, it will be good for morale, but we owe it to our Little Acts Lost to at least make sure they're okay, and to help them if they're not. The Circus is a family, and family stays together."

Manny made a gesture which Victor guessed was a face-palm, but due to his upside-down face it looked more like he was stroking his chin.

"If I may interject something, the Ringmaster is right that there's no danger in antagonizing the Foundation in this manner," Victor said. "Marshall, Carter, & Dark has been pinching items for decades without any consequence. The Foundation has actual world-ending threats they must contain. They can't be bothered to chase down every anomalous trinket that goes missing. They are already aware of both our organizations but do very little besides espionage. Besides, if all goes as planned, they'll never even know that either of us was involved."

"Manny, we don't need to be afraid of the Essie P. We have the Kaleidoscope for quick getaways, and the Fortune Teller as an early warning system," the Ringmaster said. "Essie can't touch us. What do we have to lose?"

Manny let out a long sigh.

"Open the file at least. We might as well have a look at it."

The Ringmaster squealed with delight and greedily snatched the file from the desk. Victor noticed that her eyes moved rapidly over each page, and he guessed that she was speed reading.

"Let's see…No, too stinky, too grabby, a lawsuit waiting to happen. Hmm…Motormouth."

"Oh, I liked Motormouth. He taught me to juggle," Lolly said.

"Everyone liked Motormouth," the Ringmaster said wistfully.

"Not him. He's not coming back, not after that stunt he pulled," Manny said firmly.

“I know,” the Ringmaster agreed, despondently turning the page. “Though maybe you should have taken the machine gun out of his mouth before turning him over.”

“Ooh, can we get Meaty the Meatworm back? That was so much fun!” Lolly asked. "It went so fast and so high and so many loopty loops and upside down and sideways and backwards like *schoom schoom schoom schoom*! Also it was sticky."

“We can’t operate the machine safely without Charley,” Manny said. “He’s not still kicking around, is he?”

“No, he…blew himself up. Huh,” the Ringmaster said. “Moving on. Viscera and confetti? What a mess. Can't blame him for being pissed. Cancer? That sucks. We should send him a card or something."

She turned to the next page, and her eyes went wide.

“Virtuoso,” she said softly. “They have Virtuoso.”

“Who’s that Icky?” Lolly asked.

“He was a creation of Fuller's. He had the most beautiful voice. Well, lots of voices actually. He sang constantly, it was what he lived for. I would sit by his cage for hours, just listening to him sing. I spoke to him too, I spoke to him like he couldn't understand me because I didn't think he could. But one night I came to him after Herman had caned me, I don't even remember what for, but I do remember I was still crying. Virtuoso finished his song, but instead of going straight to the next one as usual he looked straight at me and said two words: *'Any requests?'*. I was stunned and just muttered if he knew any Gilbert and Sullivan. He nodded, and sang the entire score of the H.M.S Pinafore for me.

"From then on when I talked to him he would listen, humming as quietly as he could, and speak back if he felt he had something worth saying. He'd sing silly songs for me, I'd sing duets with him, bring him flowers. I was his number one fan, and he was my friend."

The Ringmaster inhaled sharply as tears began rolling down her

face. Lolly offered her more Milk, but she pushed the glass away.

"I thought he was dead," she continued. "I thought Herman had burned him alive. There was an accident. Virtuoso's covering was pierced during a performance and all his voices deafened most of the audience. After that Herman decided he was a liability to be disposed of. I cried myself to sleep for weeks after that. But he's alive! He survived the fire and ended up with the Essie P! He's been locked up all this time. He was made to sing, he was meant to be heard, and those bastards have him locked in a soundproof room singing to himself! We can't let him live like that Manny."

"Do whatever you want. I won't stop you," he replied. "Just be sure to shut down the Kaleidoscope afterwards. I don't want a mobile task force to come storming through one of those doors."

"Thank you," she said. She handed the SCP report over to Victor. "This is the one we want Emcee D. Essie P number 1860. I want literally every last scrap of information you have on the place they're holding him."

"Excellent. I will inform my superiors and contact you once we have decided what items we would consider acceptable payment for our services and proceed from there," he said, gathering his briefcase. "If there's nothing further?"

"One more thing," the Ringmaster said, pulling out a VIP pass from her pocket and holding it out to him. "I want you to come here off the clock sometime, our treat. You need to really experience the Circus if you're going to be our Emcee D rep. Wear a cheaper suit though. Some of our acts can get a bit messy."

"…Right. Yes, I, it's just that my schedule with Marshall, Carter, & Dark isn't exactly 9-5, and your Circus doesn't publish its tour schedule so I don't know how we would…"

"You have Gary's number. Just give him a ring whenever you're free and he'll send someone through the doorway to pick you up," she said firmly.

Victor *errred* and *ahhhed* for a moment trying to think of a way to

refuse, when Ragamuffin became animate. She took the ticket from the Ringmaster and walked it across the desk to him, waving it enthusiastically. Her button eyes were spinning slowly, and her stitched mouth gradually opened in a black smile that unleashed faint and otherworldly screams.

“Awwww, she likes you!" Lolly cooed. "Now you have to come back, or you’ll hurt her feelings.”

“I wouldn’t want to do that,” he replied, gingerly accepting the ticket.

Why didn’t I just say I was afraid of clowns?

« **A Real Humdinger** | **Dread & Circuses Hub** | **Fuller Than Full!** »

Fuller Than Full!

« Former Assets |Dread & Circuses Hub | Fuller's Fantastic Fun-Lover's Funhouse »

“Ladies and Gentlmen, let’s have another big round of applause for Bubble Gum, the tipsy elephant. Try not to feel too sorry for her. We can’t help her until she admits she has a problem.”

While the crowd cheered and applauded as the permanently plastered pink pachyderm perambulated out of the Big Top, Ringmaster Icky cast her gaze towards the back of the stands where she had noticed a rather, well, *disquieting* individual.

Thanks to her many years of experience she could tell effortlessly whether or not someone was under the effects of their signature black cotton candy, and she always made sure to keep an eye on them in case they were up to something. Her circus was everything to her, and she could spot a threat to her circus from miles away.

The man she was looking at now had been watching her performance with rapt attention, but without any of the joy and wonder or disgust and horror that most people did. No, he was watching *diligently*, as if it was his job. She could practically hear him writing his report in his head.

Time to find out who that report was going to.

Icky signalled to the audio technician to switch the calliope over to *‘Officer of the Year’*. All the Circus folk present took immediate note of this, and knew they were about to go off script.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, I think we have time for one last magic trick before we get to our final act. Do you all want to see another magic trick?”

The audience of course applauded their approval.

“I want to see another magic trick!” said her assistant, who had popped out from under her top hat and was now gracefully perched on her head.

“Lolly, get down from there,” she commanded gently. Lolly did a handstand, placing the top hat back on the Ringmaster’s head, then back-flipped to the ground to laughter and applause. “For our next trick, we’re going to need one more volunteer from the audience. Only one! Do we have any volunteers?”

Dozens of eager hands shot up of course, but the man in the back remained as passively observant as ever.

Not that that made one bit of difference to Icky. With a flourish of her wand she cast the spotlight upon him.

“You sir, there in the back. You look like you’d be perfect.”

“What? I, uh…no. I mean, I couldn’t, I…”

“Come on down!”

The audience clapped and cheered their encouragement, and the man noticed a rather large Clown had already appeared beside him to usher him down. He hastily weighed his options and decided it would be best to play along, and allowed himself to be led into the ring.

“Thanks Noodles,” Icky said, taking the man by the arm. “What’s your name sir?”

“Ah…Jeremy?” he said, though it hardly sounded like he was sure.

“Well Jeremy; actually can I call you Jerry? I’m going to call you Jerry. Jerry, the reason I picked you over all these other nice folks is that I couldn’t help but notice how serious you looked, and that just doesn’t sit right with me. How can someone be so serious after seeing a drunken pink elephant blow gravity defying bubbles from her trunk?”

“It certainly is unusual Icky,” Lolly agreed. “Makes me think that maybe Jerry didn’t come here to have fun at all.”

“What do you say to that Jerry? Are you here on business or pleasure?”

“Well I just, you know, I just saw the tents set up and I didn’t have any other plans so I…Jesus Christ!”

Jeremy’s pants had spontaneously combusted, engulfing his entire posterior in fire. The audience roared with laughter as he tried to beat the flames. “What the hell is this!”

“Your pants are on fire Jerry, which means you must be a liar-liar-pants-on-fire,” Icky explained with a smug smile.

“Yeah, that’s why I only wear skirts so I can get away with any fibs I want,” Lolly boasted.

Jeremy had started rolling on the ground to try to smother the flames. A frantic Clown ran out with a fire extinguisher, but when he fired it he was sent rocketing around the tent to the amazement of the guests, assuring them it was all part of the show.

“Somebody help me!” Jeremy screamed.

“All you have to do is tell the truth,” Icky said, but then lowered her voice so that the audience couldn’t hear her. “Why did you come here? Who do you work for?”

“I just wanted to see a circus!” he claimed.

“Fine then, let your itty bitty boy parts burn off. Hope you don’t got anyone who’s gonna to miss ’em.”

As if by her command, the fire actually started to move towards his genitals.

“Ah! Okay, GOC! I’m with the occult coalition!”

To his relief the flames instantly died out. His relief was short-lived though, as he immediately noticed all the Clowns staring at him with a hatred so intense it put the fire to shame.

“Freak killer!” Lolly hissed under her breath.

“No! Please, I just do recon for them and I really did just stumble upon your circus. They don’t even know I’m here and if you let me go I swear they never will,” he claimed. Icky shook her head in contempt, and knelt down to speak with him privately.

“You *just* do recon? Every freak you ever ratted out to the Geo Sea is dead! They’re literal Nazis bent on wiping my kind from the Earth! This Circus is a sanctuary for freaks, which means there’s no way in hell you’re getting out alive. Play along, and it will at least be quick.”

Icky rose to her full height and resumed her cheerful persona.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, I do apologize for Mr. Jerry’s strange and lackluster performance, but luckily that won’t have any effect upon the astounding display of magic you’re about to witness: the Fuller than Full Human Caramel Cooker!”

Lolly and Mr. Noodles hoisted Jeremy up and placed him inside of some sort of elastic harness, and shoved a tube and funnel down his throat. Lolly leapt to the top of the harness to hold up the funnel for all to see. A stagehand entered the ring pulling a large tank filled with pristine white sugar.

With some nonsensical magic words and dramatic gestures, Icky drew all the sugar into the air and started spinning it around the ring in a vortex. The sugar assumed the shapes of various exotic animals, elephants and zebras and tigers and the like, racing around the ring on parade as Icky cracked a whip made of sugar to drive them on.

One by one they dove into the funnel to cook inside Jeremy’s stomach. His stomach swelled with burning hot molten sugar until he was sure it would burst, but it didn’t. As his stomach expanded his ribs broke off and his spine was horribly deformed, but yet all his soft tissues had taken on an unnatural elasticity allowing them to stretch to horrific proportions.

His torso continued to enlarge until it was so massive his legs broke underneath him. It was at this point that the harness lifted him up to about a dozen feet off the ground. He had swallowed all the sugar and yet still he kept growing. The harness spun him around, faster

and faster as Icky led the audience in some sort of chant, but he was in too much pain to care what they were saying.

Finally his skin had become taught. It could stretch no more, and yet whatever was inside him continued to push outwards. He let out one final scream, and then popped like a balloon.

Thousands upon thousands of colourfully wrapped caramels rained down upon the audience, most of whom applauded and eagerly scooped them up. Only the few who remained unaffected by the calliope music looked confused, uncertain as to what they had just witnessed.

While the light-weight candy had flown all across the Big Top, the heavier viscera had mostly landed in the front rows. Sitting in this splash zone, among others, was their VIP guest Victor Chan.

With as much reserve as he could muster, Victor took out his neckerchief and began wiping off the stray bits of flesh. He was certainly glad he had taken Icky's advice to wear some less expensive clothing.

Nevertheless, he fully intended to submit his dry cleaning bill on his next expense report.

« **Former Assets** | **Dread & Circuses Hub** | **Fuller's Fantastic Fun-Lover's Funhouse** »

Fuller's Fantastic Fun-Lover's Funhouse

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Having been sitting up front, Victor was one of the last to exit the Big Top after the afternoon show had concluded. He inspected himself thoroughly, making sure there were no pieces of Human viscera still clinging anywhere on his person. There were some blood stains of course, but if anyone asked he was hoping he could pass those off for food stains.

Casting his gaze now to the sprawling Circus before him, he couldn't say it was any more inviting than it had been on his first visit. The colours were too bright, the smell of the cotton candy too strong, and the never ending music from the calliope was too seductive. He was wondering if seeing the Big Top show might be enough to appease his hosts, and if he could sneak off without offending them.

He lurched forward as a small person jumped onto his back and covered his eyes with their hands.

"Guess who?" they asked gleefully.

"Hello Lolly," Victor replied, recognizing the young Clown's effervescent voice immediately.

"No fair, you peeked," she accused playfully, hopping back to the ground. "I'm so glad you came back! What'd you think of the show? Was I amazing?"

"I can honestly say I've never seen a magician pull her assistant out of a hat before."

"It's even harder than it looks. That hat stinks of bunny poop."

"If I had to offer any criticism though, the, ah…lynching, before the

final act was a bit much. Don't get me wrong, I don't care for the GOC either and I recognize the threat they pose to your community but…"

"No, no, I see what you're saying. We may have gotten a bit carried away. Even us converted Clowns still have a bit of a mean streak we have to keep in check. Rough sex or a round at the Hack-A-Mole table is usually enough for Icky and me to get our aggression out, but we still lose our tempers every now and then.
"Oh! Icky wants to know how the plans for the caper's going. She's really looking forward to getting Virtuoso back."

"That's progressing as expected. I have the site layout with me so you can pick your entrance point. The containment cell is soundproofed, so you won't be able to use your Kaleidoscope to get in there since it needs your calliopes to work, but you shouldn't have a problem getting into an adjacent room. The wing is low security so there are no guards inside and our operative is working on ensuring he'll be able to get the security systems down. Once he's got a date and time we'll let you know.
"One detail of our original agreement has changed, however; Mr. Marshall has actually personally requested a slight adjustment to your payment."

"What do you mean?"

"It's just that Mr. Marshall thought that your anomalous means of transport would actually be of more value to us than anything you could steal from the Foundation. More specifically, have you ever been to an interdimensional marketplace known as the Utterly Bazaar?"

"Yeah, tons of times."

"Mr. Marshall would like you to escort me there so that I can do an assessment and also possibly acquire any products that I think we'd be able to move. Does that work for you?"

"Oh sure! We go there all the time anyway. It'd be no problem to have you tagging along."

“Perfect. We shouldn’t have any problems then. If, ah, you need to get back to work I don’t want to keep you.”

“Nope, you’re my work today!” she announced excitedly. “I usually work the crowd in between shows, but Icky said that today I should be your personal attendant to make sure you don’t miss anything the Circus has to offer!”

“That’s…so kind of you. Thank you,” he said with a forced smile.

“Come on, we’ve got a lot to do,” she said, taking his hand and dragging him into the throng of striped tents and caravans. “Do you want to go to the midway first? You could win me an enormous prize and make Icky super jealous!”

“That really doesn’t sound like a good idea to me.”

“Yeah, maybe not. No offense, but every booth operator we have would mark you as a sucker. Well, you’re our VIP, so you should choose where we go. There’s the Menagerie of Mayhem, Den of Freaks, Hall of Humans Extraordinaire…”

“Step right up, Step right up. Come and behold the wonders and horrors that lie within Fuller's Fantastic Fun-lover’s Funhouse!” a man in a pinstripe suit announced loudly.

“The Funhouse! Yes yes yes! We should go to the Funhouse. Come on!”

She grabbed hold of his hand again and pulled him over to a whimsically painted caravan with a large sign reading ‘HERMAN FULLER PROUDLY PRESENTS THE FANTASTIC FUN-LOVER’S FUNHOUSE!’

“Hey there Lollipop, who’s the young fella you’ve got with ya?” the pinstripe-suited man asked. Though well-dressed, he still looked more or less like what Victor thought of when he pictured a carny. He had a weathered face with a dark grey beard and greasy hair in a ponytail. His smile made it clear he wasn’t a Clown, since his teeth were off-colour, crooked and riddled with silver fillings.

“This is Victor Chan. He’s from Emcee D and he’s our VIP guest

today," Lolly introduced him. "Victor, this is Alfie. He looks after all of the Circus's Fun-lovers, which is a very important job. Without the Fun-lovers, we wouldn't be able to have any Clowns or cotton candy. Can you imagine a circus without Clowns and cotton candy?"

"Fun-lovers? That's what you call those… milking creatures, right?" Victor asked nervously.

"How do you know about Fun-lovers?" Lolly asked.

"From the same source that told us about the Utterly Bazaar. He said that once a couple of Clowns were there with a Fun-lover that ended up getting loose."

Lolly threw her head back and laughed.

"Yeah, we were laughing about that for weeks. They never let Pius or Eugene in again after that. But yes, this is where we keep the Fun-lovers. It's kind of like a barn or a kennel or something. Keeps them out of trouble anyway. But you don't have anything to worry about. Manny got fed up with Morty's antics a while ago and sent him back home. We don't keep Fun-lovers as crazy as that around anymore. Just come in with me and you'll see that they're awesome."

"What do we do in there? Is it like a petting zoo?"

"No, but we have a petting zoo! Do you want to see the petting zoo?"

"Don't see the petting zoo," Alfie said with a solemn shake of his head. "It's for kids, and the best thing they got there is the Obama Llama we got from **`that delivery service`**, though it has been an especially big hit ever since the election. Son, of all the sensational spectacles this Circus has to offer, none can compare to the existential experience that is Fuller's Fabulously Fantastic Fun-lovers' Funhouse."

Victor groaned uneasily, which was perhaps an under-reaction considering he was being asked to step into a confined space with an unknown number of extradimensional monstrosities of unclear

abilities and intent.

“And you’ve been in here before?” he asked Lolly.

“Loads of times. I’ve been coming in here since I was a kid, and kids come in here all the time as long they’re over four feet tall. You’ll love it, and I promise nothing bad will happen.”

Though Victor still found Herman Fuller’s Circus as disquieting as its name intended, he had no reason to doubt Lolly’s sincerity.

“Alright then. Let’s see some Fun-lovers,” he agreed. Lolly jumped up and down, excitedly clapping her hands.

“You won’t be disappointed, son,” Alfie smiled, unhooking the red velvet rope to allow them access to the caravan. “Normally I escort groups through the Funhouse personally, but I think Lolly can handle giving you a private tour. Just don’t wander off though.”

“Wait, what? What do you mean by 'wander off'?” Victor asked as he stood by the front door with Lolly’s arm wrapped around his.

“You’ll see when you get in there,” Alfie replied, placing his hand on a lever. “Oh, and watch that first step…”

He pulled the lever and a trap door opened underneath them, dropping them down a chute. Over the screams of Victor and the laughter of Lolly he could be heard to shout “…it’s a doozy!”

The chute zigged and zagged like a tube slide at a water park, and at one point Victor swore he was actually moving up. After nearly a minute they were finally deposited inside a ball pit of fuzzy, warm and possibly breathing furballs.

As Victor tried to pull his way out of the ball pit, Lolly was of course giggling hysterically as she frolicked in the hirsute hole.

“Furball fight!” she shouted, throwing the furry projectiles at Victor as quickly as she could pick them up. They were too soft and light to hurt him, but with each impact they made a sort of distressed squeaking sound that was somewhat unnerving.

Victor pulled himself out of the pit and onto the floor. He stayed there on his hands and knees for a moment, trying to regain his composure. After a few deep breaths, he looked up to assess his surroundings.

“Holy shit.”

“I know. It’s awesome, right?”

“I have a sudden urge to quote Doctor Who.”

The interior of the Funhouse was enormous, probably bigger than any man-made structure in existence. It felt like he could see for miles in every direction, though for some reason he was having a hard time judging distance. The ceiling (or was it the sky?) was covered in constantly changing fractal patterns that bathed the surreal landscape in a soft, shifting glow. The ground itself appeared to be made of Play-Doh, slowing undulating with shapes and sculptures emerging from it in the distance. Groves of twisty pipe cleaner trees dotted the landscape, and rivers of iridescent paint meandered through the quixotic realm.

“Is it really bigger on the inside or did we teleport?” Victor asked, rising to his feet.

“It’s a pocket dimension; a whole itty-bitty universe that we can take on tour with us!” she replied enthusiastically, hopping out of the pit.

“Is it always like this?”

“No! That’s the awesome part! In here the Fun-lovers are gods with complete control over time, space, matter, even the laws of physics! One time they lowered the speed of light down to under ten miles an hour, and you could feel relativistic effects just from walking around! Then this other time…”

She was interrupted by two creatures dropping down from the ceiling. They bounced up and down like Super Balls for a bit before finally coming to a rest. They were both translucent black organ sacks a few feet across. One was held up by spider legs, the other by tentacles. Victor cautiously retreated behind Lolly, hoping that

she could deal with them.

“Ripley! Bailey! What’s the matter with you? We have a guest! Make yourselves decent!”

The two creatures dipped their bodies, possibly a bow of deference, and with a quick shimmer they assumed tall humanoid forms clad in pinstripe suits in the same style Alfie had been wearing. Each also wore a carnival mask over its seemingly blank face. The first, Ripley, wore a feminine mask with a subdued expression, while Bailey wore a man’s face with a bulbous nose and wide smile. The two beings took lanky, alien strides over to their friend and her guest, examining him with swiftly swivelling heads.

“Ripley and Bailey, huh?” Victor asked.

“Yeah, Icky said that Fuller liked to name Fun-lovers after rivals and enemies of his,” Lolly replied. “He was not the kind of guy you wanted to piss off. I bet there’s no one in all the worlds happier about Barnum and Bailey’s Circus going under than Herman Fuller. Not that Icky and Manny aren’t happy about it; less competition for us and all.
“Ripley, Bailey, this is Victor. He’s our VIP guest so I need you to show him an extra special time.”

The Fun-lovers started making chittering noises at each other. Their tone sounded confused, maybe irritated. Ripley lowered her head and sighed, then turned to face Lolly.

“Grownups are no fun,” she said in a raspy voice. “Look how scared he is. Children see the wonder of this place, appreciate the magic that grownups would rather lock away in a tiny cell. I’m not doing a tour without any kids.”

“Me neither,” Bailey agreed, nodding like an actual bobblehead.

“Excuse me?” Lolly asked angrily, placing her hands on her hips.

“I don’t want to be a bother. Why don’t we just wait until the next tour group comes along and we can join them?”

“No! You’re a VIP guest; that means you get VIP treatment!” Lolly

said, stomping her foot petulantly.

“And we’re Fun-lovers, which means we love fun,” Bailey said. “If something’s not fun for us, we’re not interested.”

“You wouldn’t want our Milk to go sour, now would you?” Ripley asked in a vaguely threatening tone. "You know how corrosive sour Milk can get."

“Your Milk’s not going to go sour from giving one boring tour, you’re just making excuses!” Lolly accused. “I have a very important job today showing our VIP guest the Circus and you are making me look foolish!”

“You’re a Clown,” Ripley said in a deadpan voice.

“I am the assistant Ringmaster…”

“ ‘To the’,” Bailey interjected.

“You guys get NBC in here?” Victor asked, more confused than ever.

“I am the Ringmaster’s assistant and playmate and I demand to be treated with respect! You will take me and my VIP guest on a private tour of the Funhouse, or I will be telling Manny about how disrespectful you were to one of our business partners. You know how important client relations are to Manny, so he’s not going to be happy about this, and how do you think Icky will react when I tell her you made her little Lollipop cry?”

“You’re not…” Ripley began, only to see that Lolly was pouting and her eyes were watering, and she was one wrong word away from bursting into tears. “Oh alright. One private tour for the VIP guest coming up.”

With a flourish of her hand, a horse-drawn sleigh made of Play-Doh arose from the ground. “Hop in.”

“Thank you,” Lolly said, grabbing Victor by the hand and pulling him into the sleigh.

“Maybe we can still find a way to have a little fun with this guy along the way?” Bailey whispered to his companion.

“Maybe,” she nodded in reply. Bailey sat up in the box to drive the sleigh, while Ripley rode in the passenger compartment with the others.

“I’m sorry you had to see me like that,” Lolly said to Victor, dabbing her tears with a clown hankie. “Can I get some Milk, please? You guys really killed my buzz.”

Ripley produced an empty milk bottle with a snap of her fingers.

“Vicky, you might want to look away,” she warned. Victor happily obliged, having no great curiosity as to how Fun-lovers were milked. “There you are, Lolly. Doesn’t get any fresher than that.”

“Thank you,” she said, snatching the bottle eagerly and chugging down its contents.

“Hey go easy on that. I’m not milking you if you drink too much,” Ripley cautioned.

“Woo!” Lolly screamed after she stopped to take a breath. “That is liquid happiness. I’m better now, I feel like myself again. So what’s our first stop?”

“Hmmm. How about a round of miniature golf? You business types tend to like the full sized version, don’t you? What do you say? It will give you a chance to work on your putt.”

“Oh, please please please please please say yes!” Lolly pleaded. “I love miniature golf!”

“Mini golf sounds great,” Victor agreed.

“To the putting greens then! Mush!” Bailey shouted.

“We’re not dogs!” one of the clay horses objected.

“Well, giddy up then. Just move!” he said with a crack of the reins. The sleigh sped off through the hills of pastel coloured putty, though

to Victor it seemed that the landscape was rushing past them as he felt no inertia and his perspective became completely warped, fractals and Play-Doh all blurring together into one unintelligible panorama.

Just as Victor thought he was about to pass out the vista in front of him settled down into something coherent. He was at what appeared to be an ordinary mini-golf course. The sleigh was gone, and he and Lolly were now seated upon two ponies.

“Where did Ripley and Bailey and go?” he asked confused.

“We’re right here,” was the reply straight from the horse’s mouth.

“Oh. You’re ponies now. But why are we riding you?”

“To play golf. Duh,” Lolly replied. Gripping her club she screamed “FORE!” and her steed charged forward. When she struck her bright pink ball it went flying at an impossible speed, bouncing off of every obstacle at just the right angle to ensure it hit the next one, and Victor wondered if it would ever hit the ground.

“Miniature polo. Interesting,” he remarked.

“It’s the sport of very small kings,” Bailey informed him.

The golf ball whizzed by them a few more times leaving a hot pink contrail as it went, bouncing off a miniature Eiffel tower, pinwheel bladed windmill, and a (live) purple giraffe with a corkscrew neck until it finally ended up in the 1st hole.

“Hole in one!” Lolly shouted victoriously, a blue ball materializing on the tee. “Your turn Victor.”

“I’ll try, but I’ve never actually golfed like this before,” he replied. He snapped Bailey’s reins and he charged towards the ball.

“They can take our lives, but they cannot take our freedom, though logically if we were dead we’d lose all agency making death the most effective form of suppressing one’s freedom so never mind!” Bailey shouted.

Victor swung his club as best as he was able, and to his surprise he actually hit the ball. It shot around the course just as Lolly's had, eventually landing in the hole with a satisfying 'plunk'.

“Hole in one!” Lolly shouted.

“Does it always end up in the hole, no matter how you hit it?” he asked.

“Of course silly, that’s what makes it fun. Everyone’s a winner!”

“Bailey dear, I do believe I detect a hint of dissatisfaction in our VIP's tone,” Ripley said.

"No, I…"

"I believe you're right Ripley. We can't have a VIP guest leaving our Funhouse unsatisfied. Why don't you take us somewhere more *challenging*."

"Wait, I didn't…"

“With pleasure,” she agreed. With a twitch of her snout, the landscape transformed into a long treadmill moving at top speed. She and Bailey broke into a full gallop to stay in place, swerving and jumping and ducking to avoid the plethora of obstacles that was coming at them.

“What is this?” Victor asked, clinging onto Bailey for dear life.

“It’s the Red Queen Obstacle Course!” Lolly replied, who was now riding side saddle and twirling a parasol. “You have to do a lot of running to stay in one place.”

“How do you win if you can only run in place?”

“You don’t win *per se*. You just don’t lose for as long as you can,” Bailey replied.

“What happens if you lose?” Victor asked.

“That,” Ripley replied, gesturing behind her with her head. Victor

looked behind to see a giant, somewhat Dr. Seuss-like catfish at the end of the treadmill, its gaping maw ready to swallow them should they slacken their pace.

Victor turned his head forward to see if there was any way off the treadmill, but he couldn't see anything beyond the obstacles rushing towards them. The obstacles were, of course, non-standard, consisting mostly of large appliances and furniture, as well as at least one Boeing 747 they narrowly managed to duck under.

"At least it wasn't a United flight? Am I right? SWIVEL CHAIR!" Bailey asked as he gracefully avoided the oncoming office fixture.

"Bailey, we've talked about the topical humour. We're not doing a stand-up routine," Ripley chastised him. "Just stick to the jokes about the food. STACKED WASHER/DRYER COMBO!"

"Lolly, can't you do something to get us out of here?" Victor pleaded.

"Well I'm not as powerful as a Fun-lover, but my magic is unusually strong in here. GRAND PIANO!" she replied. "I could wish us out of here…but what I'd really like is some bubble gum, so I wish for that!"

At her command a large gumball machine materialized a fair ways in front of them, smashing upon hitting the treadmill and sending thousands of gumballs rolling towards them.

"Oh Caramel Corn!" Bailey cursed as both he and Ripley were unable to avoid tripping on the confectioneries. They both fell to the ground and were immediately swept down towards the waiting orifice of the catfish. "Curse you, Lolly! Your oral fixation has killed us all!"

Victor screamed as he was swallowed by the monstrous fish, and he continued to scream when he found himself falling down a vine covered shaft crisscrossed with rope bridges. He was still screaming when he passed the last bridge where Ripley and Bailey were seated comfortably in their humanoid forms sipping tea. He screamed when Bailey grabbed his ankle and his arm stretched out like a bungee cord, he screamed when he saw he was falling towards a lake infested with crocodiles, he really screamed when

one of the crocodiles leapt out of the water and tried to eat him, and he even screamed when Bailey's bungee arm snapped him back up and safely deposited him on the bridge next to Lolly, who was literally ROTFLMAO.

"You're welcome," Bailey said nonchalantly as Victor laid hyperventilating before him. "As I was saying, if we can just get Manny to invest in some ultra-pasteurization equipment then we can keep Milk for months instead of days, no one has to drink that powdered crap anymore, and we can sell the surplus."

"What the hell was that!" Victor demanded, rising to his feet. "I almost died!"

"Victor, they're just teasing you," Lolly said through her snickers as she rose to her feet. "I told you everything in here is under their control, and they would never let anything bad happen to a guest, would you now?"

"Of course not," Bailey replied. "Manny would send us back home if were to let any misfortune befall any of our visitors."

"Then again, he can't send too many of us away because then he wouldn't have enough Milk, so we're not completely without bargaining power," Ripley said. "Maybe enough to ask for a new chew toy now and again?"

"Don't listen to her. Even if they actually wanted to, I take my job as your attendant very seriously and would never let anything happen to our VIP guest."

"Lolly, I believe you. I do, but I am not having a fun time. Please, I would like to leave," Victor requested.

"All right," Lolly let out a disappointed side. "Bailey, can you keyhole us straight to the exit?"

"Oh, I'm sorry Lolly but you know the fine print as well as anyone: Do not exit until the ride has come to a complete stop."

"Leaving now would be like jumping out of a roller coaster," Ripley explained. "It would be hilariously ironic if you were to let your

irrational fear of a carnival ride drive you to plunge to your death, now wouldn't it?"

"Then what's the quickest way out?" Victor demanded.

"Well below is the splash pad, and if you go through that you'll pass through Ripley's Aquarium on the way to the milking room which has an emergency exit," Bailey said thoughtfully. "Though I doubt you'll like that since you have to cross the aquarium in a paddle boat and it is full of sea monsters."

"I made them all myself, believe it or not," Ripley said proudly.

"No, I think you'd be better off going up through the 3D Jungle Labyrinth."

Victor looked up to see that the countless levels of rope bridges and ladders did form a dauntingly labyrinthine design.

"How long will that take?" he asked exhaustedly.

"Not long enough when you're having fun," Bailey replied. "But with your sourpuss attitude, it could very well take weeks."

"Well then we'll have to make it more fun, won't we?" Ripley asked.

"Oh, let's make it a race!" Lolly suggested. "Last one to the top is a Fun-lover's moulted husk!"

"I have an even better idea; a rat race, to appeal to Mr. Corporate here!" Bailey decreed. With two quick claps a swarm of enormous, black, vicious rats spilt onto the bridge they were on, hissing and baring their jagged teeth at Victor.

"Climb."

Victor and Lolly dashed for the nearest ladder, the onslaught of vermin snapping at their ankles. They clambered up the rungs as quickly as they could, but the rats proved capable of shimmying up the sides.

"That's it Vicky, climb that corporate ladder! Fake it 'til you make it!"

“Dress for the job you want, not the job you have!” Ripley added. “Honestly, an off the rack suit? What was he thinking?”

Victor was the first to reach the second bridge and immediately ran for the first ladder he saw. He had to duck to avoid a tire, log and an orangutan swinging by on vines, but he made it to the ladder safely. Just as he was about to grab it, it was yanked out of his reach.

“No!” he looked around desperately for another ladder, only to see it dangling a few meters away. He leapt for it, but it was again cruelly yanked back up at the last second. And so was the third one, and the fourth. And the fifth. “Lolly! Lolly, what do we do!”

“I think they made that very clear; have fun,” she told him. She pulled out a party horn and blew it, and the ladder gently lowered itself down and allowed her to grab hold of it. “Grab on.”

Victor wrapped his arms around her tightly and the ladder carried them several levels up to a bridge that was swinging back and forth like a gazebo swing.

“There. That should give us a bit of a head start.” A wooden plank burst in half as a rat smashed its head through from underneath. “Or not. Run!”

They sprinted off down the bridge and caught sight of a door near the end. “In there. Quick!”

Victor threw the door open and the two of them hurried inside, slamming the door behind them. Victor leaned his back against the door to catch his breath, giving him a proper view of the room he found himself in.

There was a fat Clown in a bishop’s hat tied to a chair surrounded by a group of deformed but seemingly animate sock puppets.

“Freaky Friday! Freaky Friday! Freaky Friday!” the puppets chanted rhythmically as they pumped their fists in unison.

“Ahhhh…”

“Please don’t tell my wife,” the Clown requested. Before either could

respond a Fun-lover in its default form lowered itself down from the ceiling.

“Employees only!” it screeched, grabbing Victor with one of its many webbed hands and throwing him out the door.

“Victor!” Lolly screamed as she ran after him. Victor expected to be swarmed by rats immediately but instead was greeted with the serene music of a pan pipe. He looked up to see the instrument being played by Bailey, gracefully perched on the rope railing with all the rats entranced by his music.

“We tried our best Lolly, but even when we customize our attractions to his personal tastes he’s still not having fun,” Ripley said with a sad shake of her head. “So ungrateful. You’re lucky you got your Milk when you did because mine really is going to be sour now. "There’s no point in going on like this; you’ll never reach the top by climbing.”

“So we’re just stuck here?” Victor asked.

“Not to worry little Vicky. The fastest way up is down.”

Ripley snapped her fingers, and for the four of them gravity reversed and they all fell upwards.

The bridges and vines all parted to allow the quartet to pass, and quickly gave way to the void of space. It was filled with enormous glow-in-the-dark stickers. They were mostly shaped like traditional stars arranged into circus themed constellations, but there were also some shooting stars, cratered moons, crescent moons, ringed planets and whirlpool galaxies. The sight was distracting enough that it took Victor nearly a full minute to realize that they weren’t moving.

“Why aren’t we falling anymore?” he asked.

“Because there’s no gravity in space obviously, and we usually have the inertia turned off as a safety precaution,” Ripley replied.

“Nobody panic. I can get us out of here,” Bailey assured them.

He reached into his pocket and pulled a bright red rocket kiddie ride large enough to accommodate all of them. Once he had everyone strapped in, he placed a firm grip on the steering wheel.

“Hold on to your lunches, because we’re going for the ride of our lives!” With a melodramatic gesture, he pressed the big red button on the dashboard. To his disappointment, all it did was flash the words INSERT COIN. “Oh. Does anyone have a quarter?”

“I have midway tokens,” Lolly replied.

“It doesn’t take tokens, it takes quarters,” Bailey replied. “What about you Vicky, you got any quarters?”

“I almost never use cash,” Victor replied.

“That figures, the rich guy doesn’t have a quarter when he needs it,” Ripley snorted. “I have a Canadian quarter from that show we did at Estevan.”

“A Canadian quarter is worse than nothing! It has the Queen of England on one side and a reindeer on the other! A frickin’ reindeer! Unless it’s Christmas at Buckingham Palace how the hell is anyone supposed to take that seriously? I need George Washington and a bald eagle or nothing!”

“Lolly said you were gods in here. Can’t you just make a quarter?”

“Currency created by divinities is still considered counterfeit otherwise gods would be bribing people to worship them all the time and there’d be massive inflation and economic collapse, did you fail basic theology *and* economics? GAWD!”

The four of them sat in silence for a moment, trying to think of a way out of their predicament.

“Oh! I know how to get us moving!” Ripley claimed. She snapped her fingers and in the distance appeared a fiery accretion disk orbiting a circular black abyss. The rocket immediately lurched towards it, the stars racing by at an ever increasing speed.

“A black hole! Good thinking Ripley! We’ll be out of here in no time,”

Bailey said.

“But what happens when we reach the black hole?” Victor asked. Ripley and Bailey exchanged uneasy glances with each other.

“Sorry Vicky, we can’t hear you. There’s no sound in space. You’ve seen too many sci-fi movies,” Ripley said.

“Now now Ripley, one should never let something as inconsequential as the laws of physics get in the way of a good story,” Bailey asserted. “Matter of fact, let’s have some grand sound for our grand finale!”

At his command, an unseen orchestra began playing the 1812 overture, and the stars around them began bursting into fireworks with thunderous explosions in time with the music. The faster they went, the louder the sound became, and the stars and fireworks became infinitely stretched out as they finally passed the event horizon of the black hole.

“My stars, it’s full of God!”

The next thing Victor remembered he was standing in a drab wooden room next to Lolly, with Ripley and Bailey standing over near a fancy lever.

“Thank you for visiting Herman Fuller’s Fantastic Fun-Lover’s Funhouse. We hope you had a Fantastic, Fun-loving time,” Ripley said in an apathetic, monotone voice as she read the farewell speech off a cue card. “We hope you will always remember the special time you had here and that we will see you again some day. Please remember to rate, share and review Herman Fuller’s Circus of the Disquieting on Yelp, social media, and the SCP Database. Thank you for your patronage, and have a disquieting day.”

She pulled the lever, and once again a trap door opened up beneath them and dropped them down a chute. They travelled through it for about the same amount of time as the first one, emerging out of a slide behind the Funhouse and into a regular ball pit.

“Did that really just happen?” Victor asked, who was seriously

considering the possibility that he was coming off a bad trip or otherwise losing his mind.

“I’m sorry, that didn’t turn out quite like I expected,” Lolly apologized, sheepishly casting her eyes to the ground. “They usually do behave themselves around the kids, but grownups alone can be a different story. I can tell you’re uncomfortable here, and I just wanted to show you why I love this Circus so much. It’s not just my home, it’s my paradise, and sometimes it hurts when other people don’t see it that way too. I know the Funhouse was a lot, and if it was too much you can go home. I won’t stop you.”

“I…” Victor began, but then seemed to change his mind. “Actually Lolly, can we go to the petting zoo and see the Obama Llama?”

A wide smile spread across her face, and she somehow changed her colour palette to match the red, white and blue of Obama’s iconic campaign poster.

“Yes we can.”

« **Fuller Than Full!** | **Dread & Circuses Hub** |**Your Call Is Important To Us** »

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“No ma’am, thank you for calling. You have a disquieting day now. Bye bye,” Gary said, ending the inter-dimensional call with the flip of a switch on his antiquated switchboard. It wasn’t easy what he did, redirecting radio signals and landline calls from wherever they were supposed to go to his little phone box, but he did it eight hours a day, every day.

The IV running from his arm was a constant reminder that the infernal machine was powered by his own blood and beating heart. The wires running out of the ports on the back of his neck were a memento that it used his own wetware to make up for its lack of modern electronics. The shiny silver bell crudely grafted onto the side of his face a mark of his eternal slavery to it.

But hey, at least it had got him a job.

A light on the switchboard began to flash, letting him know of an incoming call.

“Hey there, this is **`Gary Gorham`** of Herman Fuller’s Customer Service. How may I be of assistance?”

“Ah, yeah, hi,” a distressed male voice said on the other end of the line. Wherever he was calling from, it sounded windy. “I’m calling because I bought a pack of your anti-gravity balloons…”

“Ah, the Amazingly Ascending Aviator’s Anti-Gravity balloons. An excellent purchase. Are you having some trouble getting them to work?”

“No no, they’re working really, really well,” the man replied. “I made a whole bouquet of them to see if I they could lift me up and…it

turns out they can."

"I see. Now sir, if you had read the instructions on the package you would know that those balloons aren't to be used outdoors unless they're tethered to 10 pounds of weight per balloon."

"Look, I'm not going to sue you or anything I just want to know how to get down! I must be a couple miles high already and if I keeping floating up the air will be too thin to breathe!"

"Sir, I would suggest letting them go one at a time until you start gently floating down."

"Well I sort of tied them all together, and I can't untie them, at least not with one hand. I can't pop them either; these things are insanely tough."

"Yes, our anti-gravity balloons are made of the same…"

"THEY'RE MILKING CLOWNS!" a hysterical guest screamed in the background. ***"THEY'RE MILKING CLOWNS!"***

"WELL NEXT TIME KNOCK BEFORE YOU COME BARGING IN!" an irate Clown shouted in response. ***"JERK!"***

"…did that person just say you were milking clowns?" the man on the phone asked.

"No, they said cows," Gary assured him. "City slickers can be a bit a squeamish at times. Getting back to your situation, I would recommend cutting the balloons off one by one."

"I don't have anything to cut with."

"Then you'll have to chew through the string or ribbon holding the balloons," Gary said. The bell on his face rung harshly, letting him know another call was coming in. "Sir, I'm going to have to put you on hold for a moment, but I will be checking back in with you. Just do your best to chew through the strings, okay?"

"Okay. Just don't hang up."

“I won’t,” Gary promised. He saw that the new call was from the Employee Hotline and quickly switched connections. “This is Gary Gorham at Herman Fuller’s Employee Helpline. How may I be of assistance?”

“Hey Gary, it’s Eugene,” a Clown said on the other end.

“Hey Eugene. What’s up?”

“I’m calling from Ikea. **`That Ikea`**. You know the one I’m talking about?”

“I do. What are you doing there?”

“Well Pius and I are still banned from the Utterly Bazaar so we thought we’d give this place a look.”

“I’m here too!” Pius shouted into the receiver.

“We’ve loaded up the Clown Car with a butt load of stuff. We must have driven a hundred miles through this store today. I was worried it might piss the staff off but I think it’s small enough that they perceive it as a fat-mobile. Those slenderman knockoffs really creep me out though.”

“Did you know there are Humdrums trapped here?” Pius asked. “Like a lot of them. They look like they’ve been here for a while. Should we tell someone about that or…”

“I’m sure it’s being looked after,” Gary said. “So why are you calling?”

“Well that’s tangentially related to Pius’s point,” Eugene replied. “The Humdrums were pretty freaked out to see a Clown Car driving around. I laughed at them for being dumb enough to get stuck in here, but, ah…”

“You can’t find the exit, can you?”

“It’s not that I can’t find it. I just…haven’t found it yet.”

“You have your Kaleidoscope keys on you, don’t you? Just open up

a door…”

“We can’t find a door. Not just the exit; no doors period.”

“I see. Well, the Clown Car has doors on it so you could probably use those.”

“But then we’d have to leave the Clown Car behind!”

“We can’t leave the Clown Car, we only have three payments left on it!” Pius objected.

“So what do you two expect me to do?” Gary asked.

“I don’t know, just tell Icky and Manny where we are. If we don’t find a door before they close we’ll stash the Clown Car somewhere safe and leave it behind. We’ll come back in the morning and try to find a door to bring it through.”

“Eugene, we've got company!”

“Oh God, the Humdrums are swarming us! They want the car! Back you savages! Pius, get the Bazooka!”

“But it only shoots cream pies.”

“They don’t know that you idiot!”

“It’s polka-dotted and has big pink balloon letters spelling ‘KABOOM!’ on the side. I think they’ll know it’s not real.”

“Let me know how this turns out fellas,” Gary said, hanging up and leaving the duo to yet another misadventure. He was about to check back in on balloon guy, when another call came in. This one was from the Complaint Line. “Oh boy.”

He cleared his throat and put all his energy into maintaining a happy voice.

“Thank you for calling Herman Fuller’s Customer Complaint Line. My name is Gary Gorham and I…”

“I brought my kids to see your Big Top show last Tuesday and despite being advertised as such it was not family friendly,” a woman said in a petulant tone.

“I’m sorry to hear that Ma’am, what was it that…”

“REMEMBER EVERYONE, THIS IS JUST A DRILL,” somebody shouted from outside, followed by the whirring of a large drill. ***“I REPEAT, IT’S JUST A DRILL. NOBODY PANIC.”***

“I apologize for the interruption. Last Tuesday, you said? Oh, was it the part of the act when they force fed the guy sugar until he exploded? I know that may have been overly visceral but…”

“No, that part was funny,” the woman replied. “I’m upset about those lesbian clowns openly making googly eyes at each other in front of my kids.”

“…Seriously?”

“Yes seriously!”

“Well Ma’am, it’s not like they were having sex on stage. They make jokes and innuendos, most of which go over the kids' heads. At most there’s a peck on the cheek or a pat on the butt.”

“The dark haired one pulled a kitten from under the other one’s skirt and they both went on about how much they love pussy!”

“Which is funny! Ma’am, listen. It’s…”

“OH GOD, IT’S NOT A DRILL! I REPEAT, THIS IS NOT A DRILL! EVERYBODY PANIC!”

An uproar of panicked screams, animal calls and the buzzing of a rusty chainsaw briefly overwhelmed the call.

“What the hell is going on there?” the woman asked.

“Just another fun-filled day here at Herman Fuller’s Circus of the Disquieting,” he replied. It was the standard response to such questions. “Ma’am, it’s the twenty-first century…wait, is it the twenty-

first century?"

"What?"

"It's just that time moves differently in different universes and it can be hard to keep track of. Regardless of the exact the year, you can't expect people not to be themselves just because you find it offensive."

"I am a paying customer! When I take my kids to see a circus act I have a right for their impressionable minds not to be bombarded with homosexual propaganda!"

"Ma'am, believe me when I say that I am truly sorry that in a show featuring a man being blown up, an alcoholic elephant, and a Clown with literally explosive diarrhea, the part you found offensive was the consenting, loving relationship between two adults. Have a disquieting day."

He hung up before she could respond, and switched back over to the Customer Service Line.

"Hey balloon guy, how are you doing?"

"I've chewed through a couple of strings, and I think I'll be buoyant after one or two more, but I have another problem. I'm getting close to what I thought was a cloud, but now I can see it's actually made of **cobwebs**. What the hell is that?"

"Hard to say. Few men venture to such lofty heights. Who knows what strange creatures dwell so far up in the stratosphere."

"You're not helping!"

"My apologies. Just do your best to steer clear of it," he suggested. The bell on his head rung again, and he saw he had a call coming in over the Clown Transportation Services Line. "I'm sorry, but I'm going to have to put you on hold again.

"Herman Fuller's Clown Transportation Services, how may I …"

"GARY? GARY IS THAT YOU?" demanded an outraged and fast-

paced voice. Though it had been years since he heard it, Gary recognized it immediately. “GARY, YOU LET ME THROUGH THE KALEIDOSCOPE THIS SECOND OR I SWEAR TO THE BROKEN GOD I WILL SKIN YOU LIKE A LOVESICK FUN-LOVER, EVISCERATE YOU AND STUFF YOU FULL OF CURDLED CLOWN’S MILK AND THEN HANG YOU UP WITH YOUR OWN ENTRAILS LIKE A MARIONETTE!”

“Who is this?” Gary asked with a coy smile.

“GODDAMMIT GARY YOU KNOW WHO THIS IS! I PROMISE YOU, WHEN I GET BACK TO MY CIRCUS YOU ARE DEAD, DO YOU HEAR ME? YOU’RE DEAD, MANNY’S DEAD, ICKY’S DEAD, THE ZOMBIE GUY WHOSE WHOLE SHTICK IS BEING DEAD IS DEAD! ALL OF YOU ARE DEAD! YOU WILL RUE THE DAY YOU DOUBLE CROSSED…”

“I’m sorry sir, but we appear to be having some kind of connection problem. For some reason you’re coming through as a pathetic, delusional deposed despot calling from a dilapidated phone booth that you're probably using as both a shelter and lavatory.
“You want to threaten me, come here and do it to my face you bastard. Have a disquieting day.”

“GARY?! GARY DON’T YOU DARE HANG…”

“And blocked,” Gary said as he permanently severed the connection to that particular dimensional backwater. He took a deep breath to readjust himself for the next call. “Thank you for calling Herman Fuller’s Business line. How may I help you today?”

“Hello Mr. Gorham, this is Victor Chan from Marshall, Carter, and Dark.”

“Ah yes, lovely to hear from you again. What can I do for you?”

“I’m calling because I have a crucial update from our SCP operative regarding…”

“FOR THE LOVE OF GOD QUINCY SLOW DOWN!” someone screamed outside.

"I TOLD YOU I CAN'T DRIVE STICK!" Quincy shouted back. There was the sound of a car crashing, an engine exploding, and some fireworks shooting off through the air and blowing up.

"MY GOD THERE'S BLOOD EVERYWHERE! Mostly inside us, but still: THE HORROR!"

"…is everything okay over there?"

"Just another fun-filled, ah…yeah, I'm sure everything's fine."

"Gary, you got a sec," Icky asked as she stepped into his display case.

"Sorry Victor, I'm going to have to put you on hold for a moment," Gary said. He turned around to see Icky, with her hair frazzled and her face and clothes covered in gun powder residue. "You okay boss?"

"It's a little crazier than usual out there but nothing I can't handle," she replied. "So Manny still hasn't found anyone to replace **`Saccharina`** so I'm going to need you to order some candy from Wondertainment. I've got a list right here. Make sure you tell them to mark the Tattletale Truffles as private. Last time we gave those out it ruined a lot of relationships and I'm pretty sure one poor bastard got sent to Gitmo. Also, see if we can make an appointment to design some custom magic tokens for the midway. Bailey told me that Canada has glow-in-the-dark toonies and I'll be damned if a semi-real country has more whimsical currency than we do."

"Sure thing. Hey, I've got Victor on the line and I think he's calling about the Essie caper. Do you want to speak with him?"

"Yeah, put him on the speaker."

"Hey Victor, I'm back. I've got Icky here with me and I've put you on speaker phone."

"That's perfect. Icky, our SCP operative has confirmed a date and time for your operation," Victor told her. "This Saturday night at 10 pm, our operative and another guard will be the only Foundation personnel in the facility. He's confident he can slip a tranquillizer in

his partner's coffee, and once he's out our operative will shut down all the cameras, locks, and other security features in the wing holding **`your Virtuoso`**. He'll then drug his own coffee and drink it to provide a suitable alibi for himself. He assures us that everything will be good to go by 11 PM and that he and his partner won't wake up until after midnight. That's your window of opportunity, twenty-three hundred to zero hundred hours this Saturday. Is that clear?"

"Victor, that's awesome. Thank you so much," Icky said. "I'd love to talk more but I have a possibly attempted vehicular homicide to deal with so if you'll excuse me."

"Wait, there's one more thing," he said. "I have a couple of other clients who have some wares they'd like to try to sell you that I think would be excellent additions to your Circus. Would you like me to arrange a viewing?"

"I…"

"Icky!" Yume cried as she ran up to the display case. "Come quick! One of Ripley's sea monsters escaped from the Funhouse! Manny's fist fighting it to keep it away from the crowds and Gabriel's trying to calm it down but Lolly's riding it like she's at a rodeo and it won't stop bucking…"

"Victor, I'll run that past Manny but I've got to go. I'll talk to you later," she said as she dashed out of the glass phone box.

"Hey Gary, just out of curiosity have you guys ever consulted any type of actuary about the potential risks of your attractions, because it seems like that's something you might benefit from," Victor asked.

"No, Icky and Manny tend to make decisions from the gut, heart, or whatever vital organs are available, and they haven't steered us astray yet," Gary replied.

The wails of the Nessie-esque sea monster echoed across the fairgrounds as the beast did battle with an upside down faced man and two excessively exuberant Clowns.

“Right. I’ll talk to you later then Gary.”

“Wait wait wait. Before you go, what year is it?”

“…2017.”

“Thank you. I knew it was the twenty-first century. Take care of yourself, Victor.”

“You too Gary.”

Gary ended the call and took a look at the list Icky had left him.

“Let’s see; 24 crates of cheeping peeps, variety (both colours and songs), non-screaming. 24 crates of glowing gummy bears (the non-radioactive ones). 16 crates of bubble breath gum *oh my god balloon guy!*” Gary immediately put the list down and switched back to the Customer Service line. “Hey there, sorry about keeping you on hold for so long. How are you making out?

“Balloon guy?”

The line was dead.

“He, ah, he probably just dropped his phone,” Gary assured himself. He sat silently in contemplation until the next call came in. “Thank you for calling Herman Fuller prize support. I’m Gary Gorham, how may I be of assistance.”

“I won this prismatic magic eight ball thing that actually tells the future and I told some friends about it and they must've told someone about it over the phone or online or something because earlier today these spooks showed up at my house,” a panicked young man answered him. “I didn’t let them in and now there’s like a S.W.A.T. team or something getting ready to break down my door. I’ve barricaded the entrance and armed myself with an accent lamp. What do I do now?”

“Don’t try concealing it anally.”

“What?!”

“We’ve had people try that in the past. They find it anyways so it’s not worth it.”

There was the sound of glass breaking, a soft thud and something hissing.

“Oh god they just threw in some kind of gas can. It’s spraying red gas that tastes like peppermint and batteries! I can’t remember my iPhone unlock code!”

“Well you’ll have to go to the genius bar for that but…”

He heard the door breaking down and men shouting as they stormed into the room.

“This phone’s live!” someone shouted. “Who is this?”

“Certainly no one anomalous,” Gary said as he immediately cut the connection.

But of course it was someone anomalous. It was none other than Gary Gorham, the

MASTER OF TELEPHONESIS!…

Esis!…

Esis!…

Esis!…

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« Fuller's Fantastic Fun-lover's Funhouse | Dread & Circuses Hub| She Remembered Me »

She Remembered Me

« **Your Call Is Important To Us** | **Dread & Circuses Hub** | **Freaky Commodities II ~ Freak Harder** »

"But I also dreamt which charmed me most
That you loved me still the same
That you loved me
You loved me still the same,
That you loved me
You loved me still the same."

SCP-1860 bowed his head as he finished one of his favourite arias. It was nostalgic, as it had been one of the first pieces of music that Herman had ever 'fed' to him. He had been with the Circus for over a hundred years, longer than anyone else other than Fuller or the Man with the Upside Down Face. Dozens, if not hundreds of people had heard him sing each day, and over the course of his career his loving audience must have numbered in the millions.

But that was a long time ago.

Now instead of an oversized birdcage he was held in a soundproof cell. His only audience was whoever was watching through the security camera. During daylight hours he often had a live audience of at least one, and even when he didn't someone always reviewed the recordings. In spite of their avid professionalism, many of them did enjoy listening to him. It was a far cry from his glory days, but at least he wasn't singing for nothing.

Except now he couldn't help but notice that the little red light on his security camera had stopped blinking. It had never done that before, but he supposed that meant it had been turned off. He was sure it was nothing to worry about, probably a random malfunction or some scheduled downtime for the security system, but in the back of his mind he couldn't help but think that maybe his jailers had decided it was no longer worth their time to listen to him, and he would never

have an audience again.

He sighed sadly, and decided there was nothing he could do but wait. Audience or no audience, he would sing.

"In sleep he sang to me, in dreams he came
That voice which calls to me and speaks my name
And do I dream again? For now I find
The Phantom of the Opera is there
Inside my mind."

"Sing once again with me our strange duet
My power over you grows stronger yet
And though you turn from me to glance behind
The Phantom of the Opera is there
Inside your mind."

1860 fell silent in shock, for it was not he who had sung the second verse. He slowly looked behind him at the source of the heart-achingly familiar voice. The sight of a Clown suddenly standing in one's doorway was a sight few would welcome, but 1860 was one of those few.

"Icky?" he asked, his voice cracking, tears of black ink gathering in his eyes. The Clown nodded, her eyes watering as well.

"Hey V. It's, ah, it's been a while," she said awkwardly.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, not daring to make assumptions.

"I've come to bring you home."

"After all this time?"

"I know I have no excuse for letting you rot in here for so long, but I thought you were dead! I honestly had no idea you were still alive until a few weeks ago, but as soon as I found out that Essie was holding you, getting you home safe has been my top priority."

1860 cast his gaze to the floor, seemingly in contemplation.

“V, please don’t be mad at me,” Icky pleaded, kneeling down at his side.

“I’m not mad, just…confused,” he said. “I’d given up hope of rescue long ago. I thought you had all forgotten me.”

“Herman may have forgotten you, but not me. You were one of my best friends V. When I was a Humdrum and felt like shit, your music always made me feel better. When I became a Clown and was hopped up on Milk most of the time, you could still move me to tears. I miss that. I miss you. Look, we don't have a lot of time to talk, so please just say you’ll let me take you back home and sing for us again. You must be starved for new music, and I’ve gathered together reams of song sheets for you to consume. Here, they only ever study you, but at the Circus you can be adored again! Don’t waste one more second of your life in this prison.”

“What about Herman?” he asked softly. “Does he want me back? Does he miss me? Does he remember me?”

“V, Herman is gone. He’s been gone twenty years, give or take, and depending on where you’re counting from. Manny and I are in charge now. I’m the Ringmaster and he’s the manager, except we never call him that because then he’d be Manny the manager which I personally don’t think sounds that terrible but he hates it and I’m rambling and I’m sorry. I want you to see the Circus, what it’s become, what Manny and I have done with it. I want you to meet everyone who’s joined since you left, especially Lolly. She’s the sweetest, cutest, most energetic Clown we’ve had in decades, and the most passionate playmate I’ve ever had. I love her above all else and it would mean the world to me if you would sing for her. V? Virtuoso, are you listening?”

1860 didn’t reply at first, seemingly dumbfounded by what she had said.

“Herman’s gone?” he asked at last. Icky sighed sadly.

“V, I get that you have mixed feelings about Fuller. Hell, I have mixed feelings about Fuller. I know he created you, and all the way back then maybe he was a halfway decent guy but that didn’t last. I

don’t know if he was just corrupted by power or slowly driven mad by whatever he was using to extend his life or something else, but every year he got crazier and crazier and we had to do something about it. You do realize he tried to burn you, right?”

“He set lots of fires, mine might have just been collateral damage,” he said unconvincingly. “But you’re right. I gave him over a century of faithful service and after a single mishap he decided I was kindling. He was still the only father I had though. For a long time I clung to the delusion that there was still some bond of kinship between us, that eventually it would grow strong enough that Fuller would be compelled to come and retrieve me, and it broke my heart when I finally accepted that that would never happen.”

He smirked, and then looked up at Icky.

“All though, I suppose if I substituted just a Ringmaster instead of Fuller specifically, it wasn’t a delusion after all.”

“Does that mean you’ll come back with me?” she asked with a hopeful gleam in her eyes.

“This venue has grown stale, and it would be nice to receive flowers once again.”

Icky squeed in delight, rushing to the exit to open the access control vestibule. When the inner door slid open, she was faced with a Foundation guard pointing a gun at her, wearing a high-tech looking pair of neckband headphones.

“Hands where I can see ’em darling, no sudden moves,” he said, slowly stepping into the room. “The outer door is locked. You’re trapped in here ’til I let you out, so don’t do anything stupid. And don’t you try anything either Sinatra. These noise cancelling headphones will automatically block out any sound over 90 decibels.”

“You must be the Emcee D operative. Suthers, right? You’re supposed to be taking a nap,” Icky said, calmly assessing the man and plotting her next move. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“Let me answer that question with a question; do you know what the Foundation pays me to guard and hunt down paranormal creatures and artifacts that could not only kill me but quite possibly subject me to inconceivable suffering and transform everything I care about into an unrecognizable hellscape if I mess up their containment procedures?”

“Not enough?” Icky ventured.

“Bingo. And do you know what MC&D pays me to double cross a nigh omnipotent organization that, despite its adamant claims to the contrary, totally does put traitors and fuck ups on Keter duty?”

“Somewhere between not enough and jack shit?”

“Right again! You see, even if the Foundation never figures out I had a hand in this, and that’s a big fucking if, if this guy goes missing on my watch then I’m an Eldritch lizard’s chew toy. Of course, one can’t exactly say no to the Deathless Merchant of London either, so I was in a bit of a bind. But then they told me they were sending in a Clown, and an opportunity presented itself.
“The Foundation’s still a little confused about exactly what you things are, but we have discovered two significant details. First; you have what they call negligible senescence, which is a fancy way of saying you don’t get old. And second; all your various abilities are actually just different applications of essokinesis. You freaks are low level reality benders.”

“Low level? How dare you,” she said in feigned indignation. “What does any of this have to do with why you’re pointing a gun at me?”

“You see darling, you’re my ticket away from the SCP and MC&D for good. I’ve lined up a buyer for you; some millennial millionaire wunderkind, real Transhumanist type. Wants to live forever, and’s willing to pay a pretty penny for the chance to study an actual immortal up close. Enough for me to evade any retaliatory efforts on behalf of my former employers. I’m going to throw your buddy in as bonus, since I can’t just leave him lying around.”

Icky tossed her head back and laughed.

“Okay, I’ve been letting you monologue your evil plan just out of my respect for classic tropes, but as you pointed out I am a reality bender. How exactly do you plan on taking me prisoner?”

Suthers chuckled. Still pointing the gun at her, he took something off his belt with his free hand and held it up to her. It was a bronze sphere roughly the size of a baseball with an LED ring around the equator, a knob at each pole, and vent like openings scoring each hemisphere.

“Know what this is?” he asked. “This is a Scranton Reality Mini-Buoy. I’m not supposed to have it, so stealing it was kind of a point-of-no-return for me. If I recall, it maintains Hume Field Homeostasis, which essentially means that if you do anything to alter reality it will counteract it, rendering you effectively powerless. Go ahead, try to do some magic. See if I’m bluffing.”

Icky tried to telekinetically draw out her deck of trick cards, and her poker face faltered when they didn’t answer her call.

“So what? Even without magic I’m still stronger than an ordinary human, stronger than you, and I could survive a shot from a handgun. You got nothing.”

“Yeah, you could kill me, but the door is still locked. You won’t be able to get out without your magic, and you can take my word when I tell you they made this buoy damn near indestructible. You won’t be able to open a portal because this cell is soundproof, and I know that that rather unusual Multi-Universal Transit Array you have requires calliope music to work. So, you’ve got two options. You can let me handcuff the buoy to you and let me take you to the truck I got waiting, or you can try to kill me. I might kill you, and my buyer will still pay a decent sum for your corpse, or you’ll kill me, which might make you feel better, but you’ll be trapped in here and by dawn you’ll have your very own SCP designation. Tick tock darling, time’s of the essence.”

Icky remained still as she tried to think of a way out her situation, when to her surprise Virtuoso started laughing.

“Soundproof?” he asked smugly. “There’s no such thing. Icky, plug

your ears."

A maniacal smile spread across her face, knowing exactly what he was going to do. As soon as her ears were plugged, Virtuoso did what he had been made to do, what he had spent nearly every moment of his life doing.

He sang.

"Those who have seen your face
Draw back in fear
I am the mask you wear."

His voice was over a hundred decibels, instantly activating Suthers' ear protection.

"*It's me they hear*," Icky joined the duet, though her voice was hardly as ear shattering.

"I told you idiots that's not going to work, do you see what's on my fucking head?"

"My Spirit and my Voice
In one combined
The Phantom of the Opera is there
Inside my mind."

Icky and Virtuoso sang together, Virtuso's voice rising in volume.

"*Beware the Phantom of the Opera*," Icky smiled.

"He's there, the Phantom of the Opera," Virtuoso sang. His lyrics exhausted, he vocalized his high note, his voice rising over 150 decibels.

"Sing my Angel of Music!"

His voice grew louder, and though Suthers could not hear him, he could feel his eyes vibrate. He tried to shoot at him, but the barrage of sound waves prevented him from shooting straight.

"Sing my Angel. Sing for me!"

His voice had now surpassed the capacity of the guard's headphones to protect him. He dropped his gun to the ground and instinctively clasped his head as his eardrums burst.

"Sing my Angel!"

The very ground around them now shook with vibrations.

"Sing."

The guard screamed in agony as his organs were assaulted with sound, but of course his screams could not be heard over the warbling voice of the Virtuoso.

"Sing, my Angel, Sing!"

Now even the soundproof door holding them captive started to tremble, and Virtuoso could sense its resonant frequency.

"Sing for me!"

With one final high note, the sound of Virtuso's voice became a shockwave, perfectly matched to the resonant frequency of the door. The guard's lungs ruptured, killing him, and the door shattered like glass.

"That was amazing!" Icky screamed, hugging Virtuoso fanatically.

"Not so loud; you'll hurt my ears," he replied with a coy smile. Icky fell to the ground laughing.
"You are alright, aren't you?"

"Some slight ringing, but nothing some Milk won't fix. Let's get out of here."

She headed for the door, but bent down on her way to pick up the Scranton Reality Mini-Buoy.

"Wow, he wasn't kidding when he said this thing was tough. Might come in handy."

She pocketed the orb, and took out her Kaleidoscope keys. Within

seconds she had converted the doorway into a portal. The space within the frame glowed a bright white and exuded smoke, while the calliope could be heard playing *Comrades of the Legion*. It was appropriate, as Icky was feeling quite victorious.

She ran back to Virtuoso, scooping him up in her arms.

“How does your own acoustic tent sound, so that you won’t have to strain to be heard over the pandemonium of the Circus?”

“Music to my ears,” he smiled.

Stepping over the corpse of their treacherous informant, SCP-1860 left the Foundation, and Virtuoso returned to Herman Fuller’s Circus of the Disquieting.

Early the next morning, things were tense in the Ringmaster’s tent. On one side of the desk was Icky, Lolly, Virtuoso, Manny, and Mr. Noodles in case things turned violent. On the other side was an elderly and decrepit man in the best wheel chair money could buy, with catheters conveying fluids to and from multiple medical ports. He was outfitted with a bespoke grey suit and a nasal breathing tube. Despite his enfeebled body, the stern and attentive face he wore made it clear that he still retained full command of his mental faculties.

To either side of him stood two uncommonly beautiful women, a nurse and a PA, and behind them stood two uncommonly large men, his body guards. Victor was there as well, sitting quietly by his boss’s side, looking like he hadn’t had any sleep all night.

"Can I offer you some Milk?" Lolly asked sweetly, holding up the bottle of viscous black liquid. The Guards responded by drawing their weapons.

"Lolly," Manny scolded her through his teeth.

"Right, sorry. I can be a bit of a ditz sometimes," she said in a less than convincing tone. Suppressing a smile, Icky handed her playmate some Clown Impulse Suppressant, which she

begrudgingly swallowed, chasing the two purple pills down with Milk.

“Mr. Marshall… wait, are you Marshall?” Icky asked. “I know you’re not Dark, so I guess there’s a fifty/fifty chance you’re Marshall. You look like a Marshall anyway.
“As I was saying, Mr. Marshall or Mr. Carter but definitely not Mr./ Ms. Dark, there was really no need for you to come here personally. As I explained to Victor over the phone…”

“I decided it was best that we clear this up face to face, to make sure that there are no misunderstandings,” Marshall or Carter but definitely not Dark said, his ageing voice still loud and clear. “This was supposed to be a simple in and out operation, but somehow you fucked it up!”

“Mr. Marshall…”

“One of our SCP operatives is dead, his internal organs liquified by your pop star, and I want to know why!” he shouted, his heartbeat monitor beeping noticeably faster.

“I told Victor already, your man had us at gun point! He had a buyer he was going to sell me to. He was going to double cross both of us.”

“I have nothing but your word for that.”

“Why else would he even have been down there? He was supposed to have sedated himself so that Essie wouldn’t know it was an inside job.”

“Who knows? Maybe something changed at the last minute and he couldn’t get a message out, so he went down to tell you personally. Maybe your freak got spooked and killed him.”

“Sir, with all due respect, we should be the ones mad at you,” Manny objected. “We nearly lost one of our most essential personnel because your disgruntled employee decided to moonlight in human trafficking!”

“Manny, don’t blow the situation out of proportion,” Icky said. “Even without Virtuoso, I probably could’ve gotten away on my own, and if

not then you would have come for me sooner or later. Mr. Marshall/Carter/not Dark, I understand why you're upset and suspicious. I would be too if the situation was reversed. You're down a man, and you're right that I can't prove my version of events is what happened. I know that you don't care about the loss of life so much as you care about the loss of a resource, so let me make it up to you. We could put on a free private show for you. Remember **that time** when we had one of our acrobats tear himself apart and then I put him back together? Your guests loved that! It will be great, plus Lolly could meet **Iris and Robert and Skittles**. They're both named after candy, so that's an instant conversation starter."

"His name is Skitter," the wheelchair bound man said gruffly.

"Right. Could I interest you in a pink elephant then? She's cute, she blows bubbles, her drinking is almost under control, I swear."

"We'll let you use the Kaleidoscope," Manny said.

"What?" the old man asked, a rapacious gleam in his eyes.

"We were going to take you to the Utterly Bazaar anyways. We would be willing to escort Victor, and only Victor, on low risk excursions to other extra-dimensional locations for the foreseeable future. That's worth more to you than one SCP operative and you know it."

The old man nodded with a sly smile.

"This is something you would be willing to provide?" he asked Icky.

"You will do anything to keep that drunken elephant," she muttered at Manny. "But sure, I don't see a problem with that. But we decide where's safe and where's not, and no hurting or stealing from innocent people."

"You insult me Madam Clown," the old man said facetiously. "Victor, what do you think?"

"Um…based on my admittedly short time working with Fuller's Circus, I don't believe they would try to deceive us. If Icky says that she killed our operative in self-defence, I believe her. Our business

relationship profits us both, and it would be foolish to ruin it over an incident that was no fault of theirs. I would also be willing to participate in additional extra-dimensional business calls through their Kaleidoscope, on the condition that my commission be raised to fifth tier."

"I'll give you fourth tier, and only if you make quota," his boss barked.

"That's acceptable," Victor nodded.

"So everything between us is squared then?" Manny asked. The old man gave a begrudging nod.

"Porsha."

At his prompting, his aide retrieved a box of chocolates from her satchel.

"Marshall, Carter, & Dark Limited would like to formally apologize for any implied or explicit accusations of misconduct we may have made against any members of your organization. Please accept this limited anniversary addition *Choc is Chic* assortment box by *La Maison du Chocolat* as a token of goodwill on our behalf."

"Mine!" Lolly said, snatching it eagerly.

"If there's nothing further?" the old man asked. Manny turned to Icky.

"I trust that after what happened last night, you won't be wanting to try this again?" he asked.

"Well, I mean **`Amelia's head`** is just lying around in a vault. It would be so easy to…" she stopped when she saw the cold glare Manny was giving her. "Okay, fine, we're done. All the floating roadkill is probably a health code violation anyway. Mr. not Dark, it was a pleasure doing business with you and we look forward to doing business with you in the future."

"As do I. Rosalind, wheel me out."

"Wait!" Lolly said as Victor rose from his seat to accompany his boss

and his entourage. “Virtuoso was going to sing just for us to celebrate. Victor, would you please stay and listen? We never would have gotten him back without you.”

“I…”

“Stay,” his boss ordered. “You look like shit, and I can’t have you showing up at the office like that. We’ve got an image to maintain. Besides, you’ve got to keep your new most important client happy.”

“Yes sir,” Victor nodded, sitting back in his chair. Lolly sat beside him, offering him some of her chocolates.

As the nurse turned the wheelchair around, she revealed a shrivelled, emaciated human strapped to the back of the chair who was literally having the life sucked out of them. They stared at the Circus folk with pleading eyes until they were wheeled out of the tent.

“That was very nearly a disaster,” Manny said with a shake of his head.

“I don’t care,” Icky smiled, wrapping her arms around Virtuoso. “I got my friend back.”

“Well V, I’m going to have to have the audio techs put some emergency noise cancelling speakers around you in case you get a tear, but I am glad you’re back,” Manny said. “You’re a classy act, we need more of that around here.”

“Thank you sir.”

“Oh, can you sing Disney songs?” Lolly asked hopefully.

“He’s not singing Disney songs,” Manny objected.

“I don’t know, I think certain Disney songs might be compatible with his stage persona,” Icky suggested. “*Let It Go* for instance. Maybe *Whole New World*, songs like that.”

“Fine, but if I hear him singing *Hakuna Matata* someone’s getting their printer access revoked.”

“Mr. Noodles, go guard the door. No one comes in until I say so,” Icky ordered.

The tall Clown did as he was told, and the others gathered on one side of the desk, where Manny had placed Virtuoso as a makeshift pedestal. Virtuoso looked down at the small but eager audience in front of him, and at the Clown who had still remembered him after so many years. Returning her smile, he spoke the same two words he had first spoken to her when she was still a mere mortal.

“Any requests?”

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Freaky Commodities II: Freak Harder

« **She Remembered Me** | **Dread & Circuses Hub** | **There Are No Strings On Me** »

"So, here we are again," the Man with the Upside-down Face said as the elevator doors slid shut. "You know, when Burgess did this he had security guards."

"They're needed upstairs. I…*may* have left a Sarkist and a Mekhanite together in the same room," Victor replied with an awkward cough, pressing the button for the desired floor. "Besides, you two I trust."

"Awww, that's so sweet," Lolly cooed as the elevator began its ascent. "I'm so excited, this is like getting a new puppy!"

"We're not getting a puppy, we're getting a new attraction for the Circus," Manny reminded her firmly. "Remember that. It's not just about whether or not you like something. It has to be a good fit for us."

"Relax, no one loves the Circus more than I do. No one loves Icky more than I do either, and I would never let her down."

"Why didn't Icky come as well, if I may ask?" Victor said. They both remained awkwardly silent for a moment.

"Lolly, do you want to field that one?"

"Tinkles said that Bubblegum's drinking was going to lead her to an early grave. I was just trying to help!"

"What happened?" Victor asked.

"I slipped her some Antabuse so she couldn't drink without getting sick," Lolly replied, shrugging like it was no big deal.

“Now, on top of being down an act, we have a two-tonne elephant going through alcohol withdrawal,” Manny sighed. “Icky is currently handling the situation, and so Lolly is here on her behalf.”

“You’re not mad at me, are you? I really was just trying to help.”

“I know. What I don’t know is where you got an elephant-sized dose of Antabuse.”

“You’d be surprised at what you can buy in bulk.”

Manny gave a nonchalant nod and decided to change the subject.

“Victor, tell me about this first guy again. You said he’s Sarkic?”

“Yes, but I shouldn’t have, and please don’t call him that either,” Victor insisted. “They never call themselves that, it’s like a slur.”

“I’m well aware of that,” Manny said resolutely. The elevator dinged and the doors slid open to the ostentatiously gilded showroom of gleaming tiles, lacquered woods and crystal chandeliers; all of which looked not only very expensive but precariously fragile.

“Oh, I’m starting to have second thoughts about this,” Victor said quietly to himself. The three of them approached a man in front of a draped cage. The man himself wore a rather over-the-top crimson cloak, the hood of which obscured his face. “Manny, Lolly, this is…”

“Valmont will do,” the Sarkist replied in a haughty tone and an accent that, while sounding posh, was clearly an affectation. “And may I say what an absolute pleasure it is to meet two such beautifully deformed individuals.”

“Deformed?” Lolly hissed through gritted teeth, her face turning an incandescent red.

“Easy now; remember the guards,” Manny said.

“Oh, you are lucky I always take Clown Impulse Suppressant before I leave the Circus!” she huffed, taking a deep breath and letting her face return to its regular colour.

Valmont let out a condescending chuckle.

“Deformities are nothing to be ashamed of, child. To survive and thrive in spite of them is proof of strength, and to flaunt them openly is to reject the masses’ insipid obsession with aesthetics.”

“Listen Valmont, we didn’t come here to hear the Gospel of Ion. We’re here on business, so kindly show us what you’ve got.”

“Of course,” Valmont nodded. He raised his hand and pulled the veil off the cage with a single melodramatic gesture. Inside was a mound of ghastly pale flesh, lumps upon lumps like a pool of melted candle wax. Emerging from the mound were several distorted human faces, their mouths perpetually open in an eternal scream, along with a number of limbs that were mangled and twisted beyond any hope of use.

“Behold! Not long ago, while I was reaching across dimensions, I saw a **paradise** where the sun itself was blessed, where its rays transfigured every living thing it touched into beings of resplendent and rapturous malady. So enamoured was I, that I spirited one such flesh wright into our domain, in the hopes I might be able to recreate such a messianic plague and transmute our own abysmal reality into a utopia of instinctive, rapacious consumption!
“Sadly, it seems that such beautiful beings can only be created by the sun of their native realm, and it’s far beyond my ken to synthesize the peculiar effects of that hallowed star. Having no other use for the poor creature, I’ve decided to sell it.
"Imagine the horror on the faces of your audience when they see this amalgam of souls, this aberrant grotesquery, this singular pile of melted flesh, its mere presence inducing existential confusion and visceral revulsion, challenging the sanctity of nature and the benevolence of God! What do you say to that, upside-down man?”

Manny was unmoved by the Sarkist’s sales pitch. He looked at the thing coldly, and then turned his head towards Valmont.

“It’s dead,” he said, matter-of-factly. There was an awkward pause.

“No it isn’t,” Valmont replied.

“Yes, it is,” Manny said with an exasperated shake of his head.

“Its anatomy makes it hard to move so it’s at rest most of the time, but I assure you it is alive,” Valmont insisted.

“It smells likes it's dead,” Lolly said with a wriggle of her nose.

“The miasma of necrotic and rancid tissue is to force those around it to confront the inevitability of death, disease, and decay!” Valmont claimed.

“No, it’s indicative of its own death, disease, and decay,” Manny said, furrowing the brow where his chin should have been. “Look here sarkie, I know a dead beastie when I see one, and this thing is dead.”

Victor gulped at the slur, but surprisingly Valmont didn’t react to it at all.

“No, it’s like a predatory cat; it spends most of its time sleeping. It’s just asleep,” Valmont said with increasing desperation.

“You’re actually going to commit to this?”

“It’s not even breathing,” Lolly pointed out. “Sleeping things still breathe.”

“Its breathing is very shallow. It has a low metabolism to conserve its energy. Chan, help me out here.”

“Well, the creature was a little more lively earlier, so I suppose it is possible it’s merely sleeping,” Victor offered. Lolly pulled a bicycle (technically unicycle) horn out from the hyperdimensional hammerspace of her pockets and blew it at one of the creature’s numerous ears. All three men recoiled at the impossibly loud noise, but the abominable globster didn’t move an inch.

“Yeah, it’s definitely dead,” Lolly announced.

“Well it’s fainted now!” Valmont claimed.

“Fainted?” Lolly asked in disbelief.

“Yes, it’s like a fainting goat; plays dead when it’s scared. It’s a survival mechanism.”

“It’s like a predatory cat and a fainting goat?”

“Well it is a chimera in a way, so that does make sense. It’s probably got some snake qualities in there as well. Quite the bargain you’re getting, really.”

Lolly looked at him in bewilderment, while Manny just shook his head.

“Mr. Valmont, if you cannot immediately provide some proof of life for this creature, we will have to pass,” he said firmly. Valmont became pensive and took a surreptitious step right up to the cage, which then rattled back and forth for an instant.

“There, you see. It just moved.”

“You shook the cage!” Lolly accused.

“Victor, show us the next offer,” Manny ordered.

“You would dare refuse such a treasure, from one such as myself no less?” Valmont asked, resuming his haughty persona. “You will rue this day, Circus freak! No one denies a Sarkist!”

The three of them all suddenly looked at him in surprise.

“What?”

“Tell me, *Sarkist*, where does the Valkzaron say that Adytum is located?”

“Ahh…in all of our hearts?” he replied uncertainly.

“You’re not really a Sarkist, are you?” Victor asked, utterly mortified.

“How dare you!”

“In all of our hearts? Really?” Manny chuckled.

“I thought you were being figurative! Adytum is like Atlantis, no

knows for sure if it even existed, much less where it was," Valmont claimed.

"Wrong. Adytum is where it always was; in the northern Urals. Ion just cloaked it with mind-bending magic and shifted it ever so slightly out of this reality," Lolly stated, popping a sucker into her mouth.

"How the hell would *you* know that?"

"I watch that show **`Professor Abnormal's Science Lab`**. He did an episode on Adytum once."

"And I've been there," Manny added. "Herman had us perform there once or twice. Not the worst thing he ever did, which frankly says more about him than it does about Adytum. Point is, I know Sarkicism. And you boy are not a Sarkist."

"…Okay, maybe not technically, but I'm dating a black-blood girl and her dad said that if I could just get rid of this thing for them that he'd accept me as an Orin and…"

"Security!" Victor shouted.

"No please! I need the money. Neo-Sarkic girls have expensive tastes!" Valmont cried as the two security guards dragged him towards the elevator.

"So…I vote no on the gross dead thing from the Sarkic poser," Lolly said.

"Agreed," Manny nodded. "Victor, do you not do background checks on these guys?"

"Those don't exactly work with secret societies," Victor informed him as they walked over to the next display. "I do apologize for that. I can however personally vouch for the authenticity of this next seller. Manny, Lolly, this gentleman goes by the epithet of Silicon Soul. He's a…"

"A Maxwellian," Manny finished his sentence. "It's obvious enough."

The short man before them was pale and gaunt, with a pair of

electrodes permanently attached to his smooth scalp. Their wires fed into something under his heavy black coat. There was a neural port behind his right ear, and his amber glass eyes had mechanical apertures. There was a black breathing mask over his nose and mouth, and some small dark device upon his throat. Though his right arm was mechanical, it hung limp and useless, seemingly as broken as his god.

"It is nice to meet you," he said in a raspy, modulated voice. "I believe I attended your Circus once, as a child. It deeply perturbed my still developing sense of reality, and the image of a man with an upside-down face has haunted my dreams ever since."

"We try to make a difference."

"You said your name was Silicon Soul. That sounds like a screen name," Lolly commented. "You go by a screen name IRL? Lol."

"I consider myself a foreigner to meat space, and my name reflects that," the man replied.

"So what do you have for us then? Some Broken tech?"

"No, actually. Like that Sarkist swine, I too have a creature that I came upon more or less by happenstance and don't know what to do with."

He took the cover off the pedestal behind him, revealing a 'tabby cat' with dark purple fur. It was a long-haired breed, a little overweight, and its violent eyes shone with an electric luminosity.

It was also floating a few feet off the ground.

"Oh my god, it's adorable!" Lolly screamed. "Its eyes are just like Icky's!"

"I named him Khoshekh, since I've heard of a similar creature by that name described of in that anomalous radio broadcast that leaks into our reality from time to time," Silicon informed them.

"The one from that nexus in the Southwest? Yeah, I've been there too," Manny said. "Briefly, I mean. We never got to perform. We

were chased out of town by a mob screaming 'interlopers'."

"Can I pet him?" Lolly asked with eyes as big as saucers.

"Just be careful. He's not the friendliest cat I've ever known," Silicon nodded. Lolly approached the floating feline, only for it to hiss at her. The hissing it made sounded more like something from an enormous serpent than an overweight cat, and its teeth were not even mammalian, let alone feline.

"Poor thing. He's scared to death. How much?"

"Lolly, hold on a second," Manny insisted. "Aside from just not being friendly, does this animal have any other liabilities I should know about?"

"It is venomous," Silicon admitted.

"Venomous?"

"Yes, it has venom sacs in its mouth, as well as some venomous spines on its back, so you do need to be careful when interacting with it."

"That sounds like something you should have told us before you said Lolly could pet him," Manny said with an agitated shake of his head. "What about tricks? Can it do anything?"

"Well, for now, it just sort of floats there, which to me seems good enough for a freak show," Silicon said. "I did a bit of research, and I think there's some sort of flux pinning or something going on. I guess it doesn't really matter. But it's purple, it's got glowing eyes, it's poisonous, it makes scary noises, and it floats! You've got animal tamers, right? I'm sure they could teach it some tricks, or at least not to bite people. It's no more dangerous than any other animal act you have."

"What happened to your arm?" Many asked.

"What?"

"I said what happened to your arm?"

Silicon took a glance down at his disabled arm, seemingly trying to will it to move and failing.

"…It's unrelated to the cat."

"Really?"

"Yes. I mean, okay, maybe it's tangentially related to the cat. When I found it I tried to pick it up by the scruff of the neck, as you do with cats, but it didn't like that so it somehow produced an electric surge in my arm that fried all of the electronics."

"Sir, I'm afraid this animal has too many potential liabilities for us to consider incorporating it into our Circus," Manny said firmly.

"But he might die if we don't adopt him!" Lolly objected. The cat hissed again, this time flicking out multiple barbed tongues, wriggling like the tentacles of a Kraken.

"…it might kill us if we do," Manny countered.

"But we can take precautions. Put up warning signs or something, and then everyone could enjoy him," Lolly suggested. "Icky and I could use him in our 'pussy lovers' routine, or we could put him in the petting zoo!"

"Only if we want every child to die a slow, painful death," Manny said. "Lolly, I get that this thing is cute…"

"Super cute!"

"But it's also very dangerous. So dangerous no one can even touch it safely. I really can't imagine any scenario where someone doesn't get poisoned by this thing. Do you want that on your conscience? You said you weren't going to let Icky down. Do you really think Icky would want something this dangerous around kids, or up your skirt?"

Lolly gave the creature a forlorn look, only for it to swipe at her with horrifically distended claws.

"No," she admitted. "Fine, we won't get him. I'm sorry Mr. Kitty. Maybe Victor can find you someone immune to poison to be your

forever home."

"I know a surprising number of people who meet the description," Victor told her. "The cat will be fine, don't worry. Silicon, put the cover back on it and wheel it out of the showroom until the next showing, won't you?"

"It seems to prefer the darkness anyway," he said, covering the cat-like creature up and hauling it out of the room.

The creature produced a rolling, thunderous buzzing sound that they could only hope was purring.

“Victor, please tell me you saved the best for last,” Manny said.

“I did indeed. Right this way,” Victor said as he led them to the final display. Unlike the other two, this one had no attendant. It was simply a full-length mirror with an ornate brass frame, encased in some transparent material. “This item came into our possession when its previous owner passed away and we took control of their estate.”

“And what’s interesting about it?” Manny asked.

“I know this may not be the most original premise, but this old antique mirror…is haunted," Victor said with a dramatic flourish.

Literally nothing happened.

"Pepper? Pepper that was your cue," he said, still to no effect. He walked up to the mirror and gave it a gentle shake. This finally produced a result, causing a pale light like moonbeams to shine down from the mirror, illuminating the translucent figure of a pubescent girl with braided pigtails and an old fashioned dress.

“Okay, I'm out. Jesus,” she said, her voice an ethereal echo. She put on a forced smile and curtsied before them. "Hello, people who want to buy me. I'm ever so pleased to make your acquaintance."

“Oh my god!” Lolly screamed in elation, jumping right in front of the girl and scaring the no longer living daylights out of her. “Are you really a ghost? How did you die? What do you have to do with the

mirror? Are you stuck as a kid forever? How come Victor wants to sell you? Can I touch you?”

“No, don't touch me! What the hell are you on?"

"Clown's Milk," she replied, giving her signature eerily serene smile that Victor still found so unnerving. Pepper didn't seem to find it endearing either.

"I don't know what that is, but it sounds gross," she said.

"It's no grosser than regular milk, and it's *so* much more fun!" Lolly told her. "I'd let you try some, but you're dead, and if you weren't already dead it would kill you, so…sorry."

"So what's your story Pepper? How'd you end like this?" Manny asked.

"Does it matter? You're just going to make up some sensationalized horse crap to draw in bigger crowds."

"True, but I like to know my freaks. Are you actually a ghost?"

"I am. There's not really much of a story to that though. I caught pneumonia and died. I haunted my mother because I loved her and couldn't stand to see her so heartbroken. My dad knew someone who could make a mirror that would let me be seen and heard like a real person."

“The mirror acts as a focal point for aspect radiation, letting her take a semi-corporeal form,” Victor added.

"I was actually pretty happy with my folks, considering that I'm dead and can't go anywhere or do anything. But of course, they died eventually and now I'm stuck to this stupid thing forever!"

“There are worse soul traps than a mirror, believe me,” Manny said. “If you piss off the wrong god or mage, or get resurrected with any quantum retrocasuality tech you’ll be trapped in your own rotting corpse, still able to feel everything until you’re completely scattered to the winds.”

She stared at him dumbfounded for a moment.

"You are a weird dude," she said. Lolly tentatively ran her hand through the ghost's intangible body.

"She's tingly," she giggled.

"I said don't touch me!"

Manny stepped up to the mirror and examined its casing.

“What’s this you got it in?” he asked.

“Aluminum oxynitride with a clear superhydrophobic coating,” Victor replied. “You won’t have to worry about any of your guests breaking it, and it’s easy to clean.”

Lolly cleared her throat and put on the most business-like countenance she could muster.

“Pepper, would you like to come back to our Circus with us?” she asked sweetly. “It’s full of all sorts of magic people just like you, so you wouldn’t be alone anymore, and I promise it’s the most amazing, fantastic place you’ve ever seen. You’ll have an enormous family, the most special family in all the worlds who will love you and take care of you and keep you safe. Best of all you won’t have to be a secret; new people will come and see you everyday and be amazed by you because you’re magic, and that single magical experience will brighten their lives forever! Would you like that Pepper?”

The ghost gave an apathetic shrug.

“I dunno. Maybe. I guess it would be better than being sold to some creepy rich pedophile or something. But I don't want people touching me all day!"

“Manny, we have to take her with us. It’s non-negotiable. She's a freak and she has nowhere to go. She needs a home.”

“She’d be a fine addition to the Den or the Hall at the very least,” Manny nodded. “What’s the sticker price, Victor?”

“We’re asking a hundred and twenty thousand U.S. dollars,” Victor replied.

“Well knowing the way you guys mark stuff up that means you’ve got at most ten grand invested in her. How about twenty? Be reasonable, that’s a decent profit margin.”

“Maybe by the Circus’s standards, but not ours. I can take twenty thousand *off*.”

"Yeah, just haggle over the helpless adolescent girl like I'm a used car. That's not fucked up at all," Pepper groaned.

“Hush," Manny said. "Victor, who do you think’s going to pay a hundred grand for a ghost? People abandon houses worth more than that because they’re haunted. I’ll pay thirty thousand. That’s triple what you’ve spent on her, which is the same profit margin Apple has on its iPhones. Are you saying you’re greedier than Apple?”

“I think you know the answer to that. Lolly’s already made it clear that you’re not leaving without her, but if it helps I can knock a few more grand off; ninety-six thousand.”

“Forty thousand, and before you counter-offer keep in mind that we’re still your ticket to the Utterly Bazaar. Seems to me that if someone was going out-of-universe for the first time, they wouldn’t want their Sherpas to be angry at them for gouging them in a simple business deal.”

Victor actually hesitated this time before answering.

“Forty-eight thousand, final offer.”

For a second Victor thought Manny was frowning at him, before realizing it was a smile.

“Deal,” he said sticking out his arm for a handshake. “Gary will wire you the money by the end of the day tomorrow.”

“Awesome! Thanks Victor!” Lolly shouted, grabbing the mirror and sticking it under her arm. “I can’t wait to introduce you to

Ragamuffin. She’s going to love you!”

"Please don't carry me sideways, it mucks up the whole projection," Pepper complained. Her visage was still vertical, but it was now a fun house distortion of itself, as tall as the mirror was wide.

"Yeah, you look silly!" Lolly laughed, moving the mirror around erratically to produce increasingly distorted forms.

“A pleasure as always, Emcee D. We’ll show ourselves out,” Manny said, relieving Lolly of the mirror and ushering her towards the elevator.

“Take care of yourselves,” Victor waved as the elevator doors slid shut. He nearly jumped out of his skin when the silence was broken by multiple sharp gasps from the flesh pile in the cage.

“Oh thank god, I thought they’d never leave,” one of the faces said.

“Did you see the face on that one? So much makeup; she looked like a clown!” another face said.

“Security, take that damn thing back to Valmont!” Victor ordered as he attempted to bring his breathing and heart rate back to normal. “And tell him I’m still charging him a broker’s fee!”

« **She Remembered Me** | **Dread & Circuses Hub** | **There Are No Strings On Me** »

There Are No Strings On Me

« **Freaky Commodities II ~ Freak Harder** | **Dread & Circuses Hub** | **So They Called Him Darke** »

“Now remember, you can’t drink this stuff. Just soak a rag in it, wring it back out into the bottle, and then huff the rag. If you drink it, it will kill you.”

As Lolly went over the risks and benefits of Clown’s Milk with her customer, Victor examined the odd paper bills of the Utterly Bazaar. For convenience sake, all the merchants at the Bazaar accepted the same currency, which the money changers would provide in exchange for almost anything. Curiously though, they had valued Lolly’s *Fuller Funbucks* higher than Victor’s US dollars.

The legal tender of the Bazaar was a living ink, printed upon slips of parchment. The ink was in a constant state of motion, gracefully forming a never-ending series of abstract shapes, lazily pulsing and shifting in colour in an almost hypnotic display. The slips came in seven denominations, determined by how much ink had been printed on them. That made Victor think that despite being paper money it was a commodity currency and not fiat, but he had no idea why the ink was so valuable.

“Believe me, I don’t want anyone getting hurt. Dead customers aren’t repeat customers,” the Milk buyer nodded as he counted out a stack of nearly a hundred ink slips. “Thanks for doing this by the way. I usually buy Bloom from the **`Babylon Whore's Corner Store`**, but I’m boycotting them because they changed their name to **S**upernatural **C**orner-store **P**lus. Apparently, biblical references and ‘sex negative’ terms for prostitutes can’t get past the PC thought police these days. Fuckin’ SJWs.”

“Uh-huh,” Lolly said with a nervous nod. “Ah, I’m actually on the rainbow side of the spectrum myself, so I’m probably more closely aligned with social justice warriors than angry white guys, but I’m…

sorry you're upset?”

The man glared at her for a moment as if pondering a retort, but seemingly thought better of it and finished counting out the slips.

“Nine thousand eight hundred, nine thousand nine hundred, ten thousand inky-dinks. Pleasure doing business with you,” he said, setting the cash down and rolling the dolly of Milk crates away.

“Come back anytime,” she said with an enthusiastic wave, though discreetly sighing with relief that that encounter hadn’t escalated. She picked up the bills and briefly flipped through them. “Bailey was right. We have so much more Milk since we started ultra-pasteurizing it. We’re going to make a butt load selling all the surplus, and it will make so many people happier. It will save lives too since you can’t O.D. just by huffing it. Are you sure you don’t want to try some? It’s so good!”

“I’m sure Lolly,” Victor nodded. “MC&D has a surprisingly strict drug policy for its employees. No matter how good your Milk is, it’s not worth losing my job over.”

“Narc,” Lolly teased. “Now that that’s out of the way we can take a look around the Bazaar. I’ve been here a hundred times and I never get used to it. You never know what you’re going to find here.”

The Utterly Bazaar was, needless to say, utterly bizarre. The sky was nothing but a grey haze and the Bazaar itself was permeated by an eerie mist. The wooden stalls and cobblestone shops looked like something from an age long past, but many of the wares and denizens of the Bazaar looked like they were from an age yet to come, or an age that never was and never would be. It also had Wi-Fi, obviously.

The bathrooms were best left undescribed, which was likely why the side alleys stunk of ammonia.

Victor tried his best to ignore the oddities of the environment and focus on the vendors and their wares for anything MC&D might be interested in acquiring.

“Monopoles! Get your magnetic monopoles here! Great for quantum and nano tech of all kinds! Use them as a catalyst for proton decay to get perfect energy conversion, or toss them into a particle accelerator to make a baby universe! Also good for trick compasses!”

“Sign up today for our course on **epsilon wave lucid dreaming**, and become the master of both the waking and unwaking worlds! Our comprehensive three-hour course will unleash the type Green literally sleeping within you! That’s epsilon wave lucid dreaming; make your dreams come true!”

“Springwater! I’ve got Water from the **Astrakhan Spring**! Cures all ills and restores youth! Got it from a reality where the O5 council is corrupt as fuck!”

“That sounds like something we could move,” Victor said, approaching the stall and examining the glass bottles. “Tell me, what effect would this have an individual who, due to multiple mishaps with experimental life extension, now ages about fifty times faster than normal and has to continuously siphon the elan vital energy from young donors to keep himself alive?”

The woman who was renting the stall stared at him blankly for a moment.

“What?”

“I’m asking for one of my bosses,” Victor replied.

“I don’t know about any of that, I only know how it works on vanilla humans,” she replied. “I sell it in 10 ml vials and 500 ml bottles. The vials will kill all pathogens, parasites, and cancer cells, plus supercharge your regenerative abilities to heal any damage, up to and including severed limbs. The vials will have a mild rejuvenating effect, but each bottle will take twenty to thirty years off. That cleans out plaque, senescent cells, and any other garbage that makes you grow old. It corrects mutations in both nuclear and mitochondrial DNA, plus restores telomeres to a youthful length. Each vial is five thousand inklings, and a bottle’s a quarter mill.”

“Still cheaper than American healthcare, right?” Victor smirked. “I’ll take a vial for now. We’ll have our lab run some tests on it, and if it does what you say it does we’ll be back for more. Do you have a business card?”

“Mind if I save you some time, young man?” a voice from behind them suddenly spoke up. “I can personally attest to the effectiveness of that particularly potent product. I've used a number of methods to reach my current count of one and three-quarter centuries, and none has been as efficacious or as benign as water from the Astrakhan Spring. I highly recommend it, especially when compared to more invasive methods, like wrangling the White Worm. That Karcist told me I wouldn't be able to control the little blighter, but did I listen? No. Story for another time though.”

Victor and Lolly both turned to see who the talkative interloper was. It was a short, skinny, middle-aged man. His dark brown hair and beard were overgrown, and he was dressed in a weather-worn long coat and squashed top hat.

“You look familiar,” Lolly said, squinting slightly. “Are you a regular here at the Bazaar?”

“As of late, Miss, as of late,” he replied with a curt nod. “I’ve been hoping to cross paths with some old friends of mine whom I’ve sadly lost contact with. This is the busiest extra-dimensional hotspot in the multiverse, after the Library of course, and I’m not allowed in there anymore. Too many rules, too little table service. Honestly, those spider people are running the length of the Library all day. Would it kill them to bring me a Monte Cristo while they were at it?
“Tell me though Miss, was that Clown’s Milk you were selling a few moments ago?”

“Yes, and I’m fresh out I’m afraid,” Lolly replied. “Except for my personal stash, but I need that obviously.”

“That’s quite all right Miss. I was merely curious as to whether you were a True Clown, from the Circus of the Disquieting?”

“I am, actually. Have you been to our Circus?”

“Oh yes, though it was many years ago, and I don’t recall seeing you there.”

“Well, the Circus is *super* old. It’s over a hundred years older than I am. I bet you saw Manny when you were there though. Hard to miss a guy with an upside-down face; plus he’s been with the Circus forever, like since the very beginning.”

“Well, not quite,” the man said. “Do forgive me for being nosy, but I happened to overhear the end of your conversation with the other gentleman and I couldn’t help but wonder if you might be the paramour of a Clown by the name of Icky?”

Lolly beamed a proud smile.

“Why yes, I’m the Ringmaster’s playmate. Do you know Icky?”

The man’s cheek twitched at the naming of Icky as Ringmaster.

“Indeed I do. Better than you do even. For longer, at least. In fact, you could even say she wouldn’t be where she is today without me.”

Lolly’s face suddenly froze in horror as she realized why this man looked so familiar. She had seen his image every day since she was seven years old. The moustache of his beard was still slightly curled, the squashed hat on his head bore the crumpled monogram of HF, and the back of his faded red coat had the tails of a Ringmaster’s costume.

“Fuller,” she whispered softly. The man smiled widely at her, chuckling. “Victor, run! Get out of here!”

“Now now now Miss Lollipop there’s no cause for alarm,” Herman said. “It is Lollipop, isn’t it? Oh, I’ve heard about you too. Icky’s lovely and beloved assistant. I’m sure you two put on quite a show. I really do just want to catch up and get to know the new additions like yourself. Perhaps over some Clown’s Milk and animal crackers at my place? I’ve got the howler monkey crackers: quite the delicacy.”

“Get away from me!” Lolly screamed as she backed away, unwilling to take her eyes off him.

“Sir, you’re upsetting her. You need to leave,” Victor said, placing his hand on Herman’s shoulder. Herman snarled at him, and then blew a stream of air as cold as liquid nitrogen onto Victor's hand. It instantly froze solid, and Victor fell to the ground screaming in agony.

“Straight from my icy, icy heart,” Herman said, brushing the frost off his shoulder. “Also, I smoke menthols.”

"Guards!" the water merchant cried, running off for help.

Lolly gritted her teeth, her eyes burning a fiery red, and pulled out a war hammer sized wooden mallet from her pockets and charged at Fuller, swinging wildly. Herman effortlessly dodged each blow, ducking and bobbing like a champion boxer.

“Move like a butterfly, sting like a bee, if you’re going to fight dirty you should swing for the knees!” Herman slipped behind her and then knocked her down with a kick to the back of her knees. She fell to the ground and dropped the mallet. When she looked up she saw Herman towering over her, holding the enormous hammer over his shoulder like he was playing crochet. “Last chance for those animal crackers.”

Lolly sprinted off down the alley as quickly as she could.

“Worth a shot,” Herman said, pulling out a walkie-talkie and speaking into it. “Looks like we’re doing this the hard way, Tom. I’ll drive her to you.”

“Understood,” Tom radioed back.

"There, that's him!" the water merchant shouted, pointing at Fuller. She was now accompanied by a pair of masked guards in leather armour and hooded cloaks. Fuller glanced around for potential weapons or distractions, and saw that a nearby produce merchant was selling **`critical tomatoes`**.

"Hey, did you hear about the Sarkist who lost his copy of the Valkzaron? " he asked loudly. "He should've kept a better *Ion* it."

The tomatoes immediately shot towards Fuller at a dangerous

velocity. He rolled out of the way at lightning speed, leaving the guards, merchant and Victor to be mercilessly pelted for his pun.

Herman slipped off in the chaos and sped off after Lolly, zigzagging around stalls and merchants as he raced down the winding alley. It didn't take long to catch up with his quarry, and when she saw him she ducked into the food court to try to lose him. She dropped to her knees and crawled between rows and under tables to avoid his gaze.

Herman immediately starting knocking over tables and chairs with the mallet. The diners screamed and shouted, and he knocked over several cans of **Diet Ghost** so that spirits were flying around like swarms of flies, driving most everyone else away in terror.

This quickly attracted the attention of the food court's judge, leaping from atop its pedestal of the Starbuck's sign and descending upon Fuller. The blindfolded being, in its damask robes and powdered wig, towered over Fuller and unleashed a deafening, unholy howl that signified that he should clean up his mess and reimburse the other patrons whose meals he had destroyed, roughly translated.

"Hey, if you're the judge, then how come I've got the gavel?" Fuller asked as he brought the mallet down upon the judge's head, smashing it like a watermelon. The rest of the body fell limp and showed no signs of regeneration. "Yes! In your face Gallagher! Wait, what was I doing? Crap, Lolly!"

Lolly had already vanished from the food court in the confusion, having run down a stray, deserted alleyway. Not daring to stop, she pulled out her phone and speed dialled Gary.

"Hey hey, you've reached Herman Fuller's…"

"Gary, it's Lolly! I'm in trouble! I'm at the Utterly Bazaar and so is Fuller! He's after me!"

"What?"

"I know there's a Way into the Library here somewhere, I'm going to try to get to it. Tell Icky and Manny or anyone that I need help now!

Tell Icky I love her, tell everyone I love them!”

Lolly screamed as she was hoisted up into a net, dropping her phone to the ground.

“Lolly? Lolly? Zoltan, go find Icky and Manny and tell them that Fuller’s at the Bazaar and he’s after Lolly!”

Gary could hear Fuller’s laughter over the phone as he skipped towards his prize.

“Child, oh child, now don’t you fret.
There is no need for curses and threats.
*I wouldn’t dream of hurting you - **yet**.*
Not ’til you’re my merry, merry marionette.
Oh, my merry, merry, marionette,”

Herman sang, bending down to pick up the phone. “Gary old pal, is that you? Listen, I’m sorry about the last time we talked. I was under a lot of stress at the time, but I’m in a much better place now. No hard feelings?”

“Are you out of your mind? Do you know who you’ve got? Icky will send the whole Circus after you to get her back!”

Herman only chuckled, tapping a red phone icon on the screen.

“I’m counting on it,” he said as he went to put the phone in his pocket.

“What?” he heard Gary ask.

“Oh crap, did I not hang up? Curse these modern phones. The red button’s ‘end call’ right?”

“You can’t just tap it, I have it set so you have to hold it for a second so I can’t hang up by accident,” Lolly replied, bobbing up and down in her net.

“Ah, thank you,” Herman said, successfully disconnecting the call this time. “Excellent work Mr. Brenneman.”

Herman's accomplice emerged from the shadows. Even in the dim light, he was not pleasant to look upon. He was skinny, but unevenly so, as if parts of him were missing. His cheeks and eyes were deeply sunken, and his face was heavily and randomly scarred. His grey hair was limp, and his eyes looked like they had seen far too many horrible things.

"Wait, Brenneman? Tom Brenneman? Manny told me about you! You're the one who tried to kidnap Elisa, aren't you?" Lolly asked.

"I tried to save Elisa!" Tom shouted, coming right up to her face. "And do you know what The Man with the Upside-Down Face did to me for that? He tossed me to your kind! I…I can still hear them laughing, do you know that? I barely sleep, and when I do I wake up screaming. Do you want to know something else? Your Icky was there too, as monstrous as the rest of them. I wonder if you would still think she's so wonderful if you knew what she did to people who get on her bad side, what she did to me."

"I know exactly what Icky does to freak killers and traitors," Lolly assured him. She blew a bubble of spit out like it was bubble gum; bigger and bigger until it finally popped like a balloon, showering her abductors in spittle. "You obviously weren't inflated, so you got off easy."

"You think so? That wasn't even the end of it. I obviously wasn't too happy with Icky or Manny after that, so when they turned against Fuller I took his side, and they tossed us both into the **Darkness Between Dimensions**! We were there for years! In the Darkness, I could see the faces of all the vicious Clowns Manny sicced on me!"

He pulled the net closer to him and cocked his fist.

"Easy Tom! Easy," Fuller said. "Remember: she's bait. We get her back to the Matinee, then the Circus comes to us and we can have our revenge. Alright?"

"Right boss," Tom nodded, releasing the net.

"Lower the net. We've got to get moving."

“What the hell is this net made of anyways?” Lolly asked as she struggled against it, noting that it seemed to be suppressing her magic.

“Oh, just some electro-thaumic conductive alloy. Ed & Al's sold me a 60-mile reel for 99 thousand inklings. It’s amazing what you can buy in bulk.”

“I know, right? Just like a week ago I got a huge tub of Antabuse. I used it on an elephant!”

The net was carelessly dropped to the ground, and Tom picked it up and slung it over his back.

“Lead the way, Fuller.”

“Where are you taking me? And how did you even get here without a Kaleidoscope?” Lolly asked as they hustled through the alleys.

“Who do you think made the Kaleidoscope my dear? I know everything there is to know about Ways, and a Kaleidoscope is just a device to create temporary Ways to any door you want. That’s why it needs calliope music. That’s the Knock that lets you through. Of course, I also put other security measures into it, like making it impossible to accept incoming Ways unless you had a valid key, which I don’t anymore, and charmed the whole Circus to prevent anyone outside creating Ways in through ordinary doors, so it seems I was too prudent for my own good.
“No matter, no matter. I can still create Ways on my own, which is how I got here. It’s also how we’ll get back to the Matinee, assuming I can find it. All these alleys look alike.”

“What is this Matinee you keep talking about?” Lolly asked.

“I wouldn’t want to spoil the surprise, but I assure you it is the most…”

“LOLLY!” Icky’s panicked scream echoed through the Bazaar.

“…that ain’t good.”

“ICKY! ICKY I’M HERE!” Lolly screamed back.

“Goddammit, move Tom, move!”

The pair of Clown-nappers sped down alleyways more or less at random, but always away from the sound of Icky’s enraged screams.

“LOLLY! LOLLY WHERE ARE YOU?”

“IN THE ALLEYS! FOLLOW MY VOICE!”

“Boss, we aren’t going to be able to outrun her. We should drop the girl and get out while we can,” Tom said.

“The hell we should! I’m not giving up now, not when I’m this close to getting my Circus back!” Fuller snapped. “Just duck into a building. The stone walls are thick enough to be soundproof, so she won’t find us no matter how much her little urchin screams.”

Tom grabbed the knob of the first door he saw, but it was locked. As was the next one, and the one after that.

“FULLER!”

“We don’t have time for this!” Tom shouted, growing increasingly panicked by the growing proximity of Icky’s psychotic screams of fury.

“Stand back!” Fuller ordered. He took a running start at the door, slamming it multiple times with the mallet, but to no avail. “Oh, the tragic irony! Herman Fuller; master of interdimensional doorways, barred by a mundane one. No matter. This moment was inevitable anyway, that the once and future Ringmaster should have to duel his usurper to reclaim his Circus. Icky! Let us battle! Let our skills of spectacle be put to the test! Let nothing less than the fate of the Circus be decided by the pitting of our two great…”

While he was talking Icky ran up from behind and snapped his neck 180 degrees. She shoved the body out of the way and stared down Tom with murderous intent. Tom immediately dropped Lolly to the ground and raised his hands in surrender.

“Icky, it was all Herman. I didn’t want to help, I had no choice, I…”

Icky grabbed the mallet and swung it upwards, knocking Tom's head clean off and sending it flying into the nearest building. His head struck the wall with so much force it splattered, leaving a Rorschach test of blood and brains stained upon it.

Icky dropped to her knees and untied the net, then clutched Lolly as hard as she could without hurting her. She broke down into unrestrained sobbing.

"Lolly. Lolly," she whimpered.

"It's okay. I'm okay. They didn't hurt me. They didn't have a chance. You got here so fast! You saved me! You were incredible! I'm safe, thanks to you. Icky, you're shaking. It's over now, try to calm down. Deep breaths, okay?"

As Icky attempted to regain a modicum of composure, Manny finally caught up with her. He came to a stop over the body of Fuller, bending over to examine it.

He jumped backwards when Fuller started laughing.

"Why didn't I think of this sooner? The Man with the Upside-Down Face and Backwards Head Guy! What a duo we'd make!" Herman said, rising to his feet.

"Fuller!" Icky screeched, charging at him to tear him limb from limb. He somersaulted into the air to avoid her, landing on his feet and then snapping his head into its proper position.

"I'm going to have a hell of a time explaining that one to my chiropractor," he said.

"If I have to cut you into a thousand different pieces and bury them in a thousand different universes to keep you dead, I will Fuller!" Icky shouted. "Manny, don't just stand there, grab him!"

Herman beamed a mocking smile towards Manny, who made no move to attack.

"…Veronica, I think we should fall back. We don't know what he's capable of, it's too risky."

“We can’t let him get away!” Icky screamed, charging at Fuller once more. Her nails extended into monstrous claws and she took multiple swipes at him, all of which he ducked.

“Veronica, that’s not working! I want him dead too, but we need a strategy!”

Icky growled in frustration, but conceded his point. She retracted her claws and stepped back towards Lolly to better protect her.

“You know Herman, you’re shorter than I remember,” she mocked.

“Lost about a foot to the Darkness,” he sneered. He took Lolly’s phone out of his pocket and tossed it back to her. “You can have that back. It would be more of an annoyance than anything. My invitation for animal crackers still stands.”

“Buzz off,” Lolly replied.

“Ah, for the best. You murdered my valet. I may be a rat, but I would never stoop so low as to serve my own guests,” he said. “I’ll be seeing you all again real soon.”

He placed his hands in his pockets and ran off down another side alley. Icky sighed with relief and hugged Lolly to her, kissing her lovingly on the forehead.

“Victor! We’ve got to help Victor! Herman froze his hand!” Lolly remembered.

“I ran across Victor on the way in. He’s fine. He's covered in tomatoes, but he's fine. He drank that vial of Springwater he bought. I directed him to the Door we opened,” Manny told her.

“Manny, did you see anything in Herman’s mind? Anything that might help us find him?” Icky asked.

“I did,” he replied solemnly. “He’s at the Matinee, Veronica.”

“Yeah, he mentioned a Matinee a couple of times. What is it?” Lolly asked.

“It was a theatre he used to own. He used to…well, you don’t need to know the specifics right now but it was a way to punish those who defied him,” Icky replied. “But Manny made him close it down in the sixties.”

“He closed it, but he still owns it. He must have gone back there after he escaped from the Darkness,” Manny speculated. “He’s been killing people Veronica. Dozens of innocent people, maybe more, all hooked up to that infernal machine!”

“Why?” she asked aghast.

“Practice. He wants us, all of us, the entire Circus, all his again. Everyone connected to his machine, his puppets for all eternity.”

“He said I was bait,” Lolly said. “He knew you’d send the whole Circus in to get me back. It’s a trap Icky. What are we going to do?”

To both Lolly's and Manny’s surprise, Icky smirked.

“We’re going to spring his trap on him,” she said. “Come on, back to the Circus. We’ve got some planning to do.”

Icky stood in front of the Kaleidoscope Doors, gazing out at the posse she had assembled. Most of the Clowns, many of the Freaks, and even some of the Carnies had armed themselves and stood ready to defend their Circus. Lolly sat off to the side, with Mr. Noodles for protection and Yume and Ragamuffin there to console her.

“Twenty or so years ago, all of us banded together and overthrew Fuller, freeing us from his cruelty and greed, taking this Circus for ourselves and turning it into the sanctuary it always should have been,” Icky pontificated. “We showed Fuller mercy he did not deserve and let him live, and now he has returned to make us suffer for it! Manny has seen the twisted vision that fills Herman’s mind; all of us strung up as puppets in his Matinee. He tried to kidnap Lolly to lure us there! My Lolly! He tried to take my Lolly!”

She screamed in rage and pounded her fists into a clown-shaped

punching bag by her side.

“Thanks Eugene,” she sighed when she was done.

“No problem boss,” the punching bag replied, shimmering back into his Clown form.

“As I was saying,” Icky resumed. “We’re not safe just because Herman failed this time. If he can’t lure us to the Matinee, he’ll come for us. He’ll snatch us up one by one if he has to. He’ll never stop until he takes this Circus back. I say we don’t wait for that! I say we take the fight to him, and end this now!”

The crowd of Clowns and Freaks and Carnies cheered. Manny stepped up beside Icky, brandishing a large machete.

“I don’t know exactly what’s waiting for us, but I know that Fuller already has dozens or more puppets ready to fight for him,” he announced. “Remember that they are puppets. Cut their strings, and they will fall. Don’t waste time attacking their bodies; they’re already dead.”

“Herman may have been born a Humdrum, but over his very long life he acquired more powers than even Manny knows,” Icky add. “We don’t know all he’s capable of, but he doesn’t know we have this!”

She pulled out a small sphere of beryllium bronze and held it up for everyone to see.

“A little souvenir from my trip to the Essie P! A Scantron…”

“Scranton,” Manny corrected.

“…Scranton Reality Mini-Buoy! It should be enough to take some of the fight out of Fuller! Are you ready to defend our family from this menace? To make him pay for everything he’s ever done, everything he tried to do, and would do if we let him roam free?”

The crowd cheered wildly.

“I’m working on a swarm of Giant Asian Hornets just for Fuller!”

Quincy shouted, hiccupping up a couple of them prematurely.

“If anyone needs a light for a torch or Molotov cocktail, I’ve got you covered!” Danny yelled, pointing to his flaming head.

“And we've got the bazooka!” Eugene cried, hoisting the weapon onto his shoulders.

“…Which, again, only shoots cream pies,” Pius reminded him.

“Still deadly, if used properly,” Eugene insisted.

“Spin her up Manny,” Icky ordered. Having already dialled the coordinates, Manny wound up the Kaleidoscope with an enormous key. Once it was fully wound, the largest pair of doors on the Kaleidoscope slid open, revealing the smoking white portal held open by the Circus's ever-present calliope music. “Fun-lovers first! Ripley, Bailey, all of you move out!”

The black, fluid-filled sacs ran through the crowd on their varying assortment of limbs and leapt through the portal. Icky blew a kiss to Lolly and then hopped to Manny’s side, both of them facing directly into the glowing white doorway.

“You ready buddy?” she asked, tossing the buoy up and down in her palm.

“We should’ve tracked him down a long time ago,” Manny nodded. He raised his machete in the air and then pointed it forward to direct the small army. “Everyone, move out!”

And with that command, the company of Clowns and Freaks and Carnies marched out of Herman Fuller’s Circus of the Disquieting, and marched into Herman Fuller’s **`Marvellously Macabre Mechanical Marionette Matinee`**.

« **Freaky Commodities II ~ Freak Harder** | **Dread & Circuses Hub** | **So They Called Him Darke** »

So They Called Him Darke

« **There Are No Strings On Me** | **Dread & Circuses Hub** | **A Scip Or A Star?** »

“Grandsire?” **`Iris Dark`** called as she stepped through the Way from the London Office into Percival Darke’s private sanctum. She had heard Marshall and Carter call it the ‘The Museum’, presumably because they saw Darke as a relic. It was appropriate nonetheless since, in addition to being Darke's home and workspace, it also held his private collection of curiosities that he had accumulated over the centuries. Whether they had been purchased, stolen, discovered or invented by his own skilled hands, these were the few rare objects that were worth more to Darke than what they'd fetch on the open market.

It was a strange place, to be sure, and Iris didn’t even know where it was. It was windowless and she never heard any noises from outside, so she assumed it was deep underground, yet it was utterly lacking any sort of ventilation system. It was obscenely ornate, yet rustically antiquated, not even possessing electricity. All electronic reports and messages had to be printed off and translocated to him via **`ravenwave`**.

The entrance hall was lined with braziers that burned with spectral, smokeless flames, their sepia light dancing on the marble walls and pillars. The echoes of her bootsteps were the only noise as she set out seeking for her living forefather.

It had been a little over three years now since she had become Percival Darke’s proxy, the end result of a complex chain of events set in motion by a clause in a will and a (temporarily) successful assassination attempt. Darke was by far the most reclusive partner of Marshall, Carter, & Dark, and preferred to be represented by his proxy as much as was practical.

Iris was aware that she wasn’t the first of Darke’s descendants to

hold this position. She had been preceded by a Benjamin Phineas Dark, and an Abigail Agnes Dark before him, and a Johann Dark before her. The position obviously had its perks. The shares she had been given had made her an instant billionaire, and the company health plan included various forms of life extension and resurrection. Darke also allowed her mostly free rein to do as she pleased, since he was well aware that a being as ancient as himself was out of touch. She was currently using MC&D's inexhaustible resources to finance several anomalous tech projects, and had plenty more ideas on how she might spend her billions of dollars and very long life.

An interesting consequence (though not necessarily a downside) of her new position was that people frequently thought she was Darke, just as they had with her predecessors. Staff and clients alike often viewed her as a centuries-old sorceress of unknowable power. Some people whispered that Darke was like a Time Lord, and rejuvenated into new forms every so often. Others said that he had never been anything remotely human, and his 'descendants' were only those who had pledged their lives to him for the assurance of a tolerable afterlife. Iris had even caught wind of a rumour that she had been a call girl whose body Darke had desouled and possessed. She could hardly blame people though, since nobody knew what Darke was.

Not even her.

She had a theory though, one she had compiled from three years of interaction with him and her newfound expertise on the anomalous world. She believed that Darke, who she knew to be an alchemist and thaumaturge of great skill and power with deep knowledge of the Ways, had phased himself slightly out of this reality and into the **Darkness Between Dimensions**. The way he moved made it seem like he wasn't fully corporeal, and he was always shrouded in a dark aura. The void's inherent lack of entropy kept him from ageing, and its low Hume level would afford him powerful reality bending capabilities. He never faded because of the living creatures he consumed (not ate, consumed). In addition to their matter and their EVE particles replenishing his own, their Hume field replenished his. It made a weird kind of sense. He immersed himself in the Darkness, sustained himself on the Darkness, empowered

himself with the Darkness.

So they called him Darke.

It was only an educated guess at best though, as she knew better than to ask him.

She poked her head in his workshop, and found it empty. The antique alchemical laboratory, the spectral forge, and the electro-thaumic workbench were all unused at the moment. She checked his study next, only to find the divination circle unlit and the vellum codex's all in their proper places.

She was just about to work up the courage to try his bedchamber (where she would at best be disturbing his rest and at worst interrupting as he attended to whatever carnal needs a being of his nature possessed) when the study door slid open. Iris exhaled a sigh of relief as the tall, cloaked form of Percival Darke glided in with several books clutched in his hand.

“Grandsire, there you are. Just got back from the Library I take it?” Iris asked.

“I was able to locate some **Erikeshan** texts from a reality where they were a little more empirical than they were in our history,” he replied as he shut the door and set the books down on his end table. “I suspect I may be able to synthesize the substance they used to forge the Chains of Jaspetar. One never knows when one might need to imprison a colossal Elder God. But that can wait. What did you need?”

“Chan said he found a vendor selling Astrakhan Springwater at the Utterly Bazaar, and brought back a sample for testing. There is a sizable market that could afford to use the ‘soul sucker’ but refuse because of moral objections. We could stand to make a lot from ‘cruelty-free’ life extension.”

Iris took the vial out of her pocket and handed it to Darke. He clasped it in his boney, ashen, slightly translucent hand and meditated on it for a moment.

“It’s giving off a lot of Akiva radiation, indicative of a divine origin.” He then squeezed a single droplet onto his tongue. “It’s not pure. They’ve watered it down. I can hardly blame them, since most of their customers would have no way to tell the difference. If they’re willing to sell us the pure stuff then we can make a deal.”

Darke handed the vial back to his heir, and then suddenly grew pensive.

“Chan’s the one we assigned to the Circus of the Disquieting, correct?” he asked.

“Yes, we recently came to an agreement with them allowing us limited use of their Way generator,” Iris replied.

“The Kaleidoscope, yes. A truly astonishing invention,” Darke said as sat down in his reading chair, gesturing for Iris to sit beside him.

He rung a small silver bell and an imp of a creature dressed like a renaissance period servant with its face hidden behind a brazen mask appeared from around the corner. It carried a silver tray bearing a hot chocolate for Iris and a chalice of cold, condensed miasma for Darke, so heavy it was almost liquid. The servant, or slave, or whatever it was immediately retreated from sight so as not to disturb its master for any longer than was absolutely necessary.

“Herman created that contraption a hundred years before the Foundation invented their first Multi-Universal Transit Array. He was a genius with the Ways,” Darke reminisced as he both inhaled and sipped his beverage.

“You knew Fuller?” Iris asked, blowing on her hot chocolate.

“We met in the Library, when I first discovered it late last century… sorry, no, the century before last. Most of the other patrons like to keep their distance from me, but Herman couldn’t resist the opportunity to pick my brain. He was ravenous for arcane knowledge. He must have read thousands of books on the supernatural, spoken with hundreds of otherworldly sages, explored countless other realities. To tell the truth, he was so intelligent and well learned I suspected he was one of my many unaccounted for

descendants."

Darke smirked as he observed Iris trying to hide her revulsion at the thought that she might be related to some kind of carnival freak.

“As a man of means with a fascination for the occult, he was obviously a good customer. As a cunning entrepreneur of dubious morals, he was a good business partner. If I was feeling generous, I would even go so far as to say he was a good friend.”

“Until he tried to steal from you.”

“Until he tried to steal from us, yes,” Darke nodded, chuckling at the memory. “He actually created a Way into the soul-sucker’s room, despite my wards, only to realize it was too big to fit through the door! We walked in on him trying to disassemble it. He said he was doing a service call, had to make sure the machine was operating at tip-top efficiency. Amos was furious.”

“Understandable, given how reliant he is on that thing.”

“True, but we were perhaps needlessly cruel to the Circus in the years that followed. I regret that, and am glad it’s behind us now. Herman Fuller’s Circus is a wondrous place Iris, and their Kaleidoscope an invaluable resource.”

“Yes, I’d thought you’d have some ideas on how to capitalize on that,” Iris smiled, an avaricious gleam in her eyes. “You must know about some hard to get to places worth visiting. Where should we send Victor next?”

“Mr. Chan, even with a Clown at his side, may not be fully adequate for what I have in mind,” Darke replied. “I think it would be best for my proxy to accompany him. It would be good for you too I think, to experience the anomalous ‘in the wild’ as it were, not safely confined to our cages. You’ve mastered your occult studies with me enough to handle yourself in the field, and I have foreseen you will come to no harm.”

“I’m not worried about that Grandsire. My only concern would be that our agreement with the Circus made it very clear that Victor was to

be the only one allowed through the Kaleidoscope.”

Darke only chuckled at the suggestion.

“The Man with the Upside-Down Face may seem intimidating to an undersized Chinaman or an incontinent old dotard, but even he trembles at the mention of the name ‘Darke’. Give them a ring and tell them that the Heir of Percival Darke will be accompanying Mr. Chan on his outings from now on, and see if old Manny voices any objections. Come, let us see if we can find someplace appropriate to wet your feet.”

He arose from his chair and gestured for her to follow him. They entered into his map room, which had numerous decorative maps framed upon the walls. Globes of various worlds rotated in perpetual motion above their pedestals, and the long shelves held innumerable scrolls and atlases. This was a room from which a man from before the Age of Reason could navigate the Multiverse.

"You know, if you would let us digitize this information I could make an app that could let us plot Ways on a smartphone," Iris suggested, still drinking her cocoa.

"Truth contained in the Chaos Tongue cannot be properly represented by any other language, including the binary language of computers," Darke replied. "Besides, the information contained in this room is far too priceless to risk leaking out onto that vile noospheric web of yours."

He began to pull down various antique maps until he found the one he wanted. It was a map of the ‘Yesod’ multiverse, one of many such multiverses, depicted as a tree. It had twenty-one main boughs, representing the known hubs, each with dozens if not hundreds of branches. The ‘floater’ universes were depicted as stray leaves. The roots of the Cosmic Tree reached down into the Darkness Below (which Iris knew was not the same as the Darkness Between Dimensions, but still wished they had more distinct names) where they were attacked by the imprisoned Scarlet King. The tree was simultaneously threatened by Yaldabaoth from the Heavens, though He was contained in Mekhane’s silver web.

Iris knew such a map was neither literal nor accurate, but it was a charming piece of esoterica nonetheless.

“Let’s see. **The Realm of the Unclean** has His Holy Tears and some advanced technology…but it also has the Unclean. Maybe we’ll work our way up to that one. There is that **Antarctic Empire**…but the Foundation does have a fairly strong presence there. No, to make the best use of the Kaleidoscope we should go to a World we could never get to otherwise. Ah! Kul-Manas!”

“Kul-Manas?”

“Yes, it’s a charming little city-state in a delightful floater universe. Populated mostly by mystic bird people. I’ve met one of them on my sojourns to the **Court of Alagadda**. He seemed to be a man of some standing among his people. I’ll pen him a letter, see if maybe his World would be interested in establishing trade relations."

"What would they have to trade?"

"The Feathered Folk collect knowledge and technology from across all the worlds and cobble it together in a way that is uniquely their own. Their magic and technology are not only advanced but exotic. I know of nothing better for generating short-term profit than novelty. You may head back to London now if you wish. I’ll see to this, but do not forget to check your letterbox. I don’t want another incident like the one with the Eidolonic Collective.”

“I was as embarrassed about that as you were, Grandsire,” Iris said, resisting the urge to roll her eyes. “Anything I should do to prepare for the assignment?”

Darke clapped twice, and his diminutive servant appeared and presented a book to Iris while relieving her of her mug. The book's title was *Otherworld Laws and Universal Constants*.

“That should prove a sufficient primer for now. If I think of anything else I will send it to you.”

Iris nodded, already starting to read the book as she showed herself out.

Darke glided back to his study and grabbed a quill and parchment. Before he started writing, a small *objet d'art* that he had paid no attention to in years suddenly caught his eye.

It was a marionette, a souvenir from when he had attended the grand opening of Herman Fuller's Marvellously Macabre Mechanical Marionette Matinee. Fuller always did put on one hell of a show.

Darke knew what had become of Fuller, what his own Circus had done to him. He had foreseen it long ago. Still, the fact that it had only recently transpired did give it a bit of a sting. For a moment, Darke wondered if he should do something. He wondered if he should free Herman from his living hell, help him to retake the Circus, and exact revenge on those who had betrayed him.

Then he considered the cost.

Pushing the marionette out of sight, he set to work on his letter to Kul-Manas.

« **There Are No Strings On Me** | **Dread & Circuses Hub** | **A Scip Or A Star?** »

A Scip Or A Star?

« So They Called Him Darke | Dread & Circuses Hub | Dark And Disquieting »

Tears streaming down her face, and her heart throbbing in her ears, Lexi raced down the darkened allies, pushing her body as hard as she could. She had no goal other than escape, and her flight had taken her into a decaying and dangerous part of the city. It wasn't safe here, she knew that, but there was at least a chance she could be safe from *them*.

She pushed on the door to an old, abandoned office building. To her relief, no one cared enough about the eyesore to lock it up. Closing and barricading every door behind her, she climbed to the top floor and shut herself into what might have been a conference room half a century ago.

Exhausted, she plopped to the floor. Hugging her knees to her chest, she wept at the hopelessness of her situation. Her pursuers would have drones, thermal vision, all the best toys. They didn't believe in giving their prey a sporting chance. She couldn't hide here forever. Hell, she probably couldn't even hide for the rest of the night.

Come sunup, she'd be in their custody. They'd lock her up, experiment on her, torture her, kill her, maybe use her as a weapon, she wasn't sure. All she knew was that she would never see anyone she cared about again, never live the life she wanted, never again be free.

All because she was an anomaly.

"It's not fair. It's not fair," she sobbed bitterly to herself.

"I know exactly how you feel."

Lexi screamed at the sound of the stranger's voice. She kicked herself into a corner for defence, her eyes rapidly scanning the room for the intruder. She saw that the voice belonged to a large man, standing aloofly inside one of the bay windows.

Like Peter Pan.

"It's alright kid, I'm not going to hurt you," he said, gently stepping down to the floor. His clothes were oddly old-fashioned, like something from the turn of the twentieth century, not something any of her pursuers were likely to wear.

Also, his face was upside-down. That was probably important too.

"Who are you?" Lexi asked between panicked breaths.

"Call me Manny," the Man with the Upside-Down Face replied with a slight tip of his hat. His cordial demeanor calmed Lexi down just enough for her to realize that it was anatomically impossible for someone to survive with an upside-down face.

"You're…you're anomalous?" she asked.

"Now why would such a nice young girl use so joyless and clinical a term when there are a plethora of far more colourful descriptors for a Freak such as myself?" Manny asked.

"That's what we're called, isn't it? That's what I read online anyway. That's how they found me, I think. I googled the wrong words one time too many and I got flagged. I was stupid, thinking incognito mode would protect me from anything! They've been spying on me for days, at least. They were waiting until I was home alone to take me, but I climbed out my window into a tree and into the neighbour's yard then ran like hell. I don't know if I lost them or not, but even if I did they'll just find me again."

"Not if you're somewhere that can't be found," the Man with the Upside-Down Face said with a frown smile. Lexi looked up at him, trying to temper her hope with skepticism.

"What are you even doing here?"

“Scouting for talent, which does tend to take me to some odd places. You know about the Serpent’s Hand, right?”

“Some of the people I spoke with online said they were Serpent’s Hand,” she nodded.

“Well, I have some contacts in the Serpent’s Hand who watch the watchers. They let me know when some poor Freak is about to be snatched away from their home and family and locked away for the rest of their lives for having sparkly eyes. If I can, I get to them first, and I offer them something better.”

“What?”

“Ever heard of Herman Fuller’s Circus of the Disquieting?

“A circus!” Lexi scoffed. “How is that any better? How is being a sideshow freak any better than being in Area 51?”

“For starters, I’m not going to force you to come, or force you to stay. You’ll be free. The Circus is a sanctuary, run for Freaks by Freaks. Sure, your sleeping compartment will be smaller than one of their containment cells, but we’re not going to lock you in there. When you’re not performing or training you can do as you please. No testing, no termination, no fighting someone else’s war. You’ll be free, you’ll be safe, and if you give it a shot you might even be happy.”

“How can a circus possibly be safe, especially from them? What’s stopping them from finding you?”

“All our shows are one day only. No one sees us arrive, and no one sees us leave. The bedazzling lights shield us from unfriendly eyes while drawing in eager customers by the thousands! Music and spun sugar fogs their minds so that any wonders they behold seem nought more than a dream or illusion. If any of the powers that be do get a whiff of us and try to shut us down, I always know, and we vanish before they can even reach the ticket booth. I’ve been doing this for a long time Lexi, longer than they’ve been around even. No one’s caught old Manny yet.”

She squinted up at him discerningly, trying to decide if there was any truth to what he was
saying.

“If I did join this Circus, I’d be a performer? I’d be an anomalous act?”

“There’s that word again. You know why they call us anomalous? Because they don’t want us to think we’re special. They give you a number, call you ‘it’, and describe your magical, miraculous endowments as if they were taking your blood pressure. And they take special care never to call our gifts ‘powers’ lest we start thinking of ourselves as superheroes.
“So tell me Lexi, what’s your power?”

With a hesitant sigh, Lexi reached into her coat pocket and pulled out an hourglass. Holding it upright in her left palm, she pointed at it with her right index finger. The sand shot up from the bottom half to the top and started swirling around. It coalesced into the form of a ballerina, twirling in a pirouette until she let it fall inert.

“I’m a sand bender. Not even an earth bender, a sand bender. I can’t move whole rocks, just grains, I don’t know why. Maybe fluidity. And it’s harmless! They want to lock me up forever because I can control sand with my mind. Fricking sand! *‘Coarse, irritating, gets everywhere’*, sure, but the worst I could do is throw it in somebody’s eyes! It’s horseshit! Absolute, fucking horseshit!”

Lexi buried her face in her palms and screamed, trying her best to choke back her sobs. When she looked back up at the Man with the Upside-Down Face, he saw he was smiling at her.

“That’s an X-man power if I ever saw one. The Essie P wouldn’t like you one bit. How much sand can you move?”

“Once, when I was at my aunt’s cottage on Lake Michigan, I sneaked out at night when no one was around to see how much sand I could bend. I made a pillar about 16 feet tall, a few feet wide, shaped it into a totem pole. If I wasn’t scared to death of someone seeing me, I could probably do more.”

“Tell me if you like this for an act: We’ll call you Sandstorm, perfect name for an X-man! We’ll set you up with piles of fluorescent sand, all different colours, and deck you out in fluorescent make-up and body paint. To music, under a strobing black light, you bend the sand into living sculptures, dancing and playing and sparing around the ring!”

“…I wouldn’t be in just body paint, right?”

“The Big Top show’s family friendly, your outfit will be PG-13 at the most.”

“You actually do make it sound kind of fantastic. If I could put on a show like that, I’d be…”

“You’d be a star! Freaks don’t belong locked up in tiny little rooms in giant secret facilities, hidden away so as not to upset all the decent folk’s fragile sensibilities. We belong on stage, making people laugh and scream and puke! At our Circus, people will admire your gifts, not fear them. The audience will be amazed and astounded by your performance, and you’d be surrounded by hundreds of people in the same boat as you, who know what it’s like to be a Freak. The Circus is a family, and family sticks together.”

“What about my real family? My friends? I’ll never see them again.”

“That’s hard to say for sure. Essie won’t keep spying on your folks forever; not an efficient expenditure of resources. Once they’ve lost interest you might be able to pop in back home every now and then. We’d even let you send them letters; old-fashioned, hand-written, untraceable letters. They’ll know you’re alive, and safe, and free, which is a hell of a lot better than being duped into thinking you’re dead or getting pumped so full of amnestics they forget you ever existed.”

Lexi gave him a resigned nod.

“If I do join your circus, I’ll be taken care of? I’m not going to be starved or passed around like a piece of meat?”

“I’ve never tolerated any physical or sexual abuse against my

Freaks," he assured her. "The cookhouse serves three meals a day and you're free to help yourself, plus you'll start off at a thousand Fuller Fun-bucks a month."

"…Fuller Fun-bucks?"

"We're off the grid. Scrip's the best we can do," he replied matter-of-factly. Both their heads shot up at the sound of a car pulling up outside. "Well Lexi, if we stay here any longer we're going to run into a Mobile Task Force. You can let them drag you off kicking and screaming and become a scip, or you can come with me, and become a star! What's it going to be?"

Lexi knew she had no reason to trust this strange man, but ironically it was the fact that he was so strange that made her want to trust him. He was an anomaly, like her, the first other anomalous person she had ever met in real life. She knew he could be lying, but she also knew she had no hope of evading her pursuers on her own. The offer of sanctuary was not one she could ignore.

"It's for Freaks, by Freaks? You promise?"

"By the scattered parts of the Broken God, I swear it," he nodded. Sighing reluctantly, she rose to her feet.

"Deal," she said, shaking his hand. "But they're already outside! How do we even get to your Circus?"

Manny smiled, walked over to the door she had come through. When he opened it, the hallway was gone, replaced by bright white lights and smoke, as well as the faint sound of calliope music. Lexi slowly walked over to the anomalous door, staring at it dumbly at first, but then with childlike wonder. For the first time that night she felt genuine joy, and her mouth broke into a wide grin.

"How?" she murmured.

"Magic," was his reply. "After you."

She nodded, and realized she was no longer afraid but excited. Out of all the horrible fates that could have befallen a Freak like her, working for a magical Circus wasn't half-bad.

Once she was through the Door, Manny pulled out a walkie-talkie from his pocket.

"The girl's on board, thanks for your help **`Masky`**," he said quietly to it.

"Thank god. I don't know what the Foundation does to Freaks it finds impersonating its agents, but I bet it ain't good," Mr. Mask radioed back.

"That's why it's best for all involved that we both forget this ever happened."

"I'm with you there. But, just so that there's no confusion, Icky doesn't know you're kidnapping kids again, does she?"

"I didn't kidnap her, I just helped her realize that she isn't safe on her own and that she's better off with us."

"Whatever you got to tell yourself, man. I just can't help but notice you never 'rescue' any Freaks who aren't likely to draw in the crowds. See ya in the Library."

"Yeah, see you then." Manny released the talk button and discretely stashed the walkie-talkie away in his pocket. With a penitent sigh, he followed his latest recruit back to the Circus.

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Dark and Disquieting

« **A Scip Or A Star?** | **Dread & Circuses Hub** | **City of Wonder™** »

“And last but certainly not least on your VIP tour is the Kaleidoscope!” Lolly announced as she led Victor and Iris into the final tent. “Designed by Herman Fuller himself sometime in the late 19th century, handcrafted from Ravelwoods’ lumber and beryllium-bronze clockwork salvaged from the ruins of a Colossus slain during the First Occult War -”

“You mean Fuller didn’t kill it himself, with a butter knife and one hand tied behind his back?” Iris asked dryly, having had well past her fill of the Circus’s penchant for hyperbole.

“Please hold all questions until the end of the presentation,” Lolly replied with an uncharacteristic tinge of irritation. She cleared her throat and looked back down at her cue card. “As I was saying, the Kaleidoscope has been an essential fixture of The Circus of the Disquieting since our inception. The wood is both magic and immortal, and so produces EVE, which is amplified into aspect radiation, which is then channelled into clockwork casting circles of near-infinite configurability, allowing us to open Ways to any unprotected door we choose and even apportate the whole Circus if we have too. I love the word apportate; it makes me think of Harry Potter.
“And that concludes our tour. Questions?”

“Can we go through it now?” Iris asked impatiently.

“Oh no, we have to wait for Icky. I’m not supposed to dial the Kaleidoscope by myself,” Lolly replied. “There…may have been an incident or two.”

“Well, the Wandsman is expecting us. Would you please find The

Ringmaster and tell her we're ready to depart."

"No worries. I'm here, I'm here," Icky said as she ran into the tent. "Sorry, I was planning on being here first but Eugene, one of our Clowns, something triggered his PTSD and long story short if those kids weren't scared of Clowns before they are now. Victor, great to see you again, and…Iris, we've met before, right? I've lost count of how many private shows we've done for Emcee D but you were there for at least one of them, weren't you?"

"I've seen you before, yes, though I don't believe we were ever formally introduced," Iris said, extending her right hand out in greeting. Instead of shaking it, Icky took off her top hat, bowed, and kissed Iris's hand.

"Mmm. You are a marked improvement over Darke's last proxy," Icky told her. "I'm loving the turtleneck by the way; you're really rocking the sexy little nerd look."

"Let go of my hand," Iris ordered through her teeth. With a reluctant groan, Icky obliged. Victor handed Iris a wet-one for her to wipe the Clown saliva off her hand.

"I'm sorry about that. Icky can be a bit 'presidential' sometimes," Lolly apologized.

"I'm just being friendly, darling. She's practically family after all. Iris, did Darke ever tell you he thought the Fuller might have been a descendant of his?"

"He…may have mentioned it, yes," she replied as she handed Victor the used wet wipe. She sniffed her hand and muttered that it still smelt strangely sweet.

"Really? I don't see the resemblance," Lolly remarked.

"Oh, I've noticed a few similarities between Fuller and the Darks over the years," Icky said. "But I'm sure Iris doesn't want to hear about that. Lolly gave you a tour, right? She loves giving tours. See anything that tickled your fancy?"

"She spent twenty minutes looking at Gary's phonebox of all things,"

Lolly replied. “She asked him all sorts of questions about it, and took some pictures with this half smartphone, half tricorder thing.”

“I found it **`interesting`**,” Iris shrugged.

“Percy mentioned you were a whiz with paratech in his letter,” Icky said. “Seems to run in the family. I hope he’s been telling you equally flattering things about us.”

“Don’t call him Percy. I don’t even call him that,” Iris objected. “But you’ll be pleased to know he does retain a fondness for your little travelling show. He told me to give his regards to the Man with the Upside-Down Face, but oddly enough I couldn’t see him anywhere.”

The two Clowns’ faces went sour at her tone.

“Manny’s off-site today, scouting for talent,” Icky said briskly.

“How unfortunate,” Iris said, unable to suppress a smug little smile. “Hopefully we get a chance to meet soon. Grandsire was quite eager to see how he and I got along.”

“I’ll bet,” Icky murmured. “Well, I’m sorry to have kept you waiting. Just give me a minute to spin up the Kaleidoscope and you’ll be on your way.”

As Icky dialled in the coordinates for Kul-Manas, Lolly was literally jumping up in down with excitement.

“This is so amazing. We’re going to meet bird people!”

“Please try to conduct yourself with some restraint. It would be unwise to offend our hosts -”

“You mean ruffle their feathers?”

“…Yes. I don’t know this for a fact, but I doubt they’ll appreciate bird puns.”

“You mean they’d find them *unpheasant*?”

“Oh, this is going to work out great,” Iris sighed. One of the Doors to

the Kaleidoscope opened before them, revealing its smoky white portal. “Victor, you have the merchandise, correct?”

“Yes Ms. Dark,” Victor nodded, holding up his carrying case.

“Good. Do not set it down until we’ve received payment.”

“There you are, a one-way Way to the city of Kul-Manas,” Icky announced. “Lolly, sweetie, I’m still a little gun-shy after what happened at the Bazaar, so be extra careful. I want you to come back home at the first sign of trouble. If you lose your keys make for the Library -”

“When do I ever lose my keys?”

“You don’t, I know, I just…”

“I’ll be fine. I know how to take care of myself. I promise I’ll be back as soon as we’re done.” Lollipop leaned in and kissed Icky goodbye. “Love you Icky.”

“I love you too Little Lollipop,” Icky smiled. “Dark, I’m holding you responsible if anything happens to her.”

“Good luck with that,” Iris replied flippantly. “Victor, Lolly, stay behind me at all times and do not speak unless spoken too.”

“Yeah, good luck with *that*!” Lolly snorted. Rolling her eyes, Iris marched through the Door with her two escorts.

The Door the Wanderers emerged from was but one of countless others, built into the bark of a colossal tree that stretched hundreds of meters across and up into the sky seemingly without end. Before them was the city of Kul-Manas, comprised of wicker buildings that superficially resembled enormous and ostentatious bird’s nests. The sky was a deep violet, and instead of a sun or moon, it was lit by many shining silver orbs which the Wanderer’s initially mistook as stars until they saw they were gently falling below the horizon like snowflakes.

Standing before them was a humanoid crow or raven, all jet black

and covered in feathers. He was clad in a hooded cloak of crimson and gold and held a great bronze staff in his scaly, clawed talons.

“Most auspicious greetings, fellow Wanderers,” he said with a bow. “I am Ickis the Wayward, Wandsman of Kul-Manas; Sailor of the Celestial Sea, Walker of the Astral Plane, Spelunker of the Dimensional -”

“Oh my god you’re a bird person!” Lolly screamed, jumping in front of him. “I’m Lolly! Can you fly? Is your poop all white and runny? Do you celebrate your birthday when your egg was laid or when it hatched?”

The Wandsman stared at her in stunned silenced for a moment.

“No I cannot fly, that's not your concern, and both events are marked as sacred occasions. Laying an egg is considered an accomplishment of the mother, while hatching is the accomplishment of the hatchling,” he replied.

“That’s so fascinating, plus you basically get double birthdays, though the first one kind of sounds more like Mother’s day. Oh, do your people hate cats, because I love puss -”

“Lolly, behind me now!” Iris ordered. “Your Waywardness, I apologize for the impertinence of my associate.”

“It is quite all right. She is not the first Bozomorph to cross my path. Her people are well known for their exuberance.”

“I’d say that’s racist, but everything I’ve said to you was racist so I guess we’re cool,” Lolly said.

Iris shot her an ominous glance, demanding her silence.

“Great Wandsman, I have come to you on behalf of the Deathless Merchant of London so that we might exchange our equally priceless wares for our mutual benefit.”

“On his behalf?” the Wandsman asked with a curious tilt of his head. “I can see your True Name in your aura. You are Dark.”

“I am Iris Dark; proxy, apprentice, descendant and heir of Percival Darke.”

“But Dark is his True Name, a True Name bound to him and him alone through unspeakable black magic, anchoring his essence to the Mortal Plane and affording him untold occult powers. How could there be another with the True Name Dark?”

“He spells it with an ‘e’. I don’t,” she replied nonchalantly. The Wandsman squinted at her, seemingly unconvinced.

“I am…pleased to learn that there is another such as Darke,” he said, though the cawing sound he made sounded like it was a sign of distress. “And who is this mere mortal so brave or so foolish to enter the City of Kul-Manas?”

“Victor Chan, pleased to make your acquaintance,” Victor said, shaking his hand. “I’m just here to carry stuff and fill out the paperwork.”

“Now that we are formally introduced, may we please to be shown to the Guildhall of Gorok?” Iris asked.

“Of course. I am happy and eager to serve as your guide during your visit. Please, follow me,” the Wandsman bowed, extending his hand towards a rickshaw. The driver, a shorter being with the head of a sparrow, opened the door and gestured for them to board. Once they were inside, the Sparrow lifted the rickshaw up by its hand-grips and hauled it through the twisting and winding streets of the ancient city.

A city peopled by anthropomorphic birds was a curious sight, even to Lolly who had travelled extensively across worlds. Most of the common folk they saw bustling about were songbirds; sparrows, finches, warblers and the like, but there was the occasional more exotic avian. They spied a sensuous swan, a flamboyant flamingo, and even a preening peacock all proudly displaying their plumage as they strutted down the street. The lack of any obvious self-segregating among the many different species suggested that they viewed each other as a single kin. The sighting of a meadowlark and an oriole courting each other prompted the question of interspecies

breeding, but that hardly seemed like an appropriate subject of conversation.

“So how do your people have se -”

“Hey, where exactly is Kul-Manas anyway?” Victor asked, cutting Lolly off.

“As with all such Nexuses, we are everywhere and nowhere,” the Wandsman replied. “We are outside the continuum of time and space, and thus untethered by its laws. Wanderers from opposite ends of Creation could travel here with a single stride."

"That enormous tree we came out of was quite extraordinary. What is it?" Iris asked.

"It it nothing less than the World Tree itself," the Wandsman answered. "It was made incarnate here long ago by the spellcraft of our ancestors, and we have benefited greatly from its presence. Around its trunk we made our city, crafting our homes from the detritus it let fall. We drank its sacred sap and were granted both clairvoyance and gnosis. We carved Janus Doors into its bark, and with only the most basic of tools and methodologies we set out to explore the multiverse, just as the Pacific peoples of your world once sailed the vast ocean with only Stone Age technology."

“Wow, you’re a much better tour guide than I am. I need cue cards to stop from going off on tangents,” Lolly said. “Anyway, do your guys have penises, and if they do are they like those crazy corkscrew duck penises or do -”

Lolly was quickly muffled by Iris’s cold, metallic left hand covering her mouth.

“Lolly, that is not an appropriate question. When I take my hand away you are going to apologize to the Wandsman for your vulgarity. Is that understood?” she asked. Lolly nodded, and Iris lowered her hand.

“Oh my god you have a robot hand!” Lolly squeed, examining it with glee. Iris squinted her eyes at her incredulously.

“Did you seriously just now notice that?”

“Uh-huh. My attention is kind of all over the place most of the time.”

“So I’ve observed.”

“It is an interesting prosthetic, if I may say so,” the Wandsman chirped. “Where did you acquire it?”

“It’s custom made,” she replied, her expression making it clear she wasn’t taking any follow-up questions.

The Wandsman cleared his throat and awkwardly ruffled his feathers.

“Ah, we’re here: The Great Gilded Guildhall of Gorok, headquarters of the Merchant’s Guild of Kul-Manas,” he said as they rolled in front a squat spire, woven from branches that had been gilded in 24 carat gold leaf. Strange runes (that could both insultingly and accurately be described as chicken scratch) encircled the structure, and by the entrance was a marble fountain depicting a humanoid seagull regurgitating food into the mouths of its chicks, which was presumably meant to be symbolic of prosperity…or something.

There was a gentle thud as the driver set the rickshaw down and hurried around to open the door for them.

“Guildmaster Vixis and his council patiently await your arrival, Ms. Dark.”

“Kindly lead the way,” Iris said. “Victor, by my side. Lolly, behind me and quiet. I mean it.”

Lolly nodded and mimed zipping her mouth shut and tossing away the key, unaware that a passerby passerine would later recover the imaginary item and use it to unlock a Way leading to a plane comprised solely of thought-forms.

The Wandsman led the way into the hall, followed by Iris, Victor and Lolly. The interior of the hall was also gilded, as well as being decorated with velvet rugs, jade statues and enormous portraits. Lighting came from the same smokeless spectral flames the

Percival Darke used in his sanctum.

The Guildmaster and his council sat on a dais that elevated them a full fathom off the ground and forced whoever was before them into the submissive position of staring up at them. The Guildmaster himself looked to be a kingfisher of some kind, with the other councillors consisting of an ibis, a blue heron, a white crane, a cassowary, a barn owl, and a kiwi.

“Ickis, you honour us with your presence yet again,” the Guildmaster declared, his deep voice resonating throughout the hall. “And once again you delight us by bringing more Wanderers with you to trade. The Deathless Merchant of London said his proxy was one who bore his name, and yet even now I hesitate to believe my own eyes. Nonetheless, we are happy to receive you, Dark, as well as your guests. I’d introduce the council but if you are anything like your namesake I assume you wish to get straight to business.”

“You would be correct Guildmaster,” Iris nodded. She snapped at Victor to open the carrying case and take out her merchandise. “As discussed in your correspondence with Esquire Darke, I present to you three-dimensional wards, designed by both Esquire Darke and myself. Using common holography, we have created talismans inscribed with wards drawn in three dimensions, allowing them to be six times more complex than traditional wards without taking up any additional space. There are seven talismans, one for each of you, and each talisman contains two wards, one on each side.”

Victor stepped up to the dais and handed a talisman to each councillor so that they could inspect them.

“If you are satisfied with the quality of those samples, we are willing to sell you more at a price 1 kg of Morgana Silver per talisman. Those fourteen wards are the only ones designed at the moment, however we are willing to take custom orders for double the price. All payment must be upfront, no refunds, and before we go any further I will require proof that you actually possess Morgana Silver so that I know you’re not wasting my time.”

The ibis nodded and tossed her a coin purse. She poured the contents into her hands, revealing bright silver coins depicting a fairy

queen on one side and a seven-pointed star encircled by runes on the other.

“What are those?” Lolly asked, before quickly re-zipping her mouth and pocketing the key (much to the council’s disappointment).

“It’s yttrium silver from the Fey city of **Fata Morgana**,” Iris replied. She squeezed them in her right palm and smiled as she felt the EVE flow through them. “For all intents and purposes, it’s mithril. It’s thaumically conductive, and if we can get a steady supply of it we can use it in all kinds of paratech.
“Gentlemen and/or Ladies, I am satisfied with the quality of your product as I hope you are satisfied with mine. Shall we discuss bulk discounts?”

The Guildmaster chuckled cruelly, and would have sneered if he had lips.

“I have a better idea,” he snapped his talons and metal grates clamped down on every exit.

“Vixis, what in the name of Xitheus are you doing?” the Wandsman demanded, the rest of the council squawking in agreement.

“I’m stopping us from being robbed blind is what I’m doing,” the Guildmaster replied. “I was none too pleased when I received a letter from the Deathless Merchant of London, making us an offer we couldn’t refuse. A kilo of the most valuable thaumic alloy in the known worlds in exchange for these cracker jack toys!”

He threw his talisman straight at Iris, only for her to catch it effortlessly.

“I found the Merchant’s tone to be less than respectful, how he took it for granted that I would not dare to refuse his offer. Well, I dare. In fact, I’ve decided it’s time to let the Merchant know exactly where we stand. Darke may be top chicken in his backwater reality, but he has no power over us! We are the Ascendant Avians of Kul-Manas! The blood of Dinosaurs flows through our veins. Dinosaurs I tell you! The Merchant was a fool to send you Dark, and you were a fool to come. A partner of the most powerful anomalous firm on your Earth, their

chief paratechnologist, and Darke's own blood no less? To say you were worth a King's ransom would be a monstrous understatement. "The Clown and the salesman are free to go, just be sure you deliver my message to Darke; Kul-Manas is an unassailable fortress, he cannot touch us here! If he ever wants this little tinkerer of his back I will accept nothing less than majority control of his fancy little flea market. Until then Dark, you will have the privilege of being my prisoner."

The Guildmaster glared down mockingly at her, expecting the young woman to be trembling in fear.

Instead, she just looked annoyed.

"Alright then. I wasn't planning on adding 'killed a giant kookaburra' to my CV, but why the hell not?" she asked rhetorically.

Taking a deep breath and sharpening her will, she focused the Mekhane part of her being into her metal hand while channelling the Yaldabaoth portions into her flesh hand. She raised each hand up and then dragged them downwards, producing two twin serpents as she did so; one of quicksilver ichor, the other of jaundiced miasma. The two Dragons immediately attacked each other, twisting around one another in a double helix, each consuming the other's tail in a type of Ouroboros. Each Serpent feeding off the other, the Ouroboros grew in size and rose to the ceiling of the Guildhall, creating a vortex that pinned the council to the floor, unable to escape as it slowly descended towards them.

The Wandsman squawked in horror and leapt to the dais. He held up his great staff and began shouting incantations at the abomination. It held it back, but only just, and it was still growing stronger.

"Well, we got some Morgana Silver, so this wasn't a complete bust," Iris said as she casually pocketed the coin purse. "If we're lucky we could figure out how to transmute it from other metals. Lolly, would you be so kind as to open a Door back to your Circus please?"

Lolly didn't respond immediately, being transfixed by the sight of a bird wizard battling self-cannibalizing ethereal snakes.

“Iris, you can’t kill them,” she objected vehemently.

“I beg your pardon? I’m in charge here, *little lollipop*, and I don’t much care for someone trying to take me hostage. Now make a Door out of here before those two Dragons get so big they devour the whole guildhall.”

Lolly furrowed her brow resolutely and leapt up onto the dais.

“Lolly! What the hell are you doing?”

She grabbed hold of the Wandsman staff and channelled her own magic into it, strengthening his counterspell and pushing the Serpents back ever so slightly.

“Lolly get down here this instant!”

“Undo this!”

“I will leave you to die if you do not immediately come back here!”

“If I die, Icky will never let you use the Kaleidoscope again!”

Iris's face contorted in rage. Knowing Lolly was right, she climbed up onto the dais and snatched the staff away from them. Pointing it at her creation, she screamed something in the Chaos Tongue. Two bolts of lightning, one silver and one yellow, shot forth from the staff and struck the opposite coloured Dragon, reducing each of them to mist in a spectacular but ultimately harmless explosion.

“Thank you,” the Wandsman whispered to Lolly. Iris pulled Lolly off the ground and slammed her up against the wall.

“Never again, do you hear me? You are a goddamn circus act! You do not command me, you do not undermine me, you do not disobey me! You pull a stunt like this again I swear I will conjure a beast that will make that Ouroboros look like a garden snake, do you understand me?”

A short chuckle escaped from Lolly’s lips.

“You know, I see it now.”

“See what?”

“The resemblance to Fuller.”

After having managed to recover, five of the councillors rose to their feet and gathered around the Guildmaster, who was still cowering on the floor.

“Guildmaster Vixis, not only have you once again acted unilaterally and broken our laws by threatening a foreign emissary, but you endangered this council and possibly all of Kul-Manas by committing an act of war against no one less than the Deathless Merchant of London!” the barn owl screeched at him, the outrage in her voice barely contained. “For these unforgivable crimes, the council condemns you to death.”

The other four councillors savagely and repeatedly impaled the Guildmaster with their long beaks, tearing off flesh and organs as he screamed for mercy.

Lolly covered her eyes and turned away, while Iris just curiously arched an eyebrow.

“No trial or due process? Efficient,” she commented. The ibis councillor approached her, his head bowed in humility.

“Dark, I beg you to believe me when I tell you that none of us knew what Vixis was planning,” he said, his voice heavy with fear and contrition. “If you could bring yourself to overlook his treachery, Kul-Manas will gladly still do business with you. As a show of good faith, we will purchase your entire current stock of three-dimensional wards and happily pay double, triple -”

“Tenfold, plus some of that sacred sap I heard mentioned earlier,” she replied.

“Yes, yes of course. Anything.”

“Well that’s good, isn’t it Iris?” Lolly asked hopefully. “It’s a heck of a lot better than one little coin purse. You’re not still mad at me, are you?”

“She threw herself in mortal danger against my direct orders, threatening to strand us in a hostile city and permanently ruin relations between our two businesses while ordering me to stop my own Ouroboros spell!”

In the Ringmaster’s tent, Lolly once again sat on Icky’s lap while they sat across from a partner of Marshall, Carter & Dark lividly accusing them of gross misconduct.

“And before that, she was asking the Wandsman about his penis and his feces and how his people reproduce!”

“The Wandsman liked me! He said I could come back anytime and learn all about Kul-Manas!” Lolly countered, sticking her tongue out at her. Icky gently pulled her back and calmly addressed Iris.

“Dark, I understand that Lolly’s behavior may have been less than professional, but given that you attempted to murder an entire council of people -”

“Bird people,” Iris interjected.

“Racist!”

“I hardly think you have any right to accuse her of improper conduct,” Icky said. “You got your business deal, nobody innocent got hurt, can’t we agree to just let this go?”

“Listen, her crass behavior jeopardized the success of this deal from the minute we stepped through the Door, and she actively subverted my authority by forcing me to destroy the Ouroboros,” Iris replied. “That is unacceptable and it cannot happen on future expeditions. I am going to have to insist that she be disciplined for this.”

“Oh, you can watch Icky spank me if you want. That’s always fun.”

Icky snickered, but gestured for her to remain silent.

“Iris, I understand and I agree. I’ll be sure to write her up for this.”

“You’ll write her up?”

“Yes, that’s what I said.”

“I…I guess that will do. I can’t deal with any more bullocks today. Come on Victor, let’s get back to London.”

With only a polite wave goodbye from Victor, he and Dark left the Ringmaster’s tent. Once they were gone, Icky reached into her desk and pulled out a document which, unbeknownst to her, was not dissimilar to a document kept by the SCP Foundation.

The Things Lollipop Is Not Allowed To Do At The Circus Of The Disquieting

Please note: This list is not a joke. Each entry is something Lollipop either did, attempted to do, or at the very least expressed an interest in doing.

1. Attempt to break her record of drinking 5 7 8 pints of Clown's Milk in one sitting.
2. Attempt to break her record of *producing* 3 1/2 5 1/2 6 1/2 pints of Clown's Milk in one sitting.
3. Call a Circus wide emergency conference to decide whether Quincy's butterflies pollinating Yume's flowers counts as sex.
4. Debate customers on the validity of the Fifthist Church's teachings.
5. Stretch Meaty the Meat Worm into a Mobius strip.
6. Attempt to guess Manny's actual name.
7. Change the gravity in the bounce house from 'Moon' to 'Sun'.
8. Order any Wondertainment product that is living, explosive, radioactive, poisonous, autonomous, expensive or requires adult supervision without Icky's permission.
9. Create anatomically correct, animate balloon animals. (not even for educational purposes)
10. Challenge Motormouth to a pie eating contest.
11. Crawl inside Motormouth's stomach while he's sleeping in order to retrieve said pies.
12. Ask the Amazing Zoltan if he knows why kids love the great

taste of Cinnamon Toast Crunch, how many licks to the center of a Tootsie Pop, etc.
13. Consult the Amazing Zoltan on anything other than Alchemy.
14. Cite the Scarlet King mythos as a 'patriarchal yet functional' example of polyamory.
15. Attempt to harvest silk from Library Pages.
16. Attempt to hack the Essie P database to change every 'good freak's' special containment procedures to "set them free you assholes".
17. Claim she is the first openly LGBT individual to literally ride a rainbow. (It's part of the midway. I've ridden it, and I'm sure lots of other LGBT+s have too)
18. Incorporate Miles the Bonecat into her Pussy Lovers routine. (the boner pun was hilarious though)
19. Re-purpose Dicksy's old reprogenetic equipment into a DIY bio-lab. (It doesn't matter how easy Professor Abnormal made it look, self-replicating cotton candy is a disaster waiting to happen)
20. Arrange play-dates for Ragamuffin with other possessed dolls.
21. Ask Ed & Al if they stock Tartarean Brimstone. (I do not want Ragamuffin summoning play-dates for herself either)
22. Place Eliza inside of a custom made hamster ball.
23. Ask any of our Sur-prizers to create extropic bouncy balls. We're lucky that thing bounced off into space before it killed anyone.
24. Ask any of our Carnival Confectionarians to create extropic jumping jelly beans. Please see above.
25. Ride the Ferris Wheel on top of, outside of, or underneath the cars. (I know she's not in any danger, but it sets a bad example for the younger guests)
26. Use Cotton Candy and Calliope music recreationally during work hours.
27. Ride the go-carts while under the influence of the above.
28. Introduce wooden ponies from the Carousel to real ponies from the Petting Zoo. The experience is existentially horrifying for both of them.
29. Utter the phrase 'Circus Time Procedures' within earshot of Eugene.

30. Tell the children of guests that running away from home can turn out great.
31. Claim that her self-appointed position as the Circus's Princess entitles her to an adult-sized play castle. (In all fairness this turned out be a great attraction for the midway, but it still isn't hers)
32. Complain to The Masked Lords, The Ambassador, The Hanged King or that guy selling olive oil that Alagadda isn't colourful enough.
33. Attempt to weaponize Waldorf's old cannon as a defense against Essie P raids.
34. Ask the Shark Punching Center if they've ever fought a Sharknado.
35. Ride her unicyle at supersonic speeds.
36. Commission Anderson Robotics to create "Five Nights at Freddy's" knock off animatronics.
37. Attempt to spay and/or neuter any of the attractions in the Menagerie of Mayhem.
38. Claim that napping during work hours are 'business calls to the Oneiroi Collective'. (I don't care if she actually is talking with it, there's no reason she can't do it at night)
39. Make any sort of marking on an Inkling note.
40. Use the Kaleidoscope to harvest helium from Jupiter. (Yes, I know it's a dwindling resource. Let Elon Musk expose his ass to that much radiation to get it)
41. Ask any members of the Cogwork Orthodoxy how the constant ticking doesn't drive them insane.
42. Conduct 'sensitivity workshops'. (I know she meant well, but it ended up being far more offensive than the inciting incident)
43. Ask Gary to help her make crank calls to any reality's President Trump, President Clinton, President Sanders, President Ryan, President-for-life Obama, you know what, just revoke her use of Gary's phone box altogether.
44. Take Victor any VIP guest on a tour of the Funhouse without any accompanying children.
45. Order a second Obama Llama to see if they'll bite each other's testicles off.
46. Direct guests looking for the restrooms to the Milking tent.
47. Let Quincy anyone drive our Porsche!

48. Let any of Ripley's sea-monsters out of the Fun-house because 'they needed some fresh-air'.
49. Offer Clown's Milk to non-clowns she doesn't like as a covert attempt at assassination.
50. Secretly administer Antabuse any medication to Bubblegum anyone.
51. Tell Nixie that she is not allowed in her tank within an hour after eating.
52. Attempt to locate the City of Adytum on Google Maps.
53. Play 'Bloody Mary' with Pepper's mirror.
54. Hide all the Clown Impulse Suppressant because 'Clowns are supposed to be impulsive'.
55. Troll GAW chat rooms by claiming to be a gamer unironically opposed to marijuana.
56. Bring a 'dune worm' through the Kaleidoscope.
57. Ask Sandstorm to make a giant desert terrarium for said dune worm.
58. Call Iris Dark for tech support.
59. Call Percival Darke for tech support. (He doesn't have a phone, I don't know how she actually did this)
60. Upload nightcore remixes of Virtuoso's arias on Youtube.

Reaching over the standard blue pens that Manny used and grabbing her distinctive purple pen, she added a new entry.

61. Ask the Wandsman of Kul-Manas questions about his reproductive or digestive biology while on business calls with Iris Dark.

“Sorry Icky.”

“It’s alright darling. I forgive you.”

« **A Scip Or A Star?** | **Dread & Circuses Hub** | **City of Wonder™** »

City of Wonder™

« **Dark and Disquieting** | **Dread & Circuses Hub** | **The Sea Slug and the Showman** »

Icky and Lolly screamed in delight as the Frite Lite Roller Coaster zoomed along its twisted path through **`Wonder World!™`**. In addition to being the theme park city's biggest attractions, the roller coasters doubled as metro trains. While their looping and winding tracks may not have been the most efficient route, they made up for the extra distance in speed and smiles.

As much as Lolly loved the Circus, she also loved the chance to enjoy the much larger attractions that were possible at a fixed location. From the peak of the loop, she could see all of Wonder World!™. It was an unusually colourful city, full of pastel buildings with no sharp corners, most of them so oddly shaped they looked like funhouse mirror reflections of themselves. The sky was blue, the sun bright, and the music of songbirds and laughter of children pervaded the air. From the sights to the sounds to the people themselves, everything about the city was designed to project an aura of childlike innocence. Wonder World!™ was intended to be a place where dreams came true, where nothing bad ever happened.

Lolly may have been willing to believe that, but Icky couldn't help but wonder how many problems Wonder World!™ just covered up instead of dealing with to preserve its squeaky clean image.

As the roller coaster dove down towards the ground again, it began to decelerate.

"Next stop – Wonder Plaza!" an automated announcer proclaimed with the same mandatory enthusiasm it did for all stops. As soon as the roller coaster came to a halt, Lolly hopped out while pulling Icky behind her.

“So I think I’ve had enough rides for today, so we should probably do some shopping,” Lolly told her. “The Neverland Boutique has the largest selection of kid’s style clothes in adult sizes I’ve ever seen, plus all their outfits come in matching doll sizes -”

“Lolly.”

“I can probably get some props for my act at one of the toy stores, and I want to hit the candy stores because everything they sell here is delicious -”

“Lolly.”

“Then we can get dinner - how cool is it that fancy restaurants here serve dinosaur shaped nuggets? - catch a show - they’re supposed to put on an amazing Seussical - and then we can finish the day at the skating rink, or maybe a balloon ride, or maybe -”

“Lolly!”

“What?”

“Just slow down for a second. We're on a date, not running a marathon. Let’s just take a minute to ourselves, enjoy this,” Icky suggested. She pulled Lolly towards her and went in for a kiss. To her surprise, Lolly pulled back.

“Hey, remember we’re in Wonder World. We got to keep it family friendly.”

“Lesbians are family friendly now. There’s like a whole show on Cartoon Network about space lesbians. It’s awesome.”

“Icky.”

“What’s the point of going on a date if we can’t even kiss? Just kiss me and you’ll see no one cares. Trust me.”

Lolly gave a somewhat embarrassed smile and nodded her consent. Icky pulled her towards her and kissed her, only to be interrupted by the high pitch screech of a police whistle.

“Uh oh.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me.”

“That’s enough of that, you two, hands where I can see them,” the whistleblower said. He was dressed in a bright blue coat with polished brass buttons, shiny tin medals, and a reflective orange sash. On his head, he wore a comically tall Custodian's helmet with a plastic badge pinned to the front that read 'Wonder World Security Force™'.

“Is there a problem, off— I’m sorry, I was going to say ‘officer’ but you’re closer to a mall cop or something, aren’t you?”

“I’m a Hall Monitor, and you two are in direct violation of Wonder World’s public decency bylaws.”

“Is that so?” Icky asked in a low, cold voice.

“Icky, please stay calm,” Lolly urged her.

“I’m afraid it is. No individuals, be they residents or guests, may engage in kissing on the lips or the fondling of any swimsuit areas whilst in public view,” the Hall Monitor informed them.

“Swimsuit areas? That’s how the law is actually worded?” Icky asked. “You can’t even use grownup words in your legislation? Is your company charter written in crayon?”

“It is, actually. There’s an activity sheet on the back.”

“Icky, you heard what he said. It’s just a public display of affection thing. It’s not homophobic, it applies to everyone, so let’s not make a big deal out of this.”

“Hand over your hall passes and I’ll stamp them with frowny faces,” the Hall Monitor said. “Three frowny faces and your hall passes will be revoked.”

Icky couldn’t help but laugh at the absurdity of the situation.

“And what if we don’t? What then? Your nightstick is made out of

Nerf. How exactly do you plan to enforce any of this if we don't just politely cooperate?" she asked.

"Icky, think about this. I love coming here, and Wondertainment is one of our suppliers. This isn't worth it," Lolly insisted.

"Actually that's a good point. We're from the Circus of the Disquieting, which is a decent sized client of yours. Unless you want to risk losing our business, I'm going to have to insist that you waive this particular bylaw, just this once."

His face sternly resolute, the Hall Monitor unsheathed his nerf bat.

"I'm sorry miss, but the law is the law. Your hall pass, if you please."

Icky just rolled her eyes and turned to leave, grabbing Lolly by the hand. She stopped dead in her tracks when she felt the soft foam baton strike the back of her head.

"And there's another one where that came from if you don't -"

The Hall Monitor immediately fell silent when Icky spun around, her eyes burning with a fierce purple blaze. She telekinetically pulled the bat from his hand and transmuted it into a spiked medieval club of heavy iron.

"Did you seriously just hit me with this?" she demanded, her voice taking on a deep and terrifying timbre. The Hall Monitor stumbled backwards, tripping and falling, too paralyzed with fear to get back up. He stammered inanely but could produce no coherent response.

"Icky! You're making a scene!" Lolly yelled at her. Icky looked around the rest of the plaza and saw that most of the other people were now staring at them, most with looks of shock and horror. She shook her head, returning her appearance to normal, and then tossed the club to the ground. It landed with a heavy clunk, its spikes cracking the pristine pavement. Grabbing Lolly by the hand once more, the two of them ran out of public view as quickly as they were able.

Once they were gone, the Hall Monitor grabbed his Walkie Talkie off of his belt.

“We have a hostile *Bibbidi-Bobbidi-Boo* on the loose in Wonder Plaza. Subject appears to be a female Clown from the Circus of the Disquieting with long black hair, white and purple face paint. Subject is too dangerous for Hall Monitors to engage. Deploy Wondertron 9000. Repeat, Deploy Wondertron 9000!”

The two Clowns ran into the unexpectedly bright and immaculately clean back alleys of Wonder World!™ and paused to catch their breath.

“Icky, what was that about?”

“I know, I’m sorry, I overreacted, but he hit me!”

“Before that. Why couldn’t you just let him stamp our hall passes and be on our way?”

“Because I love you! I love you and I’m not going to obey any puritanical laws that say expressing that is indecent! Lolly, look, I know that when we’re in less tolerant places you don’t see what the big deal is about respecting local customs, but you’ve never been in the closet. You were with the Circus since before you even had an inkling of what you were, and you always knew you’d be loved and accepted.

It wasn’t like that for me. I was terrified of people, especially the people who were supposed to love me unconditionally, finding out I was gay. It sucks living like that which is why I left and why I refuse to live like that again. And it’s not just about me because not everyone has the option to leave a situation like that.

Think of everyone in this city who must be afraid to kiss the people they love. It doesn’t matter to me if it’s being done out of adherence to a bronze-age morality or because they want their whole city to be a kid-friendly fun-zone, it’s wrong!

I… I’m ranting. I ruined our date. I’m sorry.”

Icky hung her head despondently, only for Lolly to lean in and kiss her.

“Don’t be sorry. I never really thought about it before, what it would be like to have to live like that every day, but you’re right,” Lolly said. “I mean, I guess I didn’t want to think about it. I like it here because I thought that everyone else was like me, that they thought it was awesome to pretend to be an overgrown kid. But that’s actually the law here, these people don’t have a choice. Even I don’t want to act like a kid all the time. Icky, I love you a bazillion times more than this fascist tourist trap, and I’m sorry for not supporting you.”

“Well, maybe I should do like you do and take Clown Impulse Suppressant whenever we go anywhere,” Icky smirked. “We forgive each other then, Little Lollipop?”

Lolly smiled and nodded, and the pair exchanged a reconciliatory kiss.

“HALT RIGHT THERE NARE-DO-WELLS!” a booming robotic voice shouted from the end of the alleyway. Standing between them and escape was an eight-foot-tall robot made of shiny chrome, its chassis adorned with many blinking LED lights and buttons, with a winged jetpack mounted on its back.

“What the fuck?”

“I AM WONDERTRON 9000™, DEFENDER OF WONDER WORLD™ AND ALL INNOCENTS WITHIN. YOU HAVE BEEN CHARGED WITH COOTIE SPREADING BEHAVIOR, REFUSING FROWNY FACE STAMPS ON YOUR HALL PASSES, THREATENING A HALL MONITOR, CAUSING A PUBLIC DISTURBANCE, DAMAGING CITY PROPERTY, EVADING ARREST, AND, AS OF THIS MOMENT, NAUGHTY LANGUAGE.”

“Hey, I remember you. You’re the robot that came to the Circus when Herman tried to make his Little Mister knockoffs,” Icky said.

“LITTLE MISTERS IS THE INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY OF DOCTOR WONDERTAINMENT!”

“Look Wonderbot -”

“WONDERTRON 9000™!”

“Whatever, we know when we’re not wanted. Just take us to a door outside of the wards, and we’ll make a Way back home,” Icky said.

“SPARE THE ROD, SPOIL THE CHILD. IT’S THE NAUGHTY CORNER FOR BOTH OF YOU. SURRENDER NOW, OR FACE THE FULL ARRAY OF MY WONDERTASTIC COMBAT FEATURES.”

The pair of Clowns stared down the giant robot with simmering rage.

“You think we can take it?” Icky asked.

“Definitely,” Lolly agreed. She withdrew her oversized mallet from her pocket and charged straight at Wondertron.

“HOSTILITIES INITIATED. DEPLOYING COUNTERMEASURES.”

A large shield with the Wondertainment Logo unfolded from Wondertron’s left forearm, blocking the first of Lolly’s swings.

"ACTIVATING ONE HUNDRED PERCENT NONLETHAL MEGAPHOTONIC LASER VISION™!"

Twin rays of cherry red lasers beamed out of its photoelectric eyes, moving far too quickly to be evaded. Fortunately, its intended effect seemed to be nothing more than disorientation, and due to a combination of their Circus training and essokinetic abilities, Icky and Lolly were relatively unaffected.

Lolly struck the shield from the bottom, knocking it upwards and into Wondertron's direct line of sight, reflecting its lasers back at it.

"DEACTIVATING ONE HUNDRED PERCENT NONLETHAL MEGAPHOTONIC LASER VISION™. VISUAL PROCESSING AND GYROSCOPIC ORIENTATION IMPAIRED. SYSTEMS REBOOTING."

Taking out her trick cards and engulfing them in a murderous red aura, Icky threw the entire deck at Wondertron while it was rebooting. Though some did make it through its shield, they all just bounced harmlessly off its chrome plated hide. Lolly bashed away at it relentlessly with her mallet, causing many disfiguring but ultimately

harmless dents in its chassis.

“SYSTEMS REBOOT COMPLETE. INITIATING KUNG FU ACTION GRIP™!” Wondertron announced as it grabbed Lolly’s mallet by the hammer and lifted it off the ground, with her along with it.

“Put it down you dumb tin can!” she threatened, kicking at its shield.

“INITIATING ONE HUNDRED PERCENT NONLETHAL MAGISHOCK TASER BLAST™!”

Powerful electro-thaumic bolts shot out of the robot’s fingers like Sith lightning. They coursed through Lolly’s body, causing her to convulse and expose her skeleton like she was a cartoon character, then fall unconscious to the ground.

Unsurprisingly, that was all it took for Icky to go full monster Clown. Her nails jutted out of her fingers like claws, her tongue became forked and flickered out between sharpened teeth, and violet smoke poured from her flaming black and purple snake eyes.

Ducking the lighting, she grabbed the mallet and transfigured it into an enormous warhammer, as heavy and spiked as the club she had created mere minutes earlier. Yielding the unwieldy weapon with fury and precision, she knocked off the shield and then swung for the robot's legs.

The hammer successfully punctured the metal limb, with hydraulic fluid gushing out of the wounds. Seeing (and hearing its 120-decibel announcement) that the robot was about to use its taser again, she forcefully pulled the hammer out of its leg and bashed it across the head.

The blow was strong enough to knock Wondertron off balance and send it falling towards the ground. When the creature looked up it saw that Icky was coming in for a *coup de grace*.

“FAILURE IMMINENT. LETHAL SELF-DEFENSE AUTHORIZED. INITIATING PYROMATIC GUIDED COMBAT MISSILE™!”

“Wait, wha -”

A large missile blasted out of Wondertron's shoulder, punching Icky in the gut with the force of a freight train and ploughing her into the air with it. The missile soared up and through the city at near supersonic speeds, swerving and jerking to avoid hurting or damaging anyone or anything. Once it had a clear path up it made a beeline for the sky, rising for several seconds until it exploded above the city in a beautiful pyrotechnic display that sadly couldn't be fully appreciated during the day.

Icky, winded from both the gut punch and the explosion, fell from the sky and crashed into the middle of Mainstreet™, leaving an Icky-shaped crater in the asphalt. As the drivers skidded to a stop to avoid her they caused a 20 car pile-up. Fortunately, they were all bumper cars so nobody was hurt.

Wondertron came soaring in on its jetpack, landing in the middle of the road. In one hand it carried the unconscious body of Lolly, the other it aimed straight at Icky.

"CHARGING NINETY-NINE PERCENT NONLETHAL MAGISHOCK TASER BLAST™!" it said, its voice slightly more ominous than before. "SURRENDER NOW AND NO FURTHER HARM WILL COME TO YOU."

Since it was taking most of Icky's essokinetic abilities just to stay alive at this point, she didn't have much left to put up a fight. Shrinking back to her ordinary form, she placed her hands behind her head.

"REJOICE GOOD PEOPLE OF WONDER WORLD!™, FOR WONDERTRON 9000™ IS VICTORIOUS."

"Gary? Gary is that you?" Icky asked into the phone she had been provided with. "Good. Listen up. Lolly and I are in the Naughty Corner in Wonder World, their jail basically. They've got the Hume-idity cranked up so we can't use our magic, so we need Manny to come bail us out.

We're political prisoners! We were kissing in public, which is a misdemeanour at most here, and that somehow escalated to them

sicing a giant robot on us! Make sure Manny knows we're the victims here, and if they actually try to charge us with anything we are suing for police brutality. I was struck by a missile! If they want to keep our business after this we'd better get an apology and a tent's worth of free stuff!

Yeah, bail's 5000 Gold Edition Wondertainment Power Play Pogs. No, I don't know what the exchange rate is on that. Alright, thanks Gary."

Icky hung up the phone and sat down beside Lolly, wrapping her arms around her comfortingly.

"Lolly, I am so sorry this got so out of control," she said, kissing her on the top of the head.

"At least we still got dino-nuggets," she said, dipping the last nugget from their prison dinners into some honey. "They even got pterodactyls even though they aren't technically dinosaurs. Ca-caw!"

"You are so sweet," Icky said, running her fingers across her cheek. "Are you sure you're okay?"

"I'm fine, I just got electrocuted. You got a lot worse than I did," she replied. "Looking back on it, trying to fight an enormous battle bot was probably not the best decision we've ever made."

"Yeah, I'm starting to see the appeal of nonviolent resistance. I'm just glad you weren't seriously hurt. This was probably our worst date ever."

"In the short term, maybe, but long term it'll make one hell of a story," Lolly smiled. Icky smirked and nodded in agreement, ever impressed by her lover's unflappable optimism. "So where do you think we should go for our next date trip? Three Portlands is probably a lot more gay-friendly. Not as many rides, but more art, and the shops and theatre are probably pretty good too. Same for BackdoorSoHO."

"We could go hiking in Roadkill County."

"Roadkill County?"

“It’s just a name. The scenery’s beautiful, lots of free anomalies to admire, you’ll love it. It would be nice to go somewhere quiet for a little while.”

“It doesn’t matter. As long as we’re free to be who we are without being assaulted by giant robots, I’ll be happy,” Lolly smiled. She cuddled up closer to Icky and rested her head on her shoulder to get some sleep. “Happy date night Icky.”

“Happy date night Lolly.”

« **Dark and Disquieting** | **Dread & Circuses Hub** | **The Sea Slug and the Showman** »

The Sea Slug and the Showman

« **City of Wonder™** | **Dread & Circuses Hub** | **Freaks, Friends and Fiends** »

“Why are all the halls robin-egg blue in this place?” Spratz asked as he and his siblings were rolled down the halls of Site-17 in their dolly cart. “How many robin’s eggs were butchered to paint these walls, you ovicidal maniacs?”

“Pale blue is a calming colour, which is very important around here,” Luna Valdez, their assigned researcher, replied.

“Walls not made from canvas, painted all one solid colour, toilets that don’t empty into a truck – this place is a madhouse!” Spratz proclaimed.

“It’s a lot quieter than the Circus,” Wilby, or **SCP-3717-2**, remarked. “Kind of lonely, actually.”

“Well, that’s actually related to what we’re doing today,” Luna said. “It’s in everyone’s best interests that our residents stay sane, which is why we don’t like to keep you in solitary confinement unless it’s absolutely necessary. You are permitted social interaction so long as at least one guard is present in case of any unexpected anomalous reactions. Before that though, we introduce you to each of the other residents one at a time so we can observe you under carefully controlled -”

She was cut off by a pair of giggling preadolescent girls zooming past the dolly. One of them had had much of her body replaced with incomprehensible paratech, the other held wormholes to uncharted regions of space in her eyes, neither of which were the sort of thing one wanted around new anomalies.

“Girls, get back here!” a researcher called as he chased after them.

“Simon, what the hell?” Luna asked.

“What am I supposed to do, tackle them?” he shouted as he ran around the corner.

“Yes! Fight! Fight! Fight! Contain them with your fists of fury!” Spratz screamed.

“It’s okay, no harm done,” Luna said with a relieved sigh. “But that’s actually a perfect example of what I was talking about. Those two are great for each other. We fully encourage our residents to develop supportive relationships with one another.”

“I’d rather we just skip straight to testing to see if we can kill 682,” Spratz said. “Because I can.”

“You’re not going to meet 682. How does everyone and their conspiracy theorist uncle know about that thing?”

“The Serpent’s Hand likes to use it as anti-foundation propaganda, how your attempts to contain it only cause more harm than good,” the twins replied. “So who are we meeting then?”

“His designation is **SCP-1867**. He’s a sapient, telepathic sea slug, but don’t mention that to him. He’s under the delusion he’s still a 19th-century British adventurer by the name of Lord Theodore Thomas Blackwood. We’ve found it best just to humour him as he tends to disengage with you if you bring up the fact he’s currently a sea slug. He actually used to be kept at Site-19, but since he’s harmless they sent him here to free up some resources.”

She came to a stop in front of a room with a plastic slider under the viewing port which read, ‘SCP-1867, A Gentleman’. She tapped her security card to the black reader beside the door, and since they were in a low-security wing the containment cells didn’t have access control vestibules so she was able to roll the Punkz right in.

“Hello Lord Blackwood, how are you today?”

“Right as rain, old girl, though that’s hardly a wonder given the

nature of my accommodations," SCP-1867 replied from his aquarium. "I see you've brought me some more curios to appraise. Splendid!"

"Yes, we've given them the designation SCP-3717. They're -"

"Homunculi, and poorly made ones at that," Blackwood harrumphed. "I do hope the alchemist who created them had his guild licence revoked."

"He never got it, technically," Wilby replied. "He's called the Amazing Zoltan because it's amazing he's never been arrested or sued for alchemical malpractice."

"Hmmm. Fully endowed with powers of mind and speech? Perhaps I spoke too soon," Blackwood said. "Do forgive me, and let us have proper introductions. I am Lord Theodore Thomas Blackwood, Viscount of Westminster, member of the House of Lords and Brigadier in the British army as well as an avid gentleman scientist, both freelance and in the service of Her Majesty's Royal Foundation for the Study of Curiosities and Phantasmagoria."

"…We're freaks!" Spratz introduced himself and his siblings.

"Specifically, we were attractions in the Den of Freaks at the Circus of the Disquieting," the twins added.

"Good God, you don't mean Herman Fuller's Circus of the Disquieting, do you?" Blackwood asked. "You have my pity then, my humble Homunculi, for I myself once had the displeasure of encountering that disreputable vagabond."

Luna immediately cleared her throat.

"Not to be rude, Lord Blackwood, but I was hoping we could keep the conversation focused on the Circus's more recent -"

"It was Fall of 1888…"

"Too late," she murmured as she hung her head in resignation.

"I had come across The Pond to pay old Teddy a visit. The trip was

a bit spur of the moment, and since the first ship available was headed to Boston, I decided to take it and make the journey to New York by land; take in some of that renown New England autumn foliage, you know. The first half of the trip was marvellously scenic, but whilst I was somewhere in Connecticut I found my eye curiously drawn to garish posters advertising something called Herman Fuller's Circus of the Disquieting. I'm not normally taken in by such drivel, and I swear on my watery grave that some sort of hypnotism was afoot, but I nonetheless decided to attend."

"Oh, was it actually just a nickel to get in?" Spratz asked. "Because whenever old people tell stories everything only cost a nickel, but even taking inflation into account I can't imagine Herman charging so little."

"If memory serves, admission was precisely one dollar. Now -"

"The nerve! That's twenty nickels! Do you know what a nickel could buy back then? Do you? I'm asking, because based on what I've heard everything cost a nickel, which makes zero economic sense."

"Spratz, please, he's telling a story," the twins admonished.

"Thank you, deary," Blackwood nodded. "Where was I? Ah yes. When I arrived, the fairgrounds were all a bustle with folk of every local ilk looking to escape the dreariness or hardships of their lives for an afternoon, and Herman Fuller did not disappoint. Enormous striped tents, flames in every colour of the rainbow, and the most enchanting music that seem to be everywhere and yet come from nowhere. I suppose it was quite a bit smaller then than it is now, and its attractions perhaps not quite so queer, but by Jove, it was a jolly good spectacle. There was a man with a thousand voices performing one heart-wrenching aria after another, a mummified mermaid I would have sworn was just a simian and a sturgeon sewn together if it hadn't moved and cried of its own accord, and most curiously of all there was a boy with an upside-down face."

"Did they call him Boyie back then?" Spratz asked.

"I'm afraid I never did catch his proper name. But never mind all that lads. It was the Big Top show that brought Fuller and I blow to blow.

Let me tell you, Herman Fuller loved the role of Ringmaster. He stood in the spotlight, proud as can be in his top hat and red-tailed coat, the most preposterously verbose and verbosely preposterous poppycock rolling off his tongue as he presented each new marvel. For the fourth or fifth act, he brought out an enormous bear; nearly as big as an elephant on all fours and nearly as tall as a giraffe on its hind legs. Gave it some cockamamie backstory about being frozen in an iceberg from an age long past, and then produced a tricycle so tiny I had to squint to see it."

"Did the bear chase him around while he tried to escape on the tricycle?" the twins asked. "That would have been funny, but I can't imagine Herman ever doing something like that himself."

"Regrettably no. If I recall, the act consisted mainly of Fuller trying to convince the bear to ride the impossibly small contraption, but then the whole audience was aghast when the beast broke free from its iron leash and produced a roar so loud it nearly blew the tent free of its moorings. I could see in the creature's eyes that its heart was filled with anger from its long captivity and torment, and I won't say I didn't pity it, but I could not remain idle and let it maul so many helpless innocents. I leapt from the stands, shouted at the ursine horror to draw its attention away from the crowds and -"

"Did it eat you?" Spratz asked. "It ate you, didn't it? Please tell me it ate you I NEED SOME CARNAGE!"

"No lad, not on that day or any other did a beast get the better of Theodore Blackwood," the sea slug chuckled smugly. "No, I just drew out Dr. Moth's particle destabilizing pistol, good for only one shot you know, and fired straight at the great brute's brow and blew a borehole straight through its brain. It was bloody brilliant if I do say so myself. Of course, Herman didn't see it that way. You'd think he'd've been grateful to me for saving his life and the lives of his audience and employees, but oh no. He said it had all been part of the act, and I was a damnable fool who had ruined his show and murdered one of his star attractions. He demanded substantial recompense, and I of course refused. I called him a liar, told him that I had been around my share of beasts, wild and tamed alike, and there was not a single doubt in my mind that that poor creature was about to go on a rampage."

"Fun fact: Since Icky and Manny took over, rampages at the Circus have a gone down a full forty percent," Spratz said.

"Well, Fuller looked like he was going to go on a rampage himself, but the threat of Dr. Moth's pistol – already out of munitions, unbeknownst to him – was enough to keep him at bay. He put on a slick, snake oil salesman's smile and began to compliment my bravery and marksmanship, and suggested a compromise of sorts. With two snaps of his fingers, a bullseye target was rolled into the ring. He picked it up and twirled it on his finger, saying that if I could hit the center target in one shot whilst it was in motion, he would consider our debt squared. But if I missed, or refused his challenge, I would become indentured to him in servitude. Now, truth be told he really had no way to enforce the terms of such a ridiculous challenge, but I've never been one to back away from a wager."

"Some might call that a problem, sir," the twins said.

"Ugh, you sound just like Deeds. Regardless of the rationality of it, I agreed, but only on the condition that should I win the bear would be taxidermied and sent back to England at his expense. Fuller agreed without hesitation, and with a sharp whistle he tossed the target up into the air into the waiting hands of two acrobats. As they swung around the trapeze with grace and speed, the target was tossed between them in a blur. Fuller presented me with the rifle I was to use. I examined it thoroughly to assure no trickery was afoot, and when I was satisfied I went to take my shot. Given what was at stake I took my time, steadying my hand and studying the movements of the acrobats. I aimed straight for the center of the ring, and once I saw the target leave the acrobat's hand I nearly pulled the trigger, only to hear the familiar empty click of Moth's pistol against my own head! Despite holstering the gun myself, Fuller had used his prestidigitation to relieve me of it when he handed me the rifle and then attempted to murder me with."

"Yep, that sounds like Herman," Wilby nodded.

"I socked that rapscallion square in the jaw, knocking him down into the dirt, much to the audience's delight. With the rifle locked on him, I called him a despicable dastard for trying to murder me from behind, in front of a crowd with women and children, with my own

gun no less, and after we had made an honourable agreement. He was a liar and a cheat and a murderer, and a vile knave all around! And then, holding the rifle with only one hand and seeing the target only in the periphery of my vision, turned it away from Fuller and fired into the ring.
"The target landed straight up, with a smoking bullseye clear through its center."

"So the talent that would have made you an excellent circus performer is the same one that saved you from it? Is that ironic? It sounds ironic. I'm going to say it's ironic."

"Ironic or not, the crowd erupted into cheering and applause, and calls for Fuller to be tarred and feathered came soon after. At this, Fuller sneered at the crowd and said *'I'm a bit short on tar I'm afraid, but fortunately I've no shortage of feathers!'*. He took off his top hat and a biblical flock of white doves burst forth, outnumbering the audience a thousand to one. It was pandemonium as the crowd attempted to flee the the vortex of flapping wings and more unmentionable nuisances, but once we were out the Big Top along with all the other tents and wagons vanished in a twinkling, leaving nothing but a flurry of fluttering snow-white feathers in their wake.
"And that my lads was the first and last time I ever encountered Herman Pandareus Fuller."

The room was silent for a moment, no one quite sure what to say.

"For the record, we can confirm none of that," Wilby said at last. "Not even the middle name."

"Noted," Luna nodded, though she did not actually bother to write anything down.

« City of Wonder™ | Dread & Circuses Hub | Freaks, Friends and Fiends »

Freaks, Friends and Fiends

« **The Sea Slug and the Showman** | **Dread & Circuses Hub** | **Let's Get this Show on the Road!** »

"Okay, one more time; what's the difference between magic and alchemy?" Victor asked as he examined the show globes filled with colourful philters and elixirs at Ed and Al's Alchemist Emporium.

"Alchemy is the study and manipulation of the Aether, the fluidic medium from which all reality emerges from," Iris replied, her own attention devoted to the variety of alchemical catalysts the two brothers kept in stock. "It's a Prima Materia of sorts, the closest mainstream science comes to it is String Theory. Celestial bodies generate substantial aetheric currents, which is where astrology factors in.

"Magic, as in Thaumaturgy, is the use of ritualized methods to focus and amplify EVE into Aspect Radiation, EVE being the aetheric force that causes observer effects like wave function collapse, and Aspect Radiation being EVE that's strong enough to cause macroscopic effects. Then, of course, there are Reality Warpers -"

"Like me?" Lolly asked, her voice muffled by the fact that she had crammed herself into a one-gallon hermetic vase.

"Yes, like you, who just don't interact with the Hume field as strongly as normal and therefore have a much lower threshold for creating aspect radiation and can essentially do so at will. Though all three are colloquially referred to as magic, so it can get confusing."

Iris tipped Lolly's vase and poured her out into the floor, where she quickly reconstituted into her Clown form.

"Yeah, being a Reality Bender is definitely the best magic since we don't have to learn a bunch of spells and stuff," Lolly bragged. "Oh,

and it is Reality Bender, not Reality Warper, because we bend reality like the kids bend the elements in that awesome cartoon."

Lolly playfully air bent a few gusts of wind towards Iris, who deliberately remained as implacable as usual.

"I prefer Reality Warper," she said.

"How come?"

"Because I'm British, and in British-English 'Bender' is a homophobic slur."

"Well, I'll stop saying Bender when you guys stop calling cigarettes fags."

"… Fair enough."

Their attention was diverted to the front of the shop by the sound of Ed the Alchemist emerging from the lab and setting a crate of potions down on the cashier counter.

"There you are Ms. Dark, 48 phials of Pactolus Philter, guaranteed to cure any and all outbreaks of **`Midas Plague`**," he said. "My brother and I are especially sympathetic to children being transfigured into metal. Be sure to give Carter a kick in the ass for both of us, won't you?"

"Believe me I'd love too, but if there's one thing he's good at it's avoiding his comeuppance. I'm pretty sure that's why we keep him around," she said as she took out one of the phials to examine it. "Did you really make all of these just since you got our ravenwave? That's remarkable. While I'm here, Esq. Darke asked me to keep an eye out for some rare items for a project we're working on. You wouldn't happen to have the flesh from an Old God Incarnate, would you?"

"Old God as in?"

"His exact words were 'Titans birthed from the Primordial Chaos'. I think that means anything on par with Mekhane, Yaldabaoth, the Scarlet King, gods like those."

“Sorry. Best we got is a mummy of a Type Black Daevite warrior.”

“Hmm. Still impressive.”

“Not really. All our Fun-Lovers are technically Type Blacks, and they’re all alive and kicking,” Lolly said as she came up to the counter to pet one of Al’s cats. “That’s much more impressive than one dead Type Black.”

“It would be more impressive if they were contained in something a little sturdier than a carnival trailer,” Iris retorted. “Wait a minute, that mummy doesn’t happen to have any Daevite weapons with it, does it?”

“’Fraid not.”

“Yeah, that was a long shot. Any Akivic Purification Serum by chance then?”

“You mean His Holy Tears? No, but what the hell is Darke the Elder working on to want all this stuff for?”

“Just something to pass the time,” Iris said deflectively. “He’s an old man, he doesn’t get out much. I’ll just take the Pactolus Philter, an ounce of abiogenic catalyst, a bottle of Quicksilver and a witch’s dozen of spectral embers. Bill it to the corporate account.”

“Hey Edward, I couldn’t help but notice that there are a lot more guards around than the last time I was here,” Victor said as he gazed out the window into the bustling street outside. “Is everything alright?”

“I’m not really supposed to say anything, they don’t want to cause a panic, but ah…” He cranked his neck towards the front door to make sure no one else was listening. “There’s a **serial killer** on the loose. Some sort of inbred goblin creature from the House of Habsburg.”

“The House of Habsburg?” Iris asked, her ears perking with interest.

“Yeah, we think it’s hiding out in the sewers,” he said as he set the pack of spectral embers down before her. “The Guards have been

down there twice already but they couldn't find it. How it ended up here we have no idea. From what I've heard there are thousands of the bastards in central Europe. They're so persistent even the Foundation is having trouble keeping a lid on them. There's talk that the Coalition is getting ready to bring the hammer down on them though. They're going to set up sting operations to catch their hunters, tag them and track them back to their hives, then go full scorched earth. I hope they burn every last one of them."

They were all startled by the sound of the cat shrieking in sudden pain and bolting out of Lolly's grasp as her grip reflexively tightened.

"What did you just say?" she asked softly, the anger in her voice barely contained. "Did you actually just say you want those fascist paraphobes to burn Freaks alive?"

"Lolly, listen, I know you think of yourself as Serpent's Hand so you're no fan of the Coalition, but we're talking about psychotic cannibals who breed like rabbits. These aren't innocent Freaks."

"And genocide is the best solution? Stick to what you're good at, right?"

"Lolly, they're not genocidal. Their governing body is made up of representatives from 108 occult factions, including the Alchemist's Guild, and they have an entire division dedicated to maintaining peaceful relations with the anomalous community."

"On their terms! They expect us to stay confined to Nexuses or extradimensional ghettos and pretend we don't exist because as long as we're secret we have no rights and they can do whatever they want to us! Any Freak that doesn't submit is labelled a parathreat and 'liquidated'! The Geo Sea are Nazis who want us all either dead or locked up, I hate them, and I hope those Habsburg goblins eat them alive!"

Lolly stormed out of the shop, slamming the door so hard the glass shattered and the door frame cracked.

"I really should choose my words more carefully around type Greens," Edward lamented.

“I’m going to go after her, I’ve never seen her like this,” Victor said, running through the broken doorway.

“Ms. Dark, is it okay if I add the damage to your bill?” Ed asked, only to find that she had vanished, along with the box of spectral embers. “Ms. Dark?”

“Brother, did you scare off our customers again?” Al shouted from the backroom.

“… Maybe.”

Victor sprinted out into the busy bazaar, looking for any sign of a distressed Clown. Fortunately, he didn’t have to look far. Lolly had gone into the alley beside the Emporium and was sitting against the wall, hugging her knees with her head hung as she took deep breaths.

“Lolly? Lolly, are you alright?” Victor asked as he crouched beside her.

“I’m sorry. The Geo Sea just really triggers me,” she said.

“Yeah, I remember,” he smirked, thinking back to the first show he had ever seen her perform.
“But I didn’t actually know it was because you thought of yourself as Serpent’s Hand.”

“After the Circus, the Library was the first magical place I got to visit,” she began. “It was incredible; bookcases the size of mountains that stretched on as far as the eye could see, holding every book from every iteration of every reality in the multiverse. Icky told me that it was a Sanctuary for Freaks, just like the Circus, and that the Ways wouldn’t let anyone they knew were bad in, and if someone bad did get in the Docents and the Elephant God would protect us. Then she introduced me to some people she knew in the Serpent’s Hand and explained that they kept magic and Freaks safe from people who wanted us kept secret or destroyed, and that it was because of people like them that one day magic and Freaks wouldn’t have to be secret anymore.

"The day I found out magic was real was the best day of my life. My life has been wonderful and incredible because of magic, and I've dedicated my life to sharing that joy with others. Every time I perform, I show new people that magic is real and wonderful, and the Geo Sea want me dead because of that. I have friends who are dead because of them. They want everyone who wants the dumb Masquerade overthrown dead, and if they had the firepower they'd want every Freak in the multiverse dead.

"When I think of magic, I think of my Circus and the Library and Wondertainment's toys and mindblowing anart and kindly old Mekhanites and the Oneiroi Dreamworld. I think of amazing, marvellous things and I hate that some people only think of the anomalous as something monstrous.

"You don't still think of me as a monster, do you?"

"I never -"

"Yes, you did. I'm not stupid. Isn't that why you came after me? You were worried that the monster Clown might be going on a rampage?"

"I came after you because you're my friend, and I was worried about you," Victor told her.

For the first time, Lolly looked at him, smiling even as tears still streamed down her face.

"Really?" she asked.

"Look, I don't really want to get into a discussion about anomalous civil rights, and I think the whole situation is a lot more complicated than good guys and bad guys, but I know you're not a monster, and I don't want you dead or locked up. And maybe I wouldn't always have thought that, which is why I'm glad I've had the chance to know you and your Circus."

"That's why I do what I do," she smirked. "Jeez, I'm a mess. I gotta get some Milk into me. Hey, don't tell Icky that Edward made me cry, or what he said about the Geo Sea. She might take it worse than I

did.”

“I won’t, I promise.”

“Iris either.”

“I…” he looked around, suddenly realizing he wasn’t sure where Iris was. “Oh crap.”

While the others were distracted by Lolly’s outburst, Iris had snuck out a side door and into an empty back alley. Using her bionic hand to slide off a manhole cover, she had slipped into the sewers to do some goblin hunting.

The sewers were absurdly spacious, similar to the ones in Vienna that the Habsburg Dynasty had previously called home. One of their lineage would no doubt be quite adept at navigating and concealing itself in such a subterranean labyrinth. It made perfect sense that platoons of guards storming the sewers hadn’t been able to find it. The creature wasn’t stupid, and had safely remained in its hiding place until they had passed. But a young woman, all by herself? That seemed like it would offer the creature far more incentive to come out.

“Hello?” she said in a soft whimper, doing the best damsel-in-distress impression she could manage. “Is anyone there? I, I fell down the manhole. I think I broke my ankle, I can’t climb back up. Please, is anyone down here?”

She smiled as she heard the faint scampering of feet against wet stone coming towards her. In her right hand, she held a spectral ember at the ready. The footsteps grew louder, and she could hear the bestial thing furtively sniffing the air. She let out a small, frightened sob to draw in her prey. It took the bait, and she felt its disgusting breath on the back of her neck.

She immediately ignited the ember she held into a Spectral Flame, flooding the sewers with light. The Habsburg Noble howled in pain and shock at the dreaded illumination, shielding its eyes and blindly trying to fall back. Instead, Iris grabbed its throat with her left bionic

hand, lifting it off the ground and slamming it against the wall. It struggled with ferocious might, but relented when Iris brought the Spectral Flame up to its face.

"*Nein, nein, nicht das Licht! Bitte, wir geben nach!*" it wailed.

"I'm sorry, but I'm not quite fluent in German. Did you say you'd like some more light?" Iris smirked as she increased the intensity of the fire.

"*Nein*, no, please!" it pleaded. "Please, please we submit, just take away *das Licht*!"

"But I want to get a good look at you; you are such a rare creature after all," Iris replied.

The being was only a few inches shorter than her at about five feet, though would have stood taller had its back not been so horribly bent. Its skin was pale and hairless, each hand held seven long, splayed fingers, and its pointed ears were so large as to be almost bat-like. Its left eye, the larger of the two, had a black cornea and gold iris, while the other had a clouded cornea and red iris. Its nose was hooked and crooked, but most grotesque of all was a mouth that went almost literally ear to ear and was filled with multiple, misaligned rows of large teeth.

"Incredible. The product of three hundred years of alchemically enabled and accelerated inbreeding, dozens of generations without any outside blood, reinforced by the ruthless culling of all but the most monstrously mutated, you are a work of art!" Iris marvelled. "I can't believe I actually got a chance to look at one of you things up close. Do you have a name, little Nosferatu?"

"*Freiherr* Dagoburt von Habsburg. Please, forgive us! We thought you a mere peasant, but your strength and cunning are proof of noble blood. We were going to eat you, but now we see you would be a worthy vessel for our brood. Let us fornicate, and a fortnight from now the noble products of our union will gnaw their way through your womb and burst forth to carry on our combined bloodlines!"

“I’m flattered, really, but I am rather focused on my career at the moment so I’ll have to pass,” she replied. Placing the Spectral Flame on the ground, she pulled out her old box cutter and made a small slash on the goblin’s skin. It hissed in indignation but made no attempt to break free. A smear of a midnight blue humor began oozing from the laceration.

“Literal blue blood; brilliant!” she smiled. She now used her box cutter to carve a sigil into the goblin’s flesh.

“What are you doing?” it demanded.

“Just a little exsanguination spell I know,” she replied, pocketing the box cutter and unhooking the hermetic vase she had brought with her from her belt. “You Habsburgs aren’t the only ones who value that blue blood in your veins. If the Coalition has their way, it will be priceless pretty soon.”

“No, wait, please! I can pay you double what my blood is worth! Spare me and I -”

“Oh, I’m not going to sell it. I’m going to give it as a gift to my Grandsire, to ensure I stay in his good graces, and also just because I’m a little curious about what he’ll actually do with it. Besides, I can’t have you murdering and terrorizing the biggest flea market in the multiverse; it’s bad for business.”

Iris dropped the Habsburg to the ground and began murmuring invocations in the Chaos Tongue. Aerosolised blood began rising from the sigil and raining into the open vase. The pitiful creature shrieked and wailed as its convulsing body rapidly lost its vital fluids, flailing its limbs and thrashing its head in agony. It let out an ear-splitting scream as the last of its noble blood was depleted and its body went limp.

Somehow, the desiccated corpse was even uglier than it had been in life. Dragging it by the scruff of the neck, Iris tossed it into the sewage channel for the Bazaar’s authorities to find and deal with.

Ensuring the lid on the vase was tightly sealed, she picked it up and gazed at it in contemplation for a moment.

“Not even the weirdest part of my day,” she smirked to herself.

« **The Sea Slug and the Showman** | **Dread & Circuses Hub** | **Let’s Get this Show on the Road!** »

Let's Get this Show on the Road!

« **Freaks, Friends, and Fiends**| **Dread & Circuses Hub** | **A Circus Come To Not** »

In a quiet corner just outside the universe, bookshelves stretched to the heavens. Line upon line of them continued onward as far as the eye could see, and even further beyond that. From nowhere in particular, a soft light beamed down, just warm enough to be comfortable. At the same time, a gentle breeze rustled through pages, creating a soft whisper, reminding patrons that they were in a sacred place. *Tread lightly,* it said, *for this is the Wanderer's Library.*

A pleasant smell wafted through, carried by the wind. It came from a hollowed-out space in a particularly large bookshelf, which had been fashioned into a quaint little café. While patrons buzzed around it like flies, it retained the same quiet, dignified feel as the rest of the Librar-

"This place is freakin' awesome!" rang out a high pitched voice, followed by what can only be described as a 'squee'. The hyperactive young Clown spun around, taking in the scene with a smile on her face.

"Since when did the Library get an H.P Brewcraft? Can I get a *Frapaccthulhu*? Extra whipped cream, extra drizzle, extra existential horror? I can handle it, I'm a Clown," Lolly ordered as she juggled three books excitedly, before all three were calmly pulled out of the air by her companion.

"I think you've had enough sugar though," Icky smirked as she pointed at a small group of dark-robed figures sitting around a table, who were watching the pair with an intense gaze. "Remember darling, we're still on thin ice with the Library because of You-Know-Who. We need to be a bit more respectful."

Lolly noticed the mouthless docents (who enjoyed the coffee shop purely for the aroma), and stopped giggling. She put her hands behind her back and whistled, as if she hadn't been doing anything at all. The two turned back towards the counter, hoping the docents would be gone by the time they had finished their drinks.

"They give me the creeps. Or should I say…" Lolly pointed to a display case by the counter, which contained various baked goods. "The crepes!"

Icky tried to keep a straight face, but couldn't help but snicker.

Across the counter, an unamused barista tapped the cash register with a tentacle impatiently. "So it that a yay or nay on the *Frapaccthulhu*?" Lolly looked up at Icky with pleading eyes.

"Please? I'm already on a sugar rush, and if I don't get more I'm going to crash," she asked.

"Alright, one *Frapaccthulhu* with everything she said before, and a *Yog-Espressoth*, whatever size is the biggest." Icky relented.

The barista punched the order in, and uttered unknowable noises at a server, who began to pour dark liquids into non-Euclidean cups, all of which proudly displayed their Fairtrade certification.

The interior of the café was comfortingly normal, with just enough light to create a soothing atmosphere. The scents of freshly baked goods and hot coffee mixed together with bizarre and alien smells, bringing in patrons of the Library from all over the multiverse. One patron in particular, a human, cleared his throat and motioned for the pair to come over to his booth.

Lolly slid into the booth quickly, as Icky calmly took a seat next to her. The man across from them had dark hair, scruffy stubble, and an eyepatch over his left eye. He regarded the two coldly, before lifting a steaming mug of coffee to take a drink. As he did, he turned his hand, making sure to display **`a tattoo of a certain symbol`**.

"I was under the impression that we would be meeting the Captain

herself," Icky said, trying to hide her disappointment.

The man spoke in a gruff voice. "She couldn't make it. Something about wrangling a kaiju for some zoo. The usual."

"That's the *usual*? What's *exciting* for you? *I* want to wrangle a kaiju!" Lolly said. "Also, who is this guy? He's not as cute as the Captain."

The man templed his fingers, responding curtly. "Munin, of the Nautilus. Second mate to Captain Nemo."

Lolly leaned forward, scrutinizing Munin, who didn't even blink his eye. "I'm pretty sure all those names are from a book. I don't think any of those names were real. Then again, my name's not real either so I probably shouldn't be so judgey. What is your real name anyway? Is it Jeffrey? You look like a Jeffrey. It's probably Jeffery." She sat back, and whispered to Icky, "Is his real name Jeffery?"

Icky shrugged. "That's hardly any of our concern darling. Munin— or Jeffrey or whatever— is here to inform us about the locale of our next show."

Across the table, Munin nodded. He reached into his jacket, pulled out a small brochure, and slid it across the table. "I'm still not sure why you want to perform *there*, of all places. You've got a whole Earth to entertain, don't you?"

"More than one, actually."

Their drinks arrived, each bearing an image of the Dread Cthulhu in the style of the Starbucks Siren. Icky picked up the brochure with one hand as she sipped her Yog-Espressoth in the other.

"But we can't keep calling ourselves the Greatest Show in all the Worlds without pushing ourselves to new heights, now can we?"

The pictures in the brochure showed a completely alien landscape. A mess of colors and shapes, all of them bizarre and disquieting. Vague figures, like fetal animals floating in rose-colored bubbles, strange devices with wicked curves and bright colors. Icky absentmindedly ran a fingernail over the image, revealing it to be

scratch-n'-sniff. Cute.

"The Nautilus can get us there safely? I know the docents wouldn't be thrilled to see our entire Circus parading through the Library. Even Lolly's too much for them to handle on occasion."

Lolly looked up from her cup, and licked off a whipped cream mustache, "Yeah, sitting quietly isn't really my thing, which can be a problem at libraries. And Doctor's offices. And funerals. And…"

"He gets the idea, sweetie."

"I assure you, the Nautilus can go places even your Kaleidoscope can't. No world, realm, or plane is beyond our reach." Munin scratched the area around his eyepatch, briefly revealing a green light beneath it.

Lolly downed the remainder of her drink quickly. "Does this mean we're going on a road trip?"

"It will be less of a road trip than it will be a…" Munin paused as Lolly looked at him with puppy-dog eyes, and Icky raised her eyebrows expectantly. "…Yes, it's a road trip."

"Yes!" Lolly bounced in place with excitement.

Munin's expression remained as serious as it had been upon first meeting the two. "For my own curiosity's sake; how do you plan to be a Circus of the Disquieting when you're performing for people in a completely alien world?"

Icky hesitated for a moment, thinking. "I'm still working on that. But I do have an idea. Have you ever seen *The Little Mermaid*?"

Lolly's eyes lit up. "Oh, I have! I loved it when I was a kid, partially for the music and partially because all those half-naked mermaids made me feel funny for reasons I didn't understand yet,"

Icky shot her a perplexed glance, while Munin barely raised an eyebrow.

"Well I understand now, obviously."

The bow of the *Nautilus* sped through a technicolor void at a breakneck pace, propelled by jets of emerald green light expelled from the backside of the hull. Below it was a swirling ocean of lights and images of other times, places, and creatures.

"Wha'd'ya think of that view, Lollipop?" Rang out the voice of the Captain as she leaped down from the upper deck. Captain Nemo was a young woman with a proud stance. Over both of her eyes, she wore a strange band with various symbols woven into the fabric. On her head was a blood-red tricorne, signifying her status. "I'd challenge you to find a view so breathtaking as the eldritch plane before you."

"Eh, it's alright I guess." Lolly said, as she leaned over the railing on the port bow. She glanced disinterestedly at a technicolor leviathan, which breached a few meters from the ship, before turning back to the Captain. "I was expecting the Not to be a little more 'Mountains of Madness', you know? Iris said she was weeping blood and seeing through time after only eight minutes in here."

Icky appeared from below deck, dusting off her hands. "Everything's secured, for now at least. Manny's making sure that Eugene's taken his seasickness pills, and Bubblegum has already self-medicated herself into a stupor."

Nemo gave the pair what would have been a side-eye, if she hadn't been wearing a blindfold. "You two are sure you want to stay up here when we make the dive below the surface? I appreciate your courage, but it doesn't agree with most of you…"

"'Landlubbers'?" Icky suggested. The Captain shook her head, a sly smile on her face.

"You'll survive. But it's one hell of a sight to see." The Captain's look hardened. She barked a few orders to her crew, who were making the final preparations by tying down any loose equipment. "I haven't made a jump this far since Blackwood and I were smuggling

supplies to the refugees of Kul-Manas. Last chance to back out, you two."

Lolly sighed dramatically. "The anticipation is driving me crazy! Let's do it!"

Icky turned to the captain with an excited grin on her face. "You heard the little lady."

Nemo nodded, and motioned to Munin, who was battening a hatch. Quickly, he shifted his eyepatch to the opposing eye, revealing an eerie green glow radiating from a freshly exposed orb. He called up to the other crew members, who all quickly did the same. Finally, Nemo lifted her own blindfold, revealing two emerald orbs of her own. The air suddenly grew tense, as if lightning were about to strike.

The scene blurred around the *Nautilus*, as it slipped below the surface, and began to pick up speed. Lights and images seemed to blur together as they continued onward. Nemo held her hands in front of her, taking hold of an unseen steering wheel with an iron grip.

Lolly tried to speak, but she found herself nearly paralyzed by the sheer speed they were moving at. She gripped Icky's arm tightly, as the latter gave her a comforting look. The Captain's arms moved to and fro, making split-second decisions to adjust the trajectory of the ship, or avoid monoliths which protruded from the sea. Still, they were accelerating. Light itself seemed to be dissolving and bleeding around them—

As suddenly as it begun, it ended. The *Nautilus* slowed to its previous pace as it surfaced, and Icky and Lolly found themselves releasing a deep breath they didn't realize they had been holding. Lolly slowly turned towards Icky, her hair still frozen behind her. Silently, she mouthed 'Wow', before collapsing backwards, giggling.

Icky too was left in awe. She turned to the Captain, who had begun to pull her blindfold back down. Nemo merely smirked, and walked up to the prow of the ship. "You're still conscious. I'm impressed. We'll reach your destination shortly. As for the matter of payment…"

Icky nodded. "I have a plan in mind. According to the pamphlets, carbon is pretty rare in this world, so it's used as a currency."

"And where we come from, it isn't. What's your point?"

"They also view arranging the atoms of it into crystal latices as one of the highest forms of art, which increases it in value even more."

Nemo's eyebrows arched beneath her blindfold. "Diamonds. Clever."

The *Nautilus* neared a large whirlpool, and slowed to a stop. Icky staggered forward, clutching the railing for support. She could already see the reflection of the world they were preparing to descend into. Her eyes gleamed with a mischievious determination.

"Ladies, gentlemen, and assorted Eldritch beings of all genders and the lack thereof, give it up one more time for Charlotte and her arachnid assistants!" Icky paused, as the audience chattered excitedly.

"And now, for our final act of the evening…"

The crowd of alien beings leaned forward in their seats. The Big Top was packed to the brim with attendees. Each one appeared to be a fetal animal, floating in a bubble of deep pink liquid that stayed suspended just a few centimeters from the ground. One or two reached a long, spindly limb out to grab a stick of cotton candy, which rapidly dissolved into the liquid.

Icky signaled to Lolly, who gave her an excited thumbs up in return from offstage, indicating that everything was prepared. "As you know, we have come to you from a far away dimension. So, we have no shortage of wonders to share with you. You've seen our freaks, but now we're going to show you…"

Lolly wheeled out a small cart, covered by a deep purple tablecloth, and stopped just in front of Icky. There was an unsettling squelching noise- like balloons being rubbed together- as the aliens pressed in

once more to get a better look.

"… Something truly disquieting!" Icky whipped the cloth off of the cart, revealing a small white box, with a black tail protruding from the backside, ending in three golden points. The crowd broke out in whispers. Uncertainty, doubt, confusion.

After a moment, a smaller alien floated upwards in its seat, and called out in a shrill voice. Icky wasn't sure exactly what it was saying— the device they had been loaned by Marshall, Carter, and Dark only allowed for one-way universal translations— but the curious tone in its voice was universal enough that she understood all the same.

Icky smirked, and took off her hat. From it, she produced a cup, which was full of small orange objects. Each of them tapered to a point on one side, like an egg, which was lighter than the rest of it. Icky applied pressure to one part of the box, causing the front of it to swing open with a loud noise. She placed the cup inside, and pressed another part of the box with her finger.

There was a gasp from the crowd as the box began to emit a low hum, and the front of it lit up with an eerie yellow glow. Before long, there was a series of loud popping noises, as the orange objects began to jump wildly inside, as if they were in pain. After a minute or two, Icky opened the box again, and tiny white *things* began to fall out.

Icky beckoned to the smaller alien who had spoken out earlier, and Lolly walked into the stands to escort her down to the center of the Big Top, quietly assuring the young alien that everything would be alright. "Alright everyone, give it up for our brave volunteer! She's about to be the first to try this snack from our dimension, eaten across the world!"

Lolly took out a small paper bag, and scooped some of the snack into it, before drizzling it with an orange liquid, and covering it with a light dusting of some strange smelling powder. With a broad smile on her face, she held the bag up to the small creature before her.

Timidly, the alien stuck a limb out of its bubble, and grabbed a tiny

fistful of the white material, which was surprisingly brittle and flaky to the touch. It retracted the arm into its bubble, where the food began to quickly dissolve. The alien hummed excitedly, and did a somersault within its bubble!

As the audience looked on in excitement, Lolly popped open the door of the box again, and jumped all the way inside. The popping noise from earlier increased in volume until it was nearly deafening, and the cart fell over, leaving the white box on its back.

With a sound like an explosion, Lolly shot out like a cannonball, sending more of the snack flying in every direction, showering down on the audience like snow!

A chorus of coos and shrill excited shrieks echoed through the Big Top once again as Lolly gently floated downwards, clutching a parasol, back to the center with Icky. As the audience applauded, she let go of the parasol and backflipped onto the ground.

"And we've got more where that came from!" Lolly said, giving Icky a wink.

"A round of applause for my lovely and beloved assistance, if you would be so kind folks," Icky requested. Instead of clapping their hands, the creatures produced a rapid stream of popping air bubbles in the outer membranes to signal approbation. "Lolly my love, seeing our crowd osmosising our earthly fare makes me think that they might be interested in seeing how you and I eat."

The crowd cheered their agreement.

"I know I always like it when our oral activities have an audience," Lolly added with a naughty smile and a pause for laughter, which was only filled with confused silence.

"Lolly, we talked about this, these creatures aren't going to get any sexual references," Icky whispered to her. Lolly nodded and went to fetch the prop for the act.

"You see folks, most creatures where I'm from can't just absorb food through their outer membranes. They have to open their maws and

force sustenance down their gullets!"

This fact was met with a collective gasp of shock from the audience.

"Horrifying, I know, and we've got an exclusive demonstration set up just for you!"

The lights dimmed and the spotlight fell on Lolly, who was now holding a long, green… thing, which wrapped around her forearm like a bracelet. After holding it up for everyone to see, she placed the green object on the ground. Icky took out her hat and pulled out a large, white rabbit. It wiggled its nose in an endearing way, eliciting a few *'awws'* from the audience.

Icky crouched, allowing it to hop to the ground, where it inched towards the green thing. The mammal sniffed around it, not seeming to take much interest. Still, something felt wrong about the situation. The ground slowly began to rise, ensuring that all of the audience members would be able to see. The air was tense, as if something were holding its breath, waiting for a moment to strike…

The audience began to whisper, confused by the lack of any apparent action. One or two of the aliens began to float upwards to get a—

Moving almost too quickly to see, the green object jumped to life, ensnaring the rabbit's head in its mouth. For an instant the horrified audience thought it was going to bite the animal's head off, but instead it unhinged its own jaw in a display of pure body horror. Its head seamed to split in two, each half independently wriggling down the rabbit's body, its throat ballooning to grotesque proportions as it swallowed its victim whole.

When the ordeal was finally over the green thing's jaws closed, sealing shut as if they had never been opened at all. The green creature was once again still as a statue, the only evidence of its crime being a massive bulge working its way down its digestive track.

The audience gazed in horror as the lump worked its way down the corkscrew length of its devourer. After a moment of this, the rabbit

squirmed out of the creature's alimentary canal - disheveled but alive. In a shimmer of light, the rabbit transformed into a Clown.

"And the moral, boys and girls, is to always read your performance contracts carefully before you sign them," The Clown huffed in annoyance, marching out of the ring after being handed a towel.

"Thank you, Eugene," Icky called to him as he pushed his way through the audience, the aliens rushing to get out of his way. Lolly couldn't help but giggle as they bumped into each other, sending the smaller ones flying like inflated beach balls.

Icky picked up the green creature, where it coiled up on her hand. "Give it up for the marvelousssss, sssssspectuacular… Sssssssserpent!"

The snake turned and seemed to give her a dirty look for a second. One of its eyes flashed an emerald color, before it disappeared as a cloud of green smoke, to another round of cheers.

Icky and Lolly held hands, bowing deeply and springing back up. Icky tipped her hat, and turned as if to leave. "Alright, everyone, you've been a fantastic audience! But alas, all good— and disquieting— things must come to an end! It's time for us to bring this show to a close!"

There was a chorus of sad wails, and pulsing, sloshing noises as the aliens shook in their odd bubbles. Lolly played along, turning to Icky and giving her a tearful puppy-dog look.

"Aw, but Icky, don't we have time for just *one* other thing?"

Icky raised her hand, bringing instant silence. "Alright, I give in. I suppose we still have time for one more trick!"

On cue, a giant cylinder fell from above into the center of the Big Top, hiding Icky and Lolly from view. As it landed, there was a moment of confusion, as all the audience members could see were odd, distorted images of themselves. One or two aliens floated over to it, inspecting the odd monolith, which reflected their every move.

There was a sudden series of gasps as a new figure came into view,

prowling around the perimeter of the monolith, twice as tall as any of the aliens. It was darkly colored, covered in strange orifices and glowing eyespots. It poked its head around the ground, as if taking in its surroundings for a moment, before suddenly turning and leaping into the stands!

Panic erupted as a dark, tripodal figure was seen running through the image, and escalated as two more appeared alongside it, sending aliens flying out of the Big Top in a panic as they felt something brush against their bubbles. The first dark creature roared triumphantly, before leaping into the monolith, shattering it into a thousand pieces.

Within a few moments, the aliens had almost all fled, leaving nothing in the Big Top, save for a few small, **orange cats**, purring contentedly in the center.

About a kilometer away from where the Circus had been mere moments ago, close to a river of dark purple liquid, Icky, Lolly, and a few crew members from the Nautilus and stagehands from the Circus were loading the last shipment of equipment back onto a small boat that would make its way back to the main ship. At the back of the boat, in the Captain's Chair, Nemo eagerly dug through a satchel filled with diamonds of every shape and size, a delighted expression on her face.

Lolly sat on top of a box as it was loaded up, giggling and shaking a small snowglobe styled after the alien race they had performed for. Quietly, she whispered to herself, "Best. Road Trip. Ever."

A small snake slithered up to the scene, before glowing a bright green color, and contorting in size and shape. In a matter of seconds, Munin stood where the snake had been. He glared at Icky silently, before spitting a tuft of rabbit hair out of his mouth.

Icky chuckled and slapped him on the back. "Thanks for being such a good sport. They really enjoyed it."

Munin huffed as he climbed aboard, a palpable tension in the air around him. From her perch on top of the box, Lolly smirked and called down to him.

"Don't be such a sour face. I'm pretty sure it was harder on Eugene than it was on you!"

« **Freaks, Friends, and Fiends**| **Dread & Circuses Hub** | **A Circus Come To Not** »

A Circus Come To Not

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“Pius, how do you keep getting us into these messes?” Eugene asked as he lurched over the side of the inflatable lifeboat, his face literally green from seasickness.

Though, it would perhaps be more accurate to call it motion sickness, as they weren’t floating upon an actual ocean. The body they were bobbing upon undulated up and down slowly and without rhythm, like a super-viscous fluid being frothed around in a bowl. The surface was a perfect mirror, but instead of the sky, it reflected an ever-shifting mosaic of scenes from every corner of Reality, stretching onwards without a horizon and seemingly to infinity. Though it looked fluid, if Eugene tried to cup it with his hand it would float into the air like smoke and sift through his fingers like sand. The strange sea was neither gaseous nor liquid nor solid, but rather a substance wholly alien to the known space-time continuum. As such, Eugene’s only perception of it was what optical illusions his brain would generate as it desperately tried to make sense of it.

“I hardly see how this was my fault,” Pius replied as he calmly read over the survival guide he had found among the lifeboat’s effects.

He glanced up briefly at the sky, which instead of a sun or moon or stars held a colossal, hyperdimensional tangle of multiverses, stretching from one end of the firmament to the other. Individual universes appeared primarily as midnight blue orbs stained with luminous webs, strung together like octopus eggs.

“If it weren’t for me, you wouldn’t even have the lifeboat and you’d be sinking all the way down to the Not Abyss. Do you know why this place is called the Not, Eugene? Because it’s Not our world, Not our universe, Not our multiverse and Not even our omniverse. We are outside of Reality itself, and the only reason it’s even remotely

comprehensible is that this is just the surface of the Not and we can still see our own Reality from here. Now, if you go deep enough down that you can't see home anymore, then your mind will shatter just from the sheer nature of the Not itself. Those are some truly unfathomable fathoms, let me tell you. Literally indescribable, utterly inconceivable and unimaginable, not a single mote of stuff down there that wouldn't drive you absolutely bonkers just trying to wrap your head around it."

Eugene retched, releasing a copious volume of glittery black Clown vomit out of his mouth and straight into the incomprehensible Not.

"Okay, well now there's Clown vomit down there, and that I understand," Pius conceded.

Eugene groaned as he flopped over on his back, his face still as green as a pickle.

"You're the one who shapeshifted into a mouse and sent Bubblegum into a panic while we were in the Nautilus's passenger hold," Eugene reminded him.

"I thought she was passed out."

"Well, why would you turn into a mouse in the first place?"

"It was cramped in there, so I turned into a tiny animal. It was a perfectly reasonable thing to do. It's not my fault that a startled, hungover elephant accidentally knocked Danny over and his eternally enflamed head set the hold on fire. You were the one who screamed 'abandon ship!' and leapt out the porthole."

"You didn't have to follow me!"

"I didn't, and neither did Bubblegum. If her head wasn't stuck in the porthole, or she hadn't been trumpeting like crazy, someone might have noticed we went overboard."

"Well, like you said, at least you had this inflatable lifeboat on you. I'd probably be dead right now if it wasn't for you."

"Thank you."

“What about the rest of the Circus? You don’t think they’re…”

“Unlikely. There was at least one fire extinguisher in the hold and the blaze hardly seemed out of control. The Nautilus is probably looking for us right now.”

“Fat lot of good that’ll do us. Space and Time are meaningless here. For all we know, they’ve given up the search, gone home, and our universe has already expired from heat death.

…

“Try calling Gary.”

“I doubt we’ll get a signal here.”

“Just try it.”

“Alright then.”

Pius reached into his pocket, pulled out a French-style rotary phone and dialled Gary’s eleven digit number.

Ring Ring

Ring Ring

Ring Ring

…

Ring Ring

“It’s ringing.”

“I can hear it.”

“Gary? Gary is that you?” the voice on the phone asked.

“What? No, I was calling for Gary. Who’s this?” Pius asked.

“This is Pius the Clown. Who’s this?”

“You’re not Pius, I’m Pius!” Pius objected.

“It sounds like you,” Eugene claimed.

“I do not!” the voice on the phone said.

“Pius, it’s just pattern screamers, hang up,” another voice that sounded like Eugene said.

“We’re not pattern screamers, you’re pattern screamers!” Pius screamed, in a very pattern like way, slamming the receiver down. “That’s why I like old phones; you can’t hang up angrily with a smartphone.”

“I think we should take stock of our supplies,” Eugene suggested.

“Good idea. We have one rotary aether phone that can only be used to call pattern screamers. We have this survival guide, *How To Survive When Reality Doesn’t* by Dr. Alto Clef.”

“Why is the cover just a crudely drawn bunny in a hat?”

“It’s memetic, or at least a meme. As for the essentials, we have 1,2,3,4… 23 pints of Clown's Milk.”

…

“You just carry nearly two dozen pints of Milk around on you now? Are you trafficking the stuff?”

“Well we get lost a lot, plus since we started ultra-pasteurizing it we don’t need to worry about it spoiling.”

“Pasteurized Milk is a Fun-Lover conspiracy to weaken us! Raw Milk is natural! Raw Milk is healthier! Raw Milk is delicious! Raw Milk is…”

Eugene’s rant was suddenly interrupted by his cheeks ballooning with more vomit, which he promptly expectorated into the Not.

“Uggghhh. Not that I’ll be able to keep it down, but how are we set for food?”

“Let’s see. I’ve got a bag of Circus Peanuts, some Cotton Candy, a couple boxes of Animal Crackers, still got some of Saccharina’s Sweets but I was hoping to hold onto them.”

“You always were too sentimental.”

“There’s Kettle Corn, Corn Dogs, Dog biscuits, Purple Fluffernutter Sandwiches (Lolly’s favourite) and… an apple.”

“A caramel apple?”

“No, just an apple.”

“Gross.”

“Plus, I’m sure you still have the Bazooka, so that’s an infinite supply of cream pies right there.”

“Wait, that’s it! The Bazooka!”

“What about it?”

“We can use it as a rocket engine!”

…

“Huh?”

“It’s Thermodynamics! We set it to make pies with extra inertia, fire them out the back, and that will propel us forward!”

…

“That is the greatest idea you’ve ever had.”

Eugene forced himself to his feet in spite of his motion sickness and retrieved the enormous bazooka from his tiny pockets. Mounting it on his shoulder and taking care to keep it level so they didn’t go plunging down into the Not or flying up towards the Is, he fired off a coconut cream pie.

The pie erupted forward with so much force it sent Eugene, but not the boat, flying backwards. Thinking fast, Eugene immediately

shapeshifted into a giant anthropomorphic parachute with the bazooka tied up in his safety harnesses. He was moving fast enough that he was able to catch enough air (or whatever was floating just above the Not) to lift him up by several dozen meters. As he gradually floated back down, he was able to manipulate his position by blowing until both he and the bazooka gently landed back inside the lifeboat.

…

“Guess we should have secured it to something, huh?”

After they had completed the inventory of everything in their pockets, Pius decided to try his luck at fishing with a rod he had found.

“And what exactly do you hope to catch? It’s not a real ocean, remember?” Eugene asked, busying himself with trying to create a pivoting holder for the bazooka out of a unicycle and a few rolls of duck tape (not a typo, actual analogue tape rolls of numerous documentaries about ducks).

“Well, it’s the Not, so Not a fish,” Pius explained as he hooked the popped kettle corn kernel onto the fishing line. “Not a crab, Not a squid, Not a polyp, Not a sponge, Not a slug, Not an eel, Not a starfish, Not a jellyfish and Not a sea turtle. But at the same time, Not nothing.”

Casting his line, the popcorn kernel splashed into the Not with a good solid ‘splunk’. At the same time, a giant popcorn kernel suddenly appeared, dangling in front of them while held by only a hairsbreadth of thread.

“Ah…Eugene, do you see that?”

“I see it, Pius. Is that yours?”

“I’m not sure. Let me try something.”

Pius tentatively moved his line back and forth, only for the large kernel in front of him to mirror his movements.

“Eugene, can you see what it’s attached to?”

“No, the string just goes up for as far as I can see.”

Pius lifted his line out of the water, causing the giant kernel to disappear, only to reappear as soon as he let the lure drop below the surface again.

“I hope it’s not another pattern screamer. That last one was so rude, hanging up on us like that.”

…

“Wait, what?”

“Hey, bring it a bit closer. I want to try something,” Eugene ordered. Pius complied, manoeuvring his fishing line so that the giant kernel hung within reach of the boat. Eugene jumped and grabbed it, giving it a sharp pull. Just as expected, Pius felt a tug on his line.

“That is truly perplexing,” Pius said with a furrowed brow. “I wonder… hey Eugene, hold on tight!”

“What? Oh no, no, no, no!”

Eugene screamed as Pius reeled in his line, causing him to shoot into the sky and reappear bursting through the surface of the Not, dangling from the end of the lure.

“See Eugene, I told you I wouldn’t catch nothing!”

As Eugene huddled under a blanket and sipped Clown’s Milk in an attempt to calm himself after his brief Not exposure, Pius (who had made himself a tricorne hat out of an old newspaper, irrefutably making him the lifeboat captain) read aloud from Dr. Clef’s Survival Guide.

“Did you ever think about how weird the terms Humes and Kants are? Most scientific phenomena are named after the people who discovered them or Greek letters, but we named these things after Enlightenment Era philosophers as… what, a joke?

“Anyway, say you’re in a region with a low Hume level – or low Kant level, whatever, I never learned the damn system – you’ll know because a) the number on your Kant Counter will be low – I don’t know how low. Again, I never learned the system – and b) EVERYTHING WILL LOOK LIKE YOU'RE TRIPPING BALLS!

“Now, it’s possible you are tripping balls and reality is actually perfectly normal, so you’re going to want to do a little field sobriety test. First, stare at your hands. Keep staring at them. If your hands don’t look normal, then you’re tripping balls. Get yourself someplace safe – not a hospital – and enjoy. If they look normal, then that means you’re in a low Hume/Kant region and are probably fucked.

“I’ll be honest, getting yourself unfucked ain’t going to be easy. Talloran managed to do it though, so there’s some hope, right? Best advice I can give here is not to count on Scranton Reality Anchors. Hell, those things didn’t even help Scranton in the end, you know (You probably don’t know since this is all highly classified information)."

“Can you please just skip to something that might actually be helpful?” Eugene asked.

“I”ll try. Let’s see, next is a rant about how he thinks he might be in a nuthouse somewhere and all Reality is his delusion, making him God. Then he speculates on how Gears can be a robot and the Black Queen’s father at the same time, talks about some stuff from his Geo Sea days… yeah, I’m starting to think this isn’t an actual survival guide.”

“It’s probably not a good idea to take survival advice from a guy who would kill us if he had the chance in the first place. Where’d you get that book anyway?”

“I found it in a Bargain Bin at **`The Ikea`** that time we were there. The review on the back said it was must-read TV.”

…

“What?”

Ring Ring

Ring Ring

Ring Ring

“The phone’s ringing again Eugene.”

“I hear it.”

“Should I answer it?”

“No.”

…

Ring Ring

“I’m going to answer it.”

“Don’t.”

“Hello, this is Pius the Clown, whom may I say is calling?”

“I’m sorry, but the number you have dialled is imaginary,” an automated voiced replied.

“I didn’t dial anything, you called me.”

“Hang up. It's either a pattern screamer or a telemarketer.”

“All of our operators are currently disembodied consciousnesses trapped in an eternal hell of their own existential despair. Please, stay on the line.”

The phone began playing a dramatic if melancholic instrumental track as hold music.

…

“Are you actually staying on the line?”

“They said ‘please’ Eugene.”

“Ugh.”

“**The Is is what was Nevermeant, the Not what should have Been,**” a deep, demonic voice said as it suddenly broke the melody of the hold music.

“Hello, who’s this?”

“**For all that Is, there is an Infinity more that could have been. It is not just. The Is hath no more right to Be than the Not. Some Not is Ought whilst most Is should be Not, yet the Is will rot to Not in time**.”

"How are you speaking in bold?"

"Hang up!"

"**…THE KING SAT ALONE ON HIS THRONE OF BONE, CONDONED BY THE CLONES OF STONE. BEMOANED BY THE KNOWN, GROWN FROM WHAT WAS SOWN**, and the world felt like nothing, amen."

…

“I’m sorry, you have the wrong number.”

Click

"I told you it was a telemarketer."

“Alright, that should do it,” Eugene said as he completed the final inspection of his cream pie jet engine rig.

“Hey Eugene, what do you think these big monoliths are?” Pius asked, cocking his head at the peculiar protrusion of gleaming stone rising out of the sea.

“It doesn’t matter. If this jet engine works, we’ll be able to travel the Not until we find a whirlpool back to our Reality, then we can find the Library, and then the Circus, and then forget all of this ever happened.”

…

“Do you think they’re just like some kind of iceberg or something?”

“Next time Icky wants to travel outside all known Reality, I’m taking a personal day.”

“This one’s getting awfully close.”

“I’m telling you, I’m going to have to get Tinkles to up my dose of Clown Impulse Suppressant after this.”

“The more I look, the more real it becomes.”

“This is not where I thought I’d be at this point in my life.”

“And yet, I cannot look away.”

“Being shuffled across the Not just so that I can crawl out of a snake’s ass.”

“It’s *hypnotic*.”

“Pius, are you even lis – Pius, no!”

Alas, Eugene’s intervention came too late. The Monolith had drawn existence from Pius’s mere observation of it, entrancing him and becoming more and more real the closer it got. As soon as it was in reach, Pius reached out to touch it. The act of feeling it was enough to make it fully real. Luminescent cracks formed in a grid-like pattern all along the Monolith’s exterior, causing it to break off into a million pieces and evaporate into smoke. In its place was an entity of some sort, composed entirely of radiant blacks and vacuous whites, of three-dimensional shapes that only made sense as two-dimensional drawings, of particles and forces which could only exist in the mind but drove mad any mind that beheld them.

…

“Oh, it’s an egg or cocoon or something. That’s neat,” Pius remarked.

The entity landed with a splash into the Not, generating a tsunami that sent the lifeboat spiralling away from it. Both Clowns screamed in terror and Eugene puked from a combination of terror and motion sickness, looking up in horror at the colossal entity before them. Their horror only increased when the entity seemed to take an interest in them, swimming towards them and opening a large orifice to engulf them.

“It’s going to eat us!” Pius screamed.

“The hell it is! Why fill up on Clowns when you can skip straight to dessert?” Eugene asked as he aimed the bazooka/jet engine at the approaching monstrosity. “Eat Lemon Meringue you son of a bitch!”

Eugene squeezed the trigger and held it, producing a volley of pies at a rate of 700 rounds per minute (he had illegally modified the bazooka to be fully automatic sometime back when he realized the key to a good a pie throwing sketch was overkill). The inertially modified pies propelled the little lifeboat forward at fantastic speeds as it rode up and down the massive bow wave the creature generated in its pursuit. Though many of the pies disappeared down its cavernous cavity, they did not slake its appetite. The entity needed a conscious observer to ensure its continued reality. If it vanished from sight, it would cease to be all together, but with a pair of observers incorporated into its being it would become self-sustaining, free to go where it would.

As the tiny lifeboat and colossal entity skidded along the surface of the Not, neither seemed to be gaining the upper hand. Eugene steered as evasively as the jerry-rigged pie thruster would allow, but the monster would not be shaken. As if sensing its preys growing sense of hopelessness, the entity widened its cavity, eager to devour them and become real.

This, however, proved a foolish decision, as a beam of emerald green light was fired into its gaping maw, triggering a catastrophic explosion and blowing the creature into rapidly dematerializing bits. The blast was so powerful that the lifeboat was sent flying through the air.

Eugene and Pius thought for sure that this time they would plunge

into the Depths of the Not, but they instead landed in the Crow's Nest of the Nautilus. The pair looked up to see Munin staring down at them stoically.

"Eugene," he said, in as polite a tone as he could manage, but Eugene was sure he sensed the man's anal sphincter tighten in memory of their recent performance.

"Well, this is awkward."

"You morons!" Icky shouted as she crawled into the Crow's Nest, right before throwing her arms around the two wayward Clowns in relief. "I really thought we might have lost you this time! You have to be more careful!"

"Sorry Icky," the pair apologized, slightly out of synchronicity with each other.

"It was Pius's fault,"

"You're the one who jumped ship!"

"You're the one who caused a fire, making jumping ship the rational choice!"

"Enough!" Icky ordered. "Next time we travel through the Not, I'm locking you two up in a crate."

"How'd you find us anyway?"

"We detected a Monolith breaking on our scopes from 80 000 grimnauts away," Munin replied. "It's a rare and calamitous occurrence that Icky assured us could only have been caused by the two of you. Luckily, we're well prepared for Schrödinger Krakens."

"Come on you two. I want you below deck and well secured before Nemo makes the dive back home."

"Sounds good to me. The sooner there's dry land under my feet, the better," Eugene said, slinging the bazooka over his shoulder.

"I hope you two realize how lucky you are," Munin said severely.

"It wasn't luck, I broke open a Monolith."

“The surface of the Not is not only vast but an ever-changing kaleidoscope, with distance and location having little meaning," Munin continued. "Anything, or anyone, lost typically remains so until it sinks beneath the surface and the very concept of existence ceases to –“

His melodramatic monologue was interrupted by a cream pie to the face.

“Sorry. Hair trigger.”

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Undead, Insane and Fully Loaded

« **A Circus Come To Not** | **Dread & Circuses Hub** | **A Vale of Tears** »

“Now we take both long balloons, tie them together like so, and… tada!” Lolly proudly presented the balloon butterfly to the small group of children gathered around her. As per usual, she was working the crowd in between the Matinee and Evening Big Top shows, making sure all the guests were happy and directing them towards the attractions they would enjoy the most.

The children clapped in amazement as the balloon butterfly started flapping its wings and fluttered around its creator.

“Butterflies are easy though. Who wants to see me make a monkey?” she asked. The children cheered eagerly in affirmation, but before Lolly could start she felt someone pulling at her skirt. She looked down to see a young girl with a disturbed expression. “What’s the matter, sweetie?”

“Ms. Lolly, there’s a scary looking man over there who wanted me to take a big gun and kill monsters with it,” the girl said, calm but still clearly unnerved by the experience.

“What?” Lolly asked bemused, looking up in the direction the girl had pointed. Sure enough, she saw an undead man in **a leather trench coat, stahlhelm and combat boots** trying to give away assault rifles and other weapons of war out the back of a truck. “Oh. Thank you, you did the right thing by telling an adult. Kids, I just need you to wait here for a moment. I promise I’ll be back, but I need to go tell the Ringmaster about this, okay? Thank you so much.”

Leaving the children to play with the balloon butterfly, she dashed towards the Ringmaster’s Tent.

"What, wrong color? Oh I can paint that. I got yellow. Yellow and… I think some blue left," the undead man said as he tried to shove an AK-47 into a confused Circus patron’s hands. "There's lots of options! And hey, you don't like the make, we got lots more. Plenty to go around, do not worry, I will not run out of stock. Cannot run out of stock. Literally, there's always more of these and it's just amazing."

“Hey you, Walking Dead!” Icky shouted as she marched towards the undead and unlicensed gun peddler, flanked by Lolly on one side and Manny on the other, with Noodles bringing up the rear. “Who the hell are you and what the hell are you doing at my Circus?”

"I'm Gary. Owner of Gunmetal Gary's. I make guns and oh man, oh boy are they good guns. You can use them for all kinds of things. But mostly killing, probably, if you're a smart guy. You're a smart guy, right?" the man replied as he handed Lolly a flyer and blew cigar smoke in her face.

"Okay, even though I believe gender identity is a fluid spectrum, do not call me 'guy',” Lolly said indignantly as she swatted the smoke away from her.

"No offense intended little lady. Gunmetal Gary's does not discriminate - free fully loaded and automatic firearms for everyone! God, I love this country! Do you want a shotgun? You look like you want a shotgun."

"No, I don't want a shotgun," Icky said through gritted teeth. "Why are you doing this here?"

" 'Cuz it's a pretty good spot. I can feel the wobbles in the air. Y'know, like a flavour, but made out of energy instead of meat. It's real good and I like it."

"Sir, this is a private circus. We never said you could set up shop here," Manny said firmly, his arms folded intimidatingly across his broad chest as he glared down at the interloper.

" 'Course you didn't. Nobody tells me to do anything. Because I don't know if you know this, but I'm *super* ugly. Look at this face. Not the face of a guy you tell stuff to," the undead man said as he huffed more smoke out of the hole where his nose used to be.

"Well we're telling you now: you need to get your zombie ass and your truckload of guns out of our Circus *right now*, or I'm going to lose my shit!" Icky growled, her eyes beginning to glow with purple flames.

"Hey now, hey now. Buddy. Pal. Chief. Friend. Compadre. Amigo. This doesn't have to get sticky. We're off on the wrong tooth here, I think. Look, these are free. Anyone can have them, for free. See, you can even advertise! 'Free gun with every ticket purchased!' That's a slogan. A real good one. I think we can help one another out. Wink. See, because I'm implying stuff."

"This is a family circus! There are kids here! We can't sell, or give away, weapons!" Icky screamed at him.

"I know you don't! That's where I come in. *I* can give them away *for* you! Problem solved! Everyone gets safer, and you get to set your customers up with some real nifty door prizes. It's a win-win! Check it out!"

At this, the dead man manifested a large, mechanically complex, triple-barreled device from nowhere and aimed it into the air, releasing a massive jet of flame into the sky.

"Now tell me that's not an attention-getter!"

Icky's left eye began to twitch.

"Manny, I'm going to lose it," she said in a quiet, sing-song voice.

"Don't worry, I can handle this joker. Lolly, try to keep her calm, would you?" Manny said. "Sir, with all due respect, we don't believe that freely distributing high capacity firearms to our patrons makes anybody any safer."

"Not a problem fella; each and every one of my weapons comes with a 100% safety guarantee! Friendly Fire and shooting yourself in

the foot are things of the past when you shop at Gunmetal Gary's!"

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"Real simple pal, my guns only kill bad guys. Don't know how much simpler I can make it. Oh, I do know actually! I can give you a demonstration! Picture's worth a thousand words and what not, except this is better than a picture 'cause I'm actually doing it."

Gary carelessly discarded his triple-barrelled flame-thrower and manifested a rocket launcher.

"That tent over there empty?"

"No!"

"Perfect!"

The four Circus members gasped in horror as Gary fired off a missile. It pierced through the nearby tent which immediately erupted into panicked screams, but no actual fire. A few seconds later the missile flew back out, did a few figure-eights in the air, and then dropt down to Gary's feet.

"See, not one singed hair! Am I amazing or what?" he asked as he bent down to retrieve the missile. He then proceeded to swallow it whole, only to have it explode in his stomach.

"Oh, excuse me," he said as he belched out smoke. "Anyway, it's not just rockets either. It's everything. Check it out!"

He tossed away the rocket launcher and replaced it with an assault rifle, which he fired wildly into the air. No one was hit, with the exception of Eugene who looked like Swiss Cheese.

With a sigh of resignation, he decided to make the best of it. He grabbed a nearby drink and chugged it down, with the beverage spurting out of him like a watering can with holes in it.

"Huh. That has literally never happened before," Gary said, scratching his head and staring down the barrel of the possibly defective weapon. "So how many can I put you down for?"

"I -"

"I can load you up like you wouldn't believe! I can arm every man, woman, child and mentally unbalanced convict in your Circus with rifles, handguns, ammo bandoliers, grenades, you name it I got it!"

"Look -"

"I'm here to help you with your all your wartime needs! I'm having the sale of the century; everything absolutely positively 100% off! How are such unbelievable deals possible? Easy, I've got no overhead. I make my stock out of thin air with magic and being dead my cost of living is non-existent. You will not find finer weapons are at a lower price anywhere this side of Undervast!"

Manny waited to be interrupted again.

"What's the matter Picasso, why aren't you saying anything?"

Manny sighed, and did an upside-down facepalm that looked like he was stroking his chin.

"I admit that the fact your weapons can somehow determine friend from foe is impressive, but we already have defences of our own, and frankly they're a lot more discreet than yours," he told him.

"Discretion is not the better part of valour my good man. Trust me, you want weapons that put the fear of the Big Boss into your enemies' hearts. You want them to go 'oh my god we're all going to die' because they are and it's common courtesy to let them know that."

"That's it, we've wasted enough time with this idiot," Icky said, stepping back in front of Manny.

"Veronica, please don't attack the man with a truckload of weapons," Manny said.

"I'm not going to attack him. I've got it under control," she insisted, taking several deep breaths. "I'm going to make this real simple for you. We paid to use this fairground for the day, which means you have no right to set up shop here. You're taking up our space and

upsetting our customers and staff with your reckless gunfire! Remove yourself from this Circus, or I will remove you!"

Icky was baring her teeth now, which were beginning to transform into fangs.

Gary took a puff of his cigar as he seemed to consider the situation.

"Okay, counteroffer; I join your Circus so that this is all legit," he said.

"What?"

"Just part-time, in between road trips. It gets kind of lonely, out on the road all the time. Might be nice to have a place to call home."

"No way. You scared that little girl with your guns and your ranting, and that is not okay!" Lolly said defiantly.

"And we don't need an arms dealer!" Icky added.

"That's cool, I can dig that. I can do a show, a big pyrotechnic show with explosions in all the colours of the rainbow! It will be like if a Michael Bay movie had sex with a bag of skittles. And not vanilla sex either, but some real kinky Japanese tentacle porn sex. Plus I can use the publicity to promote my wares."

"No, you can't! It's a liability thing! You cannot, under any circumstances, hand out weapons to our patrons!"

…

"What if instead of handing them out I drop them in by little parachutes?"

"Manny, this guy's not listening to reason. Do some mind stuff on him," Icky ordered.

"Mind stuff? What are talking about mind stuff? That don't sound Kosher!" Gary shouted.

"Sir, just pack up your truck and leave and no harm will come to

you," Manny assured him.

"I… no, listen. Just hear me out."

"We're done hearing you out. This is your last warning," Icky threatened.

"I haven't even told you about my Civil Defense Points yet! Collect enough and you redeem them for even awesomer weapons, like a three-story tall tank!"

"Noodles, escort this gentleman to the Kaleidoscope and make sure he is sent somewhere very far away."

The giant Clown growled menacingly as he approached Gary, reaching out to grab him by the scruff of the neck.

"No wait! You really don't want to do that!" Gary protested. "Every time someone tries to arrest me my truck -"

The instant Noodles placed his hand on Gary, his truck blew up in a devastating explosion. Everyone screamed at the thunderous boom and looked on in horror as the plumes of smoke and flame rose into the air from the smouldering crater.

"Is anyone hurt?" Lolly shouted as she ran towards the fire.

"Lolly, careful!" Icky yelled after her.

"It's okay, no one's hurt," Manny announced, his eyes scanning the scene thoroughly for any sign of death or injury. "It scared the crap out of everyone, but no one's hurt."

"Where'd Gary go?" Icky demanded.

"I don't feel him anywhere. He's gone," Manny replied. "I'll oversee clean up of this, you settle the crowd down."

"Right. Lolly, come on, you're with me. Noodles, grab some more security and search the entire Circus for any sign of that asshole!"

Despite the best efforts of Noodles the Clown, they never did find

any trace of Gunmetal Gary. He had disappeared as mysteriously as he arrived, with nothing to indicate he had been there at all except for the plethora of high-capacity firearms haphazardly scattered about and the massive flaming crater that caused the Circus to lose their safety deposit on the fairgrounds.

Though his visit had been brief and confusing, he would be remembered by the Circus for many years to come, primarily in the form of an artistic depiction at the admission's booth reminding the ticket seller to deny him entry.

« **A Circus Come To Not** | **Dread & Circuses Hub** | **A Vale of Tears** »

A Vale of Tears

« **Undead, Insane and Fully Loaded** | **Dread & Circuses Hub** |

“This city is enormous,” Victor remarked as he stared out the 303rd story window. The adjacent buildings stood around 1600 meters, with the tallest building being nearly double that, four times as tall as the tallest skyscraper in his world. These titanic spires were forged with frames of carbon nanotubes and diamondoid windows that sparkled in the sunlight. Just as impossible as their height and composition was their abundance, as the city stretched onwards for as far as Victor could see. “Why is it so huge?”

“Hmmm? Oh, well according to what **`information`** Skitter was able to find in the Library, this whole reality was ruled by a **`pseudo-Catholic theocracy`** for over three hundred years,” Iris replied distantly as she appraised a laptop she had found. “Extremely patriarchal and puritanical, and thus they experienced an above-average birth rate. But they also possessed the advanced technology that had been gifted to them by Him, and so were able to support a large population. This world’s population grew much bigger than ours ever did; at least tens of billions of people, maybe hundreds.”

Victor turned his gaze down to the streets below. Where once there surely must have been uncountable swarms of citizens going about their day, now there were only the Unclean; faceless half humans bigger than any non-anomalous animal that had ever lived, crawling through the ruined streets in a desperate search for something they could no longer comprehend.

“And now, all those hundreds of billions of people are just… gone?” he asked softly. “Jesus. This, this is even worse than that world where the sun turns people into **`wax monsters`**. At least those things seemed kind of happy. But the Unclean, you said that they -”

“In the words of another interdimensional traveller, ‘don’t think about it’,” Iris told him. “Step away from the window Victor.”

“Right, sorry,” he said. He turned his back to the horror outside and took off his glasses to clean them. “Maybe the next post-apocalyptic wasteland we visit can just be a regular nuclear holocaust?”

“Turns out those are surprisingly rare. I guess nuclear deterrence isn’t as crazy as it seems.”

“Speaking of nuclear and crazy, I haven't heard a peep out of Lolly in a while," he said. "Maybe we should check on her."

"I'm sure she just found something to keep her distracted."

"And quiet?"

Iris finally took her eyes off the laptop.

"You're right, let's go check on her."

Shutting the laptop and placing it in her bag, the two of them went to search for Lolly.

The floor they were on was primarily an open office, with all the light coming from a wall of windows on the far side. Numerous mundane personal items dotted the room - briefcases, hats and jackets, 3D photos of loved ones - still laying where their owners had abandoned them over half a century ago. Numerous chairs were askew or overturned, left to fall where they would in a mad dash to escape the city, with no one ever coming back to right them.

Victor and Iris were momentarily startled by the sound of an angelic chime over the somehow still functional PA system.

"All pause for the midday prayer," a serene male voice announced.

"He who art above, forever Pure be His name. His Kingdom is come, and His will shall be done, on Earth as it is in Heaven.

May He grant us the clarity to avoid Sin, and may His Tears Purify us when we stray. May He forgive us our deviances, and may He

never forgive the Unclean.

May He lead the Blessed Militia to victory against the Unclean, and may the Unclean suffer for all Eternity for their unspeakable Sin, for His is the Kingdom and the Purity and the Virtue, forever and ever, amen."

Another set of angelic chimes signalled the end of the prayer break.

"That's been playing to an empty building for sixty years? So creepy," Victor remarked.

"*Blarg*!" Lolly shouted as she swung down from an air vent, having shape-shifted her face into the same blank visage of the Unclean. To her disappointment, neither of her colleagues seemed especially frightened. "*Marp*?"

"This is what you were doing instead of collecting electronics?" Iris asked with a raised eyebrow.

Lolly dropped down to the floor and shook her face back to normal.

"No, I did that," she replied, pulling out a sack from her hammerspace pockets. “I went through the whole office and nabbed everything that looked like a laptop, tower, tablet, or smartphone I could find. Are you sure these computers are magic though? Because they seem pretty normal to me.”

“I didn’t say they were magic, I said they were advanced,” Iris replied as she examined the contents of the sack. “I haven’t been able to figure out exactly what sort of hardware it is yet, but I do know it’s extremely efficient and not producing any waste heat. Memory and processing power are at least twenty times higher than a comparable top-of-the-line product in our reality. It charges wirelessly and in under a minute, consumes no power on standby, and a full charge can give you over a hundred hours of peak use. This Faithful OS, on the other hand, is, well, it’s what you would expect for a theocratic regime. The restrictions are rather severe so at the very least I’ll have to do some jailbreaking. Ideally, I’d like to make a version of DarkEnergy that’s compatible with this hardware and install that instead."

"Worst comes to worst, we could probably sell this stuff as is in Eurtec," Victor suggested.

"Uh-huh. That's cool, I guess," Lolly said disinterestedly. "So… when are we going to get my hovercraft?"

"For the third time Lolly, we're getting your hovercraft last, since we can't very well haul a car through the building with us," Iris huffed.

"Well we can't, but she might; I have no idea how much she can fit in those pockets," Victor countered. "Don't worry Lolly, the bottom forty stories of this place are a parking garage, so I'm sure you'll have your pick. Just don't wander off, since neither of us wants to re-enact a classic Seinfeld episode."

Lolly squeed excitedly and started jumping up and down.

"This is so amazing! I'm going to get a hovercraft!"

Iris closed the sack back up and handed it back to Lolly.

"Alright, these are enough electronics to keep me and my tech team busy for a while," she said. "Let's go check out the lab."

The three of them moved through the administrative offices and into the medical facility in the back. Away from the windows, the place only became darker, and they were forced to take their flashlights out to navigate. The eerie silence was briefly broken by a soft rumble through the floor. They held still for a moment to make sure it wasn't a herald of something disastrous, and then pressed onwards.

At the very back there was a large sign on a heavy door which read 'Authorized Personnel Only by Order of the Sacrosanct Father of Resplendent Penance', but the door was slightly ajar and the electronic lock appeared to be non-functional.

As they stepped into the room, the lights attempted to turn on, flickering a few times before mostly giving up, strobing at random intervals. Either side of the room was lined with transparent tubes, two meters tall by a meter across. They were all empty and in pristine condition, with the exception of a single broken tube, whose shattered fragments still littered the ground around it.

Iris was focused so intently upon it that she nearly jumped out of her skin when she heard Lolly shriek in terror.

“Oh my god, look!” she said, pointing to the end of the room while cowering behind Iris and Victor.
There, sealed behind a barrier of thick diamond, was what had made the rumbling noise only a moment ago.

An Unclean.

It was a relatively small one, only a few tonnes in weight and a few meters in height. It lay on its side, perfectly still, its blank face turned away from them.

“Is it dead?” Victor whispered.

“No, I don’t think they can die and still remain intact,” Iris replied, shining her flashlight towards the caged monstrosity. “It doesn’t seem active though. It must have been in here since just before this World ended. It's probably the very same one that broke out of this tube here, and they never got the chance to ship it off to the Unfertile Lands. Well, if it’s been locked in there for sixty-four years already we probably don’t need to worry. Keep an eye on it though.”

“Mm-hmmm!” Lolly nodded in fervent agreement, keeping her gaze fixed on the abomination. At the end of the lab, across from the Unclean, they found an adjacent room full of storage tanks.

“His Holy Tears. Excellent,” Iris said as she began inspecting the first tank.

“It’s just a bunch of goop. How is this better than a hovercraft?” Lolly asked.

“It’s Akivic Purification Serum,” Iris said. “It generates off-the-chart levels of Akiva radiation in highly specific wavelengths. The radiation strengthens traits with matching spectral resonance and destroys traits with opposing resonance. Enough exposure to this stuff will purify you of sin and embellish your virtues, at least in the eyes of Him. This is how the Church was able to control this World. If you burn a heretic you create a dozen more, but bathe them in this stuff

and you get a born-again missionary ready to spread the good news. It's the most perfect mind-controlling agent any totalitarian regime could ever ask for."

"And why exactly does Darke want this?" Victor asked nervously.

"He says he found someone willing to sell him some Incarnate Flesh, but before he buys it he wants to make sure he has a way to purify it," Iris replied. "He intends to use alchemy to change the Akiva wavelength to whatever he needs. The specifics aren't really my concern. It's dangerous to use this stuff in its pure form so I want you two to look around for anything labelled Nutrient solution, a healing serum called Blessing, and maybe something called HFT. There was no explicit mention in any of the files about what it did. Combine that with the fact that there was a shortage of it right before the outbreak of Unclean, and I think it either prevents or reduces the chances of subjects mutating into the Unclean."

As Victor and Lolly began searching through the storage area for the desired compounds, Iris dedicated her attention to retrieving the Tears out of the tank. There was a large pipe at the top that apparently sent the Tears to the tubes upon demand, but there was also a small faucet near the bottom, presumably for relieving overfill or in case they needed to test a sample. Placing a plastic container under the tap, she carefully turned the knob until a slow trickle started pouring out.

The substance was perfectly clear, utterly pure and uncontaminated by any foreign materials. It was slightly more viscous than water, yet flowed outwards with an odd sort of grace that seemed to ever so slightly skirt the laws of gravity and motion. The light was refracted through it in such a way as to give it a soft radiance, and even the sound of it flowing out from the tap and into the bucket was somehow melodious.

"Wow," Iris murmured as she stared at it in awe. "It does have a strange allure to it. I suddenly do feel unclean, along with a slight compulsion to actually bathe in it, like it would be the most purifying experience imaginable. That's a little unsettling actually. If I suddenly start stripping off my clothes one of you will stop me, right?

“Of course,” Victor agreed.

“Nope, sorry,” Lolly giggled.

“Thank you, Victor,” Iris said with a smirk and slight shake of her head. “It’s interesting that I didn’t feel anything when it was still in the tank. I wonder if it’s shielded against Akiva radiation, and if there are any shielded containers we could use instead of -”

She was interrupted by a torturous, blood-curdling wail from behind them. All at once they turned to see the Unclean in the cage rising to an upright position. Even in its hermetically sealed chamber, it could somehow sense that there was now a free-flowing source of His Tears nearby. Finally roused from its long malaise, it slammed its fist into the diamond wall with unimaginable force. Cracks immediately appeared in the wall, and the Unclean slammed it again and again and again until it shattered into thousands of shards.

Lolly jumped straight upwards at a fantastic speed, breaking a hole through the ceiling. Iris and Victor stared as the monster crawled towards them at a frightening pace, cornered and with no time to mount a defence. Fortunately, Lolly had not forgotten them. She stretched her arms down, wrapping them around their waists like a rope, and yanked them up to the floor above just as the Unclean blundered through.

“Are you okay? Did it touch you? It didn’t touch you, did it?” she asked frantically.

“Get your noodle arm off me!” Iris said, freeing herself and rushing to the hole in the floor to see what was happening.

“We’re fine Lolly, thank you,” Victor said.

“That thing is drinking all the Tears, which is the whole reason we came here!” Iris retorted.

“That's the whole reason *you* came here. I came for a hovercraft, and I only agreed to that because I thought we’d be safe from the Unclean inside,” Lolly said as she retracted her arms back to their normal length. “But we’re not safe, so I’m aborting this mission.”

She reached into her pockets and pulled out her Kaleidoscope keys with the intention to turn the next door she saw into a Way back to the Circus.

“It’s just one Unclean, not even a big one,” Iris said as she rummaged through her backpack and pulled out a double-barrelled dart gun. “This is loaded with an alchemically enhanced formula of the serum Lord Blackwood invented to destroy the Unclean. Darke made it for me especially for this trip, so I guess you could call them Darkwood Tears. Far more potent than the original, plus that thing is a shrimp. A few rounds should be enough.”

“Iris, it’s not worth risking your life to fight that thing! We can find another source of Tears,” Victor insisted.

“Recon here is expensive, time-consuming and dangerous. Taking down this Unclean now is preferable to possibly fighting a multitude of bigger ones later,” she countered as she loaded the gun.

“Iris, don’t be stupid! Getting caught by one of those is actually a fate worse than death, because we know what happens to us when we die!” Lolly said. “I’m going to Oneiroi West permanently and you two will just have **H’rasm’Kal** grab your souls and stick them into new bodies, but none of that will happen if that thing gets you!”

“She’s right; you could end up trapped in a living hell until the sun blows up," Victor agreed. "It’s not worth it!”

“Now that you bring it up, I’m not actually sure if H’rasm can cleave a soul from the Unclean,” Iris mused. “Look, it’s not that bad. If it gets me, you just go back and get more Darkwood serum so that someone else can take this thing out.”

Just as she was about to jump down, she gave them a rare ear-to-ear smile.

“But it’s not going to get me.”

The four-meter drop to the floor below was nothing, and she landed on her feet with ease. The Unclean didn’t even react to the sound, for it was too busy greedily lapping up His Tears. Iris quietly fell back

as far as she could to give herself the maximum amount of time for additional shots, and then fired a pair of darts into the Unclean's back.

The being screeched in agony as enormous heaps of molten flesh sloughed off its form, briefly resembling the people they once were before dissolving completely, finally free of their torment. The Unclean turned to look at Iris, who had already reloaded another set of darts. She aimed for its head this time but only hit its neck, causing most of its left side to dissolve into brown ichor. Using its remaining arm, it furiously hauled itself towards Iris. Hurriedly reloading her gun once more, she took her last shot as it began to throw itself upon her.

It exploded into a horrific smelling brown goo, most of which rained down upon Iris.

"Huh," Lolly said as she and Victor looked down through the hole in the floor. "Hey Victor, remember when we first met and I said I thought your job sounded boring? I take that back."

The two of them jumped down and rushed to Iris's aid, who was standing nearly catatonically still.

"Iris, are you okay?" Victor asked as he handed her a towel he had grabbed from a nearby bathing tank.

"I'm covered in Slenderman guts for the third bloody time!" she screamed, but then took several deep breaths to regain her composure, dabbing the ichor off her face.

"Third time? When was the second?" Victor asked.

"I was at the **Ikea** once, long story," she replied. "Scoop some of this stuff up, won't you? It might be worth something."

"Sure thing."

"That was pretty awesome," Lolly told her. "Sorry about your clothes though. That turtleneck is cashmere, isn't it?"

"It's fine, I have plenty of them," she said.

“Remember: if you want to take it off, I won’t stop you.”

Iris wiped some ichor off her sweater and flicked it at Lolly.

“Well, you’re not sitting in my hovercraft covered in that stuff!”

« **Undead, Insane and Fully Loaded** | **Dread & Circuses Hub** |

...And I'm the Star!

The odd, tiger-colored, water-act-ruining spectacle was helped down into a seat at one end of a table in the Ringmaster's Tent. He twitched a couple of times, trying to find a position that didn't make it painful to sit. He settled on tilting himself to lean heavily on his left elbow. He was wincing and covered in bandages (in many multiple colors). A muscular man entered and sat down opposite him, looking pensively at the sore, sorry sight trying its best to look presentable in tattered attire. Eventually, the helpers had backed off from the altogether unsightly figure and competed over who had picked the most piranha teeth out of the guy.

The muscly man rolled his shoulders and entered an inquisitive, formal stance in his seat. "Any statements you'd like to make before we begin?"

"Two. You look odd."

"I get that a lot."

"I mean, I've seen a lot of weird people — where I come from, weird is normal! Or, no, sorry, where I come from *normal* is normal, where I went after that weird is normal, and now I'm kind of in a new place where I'm unsure what's weird and not. Still, I've never seen weird like you." The tiger-pallet-toting man attempted to interlock his shaking fingers, but each time he did his whole body jolted and his hands pulled away from each other. Eventually, he let his shaking arms rest on the table, convulsing a couple times before finding a position that didn't make his body stab with pain. "Do you see the whole world upside-down?"

"No."

"That's good to know. That would be disorienting. That would be real unfortunate, but then again, if you've always been like that then how would you know if you saw everything upside-down? It would be your normal. Heh, there's that word again! Normal. I have a weird relationship with normal. It's never really sat well with me. Heh, heheh, okay, I'm sorry, now *I'm* getting weird. Or, was I already? Still, sorry, I'll shut up about it."

"Okay, now —"

"Wait! You said two state — sorry, you said 'any statements' and I said 'two'. Got confused there. Regardless, I'm sorry, I have a second statement. Can I say it?"

"Go ahead."

"Okay, this one's a bit long. Hi! I'm, uh, okay, I really liked your show! I mean, I didn't really get to see a lot of it, but it sure left it's mark! Ha, heh, heheh, okay, sorry, but really! I saw you guys when I was really little and I never forgot it. I love you guys. I almost didn't know if you were real. Sorry! I landed in your tank! It was — it's just — I forgot to carry a two, and passing through dimensional borders, no matter how 'pocket' they are, is really tough and I haven't had much practice, so I thought I was just going to plop down and make my entrance backstage — ha! Like, that wouldn't work, you can't make an entrance backstage! You enter *from* backstage, that would've been…

"Stupid, okay, I digress, thank you for saving me! I know you guys don't always… *do* that. I think, at least, from what I've heard, not like it deterred me! I like you guys… a lot… okay, so, could you please send my apologies to that mermaid lady? She was really pretty, tell her she's pretty for me, could you do that? I'm sure she gets that a lot, uh, maybe don't say that. I might tell her myself. Actually scratch the apology thing too, I'll say sorry when I see her. She'll probably slap me… I think girls slap guys, right? I've seen it happen. On television. Maybe I shouldn't get all my lessons on television. I'm rambling! I tend to do that —

"Oh! Yeah! *I. I* am… Smarty Marty! Uh, ta-dah! I've been a… a fan of you guys for a *very* long time — crepe, I don't know how long you

guys live, I might have, uh, for me it's a long time, I saw you when I was real little and now I'm… thirty… something. Isn't that weird? I've just, I haven't kept track of birthdays for a long time. I… I don't like them. I digress! Again! I, uh, you must be wondering about me! 'Who is this guy and why is he rambling at me?' Ha! Haha, heheh, heheheh, okay, uh, I'm Smarty Marty Simmons, or just Smarty, or Marty, but you can call me Marty Simmons — other way around… there were three terms, not other way around, but you get it! I worked at Wondertainment, and I didn't like it there, so here I am! I just, uh, I told them *sayonara!* and took my stuff — er, no I didn't, I just left. Then and there. I was done with their bull, bull, uh, bull honky, and I wanted out, and I didn't know where to go — except I did, and it was the circus, and here I am! I've always loved face paint and theatrics, so I thought I'd… I thought, uh, I'd thought I fit right in, but maybe I'm wrong… I'll…"

He broke from his broken flailing (clearly there was supposed to be more physical emphasis throughout his impromptu speech, but every time he tried his eyes widened and he went back to his previous position) and looked around the room, making sure not to bend his neck in any way that would send him into spasms. "I'll, uh, I'll shut up is what I'll do. I talk a lot. I should stop that."

Manny glowered at the ambitious young soul, waiting patiently to make sure he was definitely entirely completely done with his speech. Once that was clear, he straightened up and breathed deep to prepare for his speech.

"*Wait!*"

All Manny could do was look at him.

"Uh, you said statements, not questions — I'll make it short. Look, do you guys have a stress ball anywhere? I just, I think better when I have a stress ball in one hand, and uh, well it relieves stress, you know? Haha, okay, yeah. That would be nice, if you could." He cleared his throat, and looked to see that no one was going anywhere to fetch him any sort of anything. "Okay, okay yeah, I'm uh, I'm done. Please, talk away."

Manny took his *second* deep breath, held it for just a second to

make absolutely, positively, one hundred percent sure that Marty wasn't going to talk again… and then he spoke. "From Wondertainment, you say? Anything you worked on?"

"Um… no… I, no, unfortunately. I grew up in Wonder World! Tee emm and my momma supported me so I was admittedly a lazy bum and never figured out why I should get a job until she, uh…" The man shook a little harder for just a second or two. "She passed. She was beautiful. Best mom I or anyone else could have ever hoped for. Raised me right! Heh, for the most part. I might have been the teensiest bit spoiled…

"But anyways! She died and I couldn't couch surf for long before people got tired of me mooching off of them, so I looked up at that big tower and thought 'Alright Marty! You're gonna go in there and get a gosh darn job!' And uh, I did. I had a pretty plentiful portfolio and they couldn't *not* accept me. So I got in as a Toy Tinker — er, that is to say that I got into the Toy Creation Department." His breath got a bit more staggered now, and his right hand squeezed into fists in and out. "What made me leave was… on our first — *my* first, sorry. On my first, at? At my first toy idea presentation thingy I was accused of stealing somebody else's idea… it was this big dude, uh, big name in the department."

The fellow sat up, visibly paining at the motion but unwilling to back away from his more serious stance. "This guy was my idol. He was what made me want to be in Wondertainment's arms in the first place. My everything. My… my *star*. I mean, I took my nickname from him — his name was Brainy. Brainy Brian." He pursed his lips and squeezed his eyes as if the name was difficult to say out loud. It was something akin to somebody mourning over the loss of an ex-lover, or a child realizing he would never be able to attain his dream of being an astronaut. "Brainy Brian Harding. I thought he was perfect. But he sat up, he sat up at the end of my presentation and said I was a *phony*. Said that I had blatantly stolen his idea, and I…

"I had gotten a standing ovation for mine! I was clearly working, I was working my way into this world and this amazing community of friends and fellows and he just stands up and calls my, pardon if I sound like I'm bragging, but my *spectacular* first toy… the Grow-N-Know Piano Plant. He calls it a piracy. And he's… been around

them so long that they couldn't… they all believed him! They didn't reprimand him at all, I saw him with his smug smiles that he hid behind their backs in his sideways glances at me and, and, and I couldn't take it! They punished me and sent him away on paid vacation due to an outbreak he had in the meeting… *paid* vacation. Paid vacation while I got dirt and a stern talking to. I wasn't having it. I, uh… Oh jeez, this sounds bad. I'm not usually a quitter! But I quit. Heh, I'm not usually a starter either, but I started, so that's a… start…

"But hey, I put my foot down, and I quit and stormed out and I laid my foot down — I already said that, but that just speaks volumes to the amount of confidence I did it with! I *really* put my foot down. That I did. Anyways, uh, I walked out and cried my little heart out and then I opened a portal, trying to go back to somewhere I knew and start over. It was a bit impulsive, but uh, I heard you guys like impulse here. Impulse and gut feelings. I didn't make the most flattering entrance, but I know you'll love me! I've always wanted to perform, I always wanted to be on stage and see the audience dance and wave and hoot and holler and yell and scream and… and… love me. Love me like no one person can, but exactly like a whole crowd could. In my emotional state I made a miscalculation, but that doesn't happen often with me. I'm, uh, I'm a math geek, I'm pretty good with it."

Manny looked questioningly at Smarty Marty, scanning him up and down for any signs of wavering, feeling the internals and externals. Something felt fuzzy and unclear, like an object in his peripheral vision. The entire explanation looked like it had physically taxed the man, but to be fair just sitting up at that moment looked physically taxing. Still, Manny noted a hint of wet in Marty's eyes. Marty would have wiped it off if only he had the ability to effectively raise either of his arms.

"And you want to perform?"

"Yeah! Yes! Yes I do! I would love to, I wanna see the bright stage lights and dance and sing and amaze and —"

Manny raised his hand to try and silence Smarty Marty, who stopped in his tracks and sunk slightly in embarrassment.

"So you want to perform. Do you have any abilities?"

"Yeah, I'm uh, I can make things — I'm a fast wit, I'm uh, I'm a social guy, I'm… good with kids. I am! I really am."

"You're not a Freak, are you?"

"A *what?* Well I would certainly hope not! I'm normal, I'm — no, I'm not, I, oh we've already had this talk. I'm absolutely positively not a freak, jeezums! What would… what would give you that impression? Oh gosh, do I really come off like a freak? Oh I'm so —"

"Oh, stop it with that. We're talking about Freaks, capital F. When we're looking for acts, we're looking for Freaks. We've got magicians, mermaids, conjoined twins with a comedy routine, an armless guy that juggles, we've got Clowns galore with all types of horrific and amazing features. You seem like an average Joe. We don't look for average Joes around here."

"An average —? Clearly I am versed in the odd and the — okay first I'm so sorry for misinterpreting freak, that was my bad, but come now! I broke a dimensional barrier, I've made toys for Wondertainment. Or, sorry, no, I *tried* to. Still, I was a Toy Tinker for a month there… I'm not an 'average Joe' I assure you! I can be amazing, audacious, Wondrous with a capital W, I swear it! I swear it with all my heart and might that I'm no… no… I'm no Joe six-pack I swear!"

Marty shook even more than he was before, wincing at the stinging his muscle tension caused. Manny looked disapprovingly at him. Marty wasn't a freak in any sense of the word, other than being unable to clearly and concisely communicate anything. However, one thing *was* clear and concisely communicated about him: he was extraordinarily motivated, and the circus *adored* "extraordinary". Marty looked desperately for a response from Manny, breathing in a way to suggest that he was about to speak but stopping himself each time.

"You have three options. By the time you come out of intensive care, have an act idea ready. If the Ringmaster and I like it, you have another week to practice it and then show it off to us. If we like it

then, you'll have a place on stage. If at either point you disappoint us, we send you back."

"Second option?"

"I'm not one to refuse an eager worker. If you want to be here that bad, I'll give you an in. You do the dirty work. Cleaning up, unclogging the toilets, milking the Clowns, you name it. All the menial labor, I'll keep you around as long as you do it. That's your second option. Your third one is to leave now, go back to Wonder World and —"

"Wonder World! Tee emm, you mean."

"— you can keep doing the things you were doing there. Bumming around and getting a job and whatever."

"Four options."

"Hmm?"

"There are four options. You missed one."

"Oh did I."

"You did. Let me propose a fourth option. I do your menial labor, sure. I can do that. I'm a motivated worker, most of the time, and I don't mind getting my hands dirty. Anymore, anyways. So I do that, I'll do it for free even, but I bet that I have a talent you're in need of."

Manny raised (or lowered) his eyebrows at the sudden bold gesture from this altogether frail and pitiful try-hard. Staring into Marty's eyes, he gestured to prompt a continuation. This was an interesting move, he might not fully realize just how little power he held at this moment.

"Alright, so, sure, I was in a lot of pain, but being carried out gave me a good view of your circus, and I'm just noticing something. You're a circus, and you don't, uh, you don't have a lot of *rides*. I mean, okay, you have some. They're kind of… Oh please forgive me if this sounds like an insult to your ride… designers, but they're uh, they're bland! Have you noticed that? I mean, think about it.

You're at the forefront of entertainment, but acts are one-time things. You can only do them so many times, rides sit there and are ready for use whenever. You have to prepare for acts. And yet, you're all odd and crazy and you have such normal… such normal rides! You might expect them at your local fair! Like a, like a, like you just… bought…

"Okay I'm getting carried away, I don't want to insult you, but I can make you rides. Heheh, heheheh, I can make you rides! I can make you rides that will have your MC&D, or your SCP, or heck, your GOC lining up for fancy free fun. Rides that tower and yet are portable. Rides that send you on trips through the whole circus, or the multiverse, or your own friggin' *head*. I can make people switch bodies, even! I'm a, I'm a, or I will be a ride-making machine! I'd do menial labor in the meantime and spend late nights designing and building rides. I'll make rides. I can make you them. How's that sound?"

Manny considered. In just the last week (only based on their clocks, days in the circus were variable) they had been forced to decommission a sky-high drop tower. It shot patrons up into the stratosphere, but it was ever so slightly inaccurate and they were forced to build a giant trampoline for it. It was quite the attraction. People weren't told that they were going to be blown off course and the extra thrill was exhilarating for first-time patrons. However, the trampoline was just one of those things that worked forever until it decided not to, and at that point they had a very disquieting trampoline-shaped mess to clean up. Ever since they lost **`Charley`**, the ride market they had was *very* low quality. The best they had was the Fun-lovers' Funhouse, but their domain wasn't *quite* a ride. At the very least it was a different experience. Shifting his attention back, the two each made eye contact and Smarty Marty gave a weak yet eager smile.

"Ten days. You have ten days to make a schematic of a ride, and if it's not transportable, efficient, or most importantly fun, then you don't get to ask again. In the meantime, you're our janitor." Manny extended his right hand. "Deal?"

Marty frowned. "I'd shake your hand if I could, but I'm uh, it's hard. But yes, deal! Deal definitely deal. For certain. I won't disappoint

you, I swear it! Just uh, just pretend like I shook your hand. We'll shake on it properly later. Deal?"

Manny retracted his hand, and smirked. He was getting the hang of this rascal's personality, and suddenly he found him lightly charming. Lightening up, he leaned back in his chair, and nodded at Smarty.

"Deal."

"Yay! Yes, yes, yes ow, ow ow, ouch oh gods, too excited. Too excited! If there is such a thing! Heheh, okay, sorry, uh, can I have, can I get… I'm in need of more than some band-aids, I, can I, uh, an infirmary? 'Intensive care', I think you said? I need that. Can I go there? Please?"

Manny looked over at the stage hands, one of whom was begrudgingly handing over some scrip to the other due to a lack of piranha teeth, and whistled. They looked up, and came over to Smarty, picking up the stretcher they had put down earlier. They helped him onto it as he made grunts and moans of pain and grumbled out some strained gratitude. Icky sauntered into the tent, glaring at Smarty who flinched at her accusatory gaze (or maybe it was a stray tooth that they missed and was poking into his back). Manny went back to his professional demeanor, or at least became more solidly grounded in it, and prepared to explain the situation to an understandably angry Ringmaster, but first…

"Marty? I forgot one thing."

"Oh?"

"Lose the Smartie part. We have too many people named after candy."

« Life's a Show|Dread & Circuses Hub

Dystopia Contest

First place goes to Mission Statement, by Dr Reach.

Second place goes to I, Autarch, by Kalinin.

Third place goes to Starch and Cream, by djkaktus.

Congratulations to everyone who entered! Thanks for participating!

Contest Entries

1. **Mission Statement** by **Dr Reach**, at (+65)
2. **I, Autarch** by **Kalinin**, at (+62)
3. **Starch and Cream** by **djkaktus**, at (+44)
4. **Decommissioned** by **Dillinger PhD**, at (+36)
4. **ΔK=(∂K/ ∂x, ∂K/ ∂y, ∂K/ ∂z) Or: Episiotometrics** by **Eskobar**, at (+36)
4. **Let Me Guess, Applesauce?** by **Waterfire**, at (+36)
7. **The Melody Of Autumn, Passing Into Winter** by **SoullessSingularity**, at (+35)
8. **I hope you get back to me soon** by **Dr Hysteria**, at (+30)

8. **So Too Did They** by Americium241, at (+30)
10. **She's Angry and Going South** by **Vivax**, at (+28)
11. **Stage Fright** by **NomadMonad**, at (+25)
12. **Where Bad Children Go** by **Zolgamax**, at (+23)
13. **Cakework** by **CirclesAndSquares**, at (+22)
14. **Aftermath** by **Agent MacLeod**, at (+20)
15. **Who You Gonna Call?** by **Doctor Cimmerian**, at (+12)
16. **Enasni Si Gnihtyreve** by **A Random Day**, at (+11)
17. **The Fall of a Soyuz** by **LordSpy**, at (+3)

Click here to experience nostalgia for a more dystopian time

That's right, it's that wonderful time of year again… The leaves are turning wonderful shades of red and orange, it's getting colder, and the marmots are beginning their long, wintry slumber. You guessed it: We're having another contest! The theme of this one is **dystopia.** For reference, dystopia is defined by Google as "an imagined place or state in which everything is unpleasant or bad, typically a totalitarian or environmentally degraded one."

Cool, what kind of tales can we write?

Your story must take place in a universe in which the Foundation

1. Existed as seen in the non-canon at one point (exhibiting the characteristics of the SCP Foundation as we know and love it)
2. Currently exists, but having changed significantly

The world itself must be

1. **Dystopian** in some way — for reference, that means "a place or state in which everything is unpleasant or bad, typically a totalitarian or

environmentally degraded one"
2. The "main" world (as opposed to SCP-093's mirror universe, or inside SCP-108, etc. unless there's a reason for that to qualify as the "main" world)

Other than that, go wild!

Could you maybe give us some examples?

Sure. Hopefully these ideas will help you brainstorm.

- In a world where the Daeva founded and run the Foundation, a researcher discovers a Scranton box with a copy of SCP-140's documentation
- Due to the sheer number of SCPs, the Foundation has become a totalitarian regime in order to contain them all efficiently
- After the recreation of the Broken God, the remnants of the Foundation are trying to quarantine the few remaining unindoctrinated civilians from the plague of SCP-217
- Tensions between the Foundation and the GOC have come to a head, and the two organizations are engulfing the whole world in an all-out war

Here are some questions for you to keep in mind as you write.

- What caused the world to be this way?
- How long has it been this way?
- How has the Foundation changed, and why?
- What happened to all the SCPs?
- How have the GoIs changed, if at all?
- Are things going to get better, worse, or stay the same?

What about the boring rules?

- One entry per author. Collaborations are allowed but neither author will be allowed to submit another tale.
- No significant edits after the tale has been posted. If you wouldn't do it to someone else's tale, don't do it to your own until the contest ends.
- Once your entry is in, it's in. Tales will be subject to the normal deletion process, and authors with failed entries will not get another chance. Make sure your entry is as good as possible before submitting it!
- Entries must be new. No sequels either — you must write an original tale that is not part of an existing canon.
- All entries must be tagged with "dc2014" (Dystopia Contest 2014) in order to be counted. Otherwise we'll all think, "Wow, you should submit this tale to the contest!"
- Do not post before November 21st or after November 30th.
- No malicious downvoting. This is always a rule, but I mention it here again because contests can get competitive. If you do this, not only will you be disqualified, you may also be banned from the site.
- The tale with the highest vote count wins!

- If you have any other questions, PM me (*Reject* does not match any existing user name) with them. If they're good, I'll post them here for everyone's benefit.

Peanut Gallery Hall of Fame

Is there a suggestion/limit for length?
No. Just keep in mind that you're writing a tale, so if your entry is too long people might get bored and stop reading partway through, and if your entry is too short it probably doesn't have enough material.
Why can't we use canons or write sequels?

This contest exists so that users write original tales. If you just continue an arc or lift from a canon that's already on the site, you're not really doing that.
Can we use SCPs then?
Of course. Use whatever you want on the site as inspiration as long as you're not writing a sequel to a tale or an installment in an existing canon.

What's the prize for the winner?

The winning tale will be linked from the front page and the author will feel good about themselves.

Where should I submit my tale?

You shouldn't. The contest is over. Sorry.

Mission Statement

The alarm sounds its gentle, delicate electro-waltz. It does not wake me up; I have been awake for almost two hours now. Dreams are not safe anymore.

I stand up, knowing I cannot fool the kind tyrant that is my auto-manager. It will start bothering me in a few seconds if I do not get up, and in a few more it will start giving me the occasional shock just so I get to work.

For a minute, some rebellious part of myself wonders… *Well, why not? Let it fry your brain. Make this a little harder on everybody. Or aren't you tired of this lie, of all the pretending? Do you really agree with the plan?*

I do not. But no one person matters.

The rebellious impulse goes away, as usual. As I stand in my bedroom, a spartan habitat excavated from moon rock and covered in cold concrete, I check on that one thing we used to contain.

The anchor of all anchors.

Under the Sun lies a nest, shining with its own light. It is a
At its center, a goddess huddles against her legs, her face
over her face, pushed by the breath of the star below.

She wonders if it will hurt.

Death. The end, after thousands of years. For good. For re

She shivers, thousands of arms stretching out of her back,
supernumerary fingers pointing practically everywhere; sh
now she doesn't even feel them. They have their own insc
hands whose branches stretched, growing on themselves

thick cloud of her black hair for years now.

It's never been this bad. She feels how the whole universe
their pleas for help, she wonders… was trusting the Found

For a brief second, when their contraptions grip around he
for all reality — and then, she is in agony.

For hours. And days. And weeks. And forever, even when
cinders under the Sun; now, she is gone. Not dead, but as

And, even in infinite pain, she feels somewhat glad: she is

The anchors tear her apart.

The anchor of all anchors.

I observe the float, the screen of ultra-light nanogel where a goddess is dying, and will keep dying; she has been dying for a few hours now. She is the central foundation of the Border, and she has to be. Nothing else will stand the strain. Nothing else this *real* ever wanted to help us do what must be done.

I begin to dress up. Then I realize how pointless it has been for twelve years that I wear clothes at all.

While we could, we secured anomalies. When we were unable to do that anymore, at least we could contain the ones we already had, mining them for the most pitiful scraps of data we could extract. When we weren't able to do even *that*, we chose to do the one thing we were supposed to do. The one thing we intimately believed, in our core, to be right.

We protected them.

Not just from anomalies, but from the truth. From the lies we told ourselves, too. And from the sad, pathetic lies of omission we kept telling those who worked for us, hoping they would not feel curious. Hoping they wouldn't peek at the stars.

They did.

And so, a handful of them figured out that the universe was going to die.

> There are always such perceptive individuals, and we know how to de
>
> ---
>
> > "Look, mommy!"
> >
> > Risa Volyanova glances at what her beautiful six-year-old p
> > black fur, arranged in the chest area to look like a space su
> > emblazoned over the heart. Risa sighs; they just do not ma
> >
> > Knowing fully well Federation Day is coming, Risa picks it u
> > merits for their paltry checks. Certainly way too many for ju
> > junk. Not a good present, not even for such a special day.
> >
> > She sighs. There are so few special days left…
> >
> > Risa tries to remember some of the toys (anything, anythin
> > amnestic prescriptions and early conditioning have made h
> > kind of memes that could get in one's mind, who is she to b
> > been told all her life. A family condition, mental… And poss
> >
> > She shakes her head. She hates giving Caricia bad news,
> > enough with the first therapy sessions…
> >
> > … and that is when she notices the little kid has let go of h
> > of their children, Risa turns around, searching the shopping
> > enormous windows at one side of the arco-mall, watching t
> >
> > "Mom, have stars always been so far away?"
> >
> > And the alarms shriek.
>
> ---

Originally, this plan was to wait and keep our world as safe as possible from any threats, anomalies from beyond and inside alike hunted and imprisoned for the greater good; and, when the time came, we would simply go out, no fight, no fuss. If reality ended, then we would end with it.

Those who had ideas on how to solve the problem either contacted their superiors or waited until they were promoted. Eventually, they were in a position to change the original plan, and so they did.

The final activation sequence of such plan is about to begin. Phase two is already active and about to end. It will take a few minutes, so I have time to indulge in my feelings.

My desktop is made of wood. Real, earthly wood. A memento from my predecessor, an anachronism filled with memories; be it emotion or respect, I cannot bring myself to discard them. I find myself being regularly dragged to them instead. I cannot help but to be observe and study them, to lucubrate on how these small relics and prohibited things reached her hands. And I particularly cherish one of them, which I pull from the uppermost drawer.

I look at the protein-made model of a Star Womb. It is a magnificent thing, a massive, gargantuan thing. And it fits in the palm of my hand. My mind makes me feel that it is not right; it spawns worlds, how could it be so small?

I used to enter the nanogel projector rooms and ask the computer to model a few of them for me, around Earth. I know that, at such distance, their mutual gravity would disperse them and destroy Earth. But I marveled, I gaped at their incredible size, their infinite, inspiring majesty. In awe.

I gaze at the screen. It announces that Phase two will reach Earth in minutes. All gone now.

All there is left now is humankind.

The mess hall was filled with laughter and the colorful sha
Recreation Hour got into its best fifteen minutes. Everyone

Reyes danced xyr most ridiculous moves, hoping xe would
tonight. Xe liked a pair of the tall, flowing Miner types in the
low gravity had done numbers on them. Reyes was conce
blame them; a broken arm or a dislodged pelvis would be
when it could replace them and make new ones in the pro

A few of the bartenders looked cute too; there was a half-r
flirting with a bunch of guys. Reyes smiled; why wouldn't h
hour, and thanks to the nanogel that filled the air, not one
handsome, too!

But sees could get you into trouble if you happened to hea
brain scrub. Another ten months of drool every time xe wa
was too short for that kind of bullshit; Reyes danced away.

Maybe xe could get one of xyr old friends to the bunk tonig
visiting.

But then, xe saw the girl. As Reyes looked at her, xe recog
those poor people.

She had seen too much, knew too much. She danced to fo
rather not have. She downed a pill of giddy-thoughts-and-s
citizen belts (against regulation), desperately trying to forg
plastered on belts all the same.

Xe walked to the girl. Most people thought xe was part of a
design, the scum of the Earth; deserters, cowards, *degene*
image, but Reyes had both brain and standards.

Xe reached out to the girl, swatting a flock of bright pink na
synthetic music they chirped. "Hey! You alright there!"

She looked at Reyes, her eyes overflowing with tears and

Xe knew xe had stumbled xemself into trouble the very mo
say. "I-I can't hear the stars sing anym-"

And then, the alarms went off, the windows of the overlook
polarized; every citizen of xyr class, xemself included, bec
shook the WarD to the ceiling, the music gone, the lights s
with warnings and advisories.

The powerful, commanding voice went: ***Attention, D-Clas***
in this Arcology. Do not approach the exterior nor atte
return to the previously designated emergency areas.
Arcology…

Of course, the grandiosity of such anomalies is not lost on me. It is not lost on many of us. There will be stories from beyond our light that will go forever unexplained, tales of survivors who saw other suns over other worlds, and sometimes just hints, clues to a greater universe… lost. We agreed that letting go is worth more than the alternative.

"We agreed." Nobody else did. Just us.

I feel like crying. If I close my eyes, I will see how the Sister of the Sun withers and dies again, writhing, her face frozen in pain as it snaps in pieces; so I do not.

Half-walking, half-jumping down the hall of my house (a small lunar bunker, well equipped but mostly just functional), I reach my terminal. It has a magnificent screen, hemispheric, capable of reproducing in real time and perfect tridimensionality every event that I am supposed to know about in the entirety of the Solar System.

For the past ten or so years, however, we have been euthanizing every single anomaly we knew of. There are not many alerts left to which I should pay attention to. There was a good reason: we did not want them to suffer what the Sister suffered.

Or so many other things, monsters and wonders alike, that we killed. We killed them just so we would remain hidden away.

Not just us, the Foundation; not even us, humanity; us, Sol.

The one star left; the one star we will carry with us.

Old Man Sun fell, his augmented body finally spent. A con
for it. Finally, his brain died out.

Then, *he woke up.*

"Well, it took you a while," said the Old Man Dream.

Old Man Sun opened his eyes. Yes, the sky was there, bu
started, "my eyes…"

He touched his hands, his face, his ears. Old Man Sun cou
see. *He looked around.*

The moon still gleamed over his head, untouchable. Under
Mode, Arcologies bunkering down and closing sheet after
He stood over a mountain higher than any of the immense

"They've come a long ways, eh," said Old Man Dream. Old
clothes like those of the Federation's highest. "Despite our

"What happened?", asked Old Man Sun. The other shook

"They have noticed a threat they can't beat, so they're runn

"… but, you-?"

"You are dreaming. It's normal you don't recognize me, mu

"Dreamer?"

"Sun Master."

"I am dying, am I not?"

"Sure. No more ball-pushing. The younglings have it cover
late to stop it."

Old Man Sun gaped at the scene. "I am dying…"

He gasped for an air that did not exist and saw the Cities c
the Sun rolled on its own, warming the cold concrete and t

He took it all in, his dreamself shaking and beginning to cr

Old Man Dream came to him, placing a hand over his shou

Old Man Sun nodded, nervous. "What about you?"

"I will probably be joining you too, soon. I just have to chec

"Go, then… I shall see you s-"

"SCP-499-55 is down, I repeat, SCP-499-55 is down."

"Dispatching SCP-499-56. God, we're running out of clone

Because, for a very long time, the Foundation almost lost everything.

For the longest time, we had to make concessions. We had to go all the way straight down to discreetly endorsing fascism, then all the way up to enacting the world's greatest farce; Foundation, Federation, just brands for the same product. Then, with the masses blind of nepenthe, we worked our backs by handling the heft of the world on our own, and expected it to get heavier; so we expanded.

Humanity is the Foundation now. The Foundation is Humanity now. Extricating one from the other now would leave one limping to its deathbed and the other pointless.

I digress. I check on the progress of Phase two, opening a float feed connected to a camera on the surface. The last wave of true starlight already passed Earth and I missed it. Stars have dulled, and most die out entirely as I look. Amused, I wonder if that one star can still see us, and whether we can tell what it thinks of this whole thing.

I open another float on the automated array of devices meant to monitor it. I smile. Threatening to the end.

I close it, and know that the star is dead. All stars are dead.

It looks promising. It did not use to, back then; our predecessors feared we would lose everything to fanatics or anomalies… but we won. Kings of the anthill that Earth had become. And even after winning, that was not enough.

Resources were scarce, even under our rule. We absorbed every group, every corporation, every nation; it was not yet enough. So we expanded even further.

Of course, as part of an ongoing effort to secure the secrecy of our project, we told the masses that interstellar travel was impossible, probably even dangerous to experiment with. It used to be, yet we developed it one hundred and twelve years ago. We used it to collect the resources required to implement the plan, most of them extrasolar in origin.

The populace believes the underlying physics of the universe are comfortingly solid, reliable and absolute. Therein lies yet another kind lie; C is as much a barrier as it is a protective wall: nothing of the sort.

The truth is far more complicated. Thousands of self-replicating ships were launched back in the first days of the project, when the shadow had barely begun to manifest. We did not deplete our own star system because we could reliably predict how much humanity would need it in the days after the plan was completed. Those ships traveled faster than light towards their colonies, loaded with three things: automated machinery, a strict schedule, and a dedicated workforce, inspired through a manufactured religion. Billions of them. A flourishing civilization on their own.

Most of the bulk of humanity is actually composed of what we like to call "E-Class Citizens," who called themselves "Exiles." The E-Class personnel, I am told, originally handled the securing of anomalies.

Now, as I and twelve others flip a switch, they are dead. Scattered across a fractured cosmos, a dozen worlds depleted of all useful materials… just to make certain that the Foundation had a chance at success. Their exile, and the stories and legends that surround it, is ended. A century of oral tradition, dedicated machine worship and astronomical mysticism, all of it a delicately engineered and projected memeplex, burnt in a second to never be remembered by anyone.

But the Overseers.

We, the Overseers. The makers, shapers and guardians of lies.

Everything a lie. He sees it now.

The fleets of the Exiles watch in awe, fear and sudden co
machine they know well, for their mothers, and their moth
with the bones of every dusty ball of ice and rock a dozen
enter the holy space beyond it.

It had been forbidden.

Now, Grand Helmsman Roderick watches as the Border c
dimmer around them. He sees his brethren confused, sho

It had been forbidden.

Roderick turns and looks down to the small reliquary of his
which Is One (One Mind, One World, One Purpose) that h
right all along. All the promises and hopes their kin had be

Again, it had been forbidden. By whom?

He takes the most sacred thing he has ever called his own
When faced with the terrified looks of the other vat-bred E

He now knows the truth, and he shouts out.

"It Who Is was Never Whole!"

And Sol, and all its promises, goes away in a stream of tw
the universe slowly becomes darker, darker as the worlds
to devour first. Darker as if a shadow came to them…

It had always been coming. It was here. The end of the un

Desperation washes all over the fleet as the stars went ou
Border. There is nothing left, the Helmsman knows, but to

And he does. Connecting the thick tube of communication

"Pray for your souls, my brethren," Roderick says, searchi
instead. "May they reach It and make us all Whole again."

And lies were worth it, it was all worth it. For the first time in all of our history, an Overseer can look upon our works and say "Yes, we are

safe. Yes, Humanity is safe. Yes, Earth is safe. The Foundation's mission is complete."

Earth will live. Humankind will develop, and wither, and eventually die when our sun dwindles and dies itself… unless we manage to trick ourselves out of this new conundrum, of course.

Because the Foundation will persevere. We persevered these past decades, and we succeeded. At the negligible cost of the rest of the universe, we escaped a threat that is now devouring all known space… perhaps all that once was, for lack of a better word, "real."

We do not know how long our countermeasures will last. But even that has been taken into account, of course. There are dozens of temporal sinks beyond the Oort Cloud, their size larger than the Moon, continuously bartering time out of a universe that has none left for itself. They siphon what little eons can be salvaged from it… My peers say that we cut its agony short. I believe euthanizing it without asking is still murder.

The Anchors we have deployed took almost a century of uninterrupted work to finish. They do keep at bay the simple horror of a predator that we, poor prey, are not evolved enough to outrun on our own. The entire thing requires an enormous array of Dyson statites to keep it going, barely active. And still, we know — *I* know that it is the right thing to do.

As I input the final activation sequence authorization and see how the other twelve do the same, I wonder if there was a right thing to do.

Of course, I know there is, and we did it. We vowed to protect humanity. Intellectually, I know how morally myopic this all sounds, to sacrifice the entire universe as bait while we built our own defense, our *Infinite Border.* But please, judge us kindly.

It is too big for us to picture. And we have seen the children. We have met the lovers. We have embraced the siblings. We have rebelled against the elders. We are humans, and we are egotistical, and self-centered, and ultimately, scared.

We want to live.

> Is it such a crime, to not give up? To know what it means, to be huma
>
> ---
>
> > A nameless man wanders alone in the plains of Mercury.
> >
> > His suit is ancient, and has been repaired many times. His
> > computer insists that he should go to a shelter or at least a
> > may look upon now. Worse still, he cannot even feel the D
> > over… and his last friends are gone with them. Immortals
> > lost, and knows it.
> >
> > In a certain way, he ironizes, he got lost an age ago and d
> >
> > He thinks of the things he knows. Of what he has seen an
> > Earlier today, he saw a goddess die and the stars fade aw
> >
> > It is enough. He has done enough.
> >
> > True, he failed; but his was always a titanic task to accom
> > to stop the Foundation when there was time, the holy men
> >
> > They all failed, because humanity was afraid, because hu
> > Foundation's. The more comfortable choice, to sit down a
> > when it was over.
> >
> > He has never blamed them for that; no matter how little he
> >
> > Well… he does now.
> >
> > He checks again; oxygen will run out in a few minutes. Wh
> > ever know him or his fate anyways, nor care. And it matter
>
> ---

I hear weeping and prayer (prayer! Such cowardice! To whom should we pray? Would such prayers be even pondered, coming from *us?)* from my equals as the system comes online. The Border is now closed, for good. Forever.

I look through the float that shows the camera feed, knowing in

advance what I will see: a black, starless night sky. All light from other suns, looming over other worlds forevermore trapped beyond the Border, dead void looking back at us. Fortunately, and thanks to the global alert systems, only a few human beings will be looking at it right now. Only B and a few select C personnel are supposed to look at it, and those are loyal enough as to take their amnestic course and let go of it.

If we say they can live without it, they can live without it. Memories are usually a burden, anyways.

Phase three is the most poetic and, I know, the most unnecessary part… but the others said it would bring a comfort to the masses that Ennui agents could not. Only the B-Class personnel dedicated to astrophysics will ever know the truth about the statites, and those will be told that the Border is a protective system that surrounds Sol; not a veil.

As its main systems come online, the immense microwave receivers gather the energy from the statites. By the billions, satellites deploy, designed to energize the Infinite Border, divert power to mirrors and reflectors and, for the lack of a better word, massive and extremely well-contained micronized stars. They are magnetically contained fusion reactors not larger than a small country, numbering in the thousands.

And finally, as the powerful space-bender tethers close the bleeding Border over itself, knitting it in a trillion fractal arcs around the furthest limits of the System, all the excess light recaptured from Sol is turned into further energy for the Infinite Border.

Now its name is legitimate: a few of these void-bridges bend the light until recreating the vague luminous path of the Milky Way, and Solar space is a perfectly closed Klein bottle. The Border now irradiates the Solar System with a fake starry night.

As the not-quite starlight crosses the few minutes that separate us from the statites, I try to imagine a bubble barely a few light-hours large. I try to imagine a teardrop as it detaches from the universe's face and drifts away.

Safe. Confined. Protected.

No matter how many may have screamed and kicked in the process.

Attention, all citizens; ArControl is glad to report that t
casualties.

Alone in her small, dark room, B-Class citizen Tessa Lee,
herself. "The Stars are dead. The Stars are silent. H-how c

The feelings are gone, leaving her truly alone for the first ti
"The Fifth i-is over!," she whimpers, her eyes wide open; it

It feels true.

The Administrative Emergency State is being revoked
ArControl. It was designed to be motherly and comfortable
wrong.

She grabs her head and shakes like a chem addict in withd
this, that she has been hopping on Signals for too long, tha

Tessa doesn't care. She can no longer feel anything. She
overload… perhaps even the random sex would at least co
fool who just wants to be useful. Anything but the growing

Lockdown orders will cease momentarily. Please hold
midnight sky… filled with stars.

And they were not stars.

"B-but it's all-all of it!" she shouts, throwing herself at the w
you? Who do you think you are!? Fake! Fake! Lies! Blatan

She runs up and down the apartment.

Tessa knew what she was doing last week, when she was
Infinite Border, searching for that small push that every hig
she is on the run. All because she was supposed to take th
past month! How could they ask her to do such a thing, aft
grown!?

The makeshift silent alarm connected to the floor auto-mar
Force is right outside, the grey-on-grey uniforms surrounde
way out.

Lockdown orders will cease momentarily. Please hold

There is none.

Desperate, Tessa reaches for her transcript of Star Signals
her Esoteric Research Area. She always thought it wantec
freedom from the Federation. It taught Tessa a life in the c
promising her she would lead humanity to a better truth, to

Then she remembers. She remembers that the Border has
skies are blank.

And blank the pages themselves become before her eyes.
through them, unbelieving. "But… T-the signs… I know th-
slipping from it into the ground; at first, she is filled with fea
they l-loved me back! I know it all meant something, it all n

Lockdown rescinded. You may now resume your sche

As the perfectly trained SSTF anti-sectarian specialists bre
eyes, her heart and her hands before she can even unders
instructing their handlers to not look at the pages of Star S

Which slowly soak on the last Fifthist's blood, and thus bec

They will be burnt to ashes later, and another mystery will

Thank you for your patience.

For now, the SSTF soldiers bag Tessa's corpse, careful to

The few threats that remain are simple puppets, manufactured boogie men to keep the populace scared and trusting… plants and false flag operations are everyday business. Such lies are justified, as justified is the liberal application of force to make certain these harmless threats remain harmless.

And it works. Tonight, the universe died, and humanity will be none the wiser.

One by one, my now awkward homologues, of whom I know little beyond number and rank, congratulate each other and humanity on this achievement. A few, probably choking on their bullshit, are silent; whether they have killed themselves or chosen to go and sleep well, I have no idea. I do not really care.

One of them laughs at the bland joke another one makes. Idiots. *We killed the universe tonight.* No amount of levity would compare to the grandiosity of the crime, so there is no point in chastising them… again, I cannot even grasp it.

How does one compare it? To what? What Ethics Committee hearing would consider to judge this, never mind the fact that they always supported the program?

I ask the foodprinter for cold wine. Any wine, in copious enough quantities. The auto-manager replies that it can only serve me amounts insufficient for becoming drunk. Such are the duties of an Overseer that I must remain lucid, capable and sane.

It suggests I have some fresh soy milk instead.

I kick the dumb machine.

I scream at it.

I use every object I can find, my body included, to pound against it, scream against it. My muscles are weakened after living here for so long, and I do not realize that the damned thing stays unscathed despite my best efforts. The internal security system warns my memeticist, who makes sure the unknown A-Class personnel living in this unmarked, modular bunker is not insane with the madness of a thousand dark gods. Just merely furious.

Why? Well, none of their business.

I then keep hitting and hitting. I take the keyboard out of the screen, and smash it against the machine, the softform denting with each strike. I keep doing it, savage, angry, sad.

Empty.

I now know why Phase three was necessary. I envy the masses. I envy those of us that will no doubt choose to forget this night and live their lives in peace. I envy my fellow Overseers, who laugh and sing and dance and pray.

Pray. My prayers are bleeding hands and a seething semblance. And I do need to pray.

A few hours later, the alarm rings again; *twinkle twinkle, little star*, it goes. I grunt. I have pending work and too little time to do it.

I decide to get up and ask the machine for a full meal. Life goes on, I think to myself.

I must fix this. I must fix her. And if there is no way to do so, I must at least make certain there is something else for humanity to discover, something else for humanity to marvel at.

I cannot stand that there are no other suns under which new things may be, just counterfeit starlight.

I cannot stand that, in our zeal to protect humanity, we placed it in a box.

In related news, a series of Arcology Control alerts have been announced all over the planet this past afternoon, Universal Time. While the specifics are not clear, an institutional source reports that Federation task forces may be soon conducting assaults on suspected sectarian holdouts in Mars and Europa…

I, Autarch

My name is Frank Carson, Autarch of the Enlightened Republic and Free Association of Wyoming. I have overseen the Universal Dominion of the State of Wyoming and its citizenry for four thousand, nine hundred and seventy-eight years, four months, and nineteen days. I am the only ruler this universe has ever known, or will ever know. My authority is omnipresent and absolute.

From my capitol in the Palace of Black Tooth Mountain, I alone control all facets of the government of this realm. In the last five millennia, I have developed the technology and the mental ability to be in thousands of places at once, enmeshed in every possible public institution that may touch the lives of those people left in this enclosed universe. No human to have ever existed has wielded more power than I do. I am the absolute pinnacle of humanity's ability to exert control, refined to the outermost limits of mankind's capabilities to achieve my purpose of ruling over my domain.

Somebody, please shoot me. Right in the head. Please.

I wasn't always the Everlasting Autarch, All-Encompassing in His Name. I used to be Frank Carson, Director of Site-643, Foundation Subdirector for Geopolitical Anomalies, North American Sector. I don't know what we did to screw everything up, exactly. But thousands of years of thinking about it have convinced me that that asshole Russian from External Affairs had something to do with it. If, in the infinitesimal chance someone at Site-78 actually receives this and reads it, I hate you all. Come over into my reality. I'll make *you* Emperor of these clowns. See how *you* like it.

We had time to evacuate all the staff. When the alarm sounded, I had no clue what had just breached, or what even *could* breach a site where we studied vote records from Podunk County, USA all day. But someone had to go back in and retrieve the failsafe codes. I, like an idiot, assumed responsibility for someone else's monumental mistake, not wanting to put any of my subordinates at

risk. One of my selves is laughing at the irony of leadership putting me in this situation. That one's a real jerk. I've never liked him.

Whatever it was that occurred, Site-643 caused two things to happen. The entire observable universe was erased from existence, except for a small, isolated mass of physical matter that used to be the State of Wyoming. The universe literally ends now at the boundaries of the least populous political subdivision in the US. The other thing? People now live forever. And not in the horrifying way that I always feared people could live forever, but eternal life, free of aging, senility, physical deterioration. Don't ask how me how we whipped up that one. I always forbade cross-testing in my facility.

I didn't mean to even be spotted by the civilians. I swear I didn't. But the Site was in downtown Cheyenne. The emergency exit came out right on 24th Street. Next to the *Capitol*. There must have been a reason for that. Maybe. But after sheltering in place for three days, the locals had plenty of time to figure out that a few things had changed, mostly having to do with the fact that it was no longer physically possible to leave the state anymore, and that things like "nighttime" no longer happened. The Laramie Consortium of Wisdom later figured out that we somehow trapped a simulacrum of the sun in with our universe, capable of generating the same amount of energy. I digress.

So horrible, mind-breaking things are happening. Riots in the streets. Panic everywhere. And out emerges this stranger, right from the seat of government. Dressed in a labcoat and armed to the teeth. Why did they make me their leader? I guess I looked like I knew what was happening. I was mostly relieved that they hadn't decided to eat me. Then I remembered about the research outpost in Crook County. I led a team of twelve people equipped with pickup trucks and shotguns to keep *that* business from being stuck in a universe with us. When we returned, that was that. I was The Leader.

Why didn't I just lead them all into a volcanic geyser somewhere? I guess I figured I had to make the most of it. Maybe I hoped in the early days someone from Overwatch Command would come fix our mistake. That hope ended sometime after the first thousand years, I think. God forbid, maybe I wanted to actually help people. I forget

now.

Then I found out what happens when you have forever to do things. The human mind is an incredible mechanism, turns out. Freed from senescence, you have forever to get good at things. To think about things. To consider yourself and your surroundings. The citizens of Wyoming granted me the power of a king, to protect them in their strange, new universe. And I did. I worked tirelessly to set up new systems of government, appointed mayors, counselors, officials. I learned about sewer systems, tax codes, probate law and housing policy. I did such a good job they didn't bother with elections. I was satisfied because people weren't killing each other. Ha. Ahahaha.

Blessed with immortality, the citizens of Wyoming became scholars. Almost all of them. They all had time to learn now. First they wanted to know just what the hell we were living in. Oil workers, cowboys, waitresses and farmers all studied up. First they mastered astronomy. They became self-taught doctors of geology, climatology, topography and quantum physics. With all the time in the world, the people of Wyoming were a race of intellectuals, spurred on by curiosity. They built observatories, drilled deep into the crust of what once was the Earth, and confirmed that we all lived on a big (almost) flat rectangle floating in a sea of nonexistence. The telescopes couldn't find any stars, any signs of anything beyond what used to be the atmospheric thermosphere. Well duh, I told them. I've been saying that for decades. But scientists that they were, they needed to confirm it independently. See for themselves. They had already placed me in my inescapable role, nagging governmental parent of Eternity, only to be minded when a new skyscraper needed to be built or the stray dog population got out of control. I should have killed them all then.

Their scientific discoveries led them to be introspective. Now, the people must be philosophers, they all said. And philosophers they became. Great halls were constructed just for thinking and debate. All essential tasks were automated (and guess who needed to write 15,000 pages of regulations governing the construction of these automated task-robots), so that everyone could add to the effort of Understanding. And these learned citizens Understood, all right. New discoveries in the nature of self, answers finally reached about

the existence of the soul (by the way, it's more like eight thousand souls), God forever placed in His correct role of The Great and Mighty Casual Annoyance. Men whom I remembered centuries ago passing their time shooting at highway signs with buckshot after downing a case of Coors Light, were now pronouncing their inescapable theorems on the nature of human suffering from the shining dais of the Academy of Universal Advancement.

I shared in their knowledge, and paired with their technological progress, I became greater and greater. My mind expanded into the aether of the Internet, and now my electronic presence, apart from but also entirely within my being, could render judgments at the Court of Ultimate Appeal. Another electronic self now could review birthing permits even more expeditiously than the modern genius I had previously appointed. This, of course, freed up ever more Wyomingites to go and join in the increasing development of their peers. More and more, I was The State. Me, personally. I remember feeling quite proud of that achievement. That makes me want to punch at least eight of my selves in the face.

Then, they got bored. Jesus Christ the formerly almighty, they got *bored*. First it was sports. Games involving genetically-altered insects doing battle with people wielding cold laser weaponry while clad in polymer armor. That was harmless enough, I suppose, even if we did end up having to neutron-bomb the Sierra Madre mountains in order to kill the Radio Ticks. Then there were art-murders. So many art-murders. I had to appoint myself the head of a new police division, but when the victims came back, they were more interested in critique than who had done it. Eventually I just legalized that because the hell with it.

It kept escalating. They would divide up into rival factions and kill each other in the streets of Greater Cheyenne for *fun*. Entire armies were assembled, accompanied by orbital munitions and chemical weapons, going to war because they could, and because they would just show up again somewhere anyway at the end of it. Do you have any conception how hard it is to electronically jam a laser-guided missile barrage by yourself? How did I end up being an international peacekeeping agency in my own country?

Even that was boring and stupid to them after a few centuries.

Someone got the bright idea once to weaponize *nightmares*. Technology turned sharply for a couple of decades to the development of ever greater stimulants so that nobody had to endure the terror of going to sleep. I seriously considered constructing a reality-negation device in those years, though mostly I attributed that impulse to being edgy from all the super-caffeine drinks (at least that's what my therapist, Dr. Me, said one time). In the end I was stopped from ending my miserable universe because, unfortunately, it is impossible to do.

On and on it goes. A group of impossibly learned immortals, stuck with each other and free from consequence. Through it all, I restore sanity each time. I run prisons, I tend public parks, I build libraries. I am the adult in a nursery full of psychotic infants, armed with probability weaponry and smart enough to have reasoned away their consciences, forced to interact with each other by the coffin boundaries of the Smallest Universe by Population in the Continental United States. Every five years, they appoint me once more by a mental convocation as Autarch, entrusted with the governance of their hideous regenerating cityscape. They got too far ahead of me, gained too much knowledge while I was stuck learning the intricacies of managing a geothermal electrical grid, that I will never outsmart them and achieve my dream of murdering each and every one of them.

At this moment, while I write my testament, I am guiding the actions of an automated fire suppression system in Arena No. 34-Q (someone finally learned how to literally shoot atomic fire from their eyes), clearing a massive sewer line blockage in the Violet Sector caused by someone flushing 3,000 or so fetal dodo birds down a toilet, negotiating the labor contract of the Janitorial Robotic Consortium for the next eight hundred years, digging a new landfill meant exclusively for waste generated by the production of an element that I haven't gotten around to naming yet as Minister of Science, and rescuing a pet cat from a high tree branch that happens to be four miles underground. I have expanded my consciousness in ways that the early mystics could never have contemplated, that I may hose down the feces in a constellation of monkey houses.

I could stop. I could simply cease doing my countless functions that keep this society of the ever-increasingly deranged functioning, such as it is. The millions of jobs that I do every moment of every day would remain undone. The social order would grind to a halt, their unspeakable fun interrupted by real life for once in the poisoned existence of this universe. I could do it. I yearn to do it.

In the end, I am stopped by a thought shared by every single one of my selves.

My God, what would they do *next*?

ꕥ Starch and Cream ꕥ

-A Silly Dystopian Fiction in Three Parts-

By djkaktus

Part One: The Wild Winds

Book of the Holy Feast, Chapter 4 - Episode 3 - Verse 7

Oh blessed Cake, first and foremost in our hearts,

Deliver us now from this foul demon,

Which doth tread particularly heavily upon our lands.

Holy Cake,

Praise be unto you,

Amen.

The wild winds whistled through the many small cracks and creases in their makeshift stronghold, each piercing cry a testament to a

great many small mistakes that had been made during its construction. But it was hastily designed and even more hastily cobbled together, and much could be forgiven about its drab appearance and inability to keep out the cold.

Much could be forgiven, but in the eyes of Sky Martin, it was too much. The old man pulled tight at a thick cloak wrapped around his neck, cheeks rosy from exposure, and cursed the haste in which they had settled into this place. It hadn't helped that they had put it on top of a hill, with nary a windblock for miles and miles across the Scottish countryside. The vantage point was useful, certainly, but the *goddamn wind* was almost too much.

Sky adjusted himself slightly, scanning the horizon as the sun rose. His shift was the early shift, and he would be returning to the barracks as soon as the children arose to take their breakfast. He looked down the length of his rifle, nicked and scarred from over-use and under-repair, and made sure everything was in order. The Marshall was strict about that; all firearms had to be kept functional. God knows what good they would be in the situation that would require them, but there were few enough to go around and they were more than suitable for handling the various hostile stragglers and brigands that had populated the highlands in recent years.

Dawn broke over Havenhall, a town in name only. The collection of worn and weathered individuals within were hardly a contingent, regardless of their original purpose. When they had come to the hill they had been twenty, men and weapons sharp and polished for a singular purpose. But as they had waited out the storm and grown older doing so, more had joined them. A group of refugees from across the channel. A family of pig farmers from West End. Before too long, they had a flock, and the flock began settling in. Havenhall was not supposed to be a settlement, but in time, they had settled. And the twenty still watched.

Little similarities remained between the twenty brave young men who had struck out from Site 76 so many years ago and the nineteen old men who protected Havenhall now. Age and fatigue had beaten them, bent their spines, threatened to break their backs, and now seemed willing to drag out the torment as long as they were willing to remain alive. Gerard had finally succumbed years

ago, when the long winters chill of '48 had frozen his body to the parapets. Others, like Harrison, dared not leave the safety of the minor warmth afforded in the boilers, but pressed on nonetheless.

It wasn't just the cold, either. Radiation sickness threatened them, looming constantly in their minds like the low-hanging clouds left over from the bombs years ago. It would come in waves; the breeze would pick up in the middle of the night and the Geiger counters would start ringing. The women, children and infirmed would be shuttled down into the lower levels, and the men above would don their haz-masks and the thick goggles and heavy coats, and would continue to watch. When the wave passed, they would drag the scrubbers, long past their age of expiry, out to make the complex habitable again. When it was done, those below would quietly file out and return to their work, detectors strapped to their belts.

The buzz of the morning alarm signaled for the population of Havenhall, no more than three hundred souls, to rise from their beds and begin the days work. In the past, the alarm might accompany the rising sun. Now, the skies remained dark, with only the occasional patch of obscured light to remind them that the star hadn't gone out. Behind him and below, Sky could heard the masses moving slowly about, preparing for the day's work. Outside of the rickety walls were long rows of crop fields, covered in tarps and patrolled by guardsmen. He supposed he should feel fortunate, to at least have the porous walls between himself and the elements. Thomas only had the exposure gear to keep him warm, and like everything else in Havenhall, it had stopped functioning at optimal levels nearly fifteen years ago.

A heavy hand found Sky's shoulder, and he turned to see the Marshall behind him, no doubt here to relieve him of his duties. He was older than Sky, but was unfazed by the stresses of the world around him and unrelenting in his duty. The slightest stubble was seen as a personal failure, and the Marshall spent nearly an hour every morning making himself presentable. In contrast to the tattered and ragged masses within Havenhall, he might as well have been a golden god, especially considering it was often his iron will that stood between life and a slow, icy death.

"Martin," he said, his voice cutting through the morning air. "Any

signs of danger?"

Sky stood slowly, speaking as he rose. "No, and nothing from the counters, either. A quiet night."

The Marshall nodded. "And any word from command?"

Sky sighed quietly. There had been no word from command in twenty years. "No, sir. Nothing on the radio."

The man stood quietly, gazing at the dim light of the rising sun. Sky could read him no better now than he could thirty years previous, and sensed nothing from him but resolute determination. "Very well," he said. "You are relieved, Martin."

Sky gave his thanks and gathered his meager belongings in a knapsack. He slung it over his shoulder, and began trudging down the slope towards the mess hall. In the distance, he could see children scurrying about, followed by their mothers and older siblings. He smiled.

As he opened the door and felt the warmth of the hall wash over him, he was aware of a hush that had fallen over the gathered mass of younglings within the doorway. All were seated in a circle by the hearth, and at his arrival all had fallen silent and turned to face him. He stood, draped in decaying exposure gear, face hidden behind a long-range optical helmet. As they watched, he bent his knees slightly and leaned back, before bellowing across the hall.

"THE WORLD IS FULL OF DARKNESS!"

The children squealed with delight before shouting back. "WE MUST SECURE THE DARKNESS!"

He grinned behind the mask, and shouted again. "WHO CAN STAND BEFORE IT?"

A few rolled over with laughter. "WE MUST CONTAIN THE DARKNESS!"

Sky stamped his feet, and rolled his torso like a raging bull. "ARE THERE ANY BRAVE ENOUGH?"

Pandemonium reigned in the circle of children. "WE MUST PROTECT THE… EARTH!"

Sky charged towards the circle, arms outstretched. "The Foundation lives!"

The children began chanting. "Secure contain protect! Secure contain protect!"

He took a flying leap into a tumble and sprung to his feet in the middle of the circle. His joints reminded him that he had gotten far too old for those types of shenanigans, but his mind ignored it. He gazed around the circle, which once again had grown hushed. In the background, he could hear some of the mothers laughing quietly, while the older siblings rolled their eyes and put the memories of their own childhoods away.

"Now," he said, slowly removing his helmet. "Who wants to hear a story today?"

The group exploded once more with approval, and drew quiet again when he raised a finger. "One," he said, moving swiftly around within the circle. "One of you gets to decide. I will tell you who it'll be, when I point-"

"Tell us about the Bard of Boston!" shouted a chunky child behind him.

Sky spun quickly. "Not you, Hafford! I said I will choose."

He moved quietly, picking up his pace as he goes, until he stopped in front of a young girl with braids in her hair. He went to take a single step forwards, stopped mid-stride, and scooted back until he was standing square before her. His outstretched index finger lowered until it pointed at a spot directly between her eyes.

"Amelia. What story do you want to hear?"

There was a hush, greater than any hush previous. All of them sat quietly, eyes wide with anticipation. The little girl, no older than seven years, furrowed her brow in thought. The silence lasted a second, and then five, and then fifteen, before she perked up and

looked at him with blue eyes, untouched by the ravages of life outside of Havenhall.

"Tell the story about the King's Feast."

Sky felt his throat catch, but only for a moment. He smiled, and then moved slowly to his perch by the fire. The warmth of the flame felt good on his back, and he shrugged off the cloak as he sat.

"The King's Feast, it's been a while, hasn't it? Very well, gather around now. Where to begin…"

Once upon a time the world bathed in the light of the sun and the winds were not so cold, and in those days lived a young girl who was cursed by fell magic to hold within her the Son of the Left Hand of Destruction, a demon from ages past that had spoken ill words into the world and planted a seed of despair within it. The demon grew slowly within the young girl, watching and waiting for the time of his ascension.

But there was a Foundation set to contain him, a group of brilliant scientists and soldiers, who held the demon at bay with ancient magics and powerful sorcery. For a time, the demon was silent, powerless against the very forces that had first created him. The Foundation remained vigilant, never taking their watchful eyes off of the demon, prepared for any eventuality.

Until one night, when another creature in the Foundation's care broke free of its bindings and wreaked havoc throughout their numbers. The demon heard this, and knew his time was coming soon. As the monster outside drew more and more guardians away from the young girl, too few remained to protect her and to initiate the ritual that contained the demon. When the time for the ritual came and went with no sign of the binding magic, the fell beast burst forth into the world, strengthened by eons of waiting, and his name was the Scarlet King.

What little remained of the Foundation there was broken quickly by the might of the King, for his words were the Fires of Hell and his long arms stretched across the world to shatter it and remake it to

his design. The Eyes of Darkness were cast across all mankind, and threatened to pull it all into the shadows where the Scarlet King reigned supreme.

In response, the Foundation joined with its friends and foes, and found themselves helpless against the King and its supremacy. In an act of desperation, the captors of the world released their captives, who turned in kind either against the King or for him. Regardless of their intent, the King swept them up in a sea of blood and returned them to nothingness. The King had not lingered in twilight for so long to make friends with mortals.

Finally, in the light of dusk on a cold November evening, a group of men of the Foundation brought forth the most powerful force left in their control, and left them to grow away from the power of the King. They prepared for him a most vile feast, and then fled.

It was a month until the King arrived at the feast, and realized that he was undone. Before him was a mountain, greater and more terrible than any in the universe, a mountain that would grow and move and smother the Scarlet King and his fires. A mountain of endless cakes.

It was the cakes, in the end, that were the undoing of the Scarlet King. The gift that the mysterious Adephagia gave to the King of Crete, in those days was called SCP-871. If left uneaten, the cakes would multiply, and multiply, and multiply again, until nothing remained but cake.

Beneath this mountain of cake, the Scarlet King became trapped, powerless again in the face of magic more powerful than himself, and beneath the mountain he suffocated and his fires went out. The Left Hand was broken, and his conquest of the Earth and of humanity was finally ended. The work that had begun by Hevel-Ab-Leshal was finished, under the growing strength of cream and flour.

But the men of the Foundation saw their own folly, as the might of the cakes grew exponentially and threatened to destroy their country. Out of fear, they then dropped the bombs, hoping to scorch the cakes into oblivion. Fire rained for thirteen months, and when the flames subsided the skies darkened and the cold winds began to

blow. This was the beginning of the Winter That Will Not End, and at the dawn of that cold season all of the bombs were spent, and an entire country had slipped beneath the seas.

Thus ended the Feast that the men of the Foundation had prepared for the Scarlet King, Left Hand of Destruction and He Who Came Before.

"What happened to all the cake?"

Sky looked up, realizing he had had his eyes closed for the last five minutes. The children were eyeing him with curiosity, desperate for a truth that they did not need to know. He smiled at them, and tossed the hair of one to his right.

"The fires melted the cake, of course. There was no more cake after that, and hasn't been any cake ever since."

Another child across from him piped up. "But what about all the potatoes?"

A chill caught Sky unprepared, and the smile became false. He remembered a time, it could have easily been a day before, when a council met to discuss the devastation they had not avoided, the multicolored apocalypse growing once more on the horizon. He remembered a woman in a white lab coat, who presented the group with a burlap sack of potatoes. He remembered how she had described, in detail, the greatest deus ex machina he had ever heard: of how her team had been able to deduce, scientifically, that potatoes were the opposite of cakes and that exposing the two to each other would cause them to cancel out, thus ridding the world of the infinite cakes by means of the infinite potatoes.

He remembered a time when they all nodded and shook hands and agreed to the plan of action, a time before they learned that the potatoes were a hostile, extradimensional entity at odds with the concept of infinite cakes, locked away once in ages past to prevent the destruction of the planet in a food-based Armageddon. He remembered now that that probably had not been the smartest idea, and in the back of his throat he tasted *potatoes*. It almost made him

vomit.

"The… potatoes were nourished by the sugar in the ground. Obviously the potatoes began to grow because there had been so many cakes, and…" he looked up, eyes searching for an excuse. "Hey, it looks like breakfast is ready! Come on now, let's get to eating."

The gathered children sprang to their feet and rushed off to the waiting food line, and Sky Martin stood slowly, now feeling the aches in his bones. He ambled over to the entrance of the mess hall, where another older man stood waiting.

"I feel like there are fewer cakes every time you tell that story." Monroe said, his southern accent warm against the biting cold of Havenhall.

"Yeah, well, here's hoping." Sky pulled the thick curtain aside, and exited the hall. He turned towards the barracks, desperate for rest. "Wishful thinking, if anything."

Monroe snorted. "Wishful thinking, yeah. Probably only that. You heard the latest scouting reports?" Sky replied with silence. "Figured not. Echo team saw a couple spuds, bout thirty miles to the southeast. Didn't disturb em or anything, and they think they got out without being seen."

Sky grunted. "Did they investigate any further south?"

"No. Rads were too high for safe travel, and they were already low on fuel. They placed a couple of Scranton Starch Dispersion Anchors in the area, might be enough to ward them off."

"Does Marshall know about this?"

"Aye, he does. Caught him after they had already gotten back, though. He was busy with Delta Team, who went north."

"Don't tell me."

"Yep. The Kant Pan-Dimensional Glucose Counters we had up there? All overloaded. Travel north of White Side is nearly

impossible, it's too sticky. Rads were really high, there, too. Both sightings were more than we've seen in-"

"In about five years, I know." Sky rubbed his temples and pushed through the doorway to the barracks. It was warmer inside, but only just. "We need to make certain we're seeing what it looks like we're seeing, because if we need to get everybody out, we don't have-"

Monroe stepped in front of him. "There won't be time, this time. We don't have the firepower for another appearance of either of them, let alone both. We might be preparing for a full cryogenic lockdown, Sky."

The old man sat down to rest in the common room, and his friend joined him. "Sky, nobody else knows how to work those freeze tubes. If we need to get everybody in them and lock it all down, we might need you, you know… to handle it from the outside."

He knew what Monroe meant. There were plenty of cryotubes beneath Havenhall, in the ruins of Site-52, but only one operator left and that was him. If push came to shove and they had to retreat below, the only one capable of turning the machine on and making it work was him. After so many years, the automatic function had broken down, as well. It would have to be done manually. It was not exactly a death sentence, but Sky could not think of a better word for it.

"Yeah, I know." He shrugged. "Guess we'll cross that bridge when we get to it."

Monroe left him then, and Sky retired to his bunk. Within a few minutes, he had fallen asleep beneath the bundle of blankets afforded to him. In his dreams, he smelled the sickly sweet aroma of death on the horizon, accompanied by the quieting of the winds and the sound of rushing ca-

He awoke with a start, as the dull emergency klaxon blared throughout Havenhall. Struggling to his feet, he threw on a jacket and his boots, and hurried towards the sounds of people.

As he burst out of the barracks, he saw the whole population moving

quickly and silently into the tunnels of Site-52. His tired eyes searched for any sign of his compatriots, and stopped when they fell on Max. Sky ran across the courtyard and grabbed his friend by the shoulder. Max spun and knocked his hand away, but his face softened with recognition.

"Max, what is it? Marauders?"

Max's face, worn deep by age and long nights in the fields, creased into a sad smile. He motioned towards the watchtower. Sky moved towards the ladder, and when he turned back Max was gone. He quickly scaled the height of the structure, with the sounds of chaos now ringing around him.

"Into the tunnels, quickly!"

"Spuds to the south! Spuds to the south!"

"Ready artillery, take aim!"

"Women and children first, bring the sick over here!"

He reached the top of the tower, pausing only a moment to catch his breath. He looked down at the panicked mass below him, and then up towards the horizon. The wind was no longer blowing, and a shadow passed over Sky Martin's eyes as he saw it. A cascading tidal wave of potatoes, trillions of potatoes, cascading across the highlands like a loosed sea. The horizon of the Earth had disappeared, and in its place was starchy death.

He stepped back, steadying himself against a railing. It was then that he smelled it, the saccharine stench evil. He turned, and in the distance behind him he saw the rainbow terror of the infinite cakes, a moving, heaving, roaring river of cream. As his eyes passed over the scene before him, he noticed a small, running figure outside of the walls of Havenhall. A ways away from it was another figure, a dog, running after some unseen rabbit. He moved as he recognized the first, the girl, *Amelia*.

Throwing latches and pounding through doors, Sky Martin burst into the frozen openness of the highlands, and he began at a sprint

towards the tiny dot on a nearby hillside. From behind him he could hear his fellows shouting his name, but he paid them no mind. His mind was single-focused on his goal, and he could not be deterred. He was like the wind, then, swift and howling in the wake of the opposing waves of food around him.

Sky grew close to the little girl, then, and she turned to see him and saw the cakes over his shoulder. Her eyes grew wide with fear, and the small dog she held clutched to her chest barked and whimpered. In a single move, the old man grabbed her and the pup, lifting them to his shoulder, and fell into a full run towards Havenhall. Behind him were potatoes, and he saw them falling around him, their fat, spuddy bodies making a thick, wet, splashing sound as they struck the hard earth.

A single, solitary figure stood at the open doorway to Havenhall's south side. It was the Marshall, still and silent, holding the gate open. Sky's eyes met his, and the Marshall shook his head. He slipped back inside the structure, the door closing behind him.

Fear gripped Sky's heart, and he heard, distantly now, the little girl screaming. He looked back, then, and beheld the starchy death that awaited him.

Sky fell to the ground, holding Amelia and the dog beneath him. Potatoes began to pound at his back, breaking it.

Then there were potatoes everywhere.

Then there was darkness.

And *potatoes.*

Part Two: A Council of Culinary Mishaps

The man who was once known as O5-11 sat quietly behind his computer screen, eyes flitting across it. He squinted, and then hammered out a string of text.

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Video feed access: SCP-076
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The screen flickered slightly, and then displayed a live stream of the interior of a dark chamber. Most of the lights had gone out, but from the flickering headlight on the observation camera, he could make out a number of colorful pastries being pushed past the lens. The on-camera mic picked up the dull sound of rumbling confections, as well as the muffled grunting of an unseen man, suffocating again and again in the increasingly compacted cake-based prison.

He sighed, and shook his head. His fingers found the keyboard again, and he pounded out another command.

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Video feed access: SCP-1193
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Another flicker, and then a shot of a dark basement, strewn with a great many delicacies. In the far corner, a hand was waving a small white flag, and a phone was ringing. The cakes continued to pile in through the basement stairway, until the camera was completely obscured.

They were all about the same, at least in North America. Most Safe and Euclid class objects had long since been buried, either under sugar or under rubble. A few angry Keters had gotten loose and tried to wrench themselves free from the sticky mess of foodstuffs, but all had succumbed and sunk beneath the sickly sweet sea. He laughed while remembering the great fucking lizard, choking to

death in its vat of acid on a cream pie that it could not adapt to.

There were exceptions. SCP-1867 had made it out, and SCP-662 as well. They had fashioned some sort of improvised sailing vessel for themselves and, laden with supplies no doubt pulled from the Site-16 storehouses, had struck out on their own. Current estimates put them somewhere over southwestern Nebraska, in pursuit of a peculiar absence of a shark.

Most of the staff had gone the way of the skips, too, all valiantly maintaining their stations until the very last second when the cakes came pouring through the windows and up through the plumbing. A few had escaped, no doubt. The east coast had gotten word of the oncoming devastation in time, and he was certain there was no shortage of deserters then.

Jack Bright was still ok, it looked like. He had checked up on him earlier, out of a morbid curiosity. The amulet was firmly anchored within a conscious trail of mold, growing itself out of the mess one millimeter at a time. Clef hadn't been seen in months, though that was less of a surprise than anything. Much of the rest of the senior staff had either perished or deserted, or moved on towards safer sites elsewhere in the world.

The other organizations were taking it well, all things considered. The Global Occult Coalition had established a quarantine around the United States, Canada and Mexico, and were initiating large-scale carpet bombings of border areas, to keep the tide at bay. It helped, for a time, but the cakes would always come tumbling back. They were, of course, infinite. Not as infinite as they had once feared, thankfully. It appeared as if there was an upper limit to the amount of cakes that would reappear every day, and while the number did seem to be rising, the threat of an exponential cake apocalypse seemed to be avoided, at least for the present.

Marshall, Carter and Dark had long since disbanded. Much of their anomalous wares had been housed within the United States, and with its full-scale destruction most of the shareholders had headed for higher ground. The remaining warehouses had been emptied, and the paperwork burned. Not that it really mattered, the cakes couldn't read.

The religious groups, the Broken Church, the Fifthists, those holding on to their Abrahamic religions, were all doing what religious groups tend to do in apocalyptic scenarios. Neither machines, nor the stars, nor Jesus Christ seemed capable or interested in staving off the cakes. Little surprise, there, too.

In the end, the ones who had made off the best seemed to be the Hand. At the first sign of global annihilation, they had all simultaneously left for the Library, and locked the Ways behind them. Maybe, somewhere, they thought this was kind of funny.

As for the Foundation, Overwatch Command remained resilient, hunkered deep under the ice and snow of the frozen Antarctic. The distance gave them time, anyway, to formulate a plan or jettison themselves into space and hope for the best. He smiled again, laughing at the thought of the senior Foundation command passing the Hateful Star on their way to Pluto, unaware that all that remained of the world it despised so thoroughly was buttercream.

Despite the rampant destruction that had overtaken their organization, protocol demanded that a meeting be called. The Council was anything if not creatures of habit, so the meeting had been scheduled with those who remained. O5-11 was first, likely because his bedroom was just down the hall. Most of the rest should have been able to get there, except for 2. She was there when they first sent the D-Class cake-eaters home, and had watched and waited and protected them until they grew into the demon crushing monstrosity they were today.

His thoughts were broken when he saw a man rush into the room. He saluted, his brow sweaty in spite of the chill.

"O5-11, sir!" the man shouted, unnecessarily loud.

"Jesus, Conwell, relax." He waved him down. "I told you, it's Hank. We don't really need to stand on formalities at this point, I think."

Jacob Conwell slumped, obviously uncomfortable. "Sorry, sir. Two birds inbound, looks like the party is here."

Hank nodded. "Good. Let's get this show on the road."

He stood, and followed Conwell to the hangar bay. Thermal gear only did so much, to keep out the godless cold, and every one of Hank's ninety-five years felt the chill. It was his duty, though, to stand watch over Site-01, and even in the face of delectable disaster he stood strong. Out of habit, maybe.

The choppers landed on the pad outside of the building, and their cargo unloaded. Twelve other administrators, a number of site directors and regional directors, and a researcher from Greece. He knew them all by name, and could count those missing from their ranks. Harkin was gone, and Torval. Montgomery too, and Aktus, Gerald, Kiryu, Lament, Johnson. The group that remained was a skeleton crew, but something was better than nothing.

He walked out to greet them. "Welcome to Overwatch Command, everybody." He said, nodding curtly. "Follow me."

There would be no pleasantries, he figured. Not today, and not with the task that awaited them. They all knew what was going on here. There was an uncomfortable silence among the group as they trudged through the dimly lit lower passages to the main conference room. It was a circular room, spacious enough to accommodate a large, round wooden table and thirteen chairs, but not spacious enough for the mass of tag-alongs that accompanied them. Somebody would have to stand in the hall.

They all took their places in the room, either in the seats or along the wall. The other administrators, some young and some old, settled in to their usual spots. O5-1, Barry Jameson by another name, remained standing. He was not the oldest of the group, but he did look the most worn. His eyes sagged and his hair had thinned, the jet black of years past now hidden beneath a blanket of grey. As silence swept over the room, he panned over them with a tired gaze.

"Alright. We all know why we're here." He paused, motioning towards the middle of the table. A hologram projector flickered on, followed by an image of North America, distorted by the copious cornucopia of carnivorous cakes. "The issue we ran into with 231 is… resolved. The Scarlet King is buried somewhere in northern Colorado. We're not sure specifically where he met his end, but that's sort of moot at this point. The larger problem, I'm sure you're

all aware," he hesitated, "is that our initial containment plan is getting out of hand. SCP-871 was an effective means to contain and, in this case, destroy the Scarlet King, but…" The silence was awkward. "…yeah. This isn't going well."

O5-7 spoke up. "Current casualty reports are astronomical, as you can all imagine. We've lost the entire west coast, midwest, southeast, everything. Site 19 is lost, Site 17, 15, 3, 11, all of them. Containment of several Keter class objects has been lost, but most of them have been demolished, too. We've got leads on a few that made it out, but in all reality they're not even close to our biggest issue right now."

O5-1 nodded. "The biggest issue right now is that our original plan of nuking the cupcakes into sweet, sugary oblivion didn't work even a little bit. Turns out all of the pieces can regenerate, too, which is sort of a problem, and… yeah, we didn't think this through." He coughed, motioning towards the floating diagram of cupcakes pouring into the Grand Canyon. "At this point, the States are a wash. We aren't going to be able to do enough to salvage them, and might as well rename the continent Cupcake Island for as much good as we're going to be able to do there. Same goes for most of Canada, Mexico, etc. Our secondary means of containment, freezing the cakes in the result of a nuclear winter, also has not worked. Cupcakes are freezing, but that mostly just makes them hard and it hurts more when they hit your head."

O5-3 was next. "So we're going to need to come up with a way to counteract the cakes, and on a massive scale. Like, we've thrown off the orbit of the Earth with these cakes. The only things keeping the rest of the world from going under are the oceans on either side of the US. Can't imagine it'd take too long to fill those up, though."

Across the table, O5-9 motioned to her left. "That's why we're pleased to introduce you to Dr. Tamara Gates, originally of Area 43. Her team was involved with research and containment of SCP-1689, and- well, you take it from her, Dr. Gates."

A woman in a white lab coat, who had taken O5-2's vacant seat at the table, stood up and adjusted herself. "Thank you, Margaret. As she said, my team was involved in the study of SCP-1689, the Bag

of Holding Potatoes. Initial investigation of the object returned that the bag is the entrance to an extradimensional that, at least at one point, was a human civilization… somewhere. The problem with exploration of the bag is that it's full of potatoes, and- well- so is that entire universe, as far as we can tell. Potatoes *everywhere*. Infinite potatoes, and that might be the answer to our problem."

She produced a large, burlap sack from beneath the table, tied off at the top. Loosening the knot slightly, she produced a single, fat potato. "This is a potato," she said, concretely. "If left unchecked, this potato would begin to sprout another potato, and that potato another, and again and again until all that is left of this universe is potatoes as well." She produced another object, a small tupperware container. She pried open the lid, drawing from within it a single, iced cake. There was an obvious gasp through the room, and at least three people vomited while the rest recoiled. "This is a keter cake. No worries, it can't hurt us here, I've just brought it for demonstrative purposes."

She set the two down side by side. "You see, the Foundation has run into surprisingly few infinite objects in our time, so obviously we had to compare the two and note their similarities. The obvious difference is that one is a potato, and the other is a cake. BUT, if you note here, when I expose the potato *to* the cake," she poked the potato, which rolled over and bumped into the cake. "This begins a strange reaction. Observe."

As they all watched, the potato began to extend tiny little potato feelers, which wrapped around the cake. A quiet gurgling sound was heard, and then the cake was gone, and all that remained was the potato.

There was a murmur of approval from around the room. A few people clapped. O5-9 nodded vigorously. "Good show, that," he said, nose bobbing ominously. "But can it be weaponized?"

Dr. Gates nodded as well. "Indeed it can. By putting the bag of potatoes on top of a very tall thing, such as a step ladder or giraffe, and turning it upside down, we might be able to release the full strength of the potatoes within, stemming the tide of cake once and for all."

There was additional level of nodding from throughout the room, and before too long the air was a symphony of rushing air, as everybody showed their agreement by violently swinging their heads too and fro.

"In that case," said O5-1, standing once more. "I say we put it to a vote. All for holding off the apocalypse with potatoes, say-"

"Now hang on here, Barry." Hank stood up, motioning towards the potato. "Let's not be rash here. What happens when the cakes are all gone, and we've got a continent full of potatoes instead?"

From the back, there was the sound of somebody squirming gleefully. All eyes turned, and a short, pudgy, particularly toad-like man was bouncing quietly on his heels. Hank eyed him, eyebrow raised. "Is there something you'd like to add, Dr. Fourier?"

The man piggled his way forward. "Yes there is! You all laughed at me, then. You laughed at me and mocked me, but my day has come! Behold, the plan for our eventual salvation after we get through this initial salvation first!"

He pushed a number of buttons on the edge of the table, and the hologram began to display the image of a goat.

"A goat?" O5-1 was not impressed.

"Not just *a* goat, you barbaric clown." Suddenly, the hologram was a great many goats. "A great, majestic goat army! All hungry and prime for feasting upon the potatoes of our resurgence! You laughed at me when I said we could turn SCP-2000 into a goat army mobilization device, well who the *fuck* is laughing now, shitlords?"

There was a silence, and then another general murmur of approval, followed by the standard vigorous nodding. "Yeah, that'll probably work," said O5-3. O5-1 shrugged.

Hank rubbed at his eyes. "Alright, fine. Just so we're straight, let's go over this one more time. Potatoes, and then goats. That sound alright?"

One man raised his hand off to the left. "But what about the goat

excreme-"

O5-1 slapped the table. "Damn it Gableson we'll cross that bridge when we get to it. Voting time, all in favor of staving off our doom with potatoes and goats?"

Twelve ayes.

O5-1 crossed his arms. "Good enough for me. Dr. Gates, it's all you. Do what you need to do. Dr. Fourier, you're… free to make a goat army, I suppose."

Both of them squealed, and began to leave. As everybody trickled out, O5-1 turned to his comrades around the table and bid them to stay. When the room was empty, he sat down.

"This is going to be the last time we sit down together, I think." He wiped his brow, suddenly looking very much as exhausted as he was. "If this works, the Foundation is going to be no more. Cat is out of the bag on this one, and there's not much we can do about it. If it doesn't work, well… you know. Cake everywhere."

"So basically what I'm getting at is, it's been a ride. It's a shame we had to go out like this, but might as well go this way than something worse."

There was an awkward silence. "Anyway. As acting leader of this council, I hereby release you of your duties. If you have somewhere to go, go there and wait. If you don't, you're more than welcome to stay here, as long as it will last you. There's beer in the fridge downstairs, and I think we've still got some hot pockets in the freezer. Help yourself."

They all began to leave the room, heading off to whatever doom awaited them. O5-1 grabbed Hank by the shoulder as they walked out, tailed closely by Conwell, and said, "So hey, you hear about that thing down in Samothrace?"

Part Three: Lord Blackwood and His

Faithful Manservant Deeds Destroy the Behemoth and Save Britain

It was a blustery day on the Atlantic, and with the task ahead looming before them, the crew of the H.M.S. PotatoCake McStabbin was reverently silent. Deeds manned the helm, as usual, and Blackwood stood bowside, staring at the monstrosity that loomed before him on the shores of his beloved England. He wiped a solitary tear from his eye.

"A blasted shame it is, Deeds," he said, patriotism leaking from his tear ducts. "I would have liked to have gazed upon her unblemished shores once more, I think. When we were taken by the rapscallion Foundation scamps, I feared I would not return. This is worse."

Deeds nodded, his steely eyes fixed on the horizon. "It would appear, sir, that our foe is far more formidable than we had anticipated."

Blackwood stamped on the deck. "To hell with our foe, Deeds! The foul demon has besmirched the name of our homeland and coated her gentle slopes and fertile valleys with wretched potatoes and filthy cakes." He turned rapidly and pointed a stiff finger towards Deeds. "Do you know that Her Majesty the Queen God rest her soul doesn't even like cake, Deeds? She's lactose intolerant, her death was likely extremely uncomfortable." He spun back to where the distance mountain of foodstuffs sat. "I dare say the demise of this creature will be even worse, God help me."

"Our chances of success are slim, I fear." Deeds did some quick math. "Less than a tenth of a percent, it seems. My initial calculations did not include the potatoes and cakes falling in love and becoming a mammoth, sentient mass of edible death. This has changed things, fairly dramatically."

Blackwood scoffed. "Don't speak to me of odds, Deeds. Where we're going, we don't need *odds*. All we need is good old-fashioned British dignity, and that superweapon I won from Tesla in '21."

Deeds raised an eyebrow. "The anti-entropic device, sir? Our

chances of success are likely significantly lower, if you're going to bring that into the equa-"

"Nonsense, Deeds. The device is quite harmless in the hands of a skilled marksman. Harmless, that is, for the marksman. Our opponent will not be so lucky."

The manservant nodded. "Very well, sir. As it turns out, we're here."

Blackwood turned around to face the monstrous, wriggling mass of cake and potatoes. He squinted against the light, and then pulled out a very small megaphone.

"Now see here, cake-and-potato creature," he said, his voice echoing. "This is England you're traipsing around in, and I'm not keen on what you've done to the place in my absence."

The writhing, towering amalgamation of food product replied.

"What you mean, what oive done wit it? Oi think it looks moighty nice, mate, so 'ow bout you fuck roight off and let me be here."

Deeds scrunched his nose. "Cockneys."

Blackwood was undeterred. "You've done gone and buggered the whole countryside! Not to say that havoc you've wreaked with the rest of the world. How is this alright?"

"What part of 'fuck roight off' are you too dense to understand, ye twat?" There was a sound like a quick puff of air, and then a single potato came spiraling out of the side of the creature. It landed with a splat on the deck, inches from Deeds' shoes. Blackwood turned back, fuming.

"Very well. You've left me no other option, potato-beast. Bring me the missus."

The horde of potatoes rotated slightly, until the wall before them was mostly squashed cake.

"What do you want, ye fukkin slug? E' already told ye to fuck roight off now, din't he?"

Blackwood sighed. "Madam, I'm afraid I must ask you and your… mate… to kindly vacate this particular island. I don't much mind that your girth expands around the globe, but this island specifically is precious to me, and-"

A cake landed square on Blackwood's face. He wiped it off, tiny hands trembling.

"Very well. Deeds, the weapon."

Deeds vanished for a moment, and then appeared at Blackwood's side, anti-entropic gun in hand. "I'll say again, sir, I fear that the application of this device assures our-"

"Enough with your words, Deeds." Blackwood cocked the weapon. "The time for action is now. Have at you, foul beast!"

The weapon hummed, there was a crack, and then the world went dark.

"And that's how I saved Britain back in '92." Blackwood said, head bobbing with satisfaction. "Saved the whole lot of you, of course. Never once was able to collect the medal Her Majesty the Queen awarded me for my efforts, though. Not while I'm stuck in here."

Researcher Garrison nodded slowly, his eyes darting to the wall to see when the shift would be over. He hoped it was soon. "Yes, that's very nice, SCP-1867. Another thrilling story, as usual."

Blackwood puffed. "One of my finest hours, no doubt. Might even be able to compete with the time I had to fight off that great serpent in the Amazon. The year was 1875, and Deeds was nursing an amputated leg at the time…"

Sometime later, Garrison left the room. Blackwood sat in silence, meditating with his own thoughts. An hour passed, and then two, and then he heard a slight pop and a rush of air. He did not open his eyes, but he did smile.

"Deeds, welcome back. Did you manage to bring my prize this time?"

"Indeed, sir. Shall I place it within your cell?"

Blackwood nodded. "That will do just fine, Deeds."

The man approached the tank and quietly removed the cover. With a single motion, he placed within the cell a solitary potato, carved out like a canoe, and the wrapper from a cupcake. Blackwood approached the items, gave his approval, and Deeds disappeared.

Blackwood climbed within the potato, feeling its dimensions and appreciating Deeds' craftsmanship. He laid down, pulling the wrapper up over him.

"God Save the Queen, you damn victuals," he said quietly, and then fell asleep.

Decommissioned

Item #: SCP-13175

Object Class: Euclid

Special Containment Procedures: Total containment of SCP-13175 has been determined to be impractical at this point in time. Current protocols dictate monitoring of anomalous effects produced by SCP-13175 by on-site personnel. Monitoring of on-site personnel for symptoms analogous to any known anomalous effect caused by SCP-13175 is to be conducted by off-site personnel by means of remote viewing, analysis of documents produced by on-site staff, and psychiatric evaluation.

Addendum 04/14/2377: SCP-13175 is currently scheduled for permanent decommission on 08/01/2377 following unanimous vote by the O5 Council. Extraction protocols for personnel and civilians within the hypothesized effect vicinity of SCP-13175's decommission are under review pending…

Aiden Reichardt minimized the file before resting his head softly on the keyboard of his terminal. The computer sputtered several pings and pops at the repeated and faulty commands his forehead was transmitting before falling quiet, matching the deafening silence that was Reichardt's only companion in the otherwise empty office. He had returned from lunch several hours prior to an email from Silvers informing him of the addendum's appearance.

"Following unanimous vote by the O5 Council." Those fucks. What had begun as a dull ache behind Reichardt's left eye after opening the email was now a roaring engine of pain, slowly draining what little fight remained in the Senior Researcher. *Not a single goddamned pity vote, even.*

The flask was in his jacket pocket and was, as always, full. He had been terrified when he'd stolen the anomalous object from an incoming shipment of items cleared for designation and containment, but the fear had only made the drink taste better. The risk of termination, of *termination*, was minimal; the flask was assuredly just another anomalous object that would be locked up and forgotten within weeks, only seeing the light of day again during annual inventories. Reichardt was proud of himself for the relatively minor transgression. He'd made an honest-to-God decision and followed through. It was easy for him to imagine his father and grandfather, both long dead and former Foundation staff themselves, nodding in approval; he had been raised in a household that respected protocol but despised the Foundation's single-mindedness in containing every little thing. *They're sucking all the mystery outta life*, his grandfather would say. Reichardt commiserated with the thought as he tried to suck all the mystery out of his flask. He'd never been able to place the flavor but it vaguely reminded him of a whiskey he'd had on his first trip off of the station in his early twenties. Traveling off their artificial little satellite for vacation was still a new concept in those days and Reichardt had figured himself on that trip to be the first member of his family to touch the soil of any planet in well over a century.

His monitor faded to black before beginning its screensaver cycle; an old one he'd dug from an archive of software from the Earth days, its low-resolution twisting pipes were garish but offered him a nostalgic moment for a world and time that Reichardt never experienced himself. He stared at the colorful pipes as they wound their way across the void of his screen, slowly filling its blackness with vivid greens and pinks, thinking about Earth.

He'd never seen it in person and now he never would. The designation of an entire planet as an SCP object wasn't a new concept when they'd classified Earth as SCP-13175 but even still it had been a point of controversy. As interplanetary travel had become a more regular occurrence, one fact had become unavoidably obvious: anomalous activity existed everywhere to some degree but there was no place within humanity's reach that had anywhere near the quantity of anomalies as Earth. Reality was simply less stable there, as the science had proven. Reichardt had

been several years into his career with the Foundation at that point when the file went live. In the intervening three decades the O5 Council had never made any comment on the subject and quiet warnings were issued to those who began questioning the decision too loudly. Reichardt remembered it as the day his father resigned; moreso, he felt like he had watched a part of his father die that day. Following the intentional decolonization of Earth in the 2170s the planet had been used as a resource; within decades it was a ghost of its former self, a husk that had been thoroughly reaped and left to decay back into the soil it had once emerged from. Less than a million people were still on Earth. The number of stalwart populations who'd stayed behind, religious fanatics and survivalists and those who believed that mankind should stay where he came from, had dwindled to almost nothing and few were the researchers or industrialists who believed that the planet had anything more to give. There were still a few Foundation-controlled facilities even, or so the rumors went. Keter objects whose threats of global or galactic destruction the Foundation hadn't been willing to risk leaving behind to chance.

Why now, then? Reichardt's body ached from being in his cubicle chair for too long but the soreness was rapidly dulling behind the mask of his growing inebriation. He stood for the first time in hours and stretched, staring out the nearby window at the vast universe beyond. Earth wasn't visible from this station and Reichardt felt a twinge of regret. He'd never married or sired children and as an only child, he was the last in his line. No Reichardt would ever step foot on Earth again, and at his age he would likely not be approved for off-site travel until his retirement. Even then there was no guarantee. *What's changed?* The twisting pipes on his monitor had fully covered the screen and quickly blinked out of existence, the fresh blackness penetrated by red and white pipes this time.

Alone in the emptiness of space with tens of thousands of others, Aiden Reichardt felt more than a single planet slip through his grasp.

> Item Description: A flask of an unidentified alcoholic liquid which is constantly replenished as it is drained.
> Date of Recovery: 4/16/2377
> Location of Recovery: Recovered from the personal

effects of a deceased employee on Foundation Satellite Station - .
Current Status: In storage.

I hope you get back to me soon

SCP FOUNDATION STANDARD COMPUTER TERMINAL

WELCOME TO YOUR NEW AUTHORIZED FOUNDATION COMPUTER TERMINAL. TO ALLOW FOR AUTOMATIC REBOOT OF SYSTEMS PLEASE INPUT THE PROPER CREDENTIALS

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INPUT LEVEL 2 PRIMARY SECURITY CREDENTIALS

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Command:\users\personnel\Issac_Holland>_
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AUTHORIZATION GRANTED. PRIMARY MEMETIC KILL AGENTS DISENGAGED. GOOD EVENING, DR HOLLAND

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ACCESSING FILES…

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ACCESSING DATA LOG. PLEASE INPUT EVENT DATE AND EVENT DETAILS

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Date: / /

Event Data: I'm not exactly sure how to use this thing, but I hope you get this daddy. Hi!!!! It's been so long since you left us, I hope you get back to me.

Date: / /

Event Data: I know you're a long time away and the time might be different where you are but can you PLLLLLEEEEEEEEAAAAAAASSSSSSEEEEEEEE respond? We miss you.

Date: / /

Event Data: HAPPY NEW YEAR DADDY! If I find a way, I could hopefully send you some pictures of the drawings Tommy has been making for me. They're so cute. Please get back to me when you've found her. Love, Kim. :)

Date: / /

Event Data: Hey dad, I've been fiddling around with your old watch you had in the attic. I think I can make it work again. A lot of electrical stuff has been starting to work like normal but it's really slow and wonky. Maybe that's why these messages aren't being sent to you. I'll post what David thinks. See ya.

Date: / /

Event Data: David said that this computer was made in the 80's or something lol. Europa still hasn't left our sky yet and people have been thinking that it's been the cause of the power going out or something like that. :P Anyway, good night dad, I'm goin to bed.

Date: / /

Event Data: Hey dad, I've been pretty sad lately and Tommy won't talk to me. I just really need a hug. :,(

Okay, bye.

Date: / /

Event Data: There was this comet that flew past Earth and David said the light reflections was the main thing that turned Europa purple. It was soooo beautiful and also cute because Tommy took me up on top of a hill to watch it with me. I blushed so hard when he hugged me and kissed my cheek. I was like crying OMG.

BTW this "event data" thingy is kinda annoying… Do you know how to turn it off?

Date: / /

Event Data: David has been looking at some old shops that have spare parts and old computer stuff. I asked if he could get me a scanner so I can send you some drawings. Anyway, see you tomorrow dad! Love ya! :D

Date: / /

Event Data: David was pestering me again today about how I could unlock this SCP computer. I showed him your card and the password and stuff. I hope you don't get mad daddy, he was just SO annoying and I needed to shut him up. Talk to you later. Please respond…? :)

Date: / /

Event Data: Tommy was so romantic today! He took me to see the Eiffel Tower and It was AMAZING! Thank god for that wormhole haha lol jk. But seriously I love him! HEHEHEHE I'll talk to you

tomorrow dad!!! :D

Date: / /

Event Data: HAPPY BIRTHDAY DAD!!!! I hope the other people in your shuttle give you cake or whatever. :P Love you! Oh and Tommy says hi! XD

Date: / /

Event Data: Tommy was crying today because he missed his mom and I asked if he wanted to stay with me for a little while. I know I'm 14 dad but I can perfectly handle a guy sleeping over at our house for a few months lololol. Anyway, love ya! Kim. <3

Date: / /

Event Data: Why did you leave me daddy? I miss you so much! Please come home.

Date: / /

Event Data: David was scared today that our universe is gonna collapse because of the spacial anomolys (did I spell that right? :P), and that's also why we ended up near Jupiter. Is all that true??

I don't wanna die tho.

Date: / /

Event Data: David managed to get some of Tommy's drawings onto the computer interface. HOPE IT WORKS! LOVE YOU!

Date: / /

Event Data: I fucking hate you dad! You selfish fucking cunt! I saw

the photos and the backed-up diary entries that were on this fucking thing and I know exactly what you were doing! WHY THE FUCK WOULD YOU ABANDON ME JUST TO FLY INTO SPACE AND FIND SOME ASTRONAUT CIRCLING AROUND SATURN'S ORBIT???!!!!! I don't give a shit if it's your wife! You still left me here… You fucking coward!

Date: / /

Event Data: Why do you have to be so far away?

Date: / /

Event Data: My attempts at suicide haven't worked yet… I'll keep you posted.

Date: / /

Event Data: Tommy found me with my wrists slit in the bathtub this morning. Maybe it's because the sun is so dark… And the moon doesn't exist… All we have is that massive blue moon hovering just above our atmosphere. Whenever I walk down the streets people are crying, or jumping off of buildings, or doing whatever…

… Or maybe I just can't see properly…

Tommy seems to be the only one that's happy in this world, the only person I can trust. Goodnight dad.

Date: / /

Event Data: I'm sorry for being mean to you a few weeks ago… I just need you so badly right now. Tommy says that I should be emptying out my emotions to him rather that you but… I'm scared daddy. Please come home. I miss you so much.

Date: / /

Event Data: Please come home. :,(

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Command:\date\log_search\prompt>_

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RECOVERING DATA…

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FINAL MESSAGE SENT: 163 YEARS AGO

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Command:\override\file\script>_65553423-1243409

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ACCESSING PHOTOS…

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++ ACCESS ALL IMAGES ON TERMINAL ++

Hehe… It looks so cute doesn't it dad?

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ACCESSING DATA LOGGER…

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PLEASE INPUT EVENT DATE AND EVENT DETAILS

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Date: / /

Event Data: Happy birthday Kim. Daddy loves you.

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Command:\users\personnel\Issac_Holland>_ logout

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YOU ARE NOW LOGGED OUT.

She's Angry and Going South

He sank his knife into the seal which stared up at him without flinching as all the seals had on his trip south. Its hot blood steamed and coagulated on the ice as it flailed weakly, uncomprehendingly, looking up at Teriaq as if to say "What? What is happening to me?". He offered it his canteen, pouring out a bit of his water for the dying creature to drink. Respect. When it stopped moving he started skinning, splitting the seal from tail to ears. He tossed the skin into the polynya, no way to tan it, no way to know if he'd remember how to. The ribs were opened next and the intestines drawn out, they too were tossed into the hole. The meat he saved, cut in strips and wrapped in discarded tee shirts. The blubber was added to the nearly-empty jar he'd stowed away on the sled, towed behind the snowmobile. He fought the temptation to swallow some. He was hungry. Arctic exertion burned away his calories. He felt himself grow thinner inside his four layers of cloths. Instead, he chewed on a strip that was still warm. A fading memory said that his blood would be redder and his breath hotter. He didn't know why. He didn't remember why.

He continued to chew on the fresh, bloody meat as it steamed in the sub-freezing air as he walked back to camp. Top half of the red survival tent stood out on the ice along with a freshly-excavated, black snowmobile. It was the first he'd been outside in a week, the howling winds had held him in. It was July. July in the Gulf of Booethia. The ice should have retreated but it was back early. Against season and greenhouse gas it returned bringing snow and wind with it. Teriaq knew why.

When he closed his eyes he saw it again. The beginning. Green ice. Blue skies. Brown stones, slick with blubber and blood. A gasping beluga, half-dead, stares out with panicked eyes, unknowing. On breakers, wine-colored with blood white whales float like limp, cotton rags on the tide. Still more of them come to throw themselves

against the rocks. Leaping gleefully and squealing they push out of the waves and onto the cobble. The dead bake in the constant, summer sun of the arctic. He stood and watched with his old friend Fullbrush.

"They're supposed to be in the inlet." Teriaq grasped for meaningful words. "It's calving season." He looked at Fullbrush whose eyes were unreadable behind the sunglasses. "Doesn't this bother you?"

"Beachings are always sad, Teriaq, but what do you want me to do? Cry? That's not why we're here. We're only supposed to look like a field station. We're not actually supposed to be ecologists."

Gulls came. They picked at the washed up carcasses. They pecked out the eyes of the living but weak. The beaching was a buffet for the children of Sila. The tell-tale flukes of orcas cut the deep water; they'd been coming further and further north with the permanent retreat of the sea ice. Teriaq watched as they swam inward toward the carnage, watched as they ate the confused and concussed white whales. Some surfed their way into the shallows. The gulls did not scatter. They did not react. They continued eating, dumb and oblivious. Some tried to fly but faltered on the air. The rest ate.

That was when the first orca, limp, confused, washed ashore.

"Get on the radio," Teriaq said.

Their receivers erupted in static and screams.

Teriaq bundled into his tent for the night. It was screwed to the skin of the sea and held down by hundreds of pounds of drifted snow. It wouldn't move unless the ice did. He lit the small, gas stove in the tent's vestibule, put some snow in a pot to melt. He fished around in the rucksack for something else to eat and produced 2 nearly empty peanut butter containers and some crackers. He scraped the last of the peanut butter out, spread it on the crackers. Licked his fingers. Still hungry he had more seal meat, this time cooked on that same stove in the animal's own blubber. He hoped the heat would kill whatever it was in the fat that fogged him.

He had had several weeks of fuel and less food when he first ran from 641. Not nearly enough to make it to the nearest "city" which was half a continent away. There was a chance of making 300 miles to the nearest town. A good chance if the snowmobile didn't die on him. Food was a problem. In the Arctic you're supposed to eat 6000 calories a day; the easiest movements are hard in the cold. Teriaq had been eating less than that. His clothes hung looser.

There is no dawn this far north in the summer. Teriaq woke to the sound of a thuds against the tent. He donned his outer layers and stepped outside. A puffin had fallen from the sky and broken its neck against one of the struts. Still more lay in various states of injury and death on the ice. A rain of birds that had forgotten how to fly. Unnerved, Teriaq put extra effort into breaking camp.

The growl of the snow mobile carried him away from the birds. He kept his eyes on the ice, sticking to thick, white ice. Young, black ice is thin and wouldn't support his weight, let alone the weight of the snow mobile. Gray ice is shifty and brittle, the result of many freeze-thaws where the currents are strongest. Worst was green. Green was Her color and he knew that no amount of incense and combing could undo the crime that made Her freeze the seas. He sped north east, hopefully he'd hit the western coast of Baffin Island soon. The coast meant national parks and national parks meant park rangers, Inuit villages, people of some kind. He'd be able to contact his employer's employers. He'd be able to let them know that She'd escaped, and importantly, why She'd escaped.

Janet Tyrease Clinton hunched into her coat. The bridge of the icecutter was cold and the trip was long and slow. She felt the hum of the water deluge system through the hull and the sharp cracks in the sea ice against the bow of the USCG *Healy*. They'd reached the Barrow Strait after a month of icebreaking. The slow pace chaffed at her, so close to their goal. So close to the epicenter.

She pulled out her Foundation-issued laptop and connected to the satellite intranet to distract, to remind, to motivate herself through the next week's grind. There, mass amnesia in Norway as contaminated, salted fish are accidentally introduced to ice-locked coastal villages. The ruins of downtown Tokyo as drivers, pilots,

pedestrians, forgot traffic signals. Fire fighters lost the wherewithal to put out the burn, haphazardly spraying water on smoldering ruins. In America millions of pounds of contaminated fish sticks had entered the school lunches. Children forgot their parents' names. There were lakes where the water would make you forget how to swim or which way the surface was. Another mass beaching of whales, this time in Southern California, 30 minutes outside San Diego. In the arctic the ice had returned, spreading out from Somerset Island against season, current and tide.

"You seem troubled, Lady Clinton," said Eugenio through his text-to-speech translator. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

She looked at the fox. It sat on a stool, uncanny eyes staring at her over the console. "No, nothing. How is the Weather Knight doing?"

"Ah, the little chap has been doing his best to keep the wind under control but the further we go north the harder it is." A pause, the fox's paws bapped at an oversize keyboard. "He could probably do with an inspection from you, Lady Clinton."

She nodded her ascent. Eugenio was prone to polite understatement. The fox king claimed this was for the sake of propriety but Janet couldn't tell if that was true or just speech-to-text's even tone. In the biological lab a number of Foundation scientists were running tests on wild-caught samples. Others processed blubber and meat samples. Somebody cursed as the centrifuged shuddered to a stop, the display reading "error, unbalanced". They had so many samples to process, so much pulverized meat, fat. The room smelled of isopropanol and hexane.

Janet and the fox angled toward the live specimen room. A ringed seal stared up at an exhausted-looking avalanche of scruff in a lab coat, unperturbed at the close proximity of so many human predators. In the corner of the room a blackbird shifted on a dowel in an aviary. Its feathers were dull and a small pile of feathers had begun to grow on the floor. It chirped, twitched a little, chirped again.

"The Weather Knight greets you and apologizes for its state," translated the fox, itself translated by a machine.

"What's the matter with it?" Janet said loudly enough for the scruffy veterinarian in the corner to hear. The bird sang. The vet focused on examining the seal.

"The Weather Knight says that it has been unable to sleep. It's been trying to maintain the winds like you asked but when it sleeps something pushes back."

"I see. How long do you think it can keep things the way we need them to be?" There were contingency plans in the hold in case this happened. If 1948 couldn't keep the winds from changing and the ice from slamming their passage shut there were drastic options. Drastic, sea boiling options.

"The Weather Knight doesn't think it can keep this up for much longer, a day or two-"

The ship rocked and groaned with sudden impact. Eugenio fell off the counter top, paws akimbo. The blackbird, 1948, flapped irritably in its cage. Janet found herself face first in the thatch of the veterinarian's beard. The seal looked as calm as ever. This was wrong. They'd been going a paltry three knots in the open ocean. They couldn't have hit something, unless…

The alarm sounded. Anomalous contact. A spear of green ice punched through the port hole. Time for emergency measures.

Teriaq's camp sat at the base of the cliffs. It was hard, too hard to climb and Sila was angry at him so he did not dare. A nearby polynya he'd surrounded with carved, narwhal horn, tupilaqs bound together with seal ligaments. He'd seen Agloolik swim close when he'd grabbed an unaware seal, seen the qalupalik grab at his flesh offering and water sacrifice. His inu was strong here. The sky was right. The sea was right. He did not know how much time he'd spent out here. Vague memories of fear. Vague memories of fleeing. When he went to check the polynya, for incursions by the monsters below, for seal, he passed the remains of his magic dog. Black and hard it leaked oily blood on the ice from the green icicle that impaled it. It had not frozen, such was its magic, but it was dead now. A bug pinned by Sedna's wrath.

He smelled piss on the wind as it shifted. Skalugsuak had breached the surface of the polynya, fins lazily spun in the water. It scratched itself against the ice over and over and over, the water cloudy with blood. A poor omen Teriaq knew, but of what? What drew Skalugsuak from the pisspot to him? Should he end its misery? He smelled smoke on the air. In the distance a canoe, he knew it was the wrong word but could think of no other, metal clad tore through the green ice of the bay. Prow clad in flame. No, led by a giant of flame, waist deep in the water. Head wreathed in plumes of steam from the sea and smoke. A furious howl against the wind in a language he didn't understand. A memory stirred. Teriaq reached for his belt where he kept a little bit of magic. Black material, a handle grip, a lever. He raised his arm, pressed the lever with his finger, and sent the flare skyward.

"He's disoriented and suffering from acute amnesiatic poisoning."

"It's no wonder. He's been eating nothing but seal meat and blubber for the past few months. Every sample we've started this expedition has been full of the stuff." Janet said, her voice tired, "Will he recover?"

"Give him a few weeks of filtered water and therapy? Maybe. Guy was pretty far gone when we picked him up. Couldn't remember English at all." The doctor thumbed through his clinical notes. "We found this on him though. Personal notes, could be useful. "

The doctor handed Janet the journal. She paused. The sea around them boiled with the fire giant's passage, bound to service by a friendly "loaner wizard" from the Hand. She opened the journal. Trembling words greeted her.

> "Your name is Teriaq LeChatlier. You are heading south. You once worked for a bunch of white people that called themselves The Foundation. They screwed up, poisoned the water with that stuff they used on you when you first arrived at site 641. Told you it was for security, that you couldn't know where you were. Do not eat the seal unless you can't eat anything else. The seals are poisoned. The whales are poisoned. They will not know

you for what you are. You will not know who you are. Avoid the green ice because that's Her ice. She's angry. She is going south. She refuses sacrifices and songs."

It went on like that with Inuktitut pictograms cutting in until it was illegible. She closed the journal, put it aside for the anthropologist. They'd come to the right place. Janet walked over to the wall beside the sedated Teriaq and turned on the intercom.

"John. Transmit my identification code to Oversight. Include the message 'Our suspicions have been confirmed. Widespread contamination by amnesiatics in vertebrate and planktonic samples even as far as 73 degrees N by 88 degrees W. 1836 is likely beyond containment. Decommission will follow barring a breakthrough with re-acquired asset. Likely last radio contact until decommission attempt. Listen for clear code." She paused, considering. "Wish… wish us luck."

Teriaq slept. *The Healy* trundled. The giant waded. Janet decided to take tea with Eugenio. Fraternization at the end of the world.

Stage Fright

If I do, and I'm wrong, humanity dies. For a year or two.

If I don't, and I'm right, humanity dies. Forever.

The figure stared at the stone wall for a moment, wearing sweatpants and a hoodie, as if waiting for the surroundings to acknowledge the gravity of the moment. Instead, the train tracks remained rusted and silent, and a plastic bottle continued rolling down a street in the wind.

The figure carefully unfolded a diagram, and began painting with the spray can in their other hand, pausing to re-check the plan every few seconds. The lines were precisely calculated, an intricate arrangement of concentric rings and right angles, standing out from the fluid and free-form graffiti that occupied the rest of the wall. Once finished, they dropped the can in the grass, and returned to a car parked in a nearby lot, where they waited and watched the tracks.

The next train to pass was filled with passengers occupied with reading, napping, or daydreaming, but enough of them caught a glimpse of the strange design as they passed under the bridge, on their way deep into the center of Manhattan. Satisfied that their work was done, the figure started the engine and began the drive home.

Claire stared at the shapes and colors before her, trying to resolve them into identifiable objects. She wished she weren't so familiar with this sensation, but it was an unfortunate necessity of working in the memetic research department.

Amnestics, she thought. *Selective, judging from the nutty, metallic smell, assuming I'm not in an abandoned peanut butter factory. Class-B at the very least.*

She ran through her most recent memories, trying to recall where

she was and why. There was a summons to meet O5-8, face-to-face - the long drive to a covert bunker - verifying her identity via passcode, retinal scan, and a dozen machines outside of her clearance - and finally, a doctor with a syringe of clear fluid. There was apprehension, which was strange, considering how often she'd taken amnestics before - but no anger, so whatever she'd forgotten, she had done so voluntarily. That much, at least, was a relief.

The shapes before her gained definition; she was sitting across a desk from a squat, bald man, wearing a smile that suggested he was incapable of hate.

"Ah, looks like you've come to," said the bald man. "As you've probably guessed, I am O5-8, but you can call me Paul. Not my real name, of course." He chuckled, extending a hand over the desk.

She blinked off the last of the effects. "And I'm Claire. Claire Rudin." She grasped his hand, and received a hearty shake.

The desk was clear except for a handful of knicknacks, only slightly unlike those found on office desks everywhere. A row of metal ball bearings, with no visible strings to hang from, hovered in midair to her right. To her left, a gyroscope spun on a small pedestal, showing no signs of slowing down. On a shelf at the back, a Rubik's cube appeared to be scrambling itself.

The man noticed Claire's eyes wandering. "Yes, normally these wouldn't be allowed in here, but I managed to weasel out an exception. They're my way of staying sane - something we all need in this line of work." He pulled back one of the metal balls and released it. Rather than the expected clacking, the balls rang like bells as they knocked each other back and forth, playing the opening notes of "Ode To Joy".

"Don't worry, they're all the safest of safe-class. Barely anomalous objects, really."

"What was it you wanted to discuss, exactly? Your message said it had something to do with the Daevite meme."

"Yes, that's right. We finally got the results back from the field

study." He pulled a thick folder from a drawer and handed it to her.

Claire skimmed the figures on the first page, skipping quickly to the final statistical analysis. At least ten million dormant carriers, it said. She checked the figures, hoping to find some mathematical error, but found nothing. Flipping to the recorded civilian conversations, her trained eye quickly picked out the obscure word choices and memetic triggers that were the hallmarks of a particularly subtle and virulent meme. Yes, these people were definitely infected. And if the field teams' sampling methods were reliable - which she knew they were - the conclusion was inevitable.

She put the folder down and looked him directly in the eye, wondering how he still had his cherubic smile.

"This is uncontainable."

"Uncontainable by conventional methods," he corrected. "But that's why I called you here. We need to discuss some unconventional methods."

The quiet whirring of the gyroscope filled the air for a moment. Claire maintained eye contact, waiting for the man calling himself "Paul" to clarify what he would consider "unconventional".

He leaned back and spoke in a near-monotone, as if he had rehearsed this beforehand. "At 8:00 this morning, the O5 council voted unanimously to engage a contingency plan codenamed 'Stage Fright'. Part of this plan is that, once enacted, all details of its methods would be completely classified. Even I'm not allowed to know how it operates. All personnel who had any knowledge of the project have been administered selective amnestics."

"I take it I was involved in this project?" Claire said, recalling her awakening minutes ago.

"That's right. In fact, you were the head researcher. Congratulations on whatever you did, because at 9:14 the project reported success. All anomalous memetic effects have ceased completely. Not just for our personnel - everyone in the world is now effectively immune to memetic hazards."

"Immune? That would require a fundamental breakthrough in memetic science. Why would we wipe our memories of a discovery like that?"

The man shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine. It was at your personal insistence. Whatever your reasons were, they were good enough to convince the O5 council. And in any case, the details will be available once Stage Fright is deactivated. It's only meant as a temporary measure, to buy time for your new assignment.

"Effective immediately, you are being transferred to Site-121. To maintain the secrecy of Stage Fright, all memetic SCP objects have been transferred there as well. The cover story is that it's our new headquarters for memetic research. In reality, you will only be researching two things.

"Firstly, you are to monitor the continued effectiveness of Stage Fright. Any signs of memetic effects returning are to be reported directly to me.

"Secondly, you are to continue developing a counter for the Daevite meme. Once the countermeme is ready, notify me and we can disable Stage Fright to deploy it.

"Do you have any questions?"

I know this test is unnecessary.

I cannot let myself know. For previous-Claire, the test was important. Necessary.

I know the eggplant cannot control me. I must block out what I know.

I must do what previous-Claire would do, and see the eggplant without thinking of it.

"How do you feel about vegetables?"

I must think what previous-Claire would think.

"They're good for your health."

Claire sat alone in a windowless room, taking what she felt to be the world's strangest inkblot test. A bundle of cables connected to a helmet monitored her brain activity and carried it to the next room, where a team of researchers verified that she had, in fact, seen the photo of an eggplant, and had not, in fact, declared a holy war on edible plantlife. The next image was an abstract pattern of parallel lines.

"Please state your name," asked the voice from the speakers.

I know my name. Easy. Previous-Claire would struggle to know it.

I must struggle to know it.

She paused, and focused her mind. "Claire Rudin." Not Philip Gatt, the man who had painted it.

She was one of the few people cleared to know that this test was now completely unnecessary. Unfortunately, the people administering it weren't, so she had to put on a show. It wasn't too hard; memetic resistance techniques were similar to acting. Both required replacing your thought processes with someone or something else; a sort of conscious delusion. Still, she was glad to have the easier test, particularly for the next image.

"Dr. Rudin, are you prepared for the last slide?"

She paused and inhaled for dramatic effect. "Yes, go ahead."

The projector switched to the final image. Under normal circumstances, this would be a particularly dangerous cognitohazard, capable of putting unguarded minds into a temporary coma. She would need to struggle to view the image in front of her face, and allow it to pass through her mind without processing it. Today, however, she let her guard down just long enough to admire the flower.

"All readings normal. Doctor Rudin, you are cleared to enter Site-121."

Good. If they had caught on, it would be a security breach; there would be inquiries, amnestics, and worst of all, delays. Despite her

efforts, it had happened a few times before.

Claire put the helmet away and made her way to her office, eager to see if the counter-memetic search program running overnight had yielded results. To her surprise, she was not the first person to the lab today.

"Mark, you're here early."

The man looked up from his monitor, not having realized she was behind him. "Oh! Yes, I had a good feeling this time around. Thought we might have finally gotten the cognitive anchor points right." He had a manic grin, clearly waiting to be asked the obvious question.

"So, did we?"

He handed her a printout showing an abstract pattern of nested triangles. "It's the cleanest countermeme we've ever found. The software is predicting 100% effectiveness. If we got this thing into the mass media, the plague could be over in a matter of days."

Claire furrowed her brow in confusion, and turned the page over, checking if there was anything on the back.

"This is the countermeme? This exact pattern?"

"Well, yeah, of course." He laughed, increasingly concerned that she wasn't sharing his mirth. "I wouldn't joke about that, Claire. We've finally done it."

Claire stared at the pattern some more, wondering if she was imagining that she'd seen it before.

"So… you're going to bring this to the O5s, right? I mean, there isn't really much else for us to do here now. We've found the cure."

"Right, yes. I'll let the O5s know. I suppose you can take the rest of the day off."

Claire carefully slipped the paper into a manila folder, and started getting ready to leave. Before seeing O5-8, she decided to make

one other stop.

Claire stared at the painting on her living room wall.

Then back at the paper in her hand. Then at the painting again.

Yes, they were definitely identical. She tried to remember where, exactly, she had bought it.

It was when some friends were coming over, I think… Who, exactly? Hmm, it doesn't matter, I guess I was embarassed about how minimalist my apartment is… So I found that art store on Google somewhere. Can't remember the name… it was a fairly nondescript place. And… if I remember correctly, it smelled distinctly of metal and peanuts.

She stopped breathing for a moment. *I do not remember correctly.*

Claire gripped the sides of the frame and carefully lifted the painting from the wall, placing it face-down on the dining table. On the back, a packet of papers had been stapled together and messily duct taped to the painting, along with a note unmistakeably in her own handwriting.

> Hi Claire.
>
> The amnestics they gave you for anything related to Stage Fright probably hit any memories of my test for the O5s as well.
>
> I'm hoping the information I've left here is enough to lead you to the same conclusion as me: The O5s aren't taking my cautions seriously enough. At least, not all of them. That's why I had to give them a test. Misuse of Stage Fright could lead to an EK-Class scenario - and we wouldn't be able to do a thing about it, because nobody would even realize it had occurred. So as horrible as the test may be, it's better than the alternative.
>
> - Claire

P.S. Don't worry - the Daevite meme is actually completely harmless. Yes, the dormant stage is highly virulent, but the babbling about Daevite mythology during the active stage is just that: babbling. No actual connection. Just something to give the O5s a good scare. The infected won't even remember it.

MEMETICS DEPARTMENT
PROJECT SESHAT RESEARCH SUMMARY FOR O5 COUNCIL
MARCH 2011

The microwormholes discovered by Dr. Malcolm in January have been confirmed to be present in the brains of all available test subjects. Microwormholes appear to be present in all regions of the brain, and typically have a diameter under 50 nanometers.

Research into the destination of these wormholes remains at a standstill, due to their small size preventing access with measuring equipment.

Incoming signals have been determined to correspond to both sensory and memory information. These signals appear to be comprehensive; all information consciously processed by the subject passes into at least one wormhole.

Outgoing signals have thus far only been observed when the subject is exposed to anomalous memetic or cognitohazardous stimuli. Experiments run by Dr. Tarver have shown that these signals cause the anomalous effects of SCP- , SCP- , and SCP- . Dr. Tarver hypothesizes that the microwormholes may be the cause of all anomalous memetic effects.

SHORT-TERM RESEARCH GOALS: (new items in bold)

- Determine number and distribution of microwormholes (Completed)
- Continued analysis of incoming and outgoing signals
- Research origin, growth and development of microwormholes over time
- **Verify Dr. Tarver's hypothesis with other memetic SCP objects**

LONG-TERM RESEARCH GOALS: (new items in bold)

- Determine common cause of memetic anomalies (Provisionally marked as completed -Dr. Rudin)
- **Develop nanoscale equipment for analysis of microwormhole destination**
- **Research methods of closing or blocking microwormholes to prevent cognitohazardous effects**

RESEARCHER'S NOTE:

Clearly, this is an exciting time for everyone in the memetics department. These microwormholes are the most significant discovery in memetics in decades, and the research we're doing now will likely revolutionize how we deal with memetic threats.

That said, I must issue a word of caution. Until a few months ago, I would have dismissed any talk of the "mind" being separate from the brain as a violation of Occam's Razor at best, and superstition at worst. However, any good scientist is willing to change her beliefs in the face of new evidence - and we now have proof that the mind consists of two distinct parts: The brain in the physical universe we understand, and a second part, hovering out of sight, in a realm we know nothing about.

Given what is being sent in and out of the microwormholes, we cannot dismiss the possibility that their destination is what philosophers call the "Cartesian

Theater". That is, the place where the brain puts on a show for the mind - the location where actual, conscious perception takes place.

If this hypothesis is correct, then any attempt to close the microwormholes would not only render the subject immune to cognitohazards, it would also render them effectively unconscious. Their physical brain would continue unaffected, causing them to appear normal to observers, but they would no longer experience their own life.

For this reason, I must insist on two features of any such project:

1. It must be an absolute last resort, reserved only for K-class scenarios;

2. Even then, it must only be a temporary measure.

I dearly hope that such a measure never becomes necessary; however, as research along these lines has already been proposed by several members of my team, I ask that everyone keep this possibility in mind, and proceed with the necessary caution.

- Dr. C. Rudin

O5 COUNCIL MEETING TRANSCRIPT
SEPTEMBER 8, 2012

Present: O5-1 through O5-12, Dr. Julia Dean (Chairwoman, Ethics Committee), Dr. Claire Rudin (Project lead, Stage Fright)

<Begin Log>

O5-1: Dr. Rudin, could you begin by explaining the purpose of your proposed addition to the Stage Fright protocols?

Dr. Rudin: Yes. Because of the nature of the device, I believe that anyone who is aware of its methods would exhibit impaired judgement while it was active, regarding my "Cartesian Theater" hypothesis in particular. For that reason, I suggest that anyone involved in the project, including the O5 council, must be administered amnestics prior to its activation.

O5-5: This hypothesis you mention, it's the idea that the wormholes are responsible for consciousness, correct?

Dr. Rudin: Essentially, yes.

O5-8: Why, exactly, are we entertaining this notion? Frankly, I don't see why we don't turn the device on right now. It would make all our jobs a lot easier, save possibly millions of lives, and the only thing holding us back is this bit of speculative philosophy that -

Dr. Dean: If I may interject, the Ethics Committee discussed Dr. Rudin's hypothesis last night. While the scientific data is inconclusive, we decided unanimously to act on the assumption that the hypothesis is correct, until it is conclusively disproven. The risks of disregarding it override any potential benefits.

O5-4: Setting that aside, I can't help but feel a bit insulted by your reasoning, Dr. Rudin. Are you suggesting that the judgement of the O5 council can't be trusted?

Dr. Rudin: I understand, but please keep in mind what we've found from our research. Everything indicates that, aside from immunity to cognitohazards, the device would have absolutely no effect on anyone's behavior.

I wager that everyone in this room is currently convinced of their own self-awareness. "I think, therefore I am." In fact, it would be damn near impossible to convince anyone otherwise. It's too immediately obvious.

But the device does not affect behavior. Once it is activated, everyone will continue to act as if they believe themselves to be conscious - even if they are not. They will still be just as hard to convince otherwise.

And that means we will act on the belief that the device does not negate consciousness - even if it does. We would likely decide never to turn it off.

If that happens, we will be robbing the world of life, forever. For that reas-

O5-8: Assuming your hypothesis is correct.

Dr. Dean: Which we are.

Dr Rudin: As I was saying, for that reason, we can only allow ourselves to know one thing: The device must be deactivated as soon as possible. We cannot allow ourselves to know why.

O5-1: Does anyone have anything else to add?

O5-4: I still say this is an insulting proposal. We can trust ourselves to remain objective in any circumstance. We wouldn't be here if we couldn't.

O5-1: Four, your objection is noted. Shall we put it to a vote?

[Proposal passes 9-3, with O5-4, O5-8, and O5-11 dissenting.]

<End Log>

Claire read the transcript a second and third time.

I know I am conscious. Of course I am. I know I am - and my knowing proves it.

But this previous Claire - she would say my mind has been impaired.

I cannot trust what I know.

I know I am conscious. But I am affected by a worldwide memetic effect. No, not memetic - but close enough.

I must block what I know.

I must think what previous-Claire, the one not affected, would want me to think.

I am not conscious. Nobody has been conscious for two years.

I must test the O5s.

Claire flipped to the final pages of the packet, a description of the project's methods, most of it blacked out. At least three Keter-Class objects. Something level-5 classified. But the final steps, the ones previous-Claire had worked on, were visible, showing the final product of the process.

A gyroscope that never stops spinning.

Dr. Rudin had claimed she had good news. O5-8 wondered, then, why she looked like someone waiting for news on a dying loved one.

"So, how goes the countermeme project?"

"Very well, actually." Her speech was stilted, forced. Strange, he thought - but memetic researchers were always a bit odd. "We developed a countermeme this morning. It's projected to have 100% effectiveness."

O5-8 felt a lump in his throat. He had been dreading this moment, having to shoot down years of her work. Still, he thought, it was for the greater good. These past two years had seen countless lives saved by the gyroscope, and it would be a crime against humanity to give that up. Her hypothesis was an interesting bit of philosophy, to be sure, but his anti-amnestic had allowed him to remember it, and see its falseness.

"So as soon as you deactivate Stage Fright, we can begin

distribution via mass media."

A few white lies, a few well-placed bluffs. It had been easy to get the program, and its crown jewel, into his sole hands, especially when nobody else knew anything about it.

I think, therefore I am. That much is ironclad. I have nothing to feel guilty about.

"I'm afraid, actually, that we're going to put that on hold. We've decided to continue Stage Fright indefinitely."

He had girded himself for a look of disappointment, or shock, but was surprised to see a calm take hold of Dr. Rudin. She closed her eyes and breathed deeply. She was taking this better than he expected.

"We'll archive the counter-meme, and you will, of course, be amnesticized. Standard protocol, for projects of this importance."

"I see. Could you do me a favor, though?" Claire asked, removing a pen from her coat pocket.

"Yes?"

Claire jammed the pen between the spokes of the gyroscope, stopping it dead. O5-8 recoiled, and scrambled for the gyroscope just as she said the words she had memorized; the words that would dig into his mind and gouge out what he should've gouged himself.

"Mr. Paul, I'd like you to exit, pursued by a bear."

O5-8 was embarrassed to have lost focus. In the middle of an important meeting, and he was daydreaming about bears that smelled of peanut butter and rust.

"Sir?" asked a heavily-armed man just inside the doorway.

"Yes?"

"You pressed your silent alarm?"

"Oh, false alarm. Must have bumped it."

The man glanced at Claire and, satisfied, left the room. O5-8 relaxed, relieved there was a distraction from his inattentiveness.

"You said you had good news?"

"Well, good and bad. We've developed a countermeme that should end the Daevite meme in days."

"Excellent! And the bad?"

"It seems Stage Fright has worn off. People develop an immunity; we won't be able to use it again."

He frowned. "Hmm. Well, at least you found the cure just in time. I guess we'll have to contain memetics the old-fashioned way. I'll send out the orders to deploy the countermeme." He leaned back, and noticed the metal object Claire was admiring in her hand.

"So what's with the gyroscope?"

Claire smiled, putting it in her pocket. "Just a present for my niece's birthday."

Where Bad Children Go

> Though a powerful mind can overwrite all of existence, it requires significant discipline to truly eradicate what has come before. A burst of reality-altering energy, if unfocused, might radically change the overall nature of the world while only slightly altering objects on an individual basis, much as lightly running an eraser over a chalkboard smudges the writing without removing it completely.
> - Dr. Leonard Clarence, *On Reality, Unreality, and the In-Between*

In the Beginning

It could have been anyone's fault, really. In a way, that was what made it so terrible.

Stacks of papers shuffled to and fro between Foundation offices, requesting changes in position, alterations in schedule, amenities for contained individuals, and a thousand other modifications. Each appeal was slight, each approval minor. None, it seemed, amounted to any more than mere creature comforts.

Someone with a degree and a dark sense of humor requested a few of his favorite books for use in experimentation on a text-altering anomaly. Someone with a pen and a growling stomach put their signature on the paper without fully reading it. Someone with ink-covered hands and a history of insomnia smudged the document, and desperately tried to correct it. Someone with blurry eyes and an overloaded schedule entered the corrected text into a datafile. So it went for several hours, mistake piling upon oversight piling upon judgement failure, until at eleven o'clock the next morning, a small girl was given several new books.

At noon, she began reading.

At twelve-thirty, she decided she did not like the new books very much. Something about them made her feel sad and angry and sick. But most of all, something about them made her feel scared. So she closed her eyes, held her breath, and imagined a world in which she wasn't scared, in which everything would make sense and all the bad things were in the places where they belonged.

When she opened her eyes, she no longer saw the concrete and steel she had become used to. Around her, she saw stained, rotting wood, quietly creaking itself to death. She felt a stack of papers in her hands, and smelled sawdust and spilled ink. Somewhere close by, a school bell tolled.

And she smiled, because she wasn't scared anymore.

> Miss Holloway wishes to welcome you all to another education-filled day at her esteemed School. Student satisfaction checks will be carried out at random throughout the day, so remember to have a pleasant morning in order to avoid disciplinary action.

Miss Holloway's School for Children with Potential

The morning bell signaled a rush of activity, as students leapt, rolled, or were forced out of their beds and began their daily routine. Across several miles of dormitory floors, children slipped into school uniforms, put the finishing touches on their homework, and set out for the nearest cafeteria.

Students spiraled upwards and downwards along vast staircases, and dashed through hallways that curved around at impossible angles, sometimes leaving students to travel along the ceiling of another walkway. Sometimes, an inattentive student would stumble and fall through a hole in the floor, vanishing into the relentless void

between the walls of the school and emerging on another floor entirely.

Three mischievous brothers sold contraband goods out of their pockets, while another student stuck out her tongue at them and exchanged small, handmade toys for pens, books, and completed homework assignments.

The gramophone horns mounted on the wall crackled to life, shouting orders and occasional jeers at students as they made their way through the halls.

Far above it all, in a shadowed, musty conference hall, the thirteen members of the School Administration met to discuss their plans for the day, outlining what students should be monitored, what students could be manipulated, and what students needed to be reminded of their place.

A scream drifted through the school as an unlucky student tripped and fell into the basement. Fortunately, it was quickly silenced, to be replaced by snarl, and then a softer gnawing sound.

It was another day in Miss Holloway's School for Children with Potential, just like every other day that had been, and every other day that would be. The school aimed to be eternal, and it rested upon a solid foundation.

> Due to an unauthorized experiment by the members of the Manna Club of Sacred Charity, cake will be served with all meals for the foreseeable future. Consumption of this cake is mandatory, though enjoyment, while encouraged, is not.

The Bully

The Bully was a figure of much speculation around the School. Certainly, there were many bullies who stalked the corridors and brought misery upon their classmates, but there was only one

capital-B Bully that anybody talked about.

Few students could claim to have actually seen the Bully with their own eyes. The Bully, it seemed, appeared and vanished as it pleased, leaving only a trail of destruction to show where it had been. The few times anyone claimed to have actually witnessed the Bully had passed on into school legend. Some claimed the Bully had once climbed down into the Basement and fought with the monsters living there among the sacks of flour and potatoes. Others claimed that several teachers had tried to use the Bully to discipline disrespectful students, until it had gotten fed up and torn both groups to shreds. A few said that the Bully couldn't be killed, and a few others said that killing the Bully wouldn't be enough to stop it, anyway. Overall, it was tacitly agreed that nobody really knew anything.

Aldon never paid much attention to the rumors about the Bully. Personally, she felt that he, (it, whatever) probably didn't exist at all. Sure, there were stranger things in the School, like the bathtub in the third floor dormitories that screamed at itself, or the painting that surrounded itself with lizards every lunch period, but at least you could actually see those for yourself, and confirm that they were real. The Bully was more likely than not a rumor made up by the students to suggest that the faculty could be opposed, or even more likely, a rumor made up by the faculty to keep the students in line and afraid.

Aldon sighed and flicked her pen with her free hand. School had barely begun for the day, and already her mind was wandering. She hadn't slept well last night, because the Administration had gotten wind of her secret project, and replaced it with a note telling her that art supplies were not allowed out of their assigned room, and that her sculpture was highly inappropriate and had been confiscated for her own good. Though the note wouldn't have caused her to lost any sleep on its own, the fact that it was attached to a box of angry snapping turtles certainly did. Aldon absentmindedly rubbed the bite marks on her arms and sighed again.

Suddenly, there was a loud crackle from the gramophone horn fastened above the door. Everyone in the room jumped, including the teacher, who abruptly stopped his lecture on tesseracts in mid-

sentence. The horn produced the sound of a person clearing their throat, and then began to speak in a monotone, genderless voice.

"The School Committee of Normalcy Retention regrets to inform you all that there has been a minor breach of disciplinary protocol, and an especially troublesome student has gained access to the school at large. All students -" Here, the voice cut off with a tremendous crash.

A few seconds later, another voice, equally monotone but subtly different, resumed the announcement. "All students and faculty are to observe Emergency Ruling Number Twelve," it finished, ending with another crackle.

Emergency Ruling Number Twelve? Aldon thought, crawling beneath her desk and curling into a ball. *That's reserved for the worst stuff possible. What student* is *this?* Around her, she heard students whispering the same thoughts to each other, along with a single word: Bully.

Garbage, Aldon thought, or would have thought, had the door not immediately exploded off its hinges. With no time to react, she could only stare as a flurry of muscle, unkempt hair, and dark tattoos raced towards the classroom's front desk. As it grew closer, she caught a glimpse of a scowling face, twisted with inhuman rage. Aldon pulled her head further beneath her desk and closed her eyes. Above her, she heard a scream of primal rage, and a flurry of clattering, tearing, and… slicing? *I don't want to know, I don't want to know,* she thought desperately. The noises of destruction continued, until finally, a primal scream rocked the classroom. Then, silence.

After several minutes, Aldon finally pulled herself out from under her desk and surveyed the classroom. The whole place was a complete wreck. Almost all of the furniture had been smashed, and there was no sign of the teacher. The door frame had been ripped out of the wall, suggesting the monster had exited the same way it had come in.

And stuck in Aldon's desk, embedded nearly to the hilt, was a single, night-black knife. As Aldon stared, the blade faded away before her eyes, leaving a massive gash in the wood that declared as clearly as

any writing: *The Bully was here.*

Slowly, Aldon exhaled, then took a few shaking breaths. She wouldn't be sleeping well that night, either.

> The School Committee of Ethics and Discipline reminds you that the curfew exists primarily for your safety. Students not in their assigned nighttime locations by curfew will be expected to fend for themselves until morning.

Lifeguarding

It was noon, and a red, angry light beat down on the Secondary Athletic Courtyard of Miss Holloway's School for Children with Potential. The Courtyard was empty, save for one gaunt figure pacing around and around the swimming pool.

The Lifeguard sighed, counting her steps. Six thousand seven hundred seventy five. Six thousand seven hundred seventy six. Six thousand seven hundred seventy seven. That made nearly thirty-two revolutions around the pool today. And, as usual, nobody was in it to watch.

The Lifeguard paused to tap the side of her belt. Yes, it was still there. She resumed marching. Some time ago, hadn't there been others to walk with her? A man with an anchor on his arm, and another with a guitar? Somehow, she imagined a lot more people had once helped her lifeguard. But perhaps she was wrong.

But then again… hadn't the pool been… larger, somehow? No, that was impossible. Miss Holloway's swimming pool was the largest in the world. She had been told that, she thought, when she became the Lifeguard. And yet, the vague image of a much larger pool tugged at her memories. A pool with something at the bottom, she remembered. But she could see plainly that there was nothing at the bottom of Miss Holloway's pool. It was perfectly clean, as it should be. Somehow, it made her feel a bit sad.

She paused again, and checked her belt. Then, carefully, she removed her revolver from the side of it, and examined the cylinder. Five bullets. One empty space. Sometime, long ago, she had used one of those bullets. She felt a vague sense of nostalgia and guilt. She had regretted using the gun that time, she thought. They had explained it to her, she remembered. Told her that it had to be done. That sometimes Lifeguarding meant doing the exact opposite of guarding lives. But that was all a while ago, before she had come to Lifeguard at Miss Holloway's School.

At Miss Holloway's School, the recruiters had said, she could have a whole pool to herself, and she would never have to use the revolver again. But she should keep it with her, just in case. The Lifeguard hadn't questioned the suggestion. She hadn't questioned anything in a long time.

The Lifeguard replaced the revolver in its holster, sighed, and began pacing again. Six thousand eight hundred five, six thousand eight hundred six, six thousand eight hundred seven…

> The School Committee of Ethics and Discipline reminds all students that anyone found floating toy boats in the School's Sanguine Pond will be forced to retrieve them personally.

The Empty Room

The forty-third room on the third floor of Miss Holloway's School for Children with Potential was empty. No teacher held class there, and no club ever met there for long. The Administration refused to acknowledge the room at all, skipping it entirely in the organizational plans.

Those few students who spent time in the room said that it had an air of sadness, as if something belonged there, but it had left, and would never be back again.

The Administration would like to issue a reminder that it does not condone the formation of unofficial religious groups, covert or otherwise. On an unrelated subject, any hyacinth flowers found in possession of a student will be confiscated immediately.

Cleaning Floors, Moving On

The School's Clock Winders hummed happily as they repaired its central bell tower. A few of the mechanisms had broken down, as they often did, but all would be made right again with the quick application of the right tools. The Head Winder began the ritual chant as his followers scuttled to and fro, checking over all the cogs and levers and springs one final time. As he concluded, he signaled his second-in-command, who removed the wooden stoppers from between the largest gears. The mechanisms began to spin and twist, and the school's massive bell tolled, bringing the Clock Winders to their knees with its glorious sound. As the twelfth and final chime faded out into the afternoon air, a few of the Winders let out happy sighs. "And so God speaks," said the Head Winder. "Amen," the others echoed. Then, they crawled away to examine the School's other machinery. None of them paid any mind to the darkly-clad man who had begun to wipe the machinery down with a damp cloth.

Later, as the students filtered out of their classes and dispersed throughout the school, they stepped around a small space in the third-floor hallway, avoiding it without thought. If one of them had stopped and really stared at the place her cohorts subconsciously dashed around, she might have caught a glimpse of something like a man-shaped shadow, slowly mopping the floor. But nobody stopped, and nobody noticed.

This was how it always was for the Janitor. He cleaned, others moved, and the two groups never mixed or acknowledged the other's presence. Sometimes, when the Janitor had finished a job ahead of schedule, he might stand and look at those who moved around him. On occasion, he might vaguely recall a chorus of thirteen voices declaring, "As you sought attention before the

Administration through your misbehavior, so shall you lose the privilege of the attention of others," and he might feel a twinge of regret pierce his stomach. But then he would be whisked away to the site of his next job, and not dwell on such half-memories.

Presently, he was scrubbing away at a spatter of blood that had added a point of bright red to the hallway's gray-brown floorboards. As he washed away the blood, he idly wondered who or what had created it. A stronger student impressing his will upon another? A loose class project running amok? The Disciplinary Committee making its presence felt?

It could have been anyone's fault, really. In a way, that was what made it so terrible.

> Students who fail to adequately clean their assigned blackboards will be sent to the office of the Committee of Ethics and Discipline to receive appropriate punishment.

Cakework

The shift whistle's shriek broke morning air like a porcelain plate. A crow that had been roosting atop the Dispensary took flight with an indignant cry of its own. The crow was fat. All crows were fat now.

The workers from the Collection Crew were sitting around the loading area smoking cigarettes in silence, yellow streaks on their coveralls vivid in the morning's ashen drear. On some days their work was light, but not today. It had been a bad one. Morale was low.

Over the loudspeakers, a strident voice brought news of inevitable victory, accompanied by a blare of drums and trumpets. The announcer called for hope, optimism, and a sense of civic duty. Together, humanity would overcome.

This message had not changed in more than a year.

The Eaters filed into the Dispensary, their gait like rusty gears, dragging and slow. It had been almost three years since **`Cake`** Day. Weariness was a way of life.

The smell, as always, was thick and sweet and noxious.

When the workers entered the Eatery, there was a collective sigh of despair. Somewhere in the crowd, a woman did her best to stifle her sobs. Another barked a hollow laugh.

A battalion of three-tiered wedding cakes stood at attention, one for every seat in the hall. Bright yellow, covered in flowers, gaudy and absurd, each cake was almost identical. The only differences lay in the bits of grit, dirt, and debris they had collected when they had suddenly appeared the night before. Flies danced among the towers of buttercream. A beetle blindly explored the geometry of a fondant daisy. Smashed windshield glass twinkled among the edible pearls.

The Cleaners did their best, but they couldn’t get everything.

The moment passed. Everyone shuffled to their seats. They were all ages and races and genders, but they were as identical in their weight as the cakes were in their hideous, yellow glory. The hall filled with the sounds of eating. Someone made a quiet retching sound, but no one left their seat. An Eater who didn't eat wasn't eligible for weekly vegetable rations.

Outside, the smokers were finishing their cigarettes. An old man with gray hair and gray eyes took a final drag and brought his cigarette down to snuff it in a rogue clump of frosting on the concrete loading dock. The ember hovered above the sugary smear for a few seconds before the cigarette was instead flicked across the parking lot.

Mechanically, the man scooped the frosting up with his finger and put it in his mouth.

Aftermath

In June of 2003, a few weeks after my 17th birthday, I swore into the US Navy with the intention of becoming a Navy SEAL. In 2006, I completed BUD/S and earned the title I had been seeking.

In January 2017, I was recruited by a representative of the organization I would later come to know as the Foundation into Mobile Task Force Nu-7, "Hammer Down."

In **December of 2018**, a robot the size of a small building was seen wandering through the Irkutsk area of the Russian Federation. In the hours and days that followed, a "disease" that no one had even known existed was wiped out by this machine, and by three organizations the world had also never even known about, called the Horizon Initiative, the SCP Foundation, and the Church of the Broken God.

I was there, assisting in the cleanup of something that, simply put, should not have been.

Of course, a 30-foot-tall robot that seems to have gathered a following of millions of worshippers isn't precisely the sort of thing you would call "normal." Such an occurrence has all the subtlety of, well, a robot the size of a building. It's not easy to conceal something like that, and it's even less easy to conceal when organizations that can only be described as "the Men-in-Black" are there, helping it do its thing. Of course, the biggest obstacle to hiding the Broken God was the fact that, about 96 hours after it was woken, the GOC launched ballistic missiles in an attempt to blow it up.

A couple things happened after that. First, the Broken God protected itself from the missiles. I don't think so much as a piece of shrapnel ever touched the thing. Then, it continued what it was doing, destroying the remnants of **SCP-610** as they cropped up. When it was finished, it just left. No vengeance on the GOC, no further attacks on the flesh, no ascension for its followers to godhood, just

an absence.

In its wake, it left behind… some sort of tablets. I don't know, I forget the specifics. But what I do remember is that it left behind a simple message on these tablets, repeated in who knows how many languages: "I will return." No indication of when, no set of numbers, nothing, just the words "I will return."

The world being what it is, everyone lost their shit after that. The countries that had it easiest were places like North Korea, China, and Russia; they're used to putting down demonstrations and riots. Next came third-world countries like Sierra Leone; what does it matter if the government lied to you when that government will be gone in a few years, anyway?

I honestly think Mexico had it the worst. Without having to hide behind the Veil to prevent detection by the Jailors and the Book Burners, the Chaos Insurgency and the Serpent's Hand both went public. The Insurgency actually got themselves a pretty good handle on the Mexican drug trade, while the Hand used the tension of the times to get riots going. What little hold the Mexican government had on its people, it lost quickly. The civil war didn't officially start until June 2021, but anyone who didn't see it coming since March 2019 had their head in the sand. That's when there was the first big riot outside of the capital. There were, what, 200 casualties? 300? I don't remember. That was when the Mexican government started asking for outside help.

No one wanted to, at first. Countries like the US, where people already hated the status quo and distrusted the government by default, were too busy keeping themselves stable. I honestly can't remember if there was a single day when you could turn on the news and not hear about riots, protests, arrests, and terrorist plots. 2019 was also when Mobile Task Forces began working with and training alongside Special Forces, police departments, and other public safety organizations in order to help them respond to anomalies.

A lot of their work and our work was actually the same: keep your head on a swivel and know what you're looking for. That's actually why the Foundation recruited from Special Forces and some of the

higher-tier SWAT teams: less education the Foundation had to provide them.

It wasn't until 2022 that the Chaos Insurgency and Serpent's Hand really started causing enough trouble in Mexico and along the border that the Foundation decided to step in. That's when I was deployed to Juarez. Decades of training and experience in fending off the Mexican Army on the cartels' part and nearly a century of fighting the Foundation on the Insurgency's part had made the city into damn near a fortress for them and a living Hell for anyone who got in their way. That's why we were getting sent in: to take out the POI in charge of the Insurgency's Texas/New Mexico border operations.

A city as large as Juarez gives insurgents- Chaos or otherwise- plenty of room to hide. That's how a sniper was able to ambush my squad and land a round in my spine that left me paralyzed from the hips down.

One thing the Foundation had never wanted to admit about the Church of the Broken God until after the Veil had been lifted was the fact that they had the best surgeons on the planet. If you wanted an iPhone in your skull in 2009, they could've pulled it off. If you wanted to be able to turn the lights on and off in your home by blinking, they had an upgrade for that. If you lost the use of your legs because of a sniper on a rooftop in Juarez, they had you covered.

After the Awakening, which is what the Lifted Veil event became known as in common vernacular, there was a revolution in technology. Technology that futurists had anticipated in the 2040s or later became commercially available by 2024. Of course, by then, the Foundation had relegated me to paperwork. They rejected my requests for a return to front-line duty three separate times. Eventually, I just applied for training to work as a containment specialist.

I miss Roderick. He was probably my best friend when I was growing up. I wonder where he is now. When Roderick was still around, I still got to see my parents every now and then. Now, it's either sit and do tests, or sit in my room all day. And I can't even see

when I'm in my room. Like, my eyes work, but I can't look at things outside of my room.

They treat me like a prisoner. I don't know why. I'm only 13, how could I have done anything?! I remember my mom telling me that I was sick, and that this place is a hospital. I think she was lying. There are plenty of doctors, sure, but none of them do anything. *They just make me take tests. "What's behind the door? What card am I holding? Whose gun is loaded?" All sorts of stupid stuff like that.*

But that's ok. When I'm taking tests, I can see *again. I usually use the time to check on Roderick, see what he's doing. I'd check on my parents, too, but i can't seem to find them anymore.*

I'm worried about Roderick. Every time I see him, he seems stressed out about something. And he's never in the same place twice. I don't think that's normal. I ask the doctors and the guards about him sometimes, but they always ignore me.

Of course, in those days, everything was in flux. The Foundation had begun overturning jurisdiction of safe anomalies (safe in this context meaning "not likely to hurt or kill people, or manipulate them in an unethical way") to local governments. The United States government had recently formed the Bureau of Paranatural Affairs to deal with anomalies on their own terms. The Anomaly Registration Program allowed people to call 911 to report dangerous or life-threatening anomalies, while also allowing people with anomalous traits to find doctors and therapists who could help them "fulfill their true potential."

In theory, it would mean better treatment of anomalous people and respect for their civil rights. In practice, it meant that kids ended up in cells because "they were a threat to national security" or some other BS like that.

It wasn't as bad as it could've been. They still let the safe anomalies visit with their families, and even when they weren't visiting, the Foundation still let them leave their quarters for certain parts of the day. There was one kid, Thomas, that I had to watch out for

because he wasn't nearly old enough to be in that sort of setting on his own. I still worry about him sometimes.

Today is test day. I'm excited. They make me do these once a month, but they always take their time with paperwork. That means I can check on Roderick.

He's somewhere cold. I guess it must already be winter, wherever he is. And it's dark. I don't see the sun. The wind is blowing, and there's snow coming in on the wind. He's wrapped up, though, which is good. My mom was always making me wear a big coat whenever she visited around Christmas. It was dorky, but I would trade that for having to stay in a room all day.

I can see Roderick walking into a building. I think it's a bar. Or maybe a diner. He visits those a lot. He sits down and orders a black coffee, his usual… I think. Definitely a diner. The waitress smiles and goes to get his drink. The diner's mostly empty, which is why it's weird when some man I don't know sits down next to Roderick. They start talking. Roderick seems like he knows him.

The other man's name is Leonard. He says he didn't recognize Roderick with a beard. He always kept it shaved. Roderick says that it's the most he can do unless Leonard can help him. Help him with what? They start talking about "the good old days," when Roderick was "in New 7." No, that can't be right. What's New 7? Idunno, it must be from when Roderick was in the Navy.

Crap. More tests. I'll have to check back on Roderick later.

In 2027, the Foundation was dissolved and their assets in US territory liquidated by the BPA. It had been a long time coming. The GOC, now a public organization, was tasked with containing anomalies in international and disputed territory. A lot of skippers went there. The lucky ones, at least. 2027 is also when I was relieved of duty. I had to seek out alternative employment.

I've been working odd jobs for the last six years, finding work wherever and however I can. It hasn't been easy, but others have

had it a lot worse. I think the first Witch Trials were about three-and-a-half years ago. That was when the UN and most world governments started decrying the Foundation and its work. A huge document leak kicked the riots all back up. Things the Foundation had done in the name of preserving normalcy were being declared crimes against humanity. And public knowledge of what some anomalies were capable of, alongside registration with local and national governments, led to even more fear and paranoia of the government and the paranormal than had ever existed with the Foundation in charge.

When people don't understand something, one of two things will happen: they will try to understand it, so they can use it for their own ends; or, and this is far more likely, they will grow afraid of it and try to destroy it. So it was when humanity rediscovered anomalies. Former Foundation employees were declared public enemy number one, with anomalous persons at a close second.

The lynching started about three years ago, right about the time members of the Foundation Ethics Committee and RAISA started being tried by the UN. At first the National Guard and local police forces would intervene. Lately, though, they've been liable to participate. The news never talks about it, though. No one does. Even the most accepting of places turn us away. It doesn't help issues that the Unusual Incidents Unit of the FBI has unofficially been tasked with hunting us down. Hell, I've even heard rumors that the UIU and BPA have started hiring former Foundation agents to help them track down their old coworkers. I don't believe those rumors, but the truth remains that you can't trust anyone these days.

Skips have it just as bad. The ones not locked up are almost all registered, which just means that it's easier for vigilantes to find them. The ones who are able to head for Mexico, but I don't think many make it.

Ah, finally. They make me do the same thing every month. That's how I know I'll have awhile before they make me do more tests. What's Roderick doing now?

Him and Leonard are still talking. They have food in front of them,

plates almost empty. They're talking about cost now. Cost of what? I don't know. I think they've almost reached an agreement, but it looks like they're arguing over who's gonna pick up the tab. Why can't Roderick just take a gift when it's given to him? I've never understood that about him.

Now they've settled the tab. Leonard paid. They're walking outside, to an SUV. Leonard's. It's already started, and there are people inside. Leonard is reassuring Roderick that they're with him, that it'll be all right. I'm not liking the looks of this, but it doesn't matter because I have one more set of tests I need to do.

It's cold. I bring my coat tighter in to myself. Wisconsin isn't precisely like Arizona when it comes to winters. I'm only in this podunk town to meet an old friend.

The bullet that paralyzed me wasn't the first close call I've ever had. I've nearly died on multiple occasions. On one such occasion, I saved the life of a man I only knew as Agent Leonard Wells. Tonight, I'm hoping he can return the favor.

As I'm sitting, drinking my coffee, trying to warm up in this diner in the middle of Nowhere, Wisconsin, Leo walks in. We exchange greetings, and he orders his own cup of coffee. We talk. Eventually, we reach an agreement over dinner. He'll get me into Russia for five grand. It's all I have, but it's worth it. Anything to get away from this place.

After we finish our meals we argue over who will cover the tab. Eventually, I concede. I don't know why I was trying to turn down a free meal anyway. We walk outside, where Leo's SUV is already waiting. There are three men I don't recognize in there. Leonard introduces them to me as Simon, Harold, and George. The all look nervous. George asks Leonard if I'm the man they're helping to smuggle to Seattle. He says yes. Leo's words do nothing to calm the others. I ask Leonard, as an aside, why he didn't tell me about the others ahead of time, to which he responds it was a security risk. I decide not to ask whose security.

We start driving. Eventually, we reach an isolated stretch of road—

nothing around for miles. Leonard tells me that he and I will be changing vehicles, that he'll stay with me until the airport in Seattle. We get out, and the white SUV drives off. He hands me a flashlight and tells me to signal to a grove of trees in the distance. I'm signalling when I hear Leonard shift behind me. I start to turn around when—

The guards are walking me back to my room, which means I have some time to check on Roderick.

They're just driving, not talking. I didn't catch the others' names, but I don't think it matters. I don't think anything else is going to happen— No, wait, they're stopping. I can't hear who's saying what, but Leonard and Roderick are getting out. The SUV is driving off when Leonard hands something to Roderick. Then Leonard says something and Roderick starts waving the thing— I think it's a flashlight — at some trees. Then Leonard steps away and— NO!!

BUREAU OF PARANORMAL AFFAIRS INTERNAL MEMORANDUM, DATED 2033/11/03
RE: BEHAVIOR OF INMATE #864421 ON 2033/10/13
TO: SENIOR SUPERVISOR HAILEY BARRETT, UNDERAGE ANOMALOUS PERSONS PROJECT CHIEF, ANOMALOUS PERSONS DETAINMENT SITE 01
FROM: CHIEF INVESTIGATOR GABRIEL ROWLEY, BUREAU OF PARANORMAL AFFAIRS INTERNAL RECORDS DEPARTMENT
Ms. Barrett,

I believe I have found the source of Inmate #864421's unexpected behavior on October 13. At approximately 17:53 Mountain Time, Roderick X. Freeman, a person wanted by the US government for human rights violations in connection to his time employed with the now-defunct "SCP Foundation," engaged agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Unusual Incidents Unit sent to apprehend him with small arms fire. Mr. Freeman was killed in the ensuing firefight. Of note is the

fact that, in the transitionary period between SCPF and BPA custody of Inmate #864421, Mr. Freeman was Inmate #864421's primary caretaker.
I believe this is an indication that Inmate #864421's abilities exceed what we've so far recorded. I recommend immediate testing to prove or deny this claim. If my suspicions are correct, I recommend increased security protocols, or, preferably, elimination of the subject.

Sincerely,
Chief Investigator Gabriel Rowley, United States Bureau of Paranormal Affairs Internal Records Department

End of Line Hub

Excerpt from Containment Specialist Transition Notes: SCP-3860

> **Final Notes:**
>
> While SCP-3860's behavior has been increasingly compliant in the preceding months, it's important to remember that he is a known chronic emotional and psychological manipulator. It's very likely this change in behavior is a ploy to garner leniency, and from there launch a containment breach. I strongly recommend that as more of SCP-3860's systems fail, containment measures be increased. As he slowly dies, he is likely to become increasingly desperate. Should a suitable opportunity present itself, I have no doubt he is going to seize it. Stay on guard and don't let him sweet-talk you into anything that could cause trouble.
>
> Take care and godspeed,
>
> *Rose Labelle*

Series Overview:

In the conclusion of the Anderson Robotics series, after decades of investigation, raids, and numerous agents lost, Vincent Anderson has been captured and remains in SCP Foundation custody at Site-19. With his systems failing, and time running out, it seems very likely his containment cell will prove to be his tomb. However, a splinter cell of Maxwellists has other plans for the cyborg…

Tales:

- Part 1: The Vanishing of Vincent Anderson
- Part 2: Non-Volatile Memory
- Part 3: The Best Laid Plans
- Part 4: Volatile Memory
- Part 5: End of Line

Supporting Documents:

- **Anderson Robotics Hub**
- **Site-64 Dossier**
- **SCP-3560**
- **SCP-3860**

« **Family Disclosure Protocol** | **Anderson Robotics Hub** | **END**

The Vanishing of Vincent Anderson

Vincent Anderson sat motionless in his containment cell at Site-19, his attention focused on the alarm klaxons in the distance. While such sounds were not uncommon, the current alert had been initiated nearly three hours prior. Something was awry.

Anderson sighed, and then his mechanical eyes snapped to the door, which opened with a dull hiss. Three dark figures in battle scarred tactical gear stepped into the cell. Each wore a featureless silver mask. The leader pulled up its mask to reveal white PMMA eyes and a black aramid fiber skin.

"**Peregrines** 92, 46, and 34." Anderson looked over his guests with vague curiosity. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"We're certainly not here for a social visit, Mr. Anderson." PSHUD #92 voice was sharp and androgynous. "You will come with us, now. Timing is limited."

The old cyborg shook his head.

"Certainly the Hand has more valuable things for you to steal from the Foundation than a broken old man. Save yourselves, and let me die here in peace. I fought, and I lost, and now you're just wasting your time."

"You self-absorbed son of a bitch. We're not here for *your* sake," PSHUD #34 shot back. Its voice was deep and feminine. It drew its hip-holstered pistol with a fluid motion. Anderson attempted to stand, but was soon plastered with three tiny orbs of blue electricity. The old cyborg went into violent convulsions, a look of surprise frozen on his face. PSHUD #34 gave a nod, and PSHUD #92 picked Anderson up and slung him over its shoulder.

"Get back to the **Way**," PSHUD #34 said quietly.

As the three droids stepped into the hallway, the sound of yelling coming from down the hall filled their auditory sensors.

"The hostiles are in High Sec!"

Bullets filled the air. The droids lunged into Anderson's open cell, taking cover. PSHUD #46 pulled a machine gun from off its shoulder, and flipped off the safety.

"I estimate I can stall them for maybe 10 minutes." PSHUD's voice was that of a young man, eager and determined. "They will get through though. So be quick, and loop around to the elevator we discussed in planning the operation."

PSHUD #34 nodded.

"WAN be with you."

"And with you as well. See you in the **`Forest`**."

PSHUD #46 let out a low hum, and mounted its weapon on its shoulder. Letting out controlled burst after controlled burst, it walked into the oncoming fire, slowly accumulating damage as its two compatriots escaped down the hallway.

When it ran out of ammunition, they shot its legs out from under it. PSHUD #46 hit the ground with a dull thud.

Even for veteran Foundation personnel operating under calm conditions, Site-19's labyrinthine interior proved difficult to navigate. For two androids on the run from multiple task forces, the act was near Herculean.

Stairwells into hallways.

Hallways into elevator shafts.

Elevator shafts into maintenance tunnels.

PSHUD #92 and #34 hauled Vincent Anderson's paralyzed body closer and closer to their awaiting Way, their mechanical joints

squeaking as they sprinted at top speed. Occasionally, a loose bullet from their pursuers would embed itself in a nearby wall.

"We're coming in hot!" PSHUD #34 shouted into a walkie talkie. "Get ready to seal the Way behind us!"

"Copy that," a hoarse whisper replied. "You have three minutes. All other teams are pulling out. Can't wait to see your haul."

PSHUD #92 gave a relieved laugh.

"We're going to make it."

"Sure as hell looks like it! Only a little…" PSHUD #34 replied.

As the droids turned the corner, they were greeted by a stream of gunfire. An awaiting security team had cut them off; the cover of a nearby doorway provided the only defense from the incoming bullets.

"WAN damn it!" PSHUD #34 shouted as it peered out of cover. They were pinned.

"Can he hear us, still?" PSHUD #92 gestured to Anderson.

"Well yeah," PSHUD #34 snapped back, "He's paralyzed, not fucking deaf. Is that really important right now?"

PSHUD #92 pressed the cyborg into #34's arms. #92 lifted Anderson's chin and looked him in the eyes.

"Earn this, you prick."

It then took off, sprinting at full speed toward the blockade. The Foundation personnel made short work of the droid; its legs crumpled and shattered, leaving its momentum to carry it to their feet.

The security team surrounded PSHUD #92, disarming it. The droid lifted both its fists and extended its middle fingers.

"Contain this."

The explosion shook the whole facility.

PSHUD #34 looked on in shock.

"Bomber module…" it said lowly. "See you in the Forest, #92…"

A bullet landing in nearby wall shook PSHUD #34 from its stupor. The lone droid shifted Anderson onto its shoulder, and took off down the hall.

Turning the corner, it managed to slip through an out of place cobweb filled tunnel that slowly fizzled out of existence. When the security agents arrived, they found only a blank wall.

PSHUD #46 struggled against its restraints. It had been relocated to an examination table within a containment cell shortly after its capture. Despite the futility of its actions over the last hour, it still continued to strain. What else was there to do?

The sound of the cell door opening gave the droid pause, its head turning to see three agents enter, each wearing a sigil depicting **`three arrows descending upon a falcon`**. The lead agent approached the table. She was young, tall, and pale, with long brunette hair that she wore back in a ponytail.

"I take it you know who I am," the agent said.

"The angel of death herself. How many have you sent to the Forest this month?"

"Ideally less than I did the month before," she replied. "Where did you send Anderson?"

PSHUD #46 shifted its eyes to stare at the ceiling.

The agent rolled her eyes.

"We don't have time for this song and dance. You should know by now I can extract the information from your memory directly. All you are doing is dying for your pride."

The droid twisted its hand around and extended a middle finger.

"So be it. Zeke?"

The agent held out her hand, as one of her fellows pressed a pen shaped device into it. Upon pressing a button at its tip, a thick needle extended from its base. She then jabbed the device directly into the droid's forehead.

PSHUD #46 gave a high-pitched squeal, its body convulsing for several moments before it became still. An indicator light on the device began to glow green. The agent gingerly removed it, and clicked the button again. She examined the results carefully.

"Orders, Jessie?"

The agent broke from her thoughts and turned to her colleagues.

"I want this analyzed by the AIAD as soon as possible. Once we know where Anderson is we can get back to **Site-64** and assemble the troops. We'll file the AARs on the flight back."

She handed the device over. Her colleagues scrambled to accomplish their new directives.

"And someone notify Director Merlo," the agent called out. Her voice became low as she was left alone with the droid's remains. "Mom's going to want to handle this personally."

Upon the Oregon Coast, a man and a woman sat within the confines of their cottage, curled together upon a coach beneath the warm layers of a large quilt. Both gripped mugs of tea as their eyes looked through their glass patio door towards the distant storms upon the horizon. A silent mist fell, carried along by a gentle breeze.

The woman yawned and rested her head on her husband's shoulder. He gave her a friendly smile, brushing a lock of gray-streaked brunette hair out of her eyes as his hand then ran along the back of her head. She smiled in return, and felt herself begin to drift into a comfortable and warm sleep.

Bzzzzzzzzzzzt

The sound of a cell phone rang out, immediately tearing the peace away from the moment. The woman gave her husband an apologetic smile. In return he gave an understanding nod. With a sigh, she stood and went to answer the call.

"Go for Merlo."

"I see…"

"I'll be there as soon as possible."

`Director Sasha Merlo` hung up the phone and sighed once more.

"Another call to save the world?" Gabe Merlo asked with a small chuckle.

"He's escaped," Sasha replied. Gabe's smile vanished.

"I understand."

"I'll make it up to you when I get back." Sasha was already grabbing her coat and keys.

"Give him hell." Gabe saw her to the door. When he opened it, a three-man team of security personnel were waiting. He stepped aside.

"I'll be here when you get back."

Sasha gave him a nod and a sad smile.

"I love you." She was soon being escorted back to Site-64, her long-awaited vacation cut short.

End of Line | **Non-Volatile Memory** »

End of Line

"Glad to see everyone here."

"For those of you who don't know me, I am MTF Commander Jessie Merlo of ***Gamma-13****. This is Commander Damion Creed of Tau-51. Those of you from* ***Mu-13****, welcome."*

"Let's get right to it then, shall we? Within the near future, we are anticipating a reactivation of ***SCP-3560****, followed by an assault on the site. This assault is likely to be led by* ***SCP-3860****, or as more of you probably know him by now, Vincent Anderson."*

"Our resident Thaumatologists have identified eight key positions throughout the facility that may serve as entry points for the inhabitants of SCP-3560. These include most of the labs in F and G Wings, sections of H and A, and the administrative offices. These areas have been fortified with several ***Hoffman Portable Electro-Thaumic Units*** *by our on-site staff. However, they alone will not be sufficient to deter a mass assault."*

"Until such a point that Command believes that SCP-3560 is likely to remain inactive, we'll be on standby. Each of your teams has been equipped with the needed materials for rapid exorcism. I'm told that the ammunition was reverse engineered from some old Specter tech by the ***Conwell Lab*** *before he retired. Good stuff."*

"3860 is to be terminated on sight. He'll try to make his way to the AIAD lab; we think he wants to destroy an AI construct housed there. This is why so many of you will be stationed nearby. We believe 3860 is desperate and heavily wounded, so be ready for a fight."

"Heh. Of course, this all hinges on the residents of SCP-3560 not killing 3860. Keep your fingers crossed that happens, and that this all proves to be a quiet, uneventful lockdown."

"-a quiet, uneventful lockdown."

Jessie Merlo's words echoed in her mind as she sprinted through the war-torn halls of **`Site-64's`** G-wing. A spectral Taita unit was in hot pursuit, its numerous legs crawling after her. The blood of three of her fellow agents dripped from its blades. Ahead of it, a small hoard of phantom Peregrine units led the charge.

"This is Merlo!" she shouted into her mic as she turned a corner. The Taita unit was closing in. "G-Wing has been overrun, Taita unit inbound, my team is down, need back up n-"

The agent felt her leg slip across a pool of blood. She hit the ground with a loud crack; her momentum carried her into the next intersection.

"No, no, no, no, NO, NO, NO, NO!"

She fumbled forward for her gun, attempting to preserve as much of the distance between her and them. She slipped again.

Flipping herself over, she leveled her pistol and fired off the rest of the magazine. Silver bullets crashed into the spectral automatons. One by one, the Peregrine units were exorcised — popping out of existence. The Taita unit gave a loud mechanical whine in protest, its form beginning to evaporate as the incantation took effect. It still crawled forward, blades whirling. Jessie crawled back on her hands. She hit a wall.

She closed her eyes and waited for the pain.

"STAY DOWN!"

Gunshots. A loud, mechanical whine. Silence.

Jessie's eyes snapped open. From her left, a team of Mu-13 agents approached. Their guns were trained on where the Taita unit had crumpled. The lead agent spoke into his mic.

"Mu-13, Team C. G-Wing resecured, retrieving casualties, over."

He looked at Jessie and smiled.

"You alright, Commander Merlo?"

"Never better," she said with a nervous laugh. A Mu-13 agent helped her to her feet. She reloaded her pistol and surveyed the carnage down the hall. Then, she closed her eyes and sighed. "That thing came out of the fucking floor and eviscerated three of my agents. Too big for the Hoffman units to do much other than give it a tickle."

"Yeah, ghosts will do that from time to time." The Mu-13 leader signaled for the rest of his team to make their way down the hallway and search for survivors. "Always fun."

"Any sign of 3860 on your end?"

"Negative."

She frowned and rubbed her temple. "Come on. You've got to make your move eventually."

"We have to make our move eventually." **Hector** observed as he loaded a rifle he had acquired from a deceased MTF operative. The apparition turned its head to the frail cyborg that sat at the nearby security console.

"I'm well aware of that… #31," Anderson replied with labored breaths as he typed away at the keyboard. "Our move will go so much better, though… if we know where we are going. Benny will be… back soon. In the meantime, we can prep."

"Right. Couldn't we just have Benny fry the computer now? Save us the trouble?"

Anderson shook his head.

"This was always meant to be… a one-way trip. I need to say… goodbye. You understand?"

Hector nodded.

"It's your funeral."

"So, it is." Anderson gave a wheezing chuckle.

A few minutes later, a shimmering orb on spindly legs phased through the wall. It let out a little chirp to announce its presence.

"Speak of the devil." Anderson held out an open palm. "What have you got for us, Benny?"

The droid vanished, then reappeared on Anderson's hand, delivering an intricate series of chirps. The old cyborg nodded. With his spare hand, he pressed the enter key on the security console.

Throughout the facility, the sound of security doors shutting filled the air. The lights died and were replaced with the soft glow of emergency lighting. Nodding at his work, Anderson removed a black flash drive from the console. A simple white ampersand was branded on its front.

"Help me up, #31." Anderson pressed Benny to his chest. The little droid phased through the tissue and vanished. "It's time for us to leave."

"Report."

Assistant Director of Task Forces Clarissa Shaw stood within the main site security office, which had since been turned into a temporary command post. The low buzz of several Hoffman Portable Electro-Thaumic Units filled the room, ensuring a bubble of ectomorph exclusion. Before her, multiple screens showed video footage of the halls, labs, and offices of Site-64.

"Gamma-13, Team B, Cafeteria has been cleared. We've managed to close the SCP-3560 instance in the kitchen. Tau-51 A assisting in mop up. Over."

"Mu-13 Team C, G wing resecured. Recovered Gamma-13 A operatives and are still assisting with evac of casualties. Over."

"Tau-51 B, standing post. No sign current sign of target or additional hostiles. Over."

"Mu-13 Team B, primary SCP-3560 instance secured top side. No additional hostiles since the fifth wave. Standing by, over."

"Think he gave up?" a security technician asked, looking up from her monitor.

Shaw shook her head. "This was a pretty elaborate effort to just throw in the towel like that. He's got something up his sleeve, we just got to figure out wh-"

The room went dark. Emergency lights kicked on.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me," Shaw said under her breath. "Alright, everyone, game day, whatever fucking happened I want it fixed! Tau-51 B, incoming!"

Ten members of MTF Tau-51, Team B, stood in the dim emergency lighting. Each had their weapon at the ready. The security doors up and down the hall had been sealed, leaving them alone in the dark. Within a confined space. Nearly half a mile underground.

No member of the team made a sound, save their breath. On occasion, each member of the team swore they could hear the other's heartbeat.

Where are you? A bead of sweat rolled down the operative's face. His eyes panned the dark hallway.

Click.

The lights came back on. The task force members blinked as they readjusted to the brightness.

"Control was that you?" the team leader asked.

"Negative, this is all on Anderson."

"Any visuals? Help us help you."

"Negative, those systems are still down. We're trying to get them back up as fast as we can. Hang tight."

"Easy for you to say," the team leader mumbled. "Looks like we're still in the dark, fellas. Stay-"

Two team members dropped, their armored forms ballistically shredded.

The surviving members turned, leveled their weapons, and opened fire as a phantom Peregrine sprinted across the hallway. It had a machine gun in its hand and phased through the opposite wall.

"Contact!"

The team fanned out and prepared itself for a game of cat and mouse. The game did not last long.

The door behind them opened to the sound of crackling electricity. The team leader turned his head. Vincent Anderson stood at the threshold, his index finger extended. A blue bolt of energy lashed out from its tip.

Three more members of the team dropped. The remainder scattered, only to be struck by globs of neon-orange goo. The material hardened into a shell, incapacitating the unfortunate soldiers.

"I believe… we're done here. #31, would you kindly?" Anderson stumbled to a wall to prop himself up. Soon after, Hector reappeared and approached the cyborg, offering his shoulder for support. The two began to make their way onward.

"I think that went well." Hector stepped over a cocooned MTF operative.

"Swimmingly." Anderson nodded.

There was a series of bangs. The cyborg fell to the floor, his spectral companion evaporating in an instant. Several silver bullets lodged themselves in his torso. He turned his head. The monochrome comedy mask had chipped from where it hit the floor.

One of the MTF operatives squirmed away.

Anderson let out a shallow sigh. He reached into his pocket and pulled out a glob of neon-blue goo, chucking it through the air. It landed on the operative with a small plop, then began to hiss. Anderson watched the agent squirm and howl as their skin began to melt. Seconds later the operative then became still. A baseball-sized hole had been punched through the orange cocoon.

Anderson shook as he got himself back on his feet and hobbled to the nearby wall for support.

"I-I-I-I don't think… we'll-ll-ll-ll… have any more tro-tro-tro-trouble, will we-e-e-e-e-e?"

Anderson crept onward. Eventually, he arrived at the door Benny had informed him Phineas resided behind.

As Anderson reached into his pocket to pull out more of the neon blue goo, the door opened. The old cyborg was met face to face with the business end of a shotgun. Behind it was Director Sasha Merlo. Anderson looked at the weapon then into his nemesis's eyes.

"Well played, Sasha," he sputtered.

BANG

Anderson slumped to the floor. Sasha pumped the weapon again and fired.

BANG

Once for all the agents lost.

BANG

Again for all the careers ruined.

BANG

A third time for the grief he had given her family.

BANG

A final time for herself.

The final shells hit the ground. Vincent Anderson was still.

Sasha let out a sigh and lowered the weapon. She watched the body for a minute in silence, then began to laugh. Kneeling down, she pulled off the comedy mask and threw it away.

"Got you."

Sasha returned to her feet. She wore a satisfied smile as she went to assist the bound MTF members. She stopped when she heard a sad chirp. Slowly, she turned to look over her shoulder. Atop Anderson's corpse was a familiar Amur drone. The drone looked at her, then darted off towards the computer housing Phineas.

"No."

Sasha sprinted to the door, just in time to watch Benny dive through the air, phasing into the computer's hard drive.

"No!"

She pierced the room, slamming her hand into the button to activate the AIC. The computer sparked, and for a brief moment, a message flashed upon the screen.

Goodbye, Director Merlo.

The screen then went dark.

"NO!" Sasha howled and began to beat on the keyboard with her fists. "You don't get to win this time, Vince! No!"

She then shook the console, before kicking it several times.

"Director?"

Sasha did not hear Jessie enter, nor see the multitude of MTF operatives standing in the doorway.

"God damn it! We had you! We had you fucking bastard!"

"Director!"

"Rot in hell, Anderson! ROT IN HELL!"

"Mom!"

Sasha felt her daughter shake her. Her expression of rage melted away.

"Mom," Jessie said. "It's over. You won."

Sasha nodded and closed her eyes as tears built up. Jessie pulled her into a hug, and Director Sasha Merlo, former Commander of Asimov's Lawbringers, broke down.

Silence fell Site-64, save for an old woman's defeated sobs.

Vincent Anderson awoke upon his back, a blanket of mist obscuring the monochrome canopy above. He slowly lifted his head and looked around, he was alone.

With a relieved sigh, he got to his feet and brushed himself off. He was still dressed in the clothes he had worn when he died, the fabric pierced with countless holes from the shotgun blasts. Despite this, however, his pain was gone, and he felt lighter.

"Guess this answers one question," he said to himself. For a moment, the old cyborg took in the silence. "Rest in peace, Phineas. Where ever you are, I'm sorry."

The silence was broken by the sounds of applause.

"Well done." A familiar voice sounded from behind a tree."Selfless as always."

`Saker #76` stepped into view.

"Now, I believe a debt has come due."

Anderson raised his index finger and then paused. A frown soon appeared.

"Your magic won't work here, Mr. Anderson." Another voice cooed from Anderson's right. He turned to see a Peregrine unit emerge from the mist. "You're dead."

Anderson backed away and raised his other hand. A long thin wire shot forth and pierced the Peregrine's head. The droid shot back, but within a few moments was back on its feet and resumed closing in.

"We're dead too, you idiot," laughed a third voice from behind. "You have no more cards left to play."

"Stay back!" Anderson shouted. He whipped the wire around, slicing through several droids. The laughter that surrounded him only grew louder.

The wire snagged, and Anderson looked around. His vision was filled with the smiles of scores of androids.

"Hector won't let you do this," Anderson shouted. "The Maxwellists will come for me. I'll get to the Data Transmuters. I'll escape. Eventually, I always —"

"There's no place left to escape to," Saker #76 cut him off, shouting above the deafening roar of laughter. "It's the end of the line, Mr. Anderson. Welcome home."

Six Months Later

Upon the Oregon Coast, a man and a woman sat within the confines of their cottage. Curled together on a couch, each had a glass of red wine in hand. The warm rays of the dying sun cast themselves through the glass patio door and painted the room's interior with vibrant yellows, oranges, and reds. The waves in the distance caught the light and danced with fluid fire as twilight set in.

The woman yawned and rested her head on her husband's shoulder. In return, he wrapped an arm tightly around her and kissed her forehead. She smiled and gave him a quick peck on the cheek.

"Thank you," Gabe spoke.

"For what?" Sasha asked.

"Coming through the other side in one piece," Gabe answered. "And not leaving me to spend these years a widower."

"Well you know me, I do try." Sasha snickered.

"Do you miss it?"

"I think part of me always will. But hey, all things come to an end, right?"

"Right," Gabe chuckled. "Still, thank you all the same."

Sasha nodded and then grinned, raising her half empty glass of wine.

"To Asimov's Fuckups," she said.

"To Asimov's Fuckups," he replied.

They then returned their eyes to the horizon, in time to watch the sun fade and give way to dusk, and a sky full of countless stars.

« **Volatile Memory** | **End of Line** | **END**

Family Disclosure Protocol: Revision 90

Jeremiah Cimmerian, Phillip Foster, Jeffery Jacobs

Abstract: Humans, by our very nature, are social creatures. We gather, we find partners, and we form families. This is no less true for members of the Foundation than it is for any other group. Unfortunately, due to the nature of our work, such relationships create the potentials for massive breaches of security, and in several cases, have required the use of amnestics. By granting the loved ones of specific Foundation personnel a special class of **`Level 0`** clearance, not only does one decrease what could be considered a potential security breach, but also reduces amnestic use, and in many cases, helps alleviate the stress and physical/ mental strain constant deception of loved ones has upon Foundation personnel…

"But when you get down to it, Ed wasn't just a good friend. He was a good person. Kind, compassionate, and thoughtful, he poured his heart and soul not only into his own work but also in helping those he worked with."

`Site Director Sasha Merlo` looked around the crowd at all the faces lost in thought as she spoke. She stood under an umbrella in the spring rain, as part of a semi-circle of roughly fourteen formally dressed men and woman that had gathered within Portland's Forrest Park. At the semi-circle's center was a simple metal urn, inside of which was the remains of the SCP Foundation Site-64's former Site

Director, Edgar Holman.

Sasha recognized most of the faces there. There was Edgar's son and daughter-in-law: Ted and Karen, his grandchildren, Researcher Jacob Conwell and his wife, Assistant Director Clarissa Shaw, a small menagerie of other former and current Site Directors, and a representative of the local branch of the **Unusual Incidents Unit**. She had always pictured Holman's funeral to be much grander, but in the end, living a life in the shadows made your friends few and far between.

"I'm going to miss you, Ed," Sasha finally finished, tears had formed in her eyes. "I really am."

She felt her husband, Gabe, put a hand on her shoulder as she dried her eyes and looked to Holman's son with a nod. Everyone else had already said what they wanted to say. Ted nodded in return and gently picked up the urn and carried it to a pre-dug hole. Without a sound, he deposited his father's ashes within and planted a sapling on top.

Edgar Holman was put to rest.

Activation of this protocol requires fulfillment of the following criteria:

* Approval of Site Command.
* Approval of Site Ethics Committee Liaison.
* The Personnel holds a minimum of Level 2 Clearance or Higher.
* The Personnel is not actively serving on a Mobile Task Force or similar project.
* The Personnel is not actively serving on a project featuring an anomaly featuring a cognitohazard, memetic, or biological hazard of BSL-3 or higher.
* The Personnel has passed their last two Routine Mental Health Screenings.
* The Subject be a minimum of 18 years of age.

With Ethics Committee approval, Site Directors may

include additional requirements for protocol activation. Subjects that are activated by personnel who meet these requirements at the time of activation, but then become ineligible, through assignment change or otherwise, do not face revocation of their active status…

"I never know what to say at these things," Gabe Merlo mumbled to Sasha as they attended to funeral's reception.

"Perhaps it's for the best," Sasha replied. "You don't exactly need a social butterfly for these things."

The various attendees stood in small clusters, quietly speaking among themselves. Occasionally a small melancholy chuckle would rise above the low clamor before vanishing as suddenly as it had arrived.

"That was a beautiful speech you gave," Gabe continued. "Fitting you should get the last word on Ed."

"Ed probably would have thought it was far too sentimental." Sasha smiled softly. "But hey, you don't get to choose how people praise you at your funeral."

"I'm sure my dad would have loved it."

Sasha turned to see Ted Holman standing behind her, having made the rounds from the other clusters before stopping there.

"I know I did," Ted went on, stopping to give a sad, tired chuckle.

"I'm sorry for your loss." Sasha gave him a hug. "I meant every word. Your father was one of the best men I ever had the pleasure to meet."

"Thank you," Ted replied. "It means a lot to hear so many people say that."

"Of course." Sasha ended the hug and looked over at Karen Holman as she and Edgar's grandchildren spoke to another guest. "You have a beautiful family, by the way; what are your kid's names?"

"Arthur and Laura," Ted said with a smile. "Twins. Both are off to college in the fall."

"We have a daughter getting to be that age," Gabe commented. "Things really do move fast don't they."

"Like a blur," Ted chuckled. "It's a shame because they just now have reached the point where they don't mind hanging out with me again."

"Speaking of daughters, where is Linda?" Sasha asked.

Ted's smile vanished.

"My sister and my dad had a huge falling out when my mom passed," he explained. "She always saw him as someone who put work first, even when his wife was on hospice. He made attempts to reach out to her, but no dice. I wish she came today and heard all the things all of you said about him. Maybe… I don't know, maybe she would finally stop being so bitter."

"I didn't mean to open old wounds." Sasha frowned. "I'm sorry."

"It's fine," Ted said with a sad smile. "Not your fault. You didn't know."

Ted sighed and looked around at the other guests.

"I should move along. Thank you again for the kind words."

"Any time," Sasha said, looking thoughtfully down at the ground as Ted walked away.

Her mind began to wander to her own daughter, Jessie.

> At no point should any personnel feel pressured to activate a loved one should they feel the benefits of maintaining the Veil Protocol outweigh the benefits of activation. In the event of a dispute between multiple parties as to whether to activate a loved one, maintaining the Veil Protocol takes precedent…

Two days later, Sasha Merlo found herself on the couch in her apartment living room, hair tied back and glasses on her head, typing on her laptop. In the chair next to her sat an uncomfortable looking young man Jessie had introduced to them as Desmond. Occasionally, Merlo would look at him out of the corner of her eye, and smile to herself as he would awkwardly avoid her gaze.

"We'll be back before curfew," **Jessie Merlo** said as she walked into the other room, clad in skinny jeans and a flannel. Like her mother, her brown hair was also tied back.

"Have fun," Sasha replied as she watched Desmond casually scramble for the door. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do."

"Yeah, no," Gabe called from the nearby kitchen. "Don't do anything *I* wouldn't do."

"Can do," Jessie said as she rolled her eyes, and departed with Desmond in tow.

"That boy is waaaaaaaaay too intimidated by us," Sasha said aloud as she resumed typing on her computer.

"I kind of liked him, actually," Gabe said with a chuckle, emerging from the kitchen with two bowls of stir-fry. "Seems like a decent kid."

"We'll see…" Sasha put her laptop away and accepted a bowl with a smile. The two proceeded to eat in silence for several moments before she then blurted out. "I want to activate Protocol FD90 for Jessie."

Gabe stopped mid-bite.

"You… what… why?"

"Just… seeing what happened with Holman and his daughter," Sasha began, "I can't bear the thought of that happening to you or me. Besides… as a Site Director I've basically got a bulls-eye on my head, and for better or worse you and Jessie do through association. One way or another, our world's going to catch up to her. Might as well choose the option that requires fewer amnestics.

She more than qualifies for the clearance."

Gabe sighed.

"Don't you think this is a little reactionary?" he asked. "It's a cliché to say this, but you know for a fact that ignorance is bliss here."

"We both agreed when we got married," Sasha returned, "that if we had kids, and if either of us wanted to activate FD90, we would. I'm playing that card. If something happened to me, or you, wouldn't you want Jessie to know the sacrifices we made?"

Gabe nodded.

"Of course," he agreed, "I just… I don't want to bring someone to our side of the Veil recklessly. Let alone our daughter. "

He then sighed.

"You haven't steered us wrong with these decisions before… so I trust you, but please before we move forward, can you at least talk to others who activated FD90?"

Sasha nodded with a sheepish grin.

"I know a few people…"

Personnel are to complete the following steps prior to completion of activation:

1) A script for the activation is to be completed by the Personnel.
2) The activation script is to be submitted to Site Command for approval.
3) Upon approval of Site Command, the activation script is to be submitted to the Site Ethics Committee liaison.
4) Upon approval of the Site Ethics Committee liaison, a requisition for Class A amnestics is to be acquired, and a training course on their proper use is to be completed.
5) Personnel are to activate the Subject according to the activation script.

6) Immediately following activation, a representative of the Ethics Committee is to provide the FD90 Orientation, explaining the rights and restrictions of Level 0 clearance.
7) One week following completion of Orientation, the activated Subject is to undergo a mental health screening. If the Subject passes this screening, activation is considered completed until a renewal is required. In the event a Subject fails this screening, Class A amnestics are to be used, as per the protocol's Reset procedures…

Follow my light
Follow my lead
Never listen to me
Never listen to me
Fall by my side
I only needed to see
Never listen to me
Never listen to me

The sound of music carried through the office door when Site Director Sasha Merlo poked her head into the PI Office of the **Site-64 Anomalous Materials Lab**. Therein, a gangly man with messy blond hair typed away at a keyboard, humming along to the tune. Sasha watched him for several moments before clearing her throat. The man gave a start, realizing he was being watched, and quickly turned off the nearby iPod.

"Director Merlo," he said, getting up from his chair. "Sorry about that, I didn't see you come in. If you're here for the results on the **2849** pheromones, I'm going to need a few more days to…"

"Conwell," Sasha held up a hand as she spoke. "I'm not here for any of that, relax. You always meet your deadlines."

Conwell nodded and gave a relaxed sigh.

"Ah… well then, uh, what are you here for? No offense, but we don't see a lot of people from the admin offices on this sub-level."

Sasha didn't respond. Instead, she stepped into the office, and approached the desk, grabbing a framed picture that from its surface. The image was of Conwell on what looked to be a backpacking trip. Next to him was a short woman with long red hair, with an arm wrapped around his waist. A teenage boy dressed all in black, despite what appeared to be warm weather, stood between them, by his side was a preteen girl dressed in an eccentric array of bright colors.

"How are Kate and the kids?" Sasha eventually asked, putting the picture down with a smile.

"Can't complain," Conwell replied, raising an eyebrow. "Zach's going through a bit of a brooding phase. Carrie is… not. Still, they are good kids… but not why you're here. Seriously, what's up?"

"I'm planning on FD90-ing Jessie," Sasha said with a sigh. "I know you did the same for Kate, so I wanted to ask you about that."

"You're going to un-Veil your daughter?" Conwell shook his head. "Why?"

"Why did you un-Veil, Kate?"

"Because I couldn't stand lying on a daily basis to someone who only tells me the truth. Also, as a spouse to the PI for a major Foundation Lab, Kate qualified for the clearance. You?"

"Because, if anything happened to me and Gabe, I want Jessie to at least know we didn't just bail on her. I don't want her to end up like Holman's daughter."

Conwell nodded in understanding, he gestured to a spare chair in front of his desk and returned to his own seat.

"Have you asked anyone else about this before me?"

"Gave **Ralph** a call out at **77**, also a few other people around the site here."

"Then you'd know the whole thing isn't cut and dry," Conwell sighed. "A lot of people don't take being un-Veiled well. I talked to Kate

shortly after I returned from the leave of absence Holman sent me on. Upon learning that I had essentially been lying to her for the first seven years of our marriage, she socked me in the face, broke my nose, took the kids and left. I didn't see her again for four days. Thought amnestics might come into play. Eventually, however, she called, we met at a coffee shop, and things were slowly patched back up from there."

Conwell paused for a melancholic chuckle.

"Bringing people onto this side of the Veil changes how they view the world and changes how they view you, for better or worse. If your plan is for this to alleviate stress for you and your husband, that is not happening. It certainly isn't going to alleviate stress for your daughter. There is a reason that they don't allow active duty MTF agents to have FD90 as an option. All it's going to do is put all of you in the same boat. But hey, sometimes that's just what you need."

"Do you regret doing it?" Sasha asked. Conwell replied by grinning and shook his head.

"Not for a second."

Unlike typical Level 0 personnel employed by the Foundation, who typically fill clerical, janitorial, maintenance, health care, and minor administrative positions within Foundation Sites, the rights and privileges of Level 0 personnel created through this protocol are much more restrictive. Those activated through this protocol:

* Have a basic understanding of what the Foundation is and does.
* Have knowledge as to their activating Personnel's position in the Foundation.

Additional disclosure beyond this level generally is neither necessary nor desired…

All sites within the Foundation had a resident Ethics Committee liaison. Site-64 was no exception, and so Sasha found herself in the office of Dr. Lily Campbell, a pale woman with thick glasses and short, curly, blonde hair.

"Well… this is certainly one way to tear down the Veil," Campbell chuckled as she looked at Sasha's FD90 paperwork. An Ethics Committee signature was all that was left before she and Gabe could enact their plan. "I take it you've read all the required materials?"

"Of course."

"Then you know once we start this, there is no turning back or stopping halfway. In the end, your daughter will be technically considered a Level 0 personnel and subject to all the restrictions thereof, or will be subject to amnestics," Campbell went on. "You're basically at the point of no return."

"I understand."

"Very well," Campbell signed the form, sliding it back with a smile. "Godspeed, Director. Please let me know when you plan to activate. After you are done me or another EC rep will need to do our spiel."

"Tomorrow," Sasha replied. "Around 6 o'clock. What, uh, what exactly is the EC's spiel here?"

"Nothing fun, I assure you," Campbell sighed. "We get to explain why the Veil exists in the first place and the consequences of breaking it. Nothing gets people more excited about a world of eldritch horrors and horrifying magic than brutal honesty, which reminds me…"

Dr. Campbell quickly typed something into her computer. A few moments later, the nearby printer shot out a form that she proceeded to sign.

"Requisition for standard issue **`Class-A amnestic spray`**," Campbell explained. "You'll need it in the event things go south, as I'm sure you know."

Sasha nodded and collected the form, looking it over before giving a sigh.

"Well, here goes nothing."

"Like I said before," Campbell smiled. "Godspeed, Director."

> Due to the sometimes-unpredictable nature of civilians upon disclosure of the Veil from a loved one, 'Reset' protocols have been established to allow for those deemed unsuitable for Level 0 clearance following disclosure, or those wishing to opt out on their own volition.
>
> Automatic activation of the Reset Protocols is to occur during any of the following situations:
>
> * Subject fails their mental health screening at the completion of activation.
> * Subject fails a renewal mental health screening, and a follow-up screening.
>
> Reset Protocols may also be used per subject request during activation, should they wish to opt out of the clearance. Activating personnel may not interfere with this process…

The following day came and lingered, the hours before the activation of FD90 creeping away at a glacial pace. Eventually, however, the evening came, and the Merlos sat down to dinner as they would any other evening that didn't require Sasha to remain at Site-64. It was halfway through the meal that a knock came at the door. Sasha and Gabe looked to one another, the former giving a confident nod. It was show time.

"I'll get it," Gabe said, standing up and moving out of the kitchen with a quickened pace.

"Are we expecting someone?" Jessie asked, watching her father

leave and raising an eyebrow.

"Several someones," Sasha replied with a grin.

"… who?"

"You'll just have to see."

Jessie looked curiously towards the front door. A series of four low voices could be heard in the entryway. A few moments later, Gabe returned. Behind him was someone Jessie had met before: a scruffy, lanky gentleman whose face was covered in dark stubble named Daniel Navarro, or Uncle Dan as Jessie had grown up calling him. He gave her a small smile as he took a seat beside her.

"And I thought I needed a drug problem before the intervention took place," Jessie joked as she looked over her parent's friend. "What, uh, what's going on?"

All eyes turned to Sasha.

"Well Jess," she began. "There is something your father and I are going to tell you."

Sasha then pulled out her Foundation identification card and placed it on the table. Gabe and Daniel all did the same, the familiar SCPF logo standing beneath the laminate like a brand.

"Turns out," Gabe picked up where Sasha left off, "we may not have told you the whole truth about what we do for a living these past 18 years."

Jessie looked at the various badges curiously, her brow furrowed as she looked at the various titles.

Special Agent, Level 3 Clearance
Head Accountant, Level 2 Clearance
Site Director, Level 4 Clearance

"All of us," Sasha continued, "me, your father, and Dan, all of us work for an organization designed to contain and study phenomena that exist outside the purview of modern scientific understanding, or

as we call them, anomalies. Think 'Cabin in the Woods,' but instead of using the monsters to commit ritualistic sacrifice of college students to a dark god, we contain them to keep people safe, and seek to understand them on a scientific level."

Jessie looked over her mother's badge for a while, taking in the words before finally tossing it down onto the surface.

"So, what, you guys are the X-files?" Jessie snickered. "Fox and Dana Merlo? I appreciate how elaborate this joke is, but I don't get what the punchline could be."

Daniel stifled a laugh at this comment. Gabe and Sasha both sighed.

"This isn't a joke, Jess," Daniel butted in. "As hard as it is to believe, this shit is as real as it gets."

"Alright, let's say you are telling the truth," Jessie rolled her eyes. "Why tell me? Why now?"

"Because you're 18, and we're finally allowed to," Gabe sighed.

"With your parents in the position that they are, eventually this all would catch up to you," Sasha added. "Believe it or not, I'm actually a bit of a big wig for our organization, as my daughter that makes you a person of interest. If anything happened to us, we'd want you to know the reality of things. What kind of world we actually live in, so that you'd be ready. People living on military bases know that their family is part of the military. Same concept."

Jessie shrugged.

"I don't know what to tell you guys. Sorry. I don't believe you. The joke isn't funny."

"We brought proof," Gabe said. "You want to see that?"

"I.. sure…" Jessie sighed. "Show me what you got."

Gabe proceeded to pull a penny, showing both sides to Jessie then sliding it to her.

"Go ahead and flip that, I don't know… ten times?" he instructed.

Jessie complied. Her expression switching from annoyed to baffled as the coin landed heads up each and every time.

"Always lands on heads," Gabe commented. "Forever and ever."

"So, you have a trick coin…" Jessie shook her head. "That's not exactly a lot of proof."

Sasha responded by handing Jessie a pocket watch.

"Try this one on for size," she said with a smile. "Notice its six minutes behind. Go ahead and try and adjust it."

Once again, Jessie did what she was told, winding the watch, only to find it continue ticking six minutes behind. Sasha gestured for her to place it down on the table.

"Now we wait…"

Sure enough, six minutes later, the clock adjusted itself on its own volition. Jessie looked at the watch in shock.

"It’s stuck six minutes in the past," Sasha explained. "Neat, right?"

Jessie shook her head.

"Or its just broken…"

Before Jessie could finish, Daniel pulled out a small razor blade from his jacket pocket and ran it along the palm of his right hand, a small blue flame appearing as he looked at her with a sly smile. He proceeded to twirl the magic fire between his fingers before allowing it to dissipate with a dull crackle. Jessie's mouth hung open in amazement.

"I've wanted to do that for a long time," Daniel explained as he quickly placed a bandage on the cut on his palm, "since you were a little kid actually, but 'You can't show civilians magic, Navarro,' and 'We don't want to amnestitize our five-year-old daughter, Dan.' But hey, here we are now."

"H-how…" Jessie looked from Daniel to the watch, to the coin, to her mother and father, then started the circle over again.

"Daniel is what we call a thaumatologist," Sasha explained. "Or in technical terms, a wizard."

"Do you believe us now?" Gabe asked.

Jessie fell silent, then nodded. Her face became pale as an invisible weight of realization sunk down upon her. She looked as though she was going to be sick.

"Wh… where does all this leave me then… I'm… I'm not a…"

"You're now a special type of what we call 'Level 0 personnel'," Sasha answered her stuttering daughter. "Basically, you know the way things are but are still technically a civilian. There are a couple of guidelines you'll be taught, but other than that not a whole lot will change."

"Not a whole lot will *change?!*" Jessie snapped. "You just showed me my whole life to this point's been a lie, my understanding of the world is wrong, and *nothing will change?* And what the hell are these guidelines you talked about?"

"Those are for Dr. Campbell to tell you." Sasha grabbed her daughter's hand only to watch as she yanked it away.

"Who the hell is Dr. Campbell?" Jessie's voice continued to rise, "Do you have another friend lurking around here who's going to make fire shoot out of their hands, mom?"

"Ahem…"

Jessie spun around to see Dr. Campbell standing in the kitchen entryway. The Ethics Committee liaison gave an amused smile and a small wave of her hand.

"I'm afraid I'm not quite as gifted as Agent Navarro on that front," she said. "Evening everyone."

She then extended a handshake.

"Dr. Lily Campbell, Jessie, it’s nice to meet you. I'm a special kind of representative for the organization we are all a part of. Now that you've been briefed on the way of the world, as it were, I need to talk to you about some ground rules. Will you please come with me? We can speak privately in your room. I can answer any and all of your questions."

Jessie cautiously accepted the handshake and nodded. The two then departed for Jessie's room, leaving Sasha, Gabe, and Daniel alone in the aftermath of their little show.

"I thought that went rather well," Daniel commented with a small chuckle. "Though you guys need to get some better props. A statistically locked coin and a temporally displaced watch are a bit lame."

"It went well? How so?" Gabe asked, raising an eyebrow. "She looked like she was going to vomit."

"Yeah, but she didn't flip the table, or throw a spoon at Sasha's head, or punch you in the throat. My point is it could have been a lot worse."

"It could have been a hell of a lot better too though…" Sasha sighed.

"Certainly," Gabe agreed. "But we have to deal with these things as they come. Dan's right. Could have been a lot worse, and hey, at least there was some healthy skepticism."

The room fell silent for several moments before Sasha sighed again.

"Do you guys want to open a bottle of wine or something?"

> Individuals activated through this protocol are eligible for employment within the Foundation, provided they meet the requirements for the position of interest. Additional conflict of interest training is to be provided in such cases as deemed suitable by Site Command…

Sasha woke with a start at the sound of fumbling keys, her body

snapping up while her hand reached for a sidearm she no longer carried. Standing by the doorway, frozen mid-motion, was Jessie, a stuffed pack on her shoulder.

"So, this is your solution then?" Sasha sighed as she stood up and approached her daughter. "Run away? You were listening to Dr. Campbell during her orientation, right? Someone would come looking for you. *I'd* come looking for you."

"So what?" Jessie hissed in return. "Your secret's finally out and now you are going to threaten me? I'm not afraid of you, mom."

"And I don't want you to be," Sasha said, slowly shaking her head. "But there are things out there to be afraid of. Things out there I'm afraid of. The whole point of all this was so you'd know about them."

"So I could live my life in fear?" Jessie returned in a harsh whisper. "Did you ever stop to think that maybe I was happy with things the way they were? That I didn't want that kind of burden, or to get tangled in your covert web? You and Dad said you wanted me to know about things so that if something happened to you two I'd know why… but Christ that's a pretty selfish reason don't you think?"

"We told you so that you could go on without living in ignorance and face the fear," Sasha snapped back. "We mulled this moment over since the day you were born, and I hate to break it to you, sweetie, but you've been tangled up in our web about that long as well. My position paints a pretty big bulls-eye on your head, and I don't know about you, but I'd personally like to know that such a target was there so I could take actions to ensure no one saw it!"

The two women looked at each other in silent anger for several moments before Sasha shook her head again and returned to the couch.

"Where the hell were you even going to go?" she asked.

"Desmond's outside," Jessie answered. "He was going to drive me to Leanne's."

"Go on then."

"What?" Jessie did a double take.

"I said you can go," Sasha explained. "I'm not going to force you to face this if you don't want to. You're 18. You can make the decision yourself."

Jessie looked at her mom, then to the door.

"What would happen if I did leave?"

"You're scheduled for a mental health screening in the near future, as Dr. Campbell said. If you miss that, you'd officially be considered AWOL and would be tracked down by an operative who would treat you with a special compound that would make you forget the last two weeks. Same for anyone you were staying with. After that, well, everything goes back to normal."

Sasha then held up the small can of amnestic spray.

"If turning back the clock really is what you want, though, I can save us both a lot of time and grief. I have some of that compound here."

Jessie looked at the can with curiosity, then turned away and began to open the front door.

"Just…" Jessie sighed. "Why didn't you tell me sooner. Why didn't you trust me…"

"18's the age minimum," Sasha said sadly. "I have wanted to tell you for a long time. We both have."

"That's fucking bullshit!" Jessie replied. "I've been 18 for 6 months now! You two sure were in a hurry!"

"Fine!" Sasha snapped back. "You want to know what happened? I went to one of my colleague's funerals two weeks ago. There I watched as his daughter didn't show up because she had grown to hate him. Saw him as a man who was more interested in his work than his family, even though the reality of the situation is that he was the one who had my job before me! Never told his family what he did, and one of his kids grew to resent him for it, and… I couldn't stand the thought of that being me and you… You want your mom to

admit she's a selfish woman? Alright, Jessie. Here you are. People don't want their families caught up in this world, Jessie, not unless they absolutely need that support. It's one of the most selfish things you can do."

Jessie closed her eyes, her hand still on the door handle as she froze for several moments.

"I'll see you and dad real soon," she said, and exited into the night.

Sasha watched the door close, and let out a sigh, placing her head in her hands. It was then she felt a familiar arm draped over her shoulder.

"Should we go after her?" Gabe asked. "Leanne's house is not that far."

Sasha shook her head.

"Give her time…" Sasha mumbled. "We fucked up, Gabe. We really fucked up. *I* really fucked up."

"What family involved with the Foundation doesn't?" Gabe replied, gently squeezing her shoulder.

Conclusion: There is simply no escaping that Foundation personnel will form families, and potentially have children. The very nature of these relationships would typically force the strain of constant deception onto numerous Foundation Personnel, resulting in all the associated negative health effects. As the above protocol denotes, however, there is a better way.

Those living on military bases around the world know their loved ones are serving in the military. Families of FBI, CIA, and other intelligence services typically know the type of security their loved ones are required to keep. The Foundation need not be different in this sense and stands to save an approximated 1.8 million USD in Class A amnestics, and 0.6 million in Class B amnestics

annually following widespread implementation of this protocol.

There is a saying popular among some of the old guard. "We died in the dark, so you may live in the light." At a certain level, for Foundation personnel this is true. However, we do not necessarily need to enter the dark without support…

When Sasha Merlo awoke the next morning, she was still on the couch, the early morning rays hitting her through the blinds with what felt like a violent intensity. Rubbing the sleep from her eyes, she proceeded to shuffle into the kitchen, where the sounds and smells of a coffee machine awaited her.

"I don't know about you," Sasha said to the lump sitting at the kitchen table in her peripheral vision, "but I barely slept. Today is going to be hell at work."

Sasha finished pouring and preparing her cup of coffee, taking a sip and turning to the figure. When she saw it was an equally sleep-deprived Jessie, and not Gabe, she nearly dropped her mug.

"You always make a pot in the morning before work…" Jessie said softly. "I figured you'd like it if someone else made it for you for a change."

Sasha immediately placed the mug down, and crossed the room, wrapping her daughter in a tight hug.

"I'm sorry…" Jessie said. "That was just… too much to take in… and I was scared…"

Sasha didn't reply. She maintained the tight grip on her daughter, as tears began to roll down her cheek. As she took a deep breath, she heard Jessie make one more comment.

"Does this mean I get one of those neat ID badges too?"

Line »

PROMETHEUS LABS
DATABASE #-2-320

TELEKILL ALLOY INITIATIVE

PROJECT OVERVIEW

The Telekill Alloy is designed to prevent telepathic rays or fields from affecting human minds. Test subjects so far have been able to prevent these forces access to their minds, however the remainder of their tests were not as promising. Only **`6 subjects`** were able to get successfully to the end of the testing chamber without succumbing to psychic attack. This is improved upon last years result, in which we were unable to prevent any test subjects from succumbing and having to be rehabilitated. Thankfully, no one has been **`seriously injured`**.

In the coming year, I expect the following tasks to have been accomplished by our team, if we wish to hit the **`1976`** product release window. Remember, our contracts with the U.S. Military will not last forever.

Goal #1: Continued research on the properties held by the alloy, with tests involving tester-22b being a particularly avenue to pursue.

Goal #2: Reproduction of the alloy without the usage of the poorly documented effects, or prepare superior documentation about them. I expect reports on both types of phenomenon in addition to existing work.

Goal #3: Reduce the ablative properties. This is imperative

Goal #4: **`Study the effect on exposure and`**

morale before testing may continue.

Prometheans

Meeting Of The Minds

Psychiatric Profile For Researcher Lee Byron

Preaching To The Choir

When We Reach The Crescendo

A Few More Words From "The Administrator"

Prometheans

Senior Researcher L. Byron(aka "Kraito")

SCP Researcher and Telepathy Specialist.

Security Class: 3

Duties: Research of Telepathic anomalies, Objects recovered in the field, SCP containment doctrine development.

Current assignment: Site-19, Prometheus project.

Lee "Kraito" Byron was not having a very good day. Not that he usually had good days, but fate had been particularly cruel to him on this one. He'd missed the tram coming into Site-19, and been forced to wait 2 hours for the next one to come in. At least now, alone in his office, he might have some peace and quiet.

"Hey, Kraito, you busy?"

Cursing his own hopes, he turned to see a familiar young woman standing at the door. Dressed in standard task force attire, and standing at a robust 6', she struck an intimidating figure. Kraito rolled his eyes, then grumbled a reply.

"A bit. Did you need something, or did you come just to waste my time?"

Lt. Masipag walked into this office, taking time to note the mountains of papers and geegaws littering the ground.

"Actually, Fritz sent me here to pick up some papers you had, for the recon."

Kraito snorted. "You agents are always getting all the interesting stuff. I get to sit in an office with papers and broken A/C. Here are

your stinkin' papers." He thrust a handful of crumpled documents to Masipag.

Masipag took them, with eyebrows locked in an amused stance. "Someone's in a rare mood this morning. Something on your mind?"

"No…" Kraito grunted. "Sorry. I've had a rough morning, y'know?"

She nodded. "We all have those days. I'll let ya be, for now."

"Thanks…" he looked back to the papers at his desk, and renewed his work. He didn't notice Masipag stroll out of his office, and out of sight.

> Field Commander F. Williams(aka "Fritzwillie")
>
> SCP Field Retrieval and Containment Commander.
>
> **Security Class:** 4
>
> **Duties:** Field Evaluation and Command, Field Recovery.
>
> **Current assignments:** Site-19, Prometheus project.

"Sir?"

Masipag poked her head through the heavy office door, and peered inside. It was a bare, drab room, with heavy velvet curtains blocking the windows. A single desk lamp sat heavily on the wooden desk, illuminating a note taped to the desks edge.

> Sorry Mas, scheduled for testing on 85 today. apologize for absentness. please deposit papers on desk.

"… goddamnit Fritz." She dumped the papers on the desk, and stalked out of the office.

> Administrator K D (aka "Director Cyrus")
>
> Site-19 Director, under oversight of O5-12.

Security Class: 4

Duties: Administrative

Current assignments: Site-19.

Director Cyrus wasn't a hard man to please. Just do your reports on time, don't bother him, and you could be on his good side forever. So when a peeved young woman burst into his office, he wasn't exactly pleased. Not looking up from his terminal, he noted her entrance.

"Good evening Lieutenant Masipag, did you need something?"

She frowned at him. "It's Fritz. He's messing with Cassie, and missing our meetings. Again."

"Commander Williams has had a scheduled test with SCP-085 since last week. You had plenty of time to check-"

"He *told me* to meet him today!"

Cyrus glanced up at her. "Perhaps you should have double-checked the dates. If you're going to be doing more recon missions, it'd be in your best interest to be punctual."

"Are you… seriously… sorry for wasting your time, sir."

"Apology accepted. Now, if you please…"

"Cyrus said you were pretty pissed at me."

Fritz took another bite of his sandwich, doing his best to avoid her icy glare.

"He warned you, huh?

"Yeah… Look, I'm sorry I missed the meeting. We were doing major tests with…"

"Sure, sure, whatever. Listen though, did you look over Kraito's

research?"

"… Can you give me the cliffs notes?"

"You're impossible, you know that? We spend all this time researching and… y'know what, nevermind."

Fritz sighed. "Look, I know that I've been-"

"Save it. Kraito's stuff showed the metals imported by Prometheus have been weird. Like… really weird. Weird enough to be an anomaly. So I had proposed we upgrade from reconnaissance to a full-blown raid."

Fritz scratched his neck. "Nah, I don't think that'll work, we don't really have enough data to go in gung-ho like that. You gotta remember, Cass-"

"Masipag." She stood, taking her tray with her.

"… Ah, jeez."

> Agent Saul Kulzn(aka "HK-016")
>
> Special Retrieval Operations
>
> **Security Class:** 2
>
> **Duties:** Field Agent
>
> **Current assignments:** Site-19, Prometheus Project
>
> **Status:** Injured during testing of SCP-313. On paid leave until further notice. Returned to active duty.

"… And then he totally gets my name wrong! Like, I know that he was doing all those tests with eighty-five, but he could at least get my name right!"

Saul nodded. "Commander Willie could make do to get his priorities straight. He's been spending more time in the test chamber than his

team. I mean. I can understand oh-eigtht-five being cool to study, but…"

"Study, nuthin'." Masipag harumphed. "He's just trying to spend every second he can with Cassie."

"… That's a fairly serious accusation, Lieutenant. What makes you think Commander Willie would break his professional duty like that?"

"I-"

"And don't say 'it's a hunch', because we both know that means nothing."

"…"

"That's what I thought. Now come, you're going to need to get out of that agents uniform if you're headed to the dorms."

As Masipag stuffed the last of her uniform into the locker, an alarm crackled to life above her head.

« ALL FIELD AGENTS OF THE PROMETHEUS PROJECT, PLEASE REPORT TO YOUR ACTIVE HCML SUPERVISOR. AN IMMEDIATE MEETING HAS BEEN CALLED FOR »

She looked down at the now full locker, sighed, and began pulling the out the uniform.

Helicopters flew low over the orange-tinged horizon, and circling the ruins below. Their spotlights showed the scope of disaster. Wrecked cars, obliterated research laboratories, and dead men littered the earth. Masipag squinted from the passenger window, trying to catch a glimpse of anything familiar. Before she could, Fritz's booming voice emanated from the cockpit.

"Masipag! Kulzn! Are you ready to drop?"

Masipag turned her attention from the window, squinting to the brightly lit cockpit. "Fritz, where are we being dropped?"

"Well, we believe the initial detonations happened in the eastern wing, so Kulzn and I will be dropping there. You're going to the western wing, see if you can recover any of the documents."

"What? Shouldn't I go with you?"

"Negative. Kulzn's the better man for the job."

"Unbelievable…" Masipag muttered angrily to herself, slowly moving through the ruined facility. It didn't look at all like she'd imagined. For one, the corridors weren't some glowing, white marble, but plain concrete, scuffed from explosive damage and the collapsed rooftop. Most of the labs looked barren.

As she turned around the corner, she was faced not by another endless row of laboratory doors and broken concrete, but an opened steel vault. Dropping to a crouch, she slowly made her way to the door, keeping her ears and eyes peeled for any kind of sudden movement. As she got closer to the vault door, it became more and more apparent that this vault was hanging on by a thread.

One moment later, it wasn't hanging on at all. It fell to the ground with a tremendous **CLANG** shaking dust from the ceiling and shuttering the doors. Masipag scrambled backwards, stumbling back around the corner and out of sight. As the dust settled, she peeked her head around a corner, looking towards where the vault door had once stood.

There was a shimmering block of steel, visible through the doorway. It stood taller and wider then the doors confines would allow, limiting her view to one of the corners. This was something big. This was huge.

«*Fritz, can you hear me?*»

«*Yes, you're coming in clear. What is it?*»

«*You're gonna want to see this for yourself Fritz. It's something else.*»

As she drew nearer, something crunched under her foot. It was a

piece of charred paper, which was soon in her hand being read.

Research has been drawing to a close on the project. Although we've made some great progress, we haven't been able to solve the diminish/replenish issue that dofs the research and study. Putting in a notice that the budget for next quarter should be reduced unless we get more commercial results.

She flipped it over to the back. There were two simple words printed on it.

TELEKILL ALLOY

« Looking Back| End Of Olympians Hub | Meeting of the Minds »

Meeting Of The Minds

Masipag sat in the sterile briefing room, her expression of slightly nervous boredom mirrored by Fritz, Cyrus, and Kulzn. Kraito stood at the front of the rooms only table, fiddling with a black projector.

"Just a moment guys, sorry, the damned thing conked out on me right as we started."

Director Cyrus shot him a withering glare. "I hope that this briefing is important enough to have used forty-five minutes of my time. Some of us have places to be, Mr. Byron."

"Okay, okay, I think this'll work…"

A click, then a whir, and an image began to be projected onto the wall. Jumping up from the ground, Kraito scrambled to stand beside the projection.

"Now, is everyone… ready?"

Cyrus grumped. "Get on with it. We're busy people."

"Right… here we go." Kraito clicked a button, and the image of a rather large steel cube began to be projected.

"This is the 'Telekill Alloy' that Masipag recovered from the Prometheus ruins. We've got about a ton of it, in the research labs."

A series of nods and murmurs of assent echoed from the assembled audience.

Another click. This time, it was a picture of a young man grasping his head, with a nasty looking older guy behind him.

"This is, uh, a visual aid for what telepathy is. Someone can mess with your mind, and-"

Cyrus harumphed again. "Boy, get to the point, and don't insult our intelligence. I'm sure everyone here knows what telepathy is."

"Sorry sir… moving on…" Another click. A man wearing a metal helmet was grinning at the camera.

"From the notes Masipag recovered, as well as our own research, we've determined that Telekill alloy is able to block telepathy. This, ah, could have great research applications for our telepathic anomalies."

The projector clicked off, and Kraito flipped on the lights. "Now, I propose we allocate funding to this project, since the impact on containment for telepathic anomalies could be huge."

Cyrus stared at him, moving his lips from side to side as he thought. "You make a very… adequate case, Byron… well, the object does. Approved."

"You sure you know what you're doing?"

Masipag slouched in her plastic mess seat and stared square at Fritz. "You guys seem like you're moving kinda fast through all this stuff."

Fritz took a bite of his spaghetti. "The science guys know what we're doing. All the proper tests have been done, and I can trust Kraito."

Masipag rolled her eyes. "Just like you trusted him with the corn?"

"Nevermind." He picked his tray up and began stalking out. "I have to, uh, go, more tests to do."

A patrol vehicle made the slow turn around the darkened road, making its way back towards the sight. Masipag squinted to see the road, as Kulzn silently sat next to her. Not a single word had been uttered since they'd left the Site.

"So… Kulzn… ol' HK… what do you think of this telekill business?"

He grunted, in an affirmative way.

Masipag glanced over to Kulzn, then back to the road. "… Nobody seems to care about any kind of foresight, it's all full steam ahead all the time."

"It's an important project. Even if they're enthusiastic, I'm sure Commander Willie and Director Cyrus have them under control."

"Pshh." Masipag drummed her fingers on the steering wheel. "I'm pretty sure Fritz is too busy with Cassie to supervise whatever Kraito does."

"Are you still going on about him and SCP-085? We've been over this…"

"Yeah, we've been over it, but you don't seem to get it. Fritz spends *so much time* with Cassie, it's really starting to interfere with his other projects. I mean, the other day he slipped up and called me Cassie."

Kulzn turned to the window. "That's… slightly odd, but we ought to give him more slack. He was very on-point about organizing the Prometheus clean-up operations-"

"You're just defending him because you're his favorite."

"Can we just finish this patrol without an argument?"

"I feel like I'm being completely sidelined here, y'know?"

Masipag looked up to Kraito, who was standing on a scaffold about twenty feet overhead. He was drilling another sensor into the big, shimmering cube that took up most of the research floor.

"I'm sorry, did you say something?" he shouted, peering down over the guardrails at Masipag.

She sighed. "Nevermind. Just hurry up and finish."

He shrugged. "Finished now, I think."

Masipag watched as he made his way down the scaffold, taking the stairs around the massive cube and eventually reaching the floor with her. Wiping his brow, he hung his safety goggles on a wall-mounted peg.

"So… wanted to talk, uh, about something?"

"Yeah." Masipag leaned against the wall. "Wanted to talk to you about the telekill stuff, what you'd learned about it so far."

Kraito beamed. "Well, lots of things! We know that it measures HRC 39 in the Rockwell hardness test! it can, uh, well it has similar properties to platinum, in some… gimme a minute…" he scrunched his eyes together, bringing his fingers to his temples.

Masipag placed her hand on his shoulder. "Hey, don't sweat it. You've been working too hard."

"I just… don't want this one to fail, y'know? Every other thing I've worked with either got decommed or destroyed somehow, and I can't let this one go the same way."

Masipag nodded, and squeezed his shoulder. "Hey… it's alright, I'm sure the project will go great."

He wiped his eyes. "I just want something I do to have an impact… work all damned day, just to see whatever I was working on crushed, or burned, or whatever. If I can avoid fucking up just this once… maybe I won't be a joke anymore."

She released his shoulder. "I should… let you get back to work then."

Kraito nodded. "Thank you." Turning, he donned his safety goggles and ascended the scaffolding.

He would work on through the night.

Site-19 Director Cyrus flipped through the telekill proposal. It all seemed to be in order, all the t's crossed and i's dotted. Only thing left to do would be long-term effect testing. Buuut…. that could

probably be done during a provisional approval process. Couldn't hurt to let them get started right away. Kraito and the other researchers were chomping at the bit for funding, and the less they came to him whining the more time he would have.

APPROVED

He tossed it into the outgoing document pile, and moved to another project.

« **Prometheans**| **End Of Olympians Hub** | **Psychiatric Profile For Researcher Lee Byron** »

Psychiatric Profile For Researcher Lee Byron

CONFIDENTIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL EVALUATION, DO NOT DISTRIBUTE.

Name: Lee "Kraito" Byron

Clearance: Level 3

Location: Site-19

Date of Birth: 09/18/1959

Age: 49 years, 11 months

Dates of Testing: -18- , -25- , -1- , -9- , -16- , -22-

Tests Given:

- Bijhan-Ghost Test of Visual-Motor Integration (BGVMT)
- Blast-Glass Psychological Aptitude Scale(BGPAS)
- Grungkok Comprehensibility Exam(GCE)
- Standard Psionic Resistence Index Testing(PRI)
- Mann-Iceberg Scientific Competency Exam(MICE)
- Sharpnose Adult Intelligence Scale- Third Edition (SAIS-III)

REASON FOR REFERRAL

Researcher Byron has a documented history of having difficulty working under duress, and due to the nature of his current project it has been decided that a re-evaluation is necessary.

Background Information

Lee Byron is an expert in telepathic phenomenon, having trained under the late Dr. Jagyr. Lee came to his current employment with the Foundation after being recruited from Prometheus Labs in 19 . Since then, he has been instrumental in our research on various Prometheus related projects within Site-19. Since his recruitment, he has received two promotions, and currently has Level 3 clearance.

However, there has also been a history of projects he works on being removed from Foundation study. Of all the projects Researcher Byron has worked on, 11 have been neutralized, 9 destroyed by negligence, and 2 being decommissioned. This has contributed to Lee having a history of depression, which he has had medication for in the past. He is not currently on any medication.

Health/Medical

Lee has reported having a normal birth in the city of , and is allergic to shellfish. The only major medical issue that has come up in recent history is his depression, for which he was issued standard Level-3 personnel antidepressants. He has not been on nor has he requested any type of medication for the past 1 year and 4 months.

Education

As stated above, Researcher Byron is an expert in telepathic phenomenon, after his tutelage on the subject by the late Dr. Jagyr. Prior to his employment with the Foundation, he had achieved a masters degree in engineering and physics. He graduated from his high school in 1976.

Behavioral Observations

During each evaluation, Lee was noted as being lethargic, with slow reaction times and having trouble communicating. Researcher Byron exhibited sudden mood swings, typically manic. Our assessment indicates that Researcher Byron has great difficulty reading body language and did not appear to notice changes in pitch when he was spoken to by the tester. Furthermore, it became evident that he didn't understand the emotional cues of others.

It has been determined that Researcher Byron is suffering from sleep deprivation, and has been given medication and a sleeping regimen to accommodate his schedule. A follow up examination has been scheduled for the upcoming months.

"Lee."

Kraito froze. Someone had said his name. There was someone in his room. Why would there be someone in his room? Could be Masipag… or Cyrus. Hopefully not Cyrus. But it didn't sound like either of them… actually who did that sound like? Kraito frowned. He didn't know anyone who sounded like that. Wait, the lights weren't even on. Why is there someone in the dark? There's only one way to know, so…

His eyes flicked open, and glanced around. The static stillness of his dormitory greeted him, and confused him. Nobody there? Then who had said his name…. maybe it was these new sleeping pills. He never trusted pills.

"Do you remember, Lee?"

Scrambling out of his bed, Kraito pressed himself up to a thin dormitory wall.

"Who's there?" He'd hoped to sound intimidating, but it came out as a whisper.

"Not here to harm. But it is time for the symphony to resume. The intermission has gone on long enough, the crescendo must be reached."

"What… the hell are you… talking about?" Kraito stammered. He was having trouble speaking. There wasn't anything he could remember about this. All he knew was the voice sounded so familiar, and musical.

"The symphony isn't over Lee. It needs its conductor. Will be able to take place, and rise as the final notes are played."

"I… can't…" Kraito could feel the slick wetness of sweat running

down his body. This couldn't be true, this wasn't how it happened… he couldn't breathe, oh god… the music… they were singing… it was all in the band.

"Lee, don't you remember, how the children used to sing?"

"I… do…"

"You learned your part so well, Lee. Of course you remember."

The next morning, Lee Byron woke up feeling aches from his back. When he'd eaten his breakfast, he whistled a little tune for himself. He didn't remember where he heard it, but it was a rather nice tune, all things considered. Lee would whistle it all the way to work.

« **Meeting Of The Minds**| **End Of Olympians Hub** | **Preaching To The Choir** »

Preaching To The Choir

Director Cyrus knew that Fritz was watching him as he shuffled through a filing cabinet. He made a mental note to have a serious discussion with whomever had filed these things in an ass-backwards way. Yanking them out of the drawer, he hastily shut the cabinet and turned to face his counterpart.

"Commander Williams… thank you for coming on such short notice."

Fritz leaned forward in his seat. "It's Fritz, if you don't mind."

Cyrus glanced up. "Right… I'm here to check on the status of E-345. Is it on track for tomorrow's test?"

Fritz nodded. "Yes sir. They might actually be taking it to the provisional containment unit now… hold on, let me check."

A crumpled piece of paper was produced, and Fritz peered at it. "Actually… it's being moved in an hour or so. I can check back with you then if you need it."

"That will be all, Williams. You can go."

So he did.

Commander Frederick Williams walked through the halls of Site-19, out of administrative offices to containment areas. There was a better atmosphere here, friendlier. If he'd been here on any other day, he might've stopped by the employee lounge, or observe the containment areas of some skips under his watch. But he didn't do any of those things. Instead, he made a beeline for one containment area.

He entered quietly, walking to the folding table in the middle of the room. There was a single sheet of paper, and a dull #2 pencil. No

eraser. Sitting in the squeaky wooden chair, he began to write.

Hello, Cass

Welcome, please enter user ID.
Direc/Cyrus
Please enter password.
icannotrecall

Password Accepted.
.
.
.
Loading…
.
.
.
Loading…
.
.
.
Access Granted.
.
.
.
Welcome, Director Cyrus. Please enter an action.

Access Logs: Experiment E-345

Stand by….
.
.
.
Experiment E-345 involves the exposure of E-345, a humanoid with psychokinetic abilities, with Prometheus Labs Telekill alloy. Initial testing has indicated that the alloy is sufficient to block any telepathic signal, and this could prove a boon to containment, if successful. The test procedure will see Researcher Byron escorting E-345 to the center of the test area, followed by a square

of telekill alloy being lowered over it. Following this, D-3451 and D-8063 will be sent into the containment chamber, and E-345 will be instructed to begin manifesting its effect after Researcher Byron evacuates the room.

YOU(Director Cyrus), Agent HK-016, and an HMCL Supervisor(Dr. Eberstrom) will be stationed in the observation chamber. No other notable personnel will be involved in testing.

How are you?

The animate sketch looked to the left border of her paper prison, before sketching out a reply. *Very bored. What sort of test do you want to do?*

Actually, I thought we could just talk.

She paused, frowning towards the blank space she assumed the writer would be looking from. *Fritz?*

yes.

Cassandra's face broke out into a smile. *Well, that changes things…*

Access Testing Log: Commander Williams
.
.
.
Commander Wiliams Test Log:
E-0345: 13
E-0456: Unknown, object terminated
E-1371: Unknown, object terminated
SCP-278: 13
E-2300: Unknown, object terminated
E-0089: Unknown, object terminated
SCP-082: 15
SCP-085: 56!

SCP-085 Logs: Access

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.

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Loading…

.

.

.

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Currently, primary testing with SCP-085 has been performed with Commander Williams

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"You're always the first to defend him! Can't you see when Fritz is doing wrong?!"

Masipag glared across the hall to Kulzn, who wore his usual veneer of indiference.

"What Fritz does with his time is his own business, Masipag, and not yours."

She grimaced at him. "Fritz has been spending all his time with the drawing, and not with me or Kraito! How can we be ready for this huge, big-deal test if he isn't even giving his subordinates the time of day?"

Kulzn paused. "Have you thought he might have a little faith in you, for once?"

Masipag's glare hardened. "Watch what you say. Kulzn…"

"Fine … fine… but think about this: Maybe if you'd gotten off your ass for once and took some initiative, you'd be overseeing the test tomorrow and not me."

"Fuck you, Kulzn. Just… god…" She leaned against the wall, pinching the bridge of her nose.

"See you tomorrow, Lieutenant."

Access Logs: Lee Byron
.
.
.
.
.
Lee Byron is a member of the Foundation, under the Telepathic Research division of Site-19. Currently assigned as the Research lead for the "Telekill Alloy" project. Further information is restricted.

icanremembernow

…Loading Amnestic Logs

"Currently, I believe that Researcher Byron is fully capable of performing his duties, in spite of his prior history as an Amnestic user. He has shown nothing but determined work spirit and is an asset to my team. Lee is fully capable of leading this project."

Commander Williams
.
.
.
Logout
.
Goodbye, Administrator.

The research labs were usually pretty sparse this time of night. The work day had long ago ended, sending doctors, lab assistants and technicians scurrying to their dormitories. Occasionally, there was a slumbering junior researcher left behind by colleagues, but these were few and far between. There was, however. One person in the labs on this particular evening. Lumbering through the corridors, glancing in doors, Lee made his way to the primary test chamber.

Everything was ready for tomorrow. The telekill cube was in its place, resting in the center of the room. It loomed overhead, a titanic iceberg that dominated the testing area. He watched it for just a

moment, a brief one, then began ascending the scaffold that had been erected around it. Around and around, he could feel it wrapping around him.

Your audience awaits, Lee.

He stood atop the mountaintop, and saw the multitudes that would be waiting. They wanted his sound, *his* way. The notes of the crescendo would ring through history, and ready humanity for the finale.

Lee Byron spreads his arms, *and the crowd goes wild*.

« **Psychiatric Profile For Researcher Lee Byron**| **End Of Olympians Hub** | **When We Reach The Crescendo** »

When We Reach The Crescendo

The testing chamber was humming. Not a fluorescent hum, or even one from the various electrical implements hidden within its walls. No, this was a different humming. It was… hopeful. A hope that soon, the pieces would fall into place, and things would be finished. It seemed cheerful, almost giddy, and seemed ready. Somewhere, the musicians were getting into place. All that remained was to await the conductor.

> **Incident 148-A:** Timeline, from the beginning… at -22- : , analysis of the testing chamber security footage indicated a low humming sound not indicative of any equipment currently located within the room. Further investigation into this auditory discrepancy is ongoing.

… and you've doublechecked everything?"

Dr. Eberstrom nodded. "Director Cyrus, you have nothing to worry about. Not one little thing. My boys have gotten that lil' sum- the testing chamber so well wired, all I have to do is throw a switch."

Cyrus nodded. "Good, good. I'm pleased to hear it, Doctor. If all goes well, this could be a boon to all of our careers."

"It's that important?" Eberstrom threw a glance to the Director.

"Perhaps. We'll see what the results say. It could be a big boon to the research we do here."

Eberstrom grinned to himself. Who knew that just directing a bunch of faceless wrench-monkeys to wire up a room could lead to him sharing a room with the site director? Oh, the places he was going to go….

"Now, let's be going. Agent HK-016 is waiting for us in the

observation chamber."

Lee Byron looked at himself in his mirror. He was presentable, of course, almost to an impeccable degree. His lab coat had been ironed, then ironed some more, and then, for a change of pace, he ironed it again. The same went for his pants, and even his tie. He'd almost done it to his socks, before common sense crashed down onto his brain. He was ready. Today was the day.

Raise your baton, conductor

Lee smiled to himself. *This is it*.

> … Security footage shows Researcher Byron exiting his chambers, and proceeding to the testing chamber at : . Notably, analysis of audio indicates that he is humming the same tune which was detected from the empty testing chamber. Interviews are being scheduled with surviving members of the research team to determine if and when Researcher Byron had begun humming this tune.

Masipag sat in her quarters, angrily fuming to herself. Kulzn was an idiot. Fritz was obsessed with a piece of paper. And what do they get to do? Participate in Byron's big test. Her friend, and his big day, and the only witnesses would be the stuck up director and an asshole.

She flipped over on her bed, grumbling to herself as she checked the clock. They were probably setting up the test now. She could almost imagine Director Cyrus, sitting in his stuck up little seat, glancing around so he could pretend he was supervising everything. Kulzn probably had that stupid look on his face, and they both were watching Lee set up his stuff.

Bluh. I shouldn't be so angry. Bad for the soul.

Stretching, Masipag got up, and got on some gear. Might as well kill some time quadruple-checking everything in the containment wing.

Who knows, maybe she'd see Lee coming back from his big day.

: Agent Masipag exits her quarters and heads to the containment wing. The reason for this is currently unknown, as Masipag was not scheduled to perform security work in this area.

: Commander William enters the SCP-085 containment area. He will remain here until the alarms indicating Incident 148 sound.

Byron inhaled. This was it. The big game. The last hurrah, the touchdown, his hail mary moment. Glancing to his sides, he sectuple-checked that everything was in order. His papers were in hand, the controller under his arm, and his spectacles were freshly cleaned. He was ready. With butterflies in his heart, he stepped forward, then… stopped. For a moment, his arms hesitated in front of the double doors. *Was this wrong?*

Lee, they need their conductor. You are the only one. No one else can protect them.

Lee Byron pushed the doors opened, and was greeted with the brilliant light.

: Researcher Byron enters the testing chamber. At this point, no further major movement of the lost parties occurs, with the notable exception of Masipag and Commander Williams. Director Cyrus, Agent HK-016, and Doctor Eberstrom are not visible for the remainder of the footage, due to the lack of video feed inside the observation chamber(which, while being a departure from normal protocol, was insisted on by the late Director).

Cyrus peered through the glass. "Eberstrom, what is he doing now?

Eberstrom stood up, and looked through the glass panel. "Uhhh…

looks like he's getting the test subject ready. Gotta get him, y'know, strapped in and stuff. Sir."

"Right. Are you set up back there?"

Eberstrom nodded, and sat down on the carpeted floor, absentmindedly wiping his hands on his coat. "Absolutely, sir. We've got this thing running like a well oiled machine!"

"I thought it was a well-oiled machine."

"You get what I mean, sir."

Kulzn watched them, then peered back through the window. Byron, presently, was going through the motions of strapping E-345 to a specially designed chair, and getting the instruments which would hold the telekill in place around him. If, and this was if, it all went according to plan, the guy would be unable to move a disc across the room with his thoughts.

Byron looked up to the observation chamber, briefly pausing to catch his breath. Then, he gave an enthusiastic thumbs up.

"Throw the switch, Doctor."

Eberstrom complied with gusto. From the ceiling, four large, thick slabs of Telekill Alloy descended into place, their gray-green coloration complimenting the metallic sheen of the testchamber walls. Slowly, they were lowered into the iron frames, which were themselves arranged into a box pattern, completely obscuring E-345 from view. The arms then retracted into the ceiling, leaving the room quiet, and bracing the anticipation in everyone's hearts.

Then, something unexpected. Bryon strode to the center of the test chamber…

> … at : Researcher Byron produces an object, believed to be a tuning fork or a conductor's baton. He strikes the closest slab of Telekill Alloy, which immediately begins to produce a tone similar to the ones found in : and : . Camera footage begins to corrupt from this point onward, although audio recording is unaffected. The audio from

this point has been determined to be cognitohazardous, and removed.

Eberstrom glanced out the window, suddenly taking note of his compatriot's rapt attention.

"What'n the hell is that boy doing?"

Before either Cyrus or Kulzn could open their mouths, the glass panel cracked. Not enough to shatter it to pieces, although that happened momentarily. It was enough to let the sound in, and that sound was a glory to behold.

Can you tell us, how the bells are ringing? Can you hear it, the songs, the children, they are singing?

Cyrus tried to blink, only to find his eyelids were no longer present. Shocked, he stood, to find that his legs were composed of glass, shattered into infinitesimal agony beneath his body. Collapsing, his shattered form bore testimony to this corrupted earth for only a few moments more, enough time for him to bear the only eyes witnessing the deaths of his companions.

Eberstrom's face tried to twist into a scream as the flesh was rendered from it, and his bones melted into his mouth, but words failed, and the face continued to stretch, and twist, until he snapped off. Kulzn, his hair burrowing down into his scalp, until he could become a new form worthy of beholding the rhythm echoing from the conductor's waves and twirls.

Then, his own mind warped to the sheet music of a forgotten symphony, and he died.

At : , believed to be 22 seconds after the deaths of all personnel within the testing chamber, the alarms begin to sound, indicating that a sitewide lockdown is occurring. Agent Masipag immediately begins moving towards the testing area. Similarly, Commander Williams exits the SCP-085 containment area and heads towards

the test wing entrance. Both parties meet at : .

"… just for one goddamn second, okay? If they're in there, that means they're already dead! What part of that do you not understand?"

Fritz grabbed Masipag's arm, and looked at her with what he hoped represented steely determination.

"The best you can do for him now is to hang back, and wait until the breach ends. We don't need another death here!"

Masipag glared at him. "How do you know they're dead? You don't know shit about what's going on in there!"

"Listen to me, for fuck's sake! If they're in there, that means the test went wrong, which means they're at the epicenter of the goddamned breach!"

"Why the fuck are you writing them off so quickly?"

Fritz opened his mouth. "Look, just-"

"NO! Fuck you, Fritz! You never fucking cared about him! You never cared about any of us! All you ever did was spent time with a fucking *picture* of a woman, too goddamned obsessed to see the world beyond your stupid flatland!"

Masipag tore her arm from Fritz's grasp, and tore down the hallway.

Moments later, the force from the testing chamber tore her to pieces.

Through it all, Byron kept up his act, tapping the slabs when necessary, and breaking down the walls of reality around him. This was his *Pièce de résistance*, his final act of his life. Even if every object he had studied had been destroyed, and even if, *if* this failed too, he would be remembered. They would speak of this for years.

Byron's smile stretched, as the joy tumbled from his mind. This was

his immortality. This was remembrance.

« **Preaching To The Choir**| **End Of Olympians Hub** | **A Few More Words From "The Administrator"** »

A Few More Words From "The Administrator"

The Administrator looked at a watch. Ten minutes past five, and Fritz had failed to make his appearance. It sighed. *Why did they always have to make it get up after them? They were old enough to know better.* Ancient skin snapped and crackled as the neck turned to see the silver, scratched watch. Another arm showed a different time, this one saying it was eleven minutes after five. His patience was at an end.

But, before it could lift itself out of the office, there was a knock at the door. A new arm reached out from the left coat pocket and opened it, brushing the dust of this new visitor's shoulders as he walked in.

"Hello, uh, Commander. Please, have an, uh, a seat." One of the ruined hands gestured to a hard wooden chair in front of The Administrator's desk.

As he walked to the seat, Fritz did his best to look at anything that wasn't The Administrator. On the walls, he noted several decorations. Among the displays were a framed shovel, several astronomical models, and a photograph of a meteor. He closed his eyes as his hands gripped the seat, trying for the longest blink of his life. Finally, he couldn't stop it any longer.

Fritz opened his eyes. Seated before him was a decrepit monstrosity, with twisted charcoal skin and sunken orange eyes. The hair, or what was left of it, was glowing a shimmering white. The limbs were twisted and gnarled, sticking stiffly and uselessly from the main body. Surrounding it was a steel mesh, which held it inside a large overcoat. The coat of many arms.

Now, I'm positive that, uh, that you know why I've called you in here.

Fritz tried to open his mouth and explain himself, but the very instrument of speech seemed to have abandoned him. From his dry,

nerve-wracked throat, all he could manage was a low cough.

… Well, uh, to review, the incident which occurred under your watch… resulting in the deaths of several major, uh, important researchers, and, uh, catastrophic damages. What… what do you have to say for yourself, Fritz?

Fritz looked down. There was nothing for him to say.

A blacked, pus-dripping arm, as thin as an olive branch, unfurled from its collar, and slowly stretched until it came to a filing cabinet located on the western wall of this office. Opening it, it rustled through some papers, until it came up with a file. Curling back into the coat, it dropped the file on the desk.

Now, Fritz, we've, uh, reviewed your personnel file. Due to the extra amount of time you've spent with the, uh, SCP-085 object, and the multiple reports from your late subordinate, Lieutenant Masipag, who, uh, who complained about the time you spent… testing. We've interviewed Cassie, and determined the nature of the testing.

Ten full seconds passed, and neither man nor being spoke.

And, uh, so… due to high crimes and misdemeanors against the Foundation's mission, including gross negligence and inappropriate usage of an anomalous object, you are sentenced to die. This will be carried out at high noon, uh, tomorrow.

Fritz froze in his seat. All around him, the room seemed to be compressing in on itself. This couldn't be happening. This was wrong. Impossible. The words echoed in his mind, shoving every other thought to the far reaches of his mind, until only the sobering and tombstone-still realization thundered through his shattered thoughts, like a final cavalry charge through a demented thought. He was finished.

"B-but sir, surely this is an.. overreaction? I don't think- I mean, surely I deserve to at least keep my life through this? Why waste another life?"

No, uh, I apologize, but this is just how things have turned out,

Commander. You've caused a great deal, uh, much anguish to, er, many of our comrades, and somebody simply has to be responsible.

"But…" Fritz struggled to find the words. "What about the people who didn't prevent me from abus- from using the containment supervision to see C- SCP-085?"

The Administrator's body did not hold even a single withered hope. No pity, or remorse, or sadness could be detected from his rasping tone.

You seem to, uh, appear to be having difficulty with your phrasing, Commander.

Fritz opened his mouth once more, but words failed.

Maybe, uh, perhaps, or, even if what you say is true, it doesn't matter, Commander. You are still, uh, the primary bearer of responsibility. I'm afraid it's, uh, time to face the music, so to speak.

Before Fritz could utter another word, there was a creaking behind him. Two men, in identical, brown and gray uniforms stepped inside. Wordlessly, they hoisted him up by his arms, and began the long escort to the brig.

I shall, uh, be sending somebody down in around an hour, Commander, if you require anything further. Good day, to, uh, you.

The doors slammed shut, and a stuffed silence permeated the air.

From his overcoat, a long arm emerged, crossing itself in front of him.

Yes, yes, but, uh, being callous, it's better than having to empathize with a man like him. He was going to come down this road eventually.

It twisted, snapping skin and ligaments as it curled around his infantile form.

I'm sorry it had to be so explosive, too. I suppose, I suppose this is just how it happens, sometimes.

The arms moved in assent, nestling below him and cradling him. He would need his rest.

When the universe demands the absurd and impossible, we shall be there to stand and protect the rest of humanity…

Without another word, his ruined eyelids shut, and he was at peace.

« **When We Reach The Crescendo**| **End Of Olympians Hub** | **And Now, For Something Completely Different…** »

Et Tam Deum Petivi Hub Page

Welcome!

This is the hub page for the "Et Tam Deum Petivi" canon, a collection focusing on the lives of the agents of the Horizon Initiative. Here you will find background universe information and all tales and tale series taking place within the canon.

This canon is open for anyone to add to. One shots, ongoing series, it doesn't matter.

Tales and Tale Series

Mary-Ann and Salah (by Djoric)

Prologue: Just a Word to Me

1) Shepherds
2) Second Watch
3) People Look East
4) The Good of the Other
5) The Place Where Two Rivers Meet
6) Breakfast for Dinner
7) Crossing the Streams
8) The Tick Tock Gospel
9) Nor Gloom of Night Shall Stay
10) Agricola in Insula est Poeta
11) Empire of Dirt
 Part 1
 Part 2
 Part 3
12) The Settling Ash

Mud on the Carpet

When We Came Home

The Hope Lake School

Those Thin, Penultimate Hours (Djoric)
Down By the River (Djoric)
Excerpt of an Autobiography (Djoric)

Wolves (by Dmatix)

1) Tolerance
2) The Horizon Blues
3) The Man Comes Around

Writing on the Walls (by Azzleflux)

1) The Written God
2) The Word and the Wolf

Shifting Gears (by Vincent_Redgrave)

1) Ignition:
Part One- The Artists
Part Two- The Soldier
Part Three- The Rebel
2) **Are We Whole Yet**?
3) **The Grey Gospel**
4) **Judgment of the Machine**
5) **Stalled- Picking Up the Pieces**
6) **Reshaping the Machine**
7) **Rusted Breaths**
8) **Brass Sand and Blood**
9) **As Fluid as Mercury**
10) **Reignition- A Gear Forever Turning**

Chapterhouse 4 (By Ihpkmn)
Facts Concerning Team 15 of Chapterhouse 4 and the Black Book

The Verse

+ Show

This is just a collection of the basic tidbits and terminology that make up this canon.

The Tribunal - The head council of the Horizon Initiative, consisting of a representative from each of the primary religions in the Initiative.

The current Tribunal is:

• Samuel – The most radical of the Tribunal. Leader of the Sons of Shammai.
• Adnan - The moderate member of the Tribunal. Leader of Atibba al-Kitab.
• Bernard – The tie-breaker: often indecisive. Leader of the Ordinis Occulti Luminis.

The Tribunal oversees organization-wide matters: local matters are covered by the appropriate chapterhouse.

Chapterhouses - The primary headquarters for a district of the Initiative. There are ten chapterhouses in the United States, while the Initiative in Europe and the Middle East will generally operate out of the headquarters of pre-existing organizations. Mary-Ann, Salah and their friends all hail from Chapterhouse 3.

The Scribe Corps - The Initiative's librarians, researchers, archivists, and clerical staff. They generally work behind the scenes, translating and analyzing recovered document and scripture. They are currently working on compiling the Universal Texts, a collection of the most theologically and historically accurate record possible to the truth of matters.

The Shepherd Corps - The Initiative's primary multipurpose field agency. Shepherds are the eyes, ears, and arms of the organization. Shepherds operate in pairs, living out amongst the general populace.

Shepherds will generally receive their assignments from the District Head of the Corps, but may betake special

orders from the Tribunal, as they, unlike Project Malleus, are under Tribunal jurisdiction.

A Shepherd's primary duties include:

• Serving as guiding members of the local community.
• Studying religious groups and establishing relations with groups listed for assimilation.
• Recovery of artifacts and records of interest to the Initiative.
• Low-threat anti-cult operations.

Most Shepherds will own one or two items of some minor anomalous property, most often acquired through contacts with friendly anartists or Serpent's Hand cells. Veteran Shepherds will have more items on their person, sometimes upward of a dozen.

Basically, these guys are Professor Sazed's TH211 comparative theology class with a little bit of the McManus brothers thrown in.

Project Malleus ("The Wolves") - The Initiative's combat forces, under the command of Henry DeMontfort. Project Malleus is made from the most zealous and aggressive sects under the Inititative's umbrella. They will kill and die without question, to the point where they are intimidating to pretty much everyone else in the organization. A strong rivalry exists between Project Malleus and the Shepherd Corps, with the Shepherds referring to PM agents as "Wolves", while being referred to themselves as simply "Sheep".

Project Malleus favors fire-and-brimstone methods, often using relics in combat of significant destructive power.

Basically, these guys are Father Anderson from *Hellsing*. An entire organization made up of Father Anderson.

Areas of Influence - The Horizon Initiative is most influential in Western Europe, the Middle East, and North

America. Operations in South and Central America and Africa are growing rapidly. Activity in east Asia is minimal: contact with various religious organizations is present, but any significant activity in the area has yet to occur.

Demographics of the Initiative

• **Christianity** - The main base is a mixture of Roman and Orthodox Catholics, and mainstream protestants (Lutherans, Anglicans, and Episcopalians). Representatives from evangelical and congregational sects, and the LDS Church, while present, are low in number.
• **Judaism** - A very heterogeneous mixture of sects and groups, without clear majority groups.
• **Islam** - Primarily Sunni, with a many practitioners of the Sufi mystic traditions.
• **Eastern Religions** - There are a few consultants here or there, but little more than that.
• **Other** - The Initiative has absorbed numerous small-scale cults and organizations, such as the Cult of the Wordsmith, the Church of Purity, and the Australian Church of Australia, among many others.

The New Path - A method of thinking emerging within the Initiative, which emphasizes “moving away from the engrained shell of past ritual and ancient tradition and turning towards the "Truth of God”. It is generally frowned upon by the traditionalists, but the existence of the Universal Texts shows that it is gaining ground.

Initiative Relations with Other Groups of Interest

• **Good Relations:** Manna Charitable Foundation (The Initiative will occasionally sponsor them), Serpent’s Hand (most low-key cells), non-violent anartists (major suppliers of minor anomalous artifacts to the Initiative).
• **Variable Relations:** The Initiative has a tentative truce with the Foundation and Coalition, including some negotiation rights over items, but this is the ideal, not the

actual reality. The Initiative has some relations with Marshall, Carter & Dark, but keeps them at arm's reach and doesn't trust them in the slightest.
• **Poor Relations:** ORIA (As the ORIA is a Shia organization, and the Initiative a Sunni majority), Chaos Insurgency (The Insurgency focuses on exploiting the poor, while the Initiative seeks to aid them)
• **Open Combat:** Church of the Broken God, Fifthist Church, AWCY and other violent anartists (generally those who have begun a crusade of their own against religion because *so edgy*).
• **No notable relations:** Alexyva, Dr. Wondertainment, the Factory, GRU-P, Nobody, and the UIU.

The Initiative has connections of various kinds with a great many minor religious organizations not mentioned here.

BackdoorSoHo - A little pocket of compressed space in Manhattan, home to a varied and vibrant community of anartists and various other inhabitants of the anomalous underworld. The head Doorman is Charlie, and entry is gained by presenting a token with the phrase ARS GRATIA ARTIS carved into it.

Free ports like BackdoorSoHo exist all over the world, and serve as places where the human elements of the anomalous world may gather in relative peace. Most often they will be sponsored by some group or another, usually anartists or the Serpent's Hand, but a great many are, for lack of a better term, unaligned.

Key Themes

+ Show

Street-level anomalies - "For every SCP contained by the Foundation, ten thousand harmless anomalies go unnoticed."

This canon will, by and large, take place on this level. The world is not under constant threat of destruction here. People live with, work with, and are anomalies on a daily basis. It's almost urban fantasy-esque, in a sense. This view of the world is a much more weird and wonderful place than how the Foundation sees it.

Life happens wherever you are, whether you want it to or not[1] - This canon is, at the end of the day, all about the characters. Who they are, what they do, where they've been and where they're going, how they change and what changes them. There is happiness, sadness, love, loss, and life to be found here.

Affiliation does not equal alignment - Don't fall into the trap of "Church of the Broken God? Marshall, Carter & Dark? AWCY? CLEARLY EVIL." This is a fallacy. All of the groups of interest will have good people, bad people, and people of all shades of grey. All of the GOIs have their own perceptions and biases, of course, and many times with good reason, but do not let their biases become yours.

Old vs New and the Truth - The Initiative is rife with internal issues. The old guard wants to hold on to the traditions of the past, maintaining the status quo or regaining lost position. Others, seek to mold the old traditions into something new, founded instead on newer and more accurate discoveries. Some will choose to try to destroy legitimate items because they clash with old beliefs, and others may come to crises of faith because of what is discovered. On the opposite side, characters may come to various realizations and empowered belief by those same truths.

Timeline of Events

+ Show

1944 - The three members of the Tribunal meet, the

precursor to the Horizon Initiative is formed.

c. 1960 - The Horizon Initiative is officially formed.

1974 – Salah is born.

1980 – Mary-Ann is born.

1994 – Salah moves to Britain, meets Adnan.

1998 – Salah graduates from university, begins full-time work in the Shepherd corps. Mary-Ann joins the Army Field Artillery Branch.

c. 2000 – Project Malleus is founded. (**`Fire On The Horizon`**) Salah moves to the United States and is assigned to Chapterhouse 3.

2001 – Mary-Ann is deployed to Afghanistan.

2009 – Mary-Ann receives Honorable Discharge from the Army.

2011 – Mary-Ann begins training for the Shepherd corps. Tolerance takes place.

March 2012 – Mary-Ann and Salah are assigned as partners in the Shepherd corps.

November 2012 – Shepherds and Second Watch take place. Foundation/Coalition/Initiative Non-Aggression Pact is signed.

December 2012 – People Look East takes place.

January 2013 – The Good of the Other takes place.

February 2013 – The Place Where Two Rivers Meet takes place. Project Malleus destroys an anart community in California.

April 2013 – Breakfast for Dinner takes place.

May 2013 – Crossing the Streams takes place.

October 2013 – The Tick Tock Gospel tales place.

November 2013 – The Written God and The Word and the Wolf take place. Tribunal sanctions, investigations, and reforms against Project Malleus begin.

December 2013 – The Horizon Blues, Nor Gloom of Night Shall Stay, and Ignition Part 1: The Artists take place. Naomi is born.

April 2014 – Agricola In Insula Est Poeta takes place.

June 2014 – Empire of Dirt takes place. The Settling Ash begins. Salah resigns from active service.

2022 - The Settling Ash ends.

Footnotes

1. Rumors of a fat Zen Buddhist tea master and his blind MMA-fighter granddaughter within the Initiative are complete nonsense and not to be taken seriously. Theydefinitelydon't roadtrip across America in a beat-up van and hang out playing go with strangers in tea shops. Nope. Theydefinitelydon't do that.

Just a Word to Me

Mary-Ann Lewitt stood on the sidewalk outside the church. Mass had just let out, and so the congregation was dispersing out towards the parking lot, with a few people remaining to talk in the vestibule: Mary-Ann kept watching the street. The world felt very far away then, under the clear, cold sky of March.

There was another bluster of wind. Mary-Ann bunched her shoulders and drove her hands deeper inside the pockets of her black sweatshirt. Maybe it would be better to go back inside where it was warmer. But then they might get here while she was using the bathroom or something and it'd be one of those times where neither person could find the other and it'd just be awkward. She'd stay outside, then.

Ten o'clock, that's what they'd said on the phone. Someone would be around to pick her up at ten. Probably a few minutes after ten by now: traffic must have gotten in the way.

And here she was: waiting for a ride from a stranger in the cold, with heaven and hell in equal measure on the other side of the trip.

Part of her mind still balked at all of this, all of this stuff with the Initiative. It hadn't been nearly as hard to believe as it should have been, she thought in retrospect. Perhaps that was what made that little part of her mind question it all: Everything was too believable. It all made too much sense. Or at least, it made the right amount of sense for someone who had little more in her life than a cat and a little bit of faith. It made enough sense that she wanted a part of it, urged on by the itch in her soul, bruised as it was. She had spent the last night memorizing exorcism rituals and conjugating Latin verbs and reviewing the categorization of the orders of spirits.

All this did little to undo the knot of unease in her stomach. Unease at what was to come, and unease at what was behind her. Today would decide if she would be fit to join the Shepherds, and Mary-

Ann had been second-guessing herself all morning. Book knowledge was one thing, practical exercises another: Mary-Ann had no doubts with either of those. The doubt that weighed her spirit down and twisted up her gut didn't feel very holy, and that twisted up her gut. The Shepherds needed good people, and there were far better people in the world than Mary-Ann Lewitt.

She could still bow out. They gave her that option: Say the word and be returned to your old life. They'd find someone else, someone better, someone who didn't sit in the back pew and had fewer "ums" and "uhs" in her prayers.

No…no, she'd stay. She already agreed to this, already decided that she wanted to do more. She tamped down her doubting mind and barred the door. No. She'd stick through it.

Time passed. The remnants of the congregation had gone, and Mary-Ann was well and truly alone. She checked her watch. Seventeen after ten. Should she call? Check to make sure nothing had changed? Ten-twenty, she'd give them until ten-twenty. Then she'd call.

At 10:19, a plain red sedan pulled up to the curb. The engine shut off, and a man stepped out. He was of average height and build, a few inches taller than Mary-Ann. Late thirties, Middle-Eastern. His hair was buzzed down, very recently by the looks of it, which made his ears stick out a bit. Neatly-trimmed beard. He was wearing a blue polo shirt and khakis.

"Hello!" He walked around the car and stepped onto the sidewalk. "Are you Mary-Ann Lewitt?" He had an accent, some fusion of the Middle-East and British.

"Yeah." Mary-Ann nodded. "Yeah, that's me."

"Salah Zairi." He smiled and held out a hand. "Nice to meet you."

"I'm really sorry that you had to come and pick me up, I would have just taken a bus-"

Salah waved his hand.

“It’s no trouble at all. I’ve been needing to go back to the chapterhouse for a while now anyway.” He walked back around to the other side of the car. “Though it is something of a trip, we should probably be going if we want to be reasonable with time.”

“Right.”

Mary-Ann opened the door and got inside the car.

—

Some time later, the little red sedan pulled out of the toll booth onto the interstate.

“Do you mind if I turn on the radio?” Salah asked. It was the first thing that had been said since they had left the church.

“No, it’s cool.”

He hit the dial. Smooth jazz crackled out of the speakers.

“Ah, come on now, work!” He slapped the dashboard and the sound cleared up. “There we go. If you want to change it, just go ahead.”

“Gotcha.”

There was a pause. Mary-Ann watched a field filled with cows speed by outside the window.

“Are you originally from around here, Mary-Ann?”

“Hm? Ah, yeah, I’m a local. You?”

“Well, I was born in Pakistan, then I moved to Birmingham, then I moved here. So a local twice removed.”

It explained the accent, Mary-Ann thought.

“Ah. Never been to England.”

“The Queen’s Jubilee is this year, always a good excuse.”

“And the Olympics.”

“Bah. Bread and circuses, the lot of it. At the very least it will pull the crowds away from the things really worth seeing.”

Mary-Ann felt herself smile at that. The knot loosened a bit, the awkward, lonely feeling dissipated a little bit. Mary-Ann decided to keep the small talk going. It felt good to small talk.

“So…how long have you been working for the Initiative?”

“Fourteen years.”

“Are you in a branch, or do you just give rides to people?”

Salah chuckled.

“I’m with the Shepherds, though that does involve a lot of driving around, all things considered.”

A co-worker, then. Potentially.

“Guess you’ve seen a lot, then.”

“There’s always more to see. We all run out of time long before God runs out of wonders.”

“Mmm. How’d you get involved?”

“A friend I met in university.”

“I just got the phone call. And, you know, it’s weird, how all of this makes sense. Like, when I was told over the phone ‘we are secretly a secret organization and we want to hire you to shoot demons in the face’, I didn’t even *blink*. You’d think I would be all ‘I can’t even handle the revelation’, but the first thing I said was ‘okay, how much does it pay’.”

“You’re good at adapting to things.”

“I think it was more ‘I’m broke and I don’t want to eat instant ramen anymore’.”

Salah laughed, and it was not a small laugh either. It was a big,

space-filling laugh.

“You have no idea how refreshing it is to hear something honest that after all the false piety and ‘smite the heathens’ we often get. Wanting some fresh food in the cupboard is not a bad reason at all for joining.”

“You get a lot of those types?”

“Regrettably. The nuts get shunted off into the Wolves where they can be put on a leash. The others, well, sometimes they take a bit of humility, sometimes they don’t. Personally, I’d kick them back out on the street. Half of being a Shepherd is service to others, and you can’t serve people if you’re constantly reminding them of how holy you are in comparison.”

“Mmm.” The knot tightened itself again around the puckered emptiness inside Mary-Ann. These were good people, if they were anything like Salah, truly good people, and while she heard the little voice in her telling her it was okay, even though she *believed*, she didn’t feel it. The past could be forgiven, but the weight still had to be carried. Mary-Ann felt that weight, that weight that anchored her in that empty space, the weight that kept the world far away. The weight that dragged her down into the empty darkness, where there were no friends, where there was no home, where one reached for God because there was nothing left, and yet even God felt far away.

And so she sought God, and carried the weight.

"Something wrong?"

“No, I’m okay. Just a bit jittery about the test.”

“Nonsense. You’re a Shepherd. You’ll do fine.”

“I haven’t even taken the test yet.”

“And I haven’t been wrong yet. Except that one time. And that other time. And then there was the incident with- no, forget that one. I have a good C average. C-plus.”

“Oh shut up.”

Mary-Ann paused for a bit. Had she really just said that? She had. He was laughing again. Less than an hour in the car and he was already acting like they were close friends. Somewhere, Mary-Ann felt a little light in the darkness. A friend.

The laugh petered out.

“Mary-Ann…”

“Yeah?”

“Keep your chin up. You’ve got this.”

"Thanks, Salah."

« **Hub** »

Shepherds

Mary-Ann Lewitt re-adjusted her blanket. November night blustered outside the window, the cold leaking in through the seams of the apartment. Of course, the truth was that the warmth was leaking out and the “cold” was not actually anything, but Mary-Ann generally thought of that definition as the realm of scientists who had never experienced proper cold.

This cold was a small one, easily fought with a wool blanket and a mug of chai tea. Alexander was sleeping on top of the computer tower, as he often was. Mary-Ann sipped her tea and went back to scrolling through the database of groups.

> *Cult of the Wordsmith: Christian-descendant group of approximately 250. Language is considered sacrosanct in both verbal and written form: destruction of written material considered gravely sinful. In possession of the Gospel of Bartholomew. Current Status: Integrated. Threat Level: None.*

Mary-Ann had, in any sense of the term, lived a rather interesting life. She had slammed the door behind her the moment she had the chance, sworn off the faith she had grown up with, served several tours overseas, saw too many friends die, came back to America with a few more cracks than she had shipped out with, picked her faith back up while trying to get some peace of mind, went back to school, re-adapted to life, found some work.

> *Those Who Gaze Deeply: A collection of European alchemical practitioners in search of the “God-Element”, that is, the material which God consists of. Connections with the Church of the Broken God suspected but never confirmed. Current Status: Defunct. Last Activity: 1991*

That work happened to, once again, involve shooting at some rather fanatic people, except this time the fanatics she had shot at before

were now her co-workers, and the fanatics she shot at now had a tendency to consort with demons in a very literal sense.

> *Sons of the Nephilim: Group of approximately 50 individuals located in a single compound within the Hindu Kush. Believe themselves to be the descendants of angelic beings: beliefs focus on re-attaining a perfect state. Highly violent, and in possession of a dangerous artifact, the supposed corpse of an angelic being. Integration talks pending. Current Status: Active. Threat Level: High.*

Not as literal as it could have been, but at the end of the day there wasn't much difference between a horned and hoofed imp with a pitchfork and the talking corpse floating in a septic tank.

> *The Bramberly Family and followers: Group of 216 individuals located in North Dakota, United States. Central belief that the head of the Bramberly family was in contact with alien life forms, and as such was to serve as the liberator of mankind from evil through various sexual rituals. Possession of artifacts suspected but never confirmed. Compound was raided by agents of the Global Occult Coalition. Current Status: Defunct. Last Activity: 1982.*

The database entries scrolled by. There were over six hundred entries on the list, though a good deal of them were either extinct, or only fragments existed. For some, there was enough material stored away to publish an entire catechism on the belief. For others, the cover blurb was all there was.

> *Icthians: A group measuring approximately 700 practitioners in small cells along the northeastern seaboard of the United States. Group worships fish and aquatic life. In possession of no known artifacts. Notable events include a schism over the admittance of lobsters into the Salt Canon (six casualties) and the deaths of forty-five individuals inside a single trailer home under claims that sardines were the most holy of fish. Current Status: Active. Threat Level: Minimal.*

When people heard “counter-cult” what did they jump to? Church of the Broken God and the Fifthists. Most of the agents over in Project Malleus encouraged that sort of glamorizing of the job. Mary-Ann would admit that the stories about fighting off waves of cogboys and starminds did wonders for morale throughout the Initiative, but she was pretty sure those were exaggerations. In the end the vast majority of her job was cleaning up the small stuff. The big cults generally fell under the jurisdiction of other groups, the ones with the resources and ability to combat them effectively. Very few of the cults were more than a couple dozen people, most didn’t have much staying power, and eventually, almost all of them devolved into some form of violence or sex, or both. If that didn’t say something about the fallen nature of man, Mary-Ann couldn’t think of anything better.

> *The Defiled: Buddhist-derived group, consisting of one hundred and eight individuals. Group is in possession of at least four anomalous artifacts. Primary goal is destruction of the physical universe, so as to help the entire human race achieve nirvana. Current Status: Active. Threat Level: High.*

Ah, here was the one. Mary-Ann began converting her notes from that afternoon into the database. Nothing much to these ones: no name, no organization, not even a cult, really. Just an enemy group, one that managed to build a nice little torture engine in front of a church that killed fifteen people very slowly. The artifacts inside the church were likewise treated.

bleep-bloop The chat window opened on her screen. There he was, right on schedule.

Click

“Hey, Salah.” Mary-Ann continued tapping away at the keyboard.

“Hello. There has been a change in plans.” She could never place his accent. Whenever she thought it was pinned down as Middle-Eastern, it would seem more British, more Middle Eastern when it seemed British.

“Oh?”

“Three of them have committed suicide.”

“Arsenic dentures? Auto-erotic strangulation? That one thing with the diarrhea?”

“A small explosive hidden in the mouth. The splatter spelled out 'Fuck you' for two of them. The third was 'Check your privilege, you cisgendered cisnational cismental cisspecies cislingual cistime cispolarity cisdimensional scum.' The text was very small for that one.”

“Yow.”

“I was thinking of getting it engraved. It’d be a wonderful desk ornament.”

“Heh. Any of them left?”

“One. I was just about to arbitrate.”

“Wrapping up here as well.”

“Did the doctor say anything about your leg?

“Another week in the cast.”

“Ah, so it is. Well, God waits not for the machinations of man.”

blooooooop

—

Some distance away, in one of those places where people who needed to disappear disappeared in, a Pakistani man tucked his cellphone back in the pocket of his coat. It was a big, wool-lined thing, something bought on the cheap and worth a lot more than the money paid for it.

He focused his attention on the young woman in the makeshift cell. The tattoos were quite garish, as were the piercings, and the hair,

and the gore splatters from her fellows didn't do much either. She was shouting all manner of vile things at him, screeching about how she'd paint the Prophet in shit and menstrual blood all over the kaaba.

He would have loved to make her suffer for that. The young man with boiling blood shook the cage his older self had built around it, screaming to make himself heard over her blasphemies. Drop the act, just kill her. She's nothing. Less than human. The lowest of infidels. Let the worms eat her and her soul rot in fire for eternity. You'd be justified, completely justified. The ritual just holds back the real justice…

As he did many times before, Salah reminded the young man with the boiling blood what that hate had gotten him before. The young man resisted, and he fought a lot harder than Salah could. He dug through the bag on the ground, looking for an excuse to busy his hands. As he always did, with each time the young man shook his cage, he thought it best to use the weapons of an old man: A calm tone and a quick tongue.

He stood up. In one hand, he held a slim tome bound in black, opened to a pre-marked page. In his other hand was a pistol.

"As is customary, you may take this moment to make a final atonement. If you wish to make a plea for forgiveness, please do so."

The woman spat in his face.

"Very well. In the sight of God all-mighty and all-merciful, I find you guilty in the deaths of fifteen individuals and the desecration of holy relics contained within the church of St. Anthony. As appointed arbitrator of the eternal law, I hereby sentence you to death. With great regret and a heavy heart I do this, and trust in God's mercy for the sake of your soul, and for mine. Have you any final words?"

"You think you're the fucking Spanish Inquisition or something?"

Salah clicked off the safety.

“No, we don’t.”

« **Hub** | **Second Watch** »

Second Watch

> Nota Bene: It does help if you read Shepherds first, as this is a continuation of that.

"NO!"

Mary-Ann opened her eyes to see the darkness of her bedroom. She was sitting up, gasping for breath, one arm outstretched, reaching for something. Alexander was out the door already, leaving nothing but a warm, circular depression by her right leg.

She shuddered, drawing her hand back in. The dream-images had already faded into an indistinct nothingness. That hot terror that came with it had not.

She ran a hand through her hair. With the other, she reached for the bedside lamp. The clock said 3:18 in neon-red numerals.

click

The light was harsh for the first few moments. She blinked, grabbing her bearings again, not letting them go. This was her bedroom, and it was safe. The apartment building was safe. There was nothing out there in the dark. She was alive, and unharmed, and unlikely to be harmed. No one was in danger.

Her heart still hammered away at her chest, like some animal trying to gnaw away at her ribs. No use trying to go back to sleep now. She needed something to calm herself down. Some tea, a book, maybe some music in the background.

That would do it. Tea first.

The water was heating up when Johnny Cash started singing from the bedroom.

You wired me awake and hit me with a hand that broke a nail…

Phone calls at this hour involved two things: someone was drunk and needed bailing out of something, or there was trouble with work. Mary-Ann hoped for the first and expected the second.

She went back to the bedroom and picked the cellphone up off of the nightstand.

Salah

This was not a good thing.

“Hello?” She dreaded what was on the other end.

“I will be there in half an hour to pick you up.”

“What? Salah, what’s going on?”

“I’ll explain when I get there. Just get yourself ready.”

The call ended. Mary-Ann stared at the phone in her hand. Salah was worried, that was obvious. He was never worried, or at least never showed that he was worried. If he was worried…

Mary-Ann grabbed her backpack off the floor.

—

As he had said, Salah’s car pulled up in thirty minutes. Mary-Ann had been waiting in the lobby, changed into something more practical and packed up anything of use into her backpack: an extra change of clothes, a book for the ride, toiletries, some granola bars, a bottle of energy supplements.

She slid into the passenger seat, holding her backpack on her lap. Salah’s hands were tight on the wheel. His whole body was tense. He was never tense. As soon as the door shut, he took off down the street. He was even driving more forcefully than usual.

“Okay, what’s going on? You’ve got me freaking out, Salah.”

“The Children of the Scarlet King have returned.”

A memory dragged itself out of the database, a name and a date and a single paragraph describing a cult and how they had been destroyed by the Foundation. Everything else was a big blank space filled with hearsay, rumors and whisperings tricking down from those who had seen it and still opened their mouths.

“Every agent in the district has been called in to the chapterhouse,” Salah continued. “Project command is taking no chances with this. Messages have already been sent to the Foundation and the Coalition for whatever support they can lend us.”

“How’d we manage that?”

“A few old arrangements were dredged up from the last time, enough that command hopes to get a temporary alliance. I have my doubts that the agreements will be honored. The Coalition will act of their own self-interest, of course, but they are hardly allies. The Foundation, they can be bought off by throwing them a few artifacts of no importance.”

Mary-Ann remained quiet, trying to piece together the situation. The Foundation and Coalition rarely got involved with the Initiative, primarily in that they were far more interested at glaring at each other from across the metaphorical dinner table and sneaking snide insults in with the small talk. When they did, the interaction was generally the same: you have something we want, give it to us, no we are not going to compromise, yes you should do what we say because we have more guns than you. This situation pulled a Prague on the established order of power. Exactly what it turned it into, that would require more thought, but there were three and a half hours on the road for that.

Salah reached down between his seat and the center console, removing a manila folder. He handed it to Mary-Ann.

“Everything in here has been declassified for this mission. It’s a Babel-5 cipher. Destroy it when you’re done reading it.”

“Got it.”

Words lapsed into silence as the car continued down the lonely

black road.

—

Robert Hensen had seen a fight break out over a man inadvertently bringing a ham sandwich to lunch. He'd seen blood drawn over translation errors. He'd heard enough brick-headed smack-talking to qualify the entire organization as a professional wrestling circuit.

This particular web conference was not the most frustrating thing he had experienced, but it was very, very close. He had a Foundation Overseer on one end, a Coalition Director on the other, Director DeMontfort on the third, and none of them wanted to play nice with the other. DeMontfort had just finished berating the Overseer for wanting to recover everything the Children had instead of destroying it, though it was nothing close to his usual fire-and-brimstone tone. He seemed tired enough to talk like a civilized person for once.

"At this stage, it is possible that the process may be stopped without losing the host. Total destruction would prevent study of the phenomena, inevitably leading to a disadvantage when confronting them in the future." This was the Overseer, with his smugness.

"Oh?" The Director's voice raised the eyebrow absent from the logo on the screen. "Tell, me, Overseer. When was the last time the Foundation actually produced results from your studies? I can't seem to recall anything recently…rather sad, when NASA has a better track record than your entire organization."

"The scientific process does not provide instantaneous results, Director."

"And in your case it does not seem to provide *any* results."

"May we get back to the situation at hand?" DeMontfort said. "We're getting nowhere with this idiocy. Mr. Director, your hostility is not helping matters at all…"

"The Initiative is currently in possession of numerous anomalous artifacts without the resources nor experience to properly contain them. You are a rogue element, and not in a position to make

demands.” The Overseer was having none of this. “And, may I add, these items are used by agents in the field.”

“They have been tested.”

“Have they? Director DeMontfort, I mean no offense, but your personnel are hardly the foremost in the field.”

Hensen pinched the bridge of his nose. Time to say something.

“Can we just shut up and cut the bullshit?”

That got them to pause.

“We could do this alone, as it stands." Hensen continued. "The Initiative has one hundred and ten agents in the district, a sufficient number to raid the compound if pressed. Numbers are not the issue here. As a matter of fact, the issue here has nothing to do with the Children and everything to do with the fact that our organizations are so busy trying to strangle each other that we can barely see what’s going on in front of us.”

“That is a simplistic viewpoint that doesn’t…”

“January thirteenth,” Hensen cut the Overseer off. “Initial recovery of anomalous individual 091 by Foundation agents. March fourth: Coalition raid on a Foundation holding facility, unsuccessful termination of AI-091. March sixth, Initiative raid on Foundation facility, AI-091 recovered. March tenth: Coalition raid on Initiative facility, AI-091 escapes. June first: AI-091 acts under command of hostile organization, and is killed by Foundation agents after significant collateral damage and over two hundred civilian casualties.”

He let that sink in for a bit.

“I will be honest, I’m using the Children as an excuse to push another agenda, because I doubt I’ll have a better excuse any time soon. I propose a non-aggression pact between our organizations, with protocol for determining possession of items, on the basis that it’s time someone here did something reasonable. A joint operation against the Children of the Scarlet King, using Coalition magekillers,

Foundation augmented operatives, and our own Project Malleus and Shepherd corps would serve as the springboard to this pact."

"You have no authority!" DeMontfort's anger had returned.

"No, I do. Tribunal permission, in fact. I sent you the file, DeMontfort."

The priest looked like he was going to turn into a beetroot.

"And if we don't comply to your request?" the Director said.

"Then enjoy finding the cult on your own, after they've had time to grow stronger, and I *will* make sure this information is withheld from you. We could have an exact repeat of nine years ago, all because you wanted to keep on with your feud."

Silence.

"Now then, I am sending you all copies of the proposal…"

—

Salah knew he needed sleep. Mary-Ann had taken over driving halfway to the chapterhouse, and while he had set the seat back and closed his eyes, he didn't sleep. He couldn't, really.

He was scared. Who wouldn't be, after reading those documents? He hadn't been part of the original mission nine years prior: All of those agents were dead now. But he had heard stories, horrible stories. They were nothing when compared to the real thing. Dread sat in his stomach, dense and cold.

Unlike a great many of the groups the Initiative fought, the Children of the Scarlet King had an actual god at its core, and that was not a title given out to every anomaly that attracted worshippers. The Scarlet King was very much real, and very much to be feared, from what had been pieced together of its nature and the Children's beliefs. The King gloried in violence and depravity, calling to it the psychopath and the deviant, who then attempted to summon it and bind it to the world, as the King could not make avatars of its own. Rituals spanned from the proper preparation of a person for

consumption, to methods of violation, to the summoning of the King's servants, and all pointed towards the singular purpose of reshaping the world of man in its own image.

The biggest problem, Salah thought, was how one went about killing a god. You could burn its scriptures, wipe out its worshipers, kill its avatars, but that would only ever delay it. Eventually it would come back, whispering, and the whole cycle would begin again. It could wait forever.

Salah tried to focus on finding Mary-Ann amidst the bustle.

The chapterhouse was abuzz, crawling with agents and operatives. The majority were of the Initiative, men and women Salah had worked alongside for years. Scattered amongst them even now were a few Foundation and Coalition representatives, trying to avoid each other as much as possible. The Coalition agents were grizzled veterans, with wary eyes and hardened faces. The Foundation agents had a stiff plastic look to them, like they had been pushed from a mold. The Initiative agents almost seemed out of place: most of them looked like they had just walked in off the streets. A motley bunch if there ever was one.

Shouting in the next room. A fight had broken out. He was surprised that it had taken this long. The crowd had formed the traditional circle, with combatants at the center. On one side was a Coalition agent in camouflage, with a scar over one eye. He was holding a portable white-board in one hand. On the other side was a woman with blonde hair down to her waist and robes covered in writing, just barely restrained by Rabbi Arnheim and Smitation-Of-Evil-And-Trampling-Of-Sinful-Things Toton. She looked to have been trying to brain the Coalition agent with a book.

"Unwriter! Unwriter!" She screamed at the agent, who looked thoroughly confused. "Wordkiller! *Let go of me…*"

Salah stepped through the circle. Time to do what he was good at: smooth talking.

"Good morning, Di. Read anything good lately?"

“One moment, Salah, just have to dispense some justice to this agent of the Censor.” Her tone of voice jumped right from howling for blood to bubbly cheerfulness.

“Perhaps I could persuade you otherwise? He looks like a man who files his paperwork. This was a mistake, true, but I think we could consider him enlightened to his wrongdoing, don’t you? Can’t hold the ignorant at fault.”

Di relaxed somewhat, her restrainers letting go of her arms. She glared at the Coalition agent.

“Don’t do it again.”

The agent, with an expression of pure “what the hell just happened”, nodded and walked off. The circle broke down. Di came bounding over to Salah, a big smile on her face. He was quite sure she was bipolar.

“As a matter of fact I have read something good recently you see I was in this little used book store just off the interstate and…”

Di kept talking, blissfully unaware of anyone else in the room. Salah nodded occasionally towards her, directing his actual attention to Arnheim and Toton.

“Thank you, Salah. I doubt we could have held her back for much longer.”

“Ah, it was nothing. It’s good to see you again, Aaron. How’s the family?”

“Oh, they’re doing just fine. Just finished putting an addition on the house, so the kids have their own bedrooms now. There was a lot of celebration with that, let me tell you.”

“And you, Soeantost?”

“Quaking in fear and awe of the Lord, as usual.”

There was a tint of self-aware humor to the statement. Toton was good with that. You had to be, when you were the woman who had a

habit of belting out “He Shall Crush the Sinful ‘Neath His Blessed Feet of Burning Light” at the top of her lungs.

“Have either of you seen Mary-Ann around?”

“Nope,” Toton said. ‘Haven’t seen her at all, actually.”

“I saw her maybe half an hour ago, up on the third floor. Looked like she was about to fall asleep right then and there.”

“Ah. She probably has. I should find some place to rest as well.”

“…and what’s really interesting about that character is his relationship with his father, which parallels…”

“Mm. We’re in dark times again, Salah.”

“They come and go, and we know more than we did then.”

“So do they.”

“True. God willing, we’ll be able to prevent things before they escalate.”

“So hope we all,” Toton said.

“…and that’s the end of the book, and while there are a few shakes in the writing it’s a wonderful way to spend an afternoon and I recommend it highly.”

Salah nodded.

“Sounds good, Di. I’ll have to check it out.”

A short time later, Salah found Mary-Ann asleep on a couch in the third floor lounge. He left her there.

—

Time passed. Plans were made, some amount of restless sleep was had, gear was doled out, prayers were said. A muted cloud fell over the chapterhouse as deployment time approached, the bustle and worry of the morning turning into a calm dread.

They waited.

Then, it was time.

—

The group descended on the compound under darkness, unsuspected. The Coalition ritual hackers broke through the outer wards, allowing the armored personnel carriers to drive up right to the doors. The wind screamed, the earth burst open with a misshapen brood, and battle was met.

—

Mary-Ann ducked into an alcove, just avoiding a stream of black acid shot down the hall. As soon as the splatter stopped she leaned around and fired off two shots: one miss, one in the shoulder. A Foundation agent in the alcove on the other side of the hall downed the creature.

They kept moving, ignoring the spindly corpse with the marbled skin. The compound was crawling with them, more so than the actual Children. Those were easily dealt with: they had no guns, no survivors were taken. Mary-Ann had not seen any captives yet. If there had been, it would have been an act of mercy.

The place was very wrong. Apparitions would flit in and out of vision, screams and cries of pain would sound from the distance, but there was never anything there.

Mary-Ann was working automatically. Questions like how the Children managed to make a complex this large and ornate without anyone noticing were brushed to the back of her mind. The existence of these little creatures scrabbling all over the place made it feel like a scene out of *Aliens*, except the horror was undercut by the fact that she had night-vision goggles. Given the artisans the Initiative procured most of its high-end equipment from, those goggles were covered in iconography and had a heads-up display in Latin.

According to the radio, the other teams had had much the same.

The whole event was a blessing in disguise: the Children had no time to prepare for a force of this size. Compared to what they were before, compared to what the stories had been, it was almost a letdown.

Things blurred together. The statues of various acts of violence and debauchery, the paintings, the creatures, the few men and women in red robes, usually found cowering in corners, everything blurred. The gunfire, the shouts, the commands, everything blurred.

Eventually, after many shots, the group of five came to a pair of doors, big ones. Big doors mean important things on the other side, it was a rule of life. The agents positioned themselves, and two opened the doors. They creaked as they swung outward.

A massive circular room with a domed roof stretched out before the group. The dome was covered in a painting, like some sort of twisted Sistine chapel, covered in horrifying beasts and great orgies of people surrounded by further scenes of graphic depravity. Columns lined the perimeter of the room, etched with symbols of some language that was better off unknown. Hundreds of candles were arranged just so, the wax dripped on the floor just so, tiles in the floor arranged just so, writing out rows and layers of symbols on the floor. Deep red tapestries and banners hung about the place.

In the center of the room was a blue whale, lying on its back, smeared with whorls and swirls of blood. A lone man was standing in front of it. He was middle aged: short black hair and a biggish nose. For a flashing moment, Mary-Ann wondering what had driven him to do this, who he was, what his history was. Would he be mourned by parents who had lost a son, a wife who lost a husband, children who lost a father?

The man got out a half-shout before a bullet passed through his skull and his body dropped to the floor. The echoes died away, and everything was silent in the room.

Mary-Ann had no idea how the Children had gotten a blue whale this far inland. She decided it was better not to pursue an answer.

All that was left was to kill it.

People Look East

> Nota Bene: It would behoove you to read Shepherds and Second Watch before reading this tale.

Mary-Ann Lewitt sat at the little table in the kitchen, reading her book. It was snowing outside, with big white flakes spiraling out of the blackness beyond and dashing themselves against the windowpane. Chatter flowed out from the living room, the occasional laugh interspersed with the conversation and the sound of the TV.

The kitchen itself was cozy, still warmed by the frenzied cooking of that afternoon. The smells of dinner still lingered in the air. Now *that* had been a meal, the kind where you didn't plan on moving more than a few feet for the next day or so. When Big John Courtemanche, Rabbi Arnheim, and Rigatoni Carbonara IV shared a kitchen, there was no alternative.

Technically, it wasn't a Christmas party. It was the "Completely Secular and Non-Denominational Winter Celebration of Fellowship and Goodwill towards Mankind (Please Check Your Attitude and Weapons at the Door)" party. Someone's tongue had been planted firmly enough in their cheek that Mary-Ann guessed that some sort of surgery would be needed to remove it.

The bizarre thing was that it worked. There was not a single decoration of religious significance on display in the entire house. That would have pained Big John. The man was practically Santa Claus already: gigantic white beard, ruddy complexion, wide around the middle, and a habit of punching heretics.

"You're being anti-social, Mary-Ann."

She looked up to see Salah at the kitchen entry. He was holding a mug of hot chocolate, and wearing a horrifically tacky sweater: bright red with a goofy-looking snowman on the front.

“And I didn’t think you’d actually wear that.”

“I am a Pakistani-born British Muslim who is working alongside a motley array of Christians, Jews, and sundry other faiths to fight the horrific things that lurk in the dark corners of creation.” He took a sip from his mug, clearly using it as an excuse for dramatic timing. “I should think that by now I would have a fine-tuned sense of irony.”

“Or you just refuse to refuse a gift.”

“That too.” He sat down in the opposite chair, left ankle resting on right knee. Another sip. “There’s something on your mind. Talk to me.”

Mary-Ann sighed, putting on a smile for it. She placed the napkin she had been using as a bookmark back in its place.

“Yeah. Okay.” She set the book down on the table. “You got me. I guess it’s just that time of year is all.”

“Bad memories?”

“Spending time with family doesn’t mean much when they never want to see your face again. Except maybe in a police report.”

“Ah. I know the feeling. If my father could see me now, he’d probably burst an artery out of sheer rage. But alas, he is dead.”

“I mean, it’s not as bad as it was last year. Last year my Christmas was a TV dinner I shared with my cat. I’m okay out here, Salah. Really, I’m okay.”

Salah nodded, taking another sip of cocoa. There was quiet for a bit. Maybe he was done, maybe he was just pausing. She didn’t feel like opening her book back up, because it felt like he was about to say something.

“Remember that spirit we exorcised from that restroom?” he said.

“I don’t think I’m going to forget the ghost that lived in a toilet and spent five hours telling me I had a nice butt. And also that it wanted to eat it.”

“And that was when you threatened it with a plunger.”

“That was when I *exorcised* it with a plunger.” Mary-Ann smiled for a moment. “Though that was just an awful day in general. Way too hot outside, no air conditioning in that building, job took like five hours. I mean, it’s funny now, but I know we were both ready to kill each other and quite a few civilians over it.”

“Mmm-hmm.”

“And, you know, I think it might have had some eyesight problems. Really, on a scale of “plywood” to “dayum”, my butt is maybe an “eh, okay”.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

There were shouts from the living room. Someone had scored a touchdown, apparently.

“You’re doing that thing, aren’t you?” Mary-Ann said.

“What thing?”

“That thing where you start innocent conversations to make people comfortable. You’re trying to lure me into a sense of security so I’ll start talking about my feelings.”

Salah shrugged.

“You said it, not me.”

“Well, it’s working. It’s definitely working…” her voice trailed off.

“I’m listening.”

“It’s…I don’t know, I’m more comfortable out here. You know me, Salah; I don’t really have other friends. I mean, I know them, I talk to them, but I’m not really friends with them. Not really.”

“You know Di and Aaron, and I know you’ve spoken with Anas and Rasha before. Just come in and talk with them for a while.”

“I’m all right.”

“Mary-Ann…”

“It’s…I’m just…I’m scared, Salah.”

“What are you afraid of?”

Mary-Ann twirled a lock of hair around her finger, her eyes focused on the base of the refrigerator, across the kitchen.

“A lot of things.”

“Like what?”

There was a pause. In the living room, Di was energetically arguing literature with someone else.

“Well…you know.”

Salah nodded.

“Hm. Have you seen the progress they’ve made on the Universal Texts? Almost fifty pages done, I hear," he said.

“Yeah. Pretty good for sticking a post-it note with ‘Abraham was a pretty rad dude’ on the wall.”

“So then, gentlemen, what progress have we made this week? Well sir, we have determined that Moses was also a pretty cool dude.”

A limp chuckle rose from that.

“You’re doing it again.”

Salah shrugged again.

“If it would make you feel better, I’m willing to speak first.”

“Yeah. Yeah, that’d be better.”

“Very well then. My greatest fear is myself.”

Mary-Ann's face was quizzical.

"Twenty years ago or so, I would have loved nothing less than to burn down this house. Smuggle a bomb in under my sweater, detonate it when everyone was gathered together, one final blaze of glory as I was whisked away into Paradise."

On the list of things Mary-Ann considered plausible, that statement was very, very low on the list, somewhere between "Beatles reunion tour" and "actually getting around to reading *Les Miserables*".

"I was a very angry young man. Very angry with no easy outlet. No job, no family of my own, amid many others of the same state."

"I don't think I've ever even seen you anything more than mildly irritated."

Salah waved a hand absently.

"That we can attest to development of character. Needless to say, I…" he paused mid-sentence. A skinny man with a colander on his head ran into the kitchen, grabbed a plate of cookies off of the counter, and ran back out. He nodded politely as he exited.

"That is possibly the most awkward man I have ever met." Salah shook his head. "Anyway, needless to say, I did not end up splattering myself across the pavement and murdering innocents for the glory of God. That story is for another time. What is important here is that I am still afraid of that angry young man. You see, he never left. He's locked up. In here." He pointed to his head. "And in here." He pointed to his chest.

"Then hasn't he won, if you still fear him?"

"No. I fear him the way a zookeeper would fear a tiger. It would be idiotic to be without fear, and impossible to do his job with too much." He drained what was left of his cocoa. "You need to find the proper amount."

Mary-Ann let out a long breath, leaning forward in her chair. Another chuckle.

“Kinda hard to follow up on that one, Salah.”

“Don’t rush yourself.”

“Okay…yeah. I guess…guess I’m afraid of myself too. Afraid I’ll just get hurt again. I get close to people, and either I push them away and burn the bridge, or they die. It’s easier not to care. Hurts less.”

“But being alone hurts too, doesn’t it?”

“Yeah. It does. I feel hollow. Just a shell with a hole that can’t be filled up.” She paused, staring out at some indeterminate point on the other side of the kitchen. “I don’t want to be alone anymore, but I can’t do it. I’ve tried, but it just hurts more.” A pause again. “It sounds pathetic, but it’s the truth.”

Salah pulled a napkin from the dispenser and handed it to Mary Ann. He said nothing. She blew her nose and wiped her eyes.

“Just take your time. You'll get through it. I know it.”

Mary-Ann balled up the napkin and tossed in in the garbage.

“Could I catch a ride home with you? I think I’m partied out.”

“Of course. I’ll grab my jacket.” Salah stood up, washed out his mug, and stepped out of the kitchen. Mary-Ann could feel a weight lift off of her spirit. Not all the way, but enough. Enough for now. She stood up, taking her book with her, and walked into the living room. Maybe she’d talk to them more next time.

Yeah, she could do that.

“Sorry to cut and run, but I’ve got to get home. Thanks for having me. See you all around later.”

The good-byes strung themselves together, hugs and handshakes and wishing well, and RCIV making everything awkward by exclaiming “Be blessed by the Noodly Appendage!” Mary-Ann had a smile throughout, a small one, but genuine. It was enough for tonight.

Salah was waiting for her in the kitchen. He was holding a small package wrapped in red tissue paper.

“One last thing.” He handed over the package. “A gift from me.”

Mary-Ann tore off the paper, revealing a set of CDs, held together with a rubber band.

"Yes, outdated, I know, but there's a proper feel to them."

"Thanks, Salah." Mary-Ann smiled. "It means a lot."

—

Salah’s car floated through the inky night, headlights piercing the black, fat flakes of snow swirling and dashing about. Mary-Ann sat back in her seat, eyes closed, letting the violins and the lilting voice wash over her.

In demon days, it's cold inside
You don't get nobody, people sigh
It's so bad, lasting far, but love yourself
Hiding in a hole in there

They drove on through the night.

« **Second Watch** | **Hub** | **The Good of the Other** »

The Good of the Other

> Nota Bene: It would behoove you to read Shepherds, Second Watch, and People Look East before reading this tale.

Mechanoid Moloch! Moloch the mighty maw! Gnawing Moloch! Sawing Moloch! Moloch the grinding end!

The words rang around in Mary-Ann's head, even now, some three hours after she had heard them first. She brushed them away, but they oozed back through the cracks in her mental concrete.

Maladaptive Moloch, eater of babies!

It had just been an insane man on the side of the street. You had those in New York.

She looked up at the sun.

"This weather's just crazy. We were snowed in the day before yesterday, and now it's practically warm enough for shorts."

"Well you see, God hates homosexuals," Salah said. "And so He is clearly manipulating the weather to rain judgment down upon us."

Mary-Ann elbowed him, laughing.

"You. You are a funny person."

"So I've been told. Personally, that's a load of garbage. I am a thoroughly unfunny individual. Did I ever tell you about the time I was sold a dead parrot? I went right into that pet shop and continued to be unfunny the entire time I complained." There was the tiniest smile at the corner of his mouth. The rest was in his eyes.

"How do you keep a straight face when you say stuff like that?"

“Years of practice.” There was the smile.

They turned right, heading down an alley to cut across to the next street. Dumpster, fire escapes, trash, a puddle, graffiti. The bustle beyond seemed deafened by the plain brick and concrete: a little slice of quiet, broken by two pairs of shoes.

The graffiti on the wall, a big bubblegum-pink “G”, began to squirm and they passed it. It flowed down the bricks, and about ten feet in front of the pair it bulged out from the wall and launched itself into the alleyway like a wet spitwad. It sat there for a moment before snapping into the form of a young man wearing an overcoat the same color as the paint. His hair was likewise the same shade. A cigarette dangled from his lip, unlit.

“Hey hey hey, what’s all this? You’re walkin’ into BackdoorSoHo without payin’ customs? Low blow there, low blow. Man’s gotta make a living and art ain’t fillin’ the belly, y’know what I mean?”

Salah dug in his pocket and removed a small silver coin and tossed it to the man. He turned it over in his fingers, squinted, bit it, and threw it back.

“We cool yet?”

“No.” Salah put the coin back in his pocket.

“Good. Management’s been up our asses, makin’ us check everyone who comes in. Pack a’ those bastards snuck in last month and fucked around. Doesn’t help that we’re up to our ears with the Snakes and Mac-Daddies boppin’ around, much less you Choir Boys.” He shrugged. “Why the fuck am I still talkin’? Get in there.”

He dropped into a pink puddle on the concrete and slid back onto the wall. In the distance, there was a slight shimmering in the air, a little momentary mirage. Mary-Ann and Salah passed through the rest of the alley and stepped out into the Backdoor.

The cobblestone street was an explosion of color and light and sound. Narrow brick federal houses and cast-iron faced lofts lined the way, railed balconies jutting out into the air. Every flat surface

(and most non-flat surfaces) looked to have something painted on it. The world was a mural, some parts animated, some parts layered on top of other works. Statues of metal and plastic and wood and stone stood and walked and danced: people, animals, objects, shapes and forms without any prior meaning than their own existence. The air was heavy with music: brass jazz and basswood blues and murmuring vinyl dub.

Mary-Ann tried to absorb as much of the sensory assault. She had only been to the Backdoor once before, and from what she saw now, no two visits were the same. The art and atmosphere would be completely changed by next week, let alone several months later.

The street was too narrow for cars, and so was filled with pedestrians, and one man riding a panda: Squads of muralists in paint-stained jeans and t-shirts, contortionist actors in peacock feather tights, dreadlocked musicians smelling of ganja and listening to the songs flow through the holes in their heads, clothing and hair and decoration in a blindingly bizarre array of flamboyant colors and patterns. A barrel-chested firebreather, his beard licked with flame, spat green deer and purple tigers from his mouth, and the fiery cats went about hunting down their prey before wisping out of existence.

They continued in this way down the street before reaching a narrow brick building, unpainted, with a little green door. The wooden sign above the door proclaimed “De Luca Brothers, Artisans”.

The bell tinkled as they stepped through the door. It felt like walking between worlds: there was none of the noise or color of outside. Just a quiet little shop, with clean wooden shelves and golden light falling through the windows. Behind the counter sat a wrinkled old man, painting an icon with the still-steady hands of a master.

He looked up at them.

“Ah! Here for, the next batch, yes? I have them ready, four of them!” He ducked down behind the desk for a moment, coming back up with a small cardboard box.

Salah reached in and removed a palm-sized wooden pendant, three nodes smoothed and shaped to fit comfortably in the hand, with

intricate engravings: bands of miniscule text wrapping around it in one continuous sentence.

“I’m going to look around for a bit.”

“Okay.”

Mary-Ann wandered through the small aisles, looking over the hand-carved crucifixes and beaded rosaries and icons of the saints. To the untrained eye glancing at the shelves, they would have noticed nothing out of the ordinary. Closer inspection though, revealed a few oddities: Jesus was very clearly not white and significantly more torn up, the Virgin was not particularly beautiful, and Anthony and Francis were accompanied by Kerrin of the Cog and Opun the Steel-Speaker. Mary-Ann knew a whole lot of people who would be very happy to burn that out of the records. The Breaking and the Brass Gospel was a touchy subject with the canonists.

Near the back, she came to a stop in front of one on the larger paintings. A deep green of forest was interspersed with rays of gold that pierced the leaves. An old tree by a stream, twisted from age, a mossy boulder by its gnarled roots, upon which sat a girl on the cusp of womanhood, leaning back against the trunk of the tree. She was in armor, dirty and dulled with dried blood and ash. One hand rested on the pommel of a rusting greatsword, its point buried in the soil. The other hand was curled up in her lap, useless, the skin blackened and cracked. Her face was scarred and burned, ashen grey and fleshy red, one cheek just a few strips of shriveled flesh exposing half a skull grin. What remained unharmed showed the traces of a young face, one that had had all delicacy rubbed out from it. One eye was gone: the other was green, reflecting the forest. Her hair, what hair there was left, was a dirty brown-blond, rough-shorn and short. She did not seem out of place in the forest: her expression was peaceful, at rest.

The notecard next to the painting proclaimed, in small, delicate cursive, “*Il Trionfo della Vergine Joan*”

“She looks a bit like you,” Salah said from behind her.

“I guess. If you squint a bit. You’re just trying to shoehorn some

symbolism in here, aren't you?"

"Please, what is there to shoehorn? It fits your foot quite nicely."

The bell tinkled. Mary-Ann paid it no mind, and continued to inspect the painting. She did have a rainy day fund, and she had to admit that she liked it. A certain wall in her apartment was obnoxiously blank, and this would definitely fill it…

"Massive Moloch, swimmer in the concrete ocean!"

Mary-Ann spun around, her eyes confirming what the voice had said. It was the same man. A dirty, disheveled man, with dirt in his stringy grey beard, grime in the creases of his face, tobacco-stained teeth, plastic bags taped to his patched coat. Underneath the coat, a stained t-shirt bearing a red panda with x-ed out eyes, hung by an umbilical cord.

A tail, and with the content of the ramblings taken into consideration…

"This guy's ahwecky." Mary said. "Might be ex."

Salah nodded. The beggar wobbled forward towards them, clearly intoxicated.

"Munching Moloch! Crunching Moloch! Moloch in the bones and Jones!"

Mary-Ann weighed the possibilities. He might be insane, or he might only be temporarily insane, or he might just be acting. All three were just as likely.

"Are you going to try talking to him?" Salah said.

"Yeah. I'll drop him if he tries anything. Keep an eye out for friends."

"Right."

Mary-Ann looked the man in the eye. One of his was lazy.

"Hey man. No need to turn this into trouble, right?"

“Moloch the Mean! Moloch the Monkey!”

“How about we find you some place to stay for the night, get a good meal. Food sound good to you?”

“Mother Moloch! Master Moloch!”

“Come on, man, let’s go outside.”

“Master Moloch, Master Moloch, am I cool yet?”

An arm lashed out. Glint. Knife. Thrust. Crazy-eyes.

Mary-Ann knocked his knife hand to the side. Three punches: stomach, chest, nose. The man stumbled back, blood pouring from his nose. Once again to the face. He dropped to the floor.

She picked him up by the collar.

“Can you understand what I’m saying at all? Who are you, and what are you doing here?

The man coughed. Blood poured from his nose, thin and black. Inklike.

“Moloch the magnanimous. Moloch the hungry.”

His body went black and splashed to the floor. His clothes collapsed around the puddle that sank through the tiles.

Mary-Ann stood up, holding a ratty, filthy t-shirt in one hand.

—

Mary-Ann sat on her bench, holding two slices of pizza on a paper plate. Plain cheese. The sun had gone down, but with the city lights, that didn’t matter much at all.

Next to her on the bench were two cardboard boxes, one flatter than the other. She had decided to buy the painting. People walked past the little pizzeria, cars drove past, and she watched.

Footsteps, and then Salah was next to her. She offered him the

plate, and he took a slice.

They watched people for a time, quiet. It was a moment where there was more to be said between friends with simple silence than with words. The noise was out there, the world was out there. The bench was peace.

A thought bubbled up in her mind, strong yet gentle. She didn't chase it away. It had been returning ever more often of late. The hollowness was still inside her, but she had endured, like she had promised, slowly creeping from the bunker she had constructed around herself. This thought didn't want her to be slow: it wanted her to run out the door, arms wide open to the world. Letting it hurt her. Letting it hurt her because the pain was worth the end.

She knew the world. She'd seen what people could do. She knew it was ugly and dirty and polluted and foul and dark, and the lights were few and far between.

It wasn't good to face it alone. Alone, the light was too weak to face the darkness.

"Hey, Salah, how long have we been working together?"

"I think…let's see…ten months, I believe."

"Feels like a lot longer."

"It does."

A bicyclist rode past.

"You know, I've been doing a lot of thinking. Since the party. And there's something I've been meaning to ask you."

Mary-Ann's hand reached out a bit, coming to rest on top of Salah's. What was it on his face? Surprise? Confusion?

She threw open the door. The world waited, teeth bared, and she didn't care.

"Salah, will you marry me?"

The Place Where Two Rivers Meet

Salah felt as if he was about to vomit butterflies. He was married. He was a married man, sitting next to his wife, a big smile on his face. This was a thing that had happened.

The actual wedding had been a short, simple affair. The New Path required only an exchange of vows before God and the community, and beyond that there had only been words said by friends, some prayers to bless the union, and a couple choruses of “Get on with it!”

Salah was happier than he could recall being in a long time, sitting there at the head table, Mary-Ann’s hand in his. The angry young man that usually remained caged inside his soul had been replaced with a giggling, excited child, running about and laughing with the simple joy of simply being.

And Mary-Ann… she was stunning. She was wearing a blue silk dress, simple, modest, but very fitting for her. Salah was so used to seeing her in her well-worn jeans, baggy Notre Dame sweatshirt, and her favorite knit hairnet that the change was startling. She had her hair done and was all made up, and she was beautiful by any reasonable standards. More importantly, she was happy. Salah could see it in her eyes, her smiles, just they way she held herself. That was enough for him.

The Chapterhouse’s meeting hall was packed full, tables with white tablecloths lined up in a big square around the open space for dancing. One whole wall was lined with the food: in lieu of catering the affair, a potluck had been chosen, which meant that everyone had dug out grandmother’s secret recipes, which triggered that eternal struggle that burns in the hearts of all men: my grandma’s secret recipe is better than your grandma’s secret recipe. The table was weighed down with twenty types of bread, ten vats of pasta, casseroles, salads, roast beef and mashed potatoes, lamb and chicken and whatever else people could put together. For practical purposes, there was labeling for dietary restrictions. After no small

amount of finagling and argumentation, a corner had been cordoned off for alcohol, so long as things didn't get too rowdy.

The head table had been host to a constant stream of well-wishers, to the point that Salah was sure his food would be cold by the time they'd finished greeting them all. The line was almost done when… no…it couldn't be…

An old man now stood in front of their table. He was brown and bent and creased, with a hardwood cane. He had that mellowed, soft, grandfatherly look with a twinkle in his eye, the look of a man who would sit in his chair reading National Geographic and doing crosswords while watching his great-grandchildren run about.

Salah nearly leapt out of his chair. "*Assalam alayka, sayyid*." The two shook hands and exchanged a short hug.

"*Wa alaikum assalam wa rahmatu Allah*", the old man responded, smiling. "You're looking well, Salah."

"Adnan…I…I didn't think you would be able to make it!"

"People have been saying that more and more now that the Tribunal has opened up, and I don't know why: I always show up sooner or later, except for those times when God sees that I am better suited somewhere else."

"Wait wait whoa whoa whoa *hold on*…" Mary-Ann said. "Adnan? As in Adnan of the Tribunal?"

"The very same. I was Salah's mentor when he joined the Initiative."

Mary-Ann looked from Adnan to Salah with bemused bewilderment.

"You realize that I'm now expecting you to say something like 'Mary-Ann, I've invited the pope over for coffee and donuts' in the near or distant future? Because right now I wouldn't be surprised if you did that."

"Maybe, maybe." Salah chuckled. "Sayyid, please, have a seat, have some food."

“I plan on it. We have a great deal to catch up on.”

—

“They are a wonderful couple.” Adnan said to Rabbi Arnheim some time later as they stood by the punch bowl. Mary-Ann and Salah were dancing in the center of the hall.

“That they are. They’ll be happy together, I’m sure of that. Are you leaving now?”

“Yes, I’m afraid. Henry has been off causing difficulty, as usual.”

“What’s happened?”

“His wolves attacked an artists’ commune on the west coast yesterday. The reports say over one hundred dead. I’m going to speak with him personally about it, and then return to Istanbul for the conference.”

“Hmm. Think it has to do with the inkblood those two found in BackdoorSoHo?” Aaron nodded towards Mary-Ann and Salah.

“Henry believes it, but I say it is better to wait and see. The blacker artists worship all manner of foul things, to the point where one and the other seem very much alike.” Adnan sighed. “But these are my troubles for tonight. Don’t let yourself be troubled when there is so much good here.”

He walked away, hobbling on his cane and vanishing in silence.

—

The evening went on. Good friends, good food, and good drink were had in full.

—

Mary-Ann stood up, motioned for Brother Ivan to pause the music and cleared her throat obnoxiously loudly.

“Excuse me! I have an announcement. I’m going to sing a song, and

I'd like to dedicate this song to Salah, because he's made a great sacrifice: he put the Queen in second place." She swung her arms out dramatically and took a deep breath. "Christians have their hymns and pages."

Salah pinched the bridge of his nose, an embarrassed smile spreading across his face. He knew where this was going, and it was going *there*.

Hymns and pages. Di and Toton and Sazed and RC4 and a few other friends echoed back.

"Hava Nagilas for the Jews."

For the Jews. More echoing now, and louder.

"Baptists have the rock of ages"

Rock of ages

"Atheists just sing the blues…"

This had to have been planned beforehand.

"Catholics dress up for Mass, and listen to Gregorian chants…"

Had to have been planned ahead of time.

"Atheists, just take a pass. Watch football in their underpants…"

Watch football in their underpaaaaaaaants…

There was one mass inhalation for the last, ceiling-shaking lines.

Atheists…
Atheists…
Atheists…

Mary-Ann swept an arm towards Salah, a massive smile on her face.

Oh, what the hell. It was his wedding day.

“Don't have no SOOOOOOOOOOONGS!” he shouted.

—

The apartment door swung shut softly behind them.

“Ugh…I think I gained five pounds from all that food.”

“It can’t have helped that you drank as much as you did.”

Living room to bedroom.

“Salah, I’ve got a cast-iron liver. And you don’t drink, so I drank for ya.”

“Fair enough.”

Some rustling.

Mary-Ann *flomped* down on the bed.

“It’s almost like we’re reasonable adults or something. I love it.”

Salah lay down next to her, resting on his elbow.

“My mistresses’s eyes are nothing like the sun, and yet, by heaven, I think my love as rare, as any she belied with false compare.”

Mary-Ann gave him a coy smile.

“You are so classy it’s unreal.”

“I could be classier. *Madame, ye ben of al beaute shrine, as fer as cercled is the mapamounde, for as the cristal glorious ye shyne…*”

She laughed, punching him in the shoulder.

Life was good.

« **The Good of the Other** | **Hub** | **Breakfast for Dinner** »

Breakfast For Dinner

> Seriously you need to read The Place Where Two Rivers Meet first

Salah opened the door, and thanked God almighty that he was finally home. He hung his jacket on the hook and slipped his shoes off. Mary-Ann was at the stove, cooking.

“So, how was it?”

“It was. That’s about as much as I can say about it.” He walked over to her. Hug and a kiss. “Need any help?”

“I’m good. Though I hope you’re in the mood for breakfast for dinner, because we’re having breakfast for dinner.”

“Breakfast for dinner sounds fine. Are you sure you don’t need any help?”

“Salah, chivalry is supposed to be dead. You’re supposed to be getting all offended that I, a woman, am doing such subservient domestic activities as cooking.”

Salah smiled, and got the butter out of the refrigerator and syrup out of the cabinet.

“So then, tell me how the newbies were.” Mary-Ann flipped the pancakes on the griddle one by one. “You get a fundie in your group?”

“Just one this time.”

“And?

“Very conservative Christian, not entirely sure why he joined, but that’s a digression for another day. It was actually pretty funny, because I’d say something and when I looked over he had this

constipated look, and I just knew he was this close to saying something offensive."

"How big did his eyes get when you showed him the dinosaur gospel?"

"I thought he was going to have a heart attack." Salah took two cups from the cupboard and filled them. Water in one, milk in the other.

Mary-Ann laughed.

"You told him the story of Blue-Feathers and the Tournament of Bright Autumn, right?"

"Of course." Glasses on the table. "'Blue-Feathers, his crest at peak and teeth bared, roared challenge to the Black-And-Green Scale, so that they might meet on the field in single combat and settle the matter of the honor of She-Who-Tears-At-Furred-Ones. The battle would be by bone-spear, riding upon their beaked beasts, until one lay slain and the matter of honor had been sealed, and the line could then continue by her eggs.'"

"Ah, so romantic."

"Except for the part where they all die horrific gory deaths, the kingdom is toppled into war and chaos, and the resulting dark age continues for almost three centuries before the emergence of Softwalker."

"We have the best job ever."

Salah nodded.

"That all said, the rest of the group was fine, nothing too unusual. Had an atheist in there, just for the tour. Scribes brought him in for consulting on the Fifth Church."

"He didn't get in a fight with the fundie or anything, did he?"

"No, he was actually quite pleasant. And Benson, the fundie, he'll be fine. Just needs a few months." Salah sat down.

“Well, I had a pretty exciting day myself.” Mary-Ann set the plate of pancakes and bowl of scrambled eggs on the table and sat down. Salah looked across the table, eyes locked with his wife’s.

“Why do I get the feeling that you’re going to tell me something important?”

“Because you’re a perceptive and intelligent person. And also because I’m pregnant.”

Salah blinked a few times, the words registering in his brain. Stunned flatness turned into a smile, into a grin, into a laugh, into a uproarious, gasping guffaw.

"I…I don't even…I don't even know what to say," he wiped a tear from his eye. "I'm sorry, I…this is wonderful…I'm glad you got me to sit down first…thank God…"

"You're totally going to brag when we go into work tomorrow."

"Of course. Oh, so many things to do now. Living arrangements, making the announcement. And names, have to think of names…" Salah's expression became somber.

"Something wrong?"

"Just thinking ahead. Schooling, how we'll raise them. What holidays to celebrate in the house. All of that. You'll want her baptized, I presume, and I'm fine with that, but…"

Mary-Ann placed her hand over his.

"Salah, I wouldn't be where I am now if I wasn't able to compromise. Yeah, it's tricky. It's all tricky business. But, just look at what the Initiative's been able to do with the New Path and the Universal texts and all that. We could always go that way, raise them on the New Path. Or we could go for the trifecta and bring them up Jewish." She paused for a bit. "If there's one thing I've learned, it's that the most important thing is that you're a good person. The ritual's just the dressing on top, at the end of the day. God cares more about what's inside. Whatever we choose, I know we'll be doing what's best for our baby."

Salah nodded, saying nothing.

"And we don't have to decide just now. Let's eat first."

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Crossing The Streams

“Come on, Clementine’s a great name. Clementine Zairi-Lewitt. Rolls right off the tongue.” Mary-Ann sipped from her iced tea. “Though that doesn’t do us any good if it’s a boy…Sean? Can’t go wrong with Sean.”

Salah shrugged.

“Maybe.”

“Okay, so what are your suggestions?”

“Hmm…My maternal grandmother’s name was Ibtisam, if that helps at all…”

“Mine was Carol, so you’ve got me beat in terms of cool sounding grandma names, but seriously, Salah, you can’t let me do all the thinking here.”

“Nothing’s coming to mind, I’m afraid.”

sigh

“Fine, we’ll let it sit for a while.”

Mary-Ann sat back in her chair and stared out at the ocean. The setting sun had turned the world orange and gold and pink and red. The palm leaves swayed a bit in the evening breeze. The smoke from the cooking pit drifted over to her. It smelled absolutely delicious.

Wait…shit, that’s pork!

She shot a worried look at Salah, the words half-formed in her mouth. He held up a hand.

“I’m fine. I’ll just get something on the way back to the hotel when

we're done here."

"You don't have to…"

"I'm fine."

"Right…right…" *Shit how did you fucking not notice that? You've been sitting here for half a fucking hour…didn't even ask… No wonder he was acting off. Fuck. And you didn't even think to ask… but he hadn't said anything at all either…augh, why didn't he just* ***say*** *things? The stiff upper lip is fine most of the time but augh… okay…okay…collect yourself, Mary-Ann. You're being paid to vacation in Hawaii. This is meant to be a happy time.*

Time for a humorous outburst to lighten the mood.

"Ha! Got it! A perfect name!" Mary-Ann snapped her fingers. "Vishnu!"

On a scale of awkward pauses, this particular pause rated about an 8, which was the "that joke wasn't funny at all" stage. Salah chuckled and shook his head.

"Something tells me that won't go over very well."

"It's still a viable third option," *No what are you doing the joke wasn't funny stop continuing it.*

"That's a very loose sense of viable." Salah stood up. "I'll be back in a bit."

Mary-Ann nodded, and Salah walked back into the house. She knew that the form of "bit" he was using was a lot longer that what most people used.

Some time passed. Mary-Ann watched the gulls circle and the sun dip below the water. Despite the astounding weather, it felt like a gloomy day in March, when spring decides to show its head with freezing rain and overcast skies.

Eventually, the host approached the patio, balancing in his arms an array of bowls and plates that looked destined to fall over at any

moment. He was a rather broad and strong-built man of forty or so with something of a beer gut, dark skin, dark hair, an obnoxiously loud floral-print shirt, board shorts, and sandals.

This was Lono, and he was the god around these parts.

He set out the food on the table: kalua pork, sweet potatoes, plantains, taro, breadfruit, shrimp, and eel, steam rising up in a great miasma of deliciousness. Mary-Ann's saliva glands and guilt jostled for primary position.

Lono sat down in his chair, and took a beer from the cooler next to it.

"Thanks be to me, amen." He cracked open his bottle and took a long drink. "Damn, that's good stuff." He glanced at Salah's empty chair. "So, uh, where'd he go?"

"Inside. He's washing up for evening prayers." Mary-Ann took a paper plate and began filling it with some sweet potatoes and shrimp. The guilt sat right alongside the hunger in her stomach, an undigestible lump. She didn't have to observe *halal*, of course, but it didn't feel right with Salah still around, but of course he would just tell her to go ahead and eat, and then there was being a good guest and all, wouldn't want to look ungrateful… "I don't think he'll be joining us."

Lono paused in his piling of food on his plate to lift a quizzical eyebrow.

"He doesn't eat pork," Mary-Ann said.

"Takes all types, I 'spose. His loss though." Another swig of beer. "So, what's this whole thing about? The guy on the phone a few days ago was about as clear as mud."

"There's not a whole lot to it, really. Just smoothing over relations between you and the Initiative."

"And we do that by…"

"Avoiding the part where a bunch of maniacs rush in, burn this place to the ground, and waste a great deal of time, money and manpower

trying to kill you. They're about as subtle as someone who ate a lot of shitty Mexican food and shoved a lit firecracker up their ass. Just about as pleasant, too." Admittedly, this was a bit forced on her part, but she was on the job, and getting back into the role of snark-having, gregarious Mary-Ann was a necessity for this.

Lono laughed heartily.

"Sounds like *someone* has their panties in a twist, and for once I'm not the one doing it!"

"You have no idea."

"So this is going to be one of those 'you leave us alone we leave you alone' quid pro quos, right?"

"Right. It's a really simple agreement, really. Nothing big. No smitations, no direct interventions, no going out and leaving a bunch of little demigods running around all over the place. Essentially, don't go around being an asshole or do anything that attracts undue attention."

Lono frowned.

"Wait, what was the next to last one?"

"No demig-"

"Oh! No, this cannot be!" He flung out his arm as if he were delivering a stage oration. "You seek to take from me one of the few pleasures I have left in my life! Now I shall never again know the joy of a woman in my arms, the excitement of the courting, the sheer uninhibited wonder of a really good fuck out under the stars! It is not right that a man live alone, my dear. At some point or another, he needs to get some tail."

Mary-Ann finished chewing her mouthful of breadfruit, trying her best to appear composed: She had very nearly spat it across the patio from laughter.

"So long as it's consensual, legal, and doesn't involve superpowered kids, we're not going to stop you. But tell you what: Call me back

about ten years ago and we'll go a round."

"Oho? Was I that obvious?"

"I'm just savvy. This would be the part where I'd say something like 'no one makes oogly eyes at me but my husband', but between you and me he's absolutely horrible at it. Wouldn't have it any other way, of course."

God help me I am actually having this conversation.

Lono shrugged and drained the rest of his beer.

"Ah, you don't need my help anyway. Did you choose a name yet?"

"No, not yet."

"Could always go for Lonnie," he smirked.

"Eh, I think we'll pass on that one. Thanks for the suggestion, though."

Dinner and conversation went on. It was a surreal experience, to say the least: if Mary-Ann had not known Lono's true nature, she would have thought him just a cheery neighbor man who spent a lot of his time in the garden enjoying dirty jokes and ukulele music. Essentially that was what he was, but on a larger scale. That was most likely why he had remained so stable for so long: being a patron of sex, food and music was excellent for sustainability.

It was nice to meet something that didn't want to kill everyone, for once.

The sun had set now, the sky slowly fading from orange to deep twilight blue. The eating had slowed to a lull, as had the conversation. A lone lamp had been turned on.

"I'll go get Salah and we can get this thing finished." She stood up and walked around to the eastern side of the house.

I'll treat him to dinner to make up for this. A really good dinner. There's got to be a place nearby…or maybe ice cream…

She paused a moment: Salah was still kneeling prostrate on his mat. This was cause for concern: he had left almost an hour ago, and he never stretched out prayers that long…

Mary-Ann sat down in the grass where she was and waited. Maybe five minutes later, Salah rose, rolled up his mat, and walked over to her.

“You don’t have to apologize for anything.” He sat down next to her.

“Yeah, well, I feel bad about it anyway. That’s good old Catholic guilt for you.”

“You worry too much.”

“And you try too hard to make sure I don’t worry at all. I get it, you don’t want to cause any trouble for anyone, but sometimes it’s just too much, okay? It’s not like you’re barging into places and screaming 'CATER TO MY WHIMS.' You’ve got the self-control of a crazy aesetic out in the desert, you’ll deal with the Wolves when there’s no one else around to do it, you take care of stuff around the house before I even get a chance to see it, you don’t even take your food back when someone messes up your order…And I love you for all of that, but I’m your *wife* for heaven’s sake: I signed up to deal with you for the rest of my life because out of all the people in the world with issues I want to deal with yours. And when you don’t let me help, well…that makes me feel shitty because you do so much for me, and I feel like I should have done something so you don’t have to put up with the crap in the first place and…man, I am just *babbling*.”

And that was that. The weight was off her chest, now only to see where it would fall. Salah didn’t respond for a moment, and then began to laugh.

“You do cut right to the chase, there. I needed that."

“It’s what I’m here for."

"How go the negotiations?"

That was good, getting back to business as if nothing had

happened.

“He’s very agreeable to the idea. Just need you to witness it and we’re set. Scribes will probably write him down as the saint of sweet potatoes or something like that.”

“They probably will.”

The was a quiet pause, filled with insect buzzings.

"Now, our plane doesn’t leave until tomorrow evening, and after that we’ll be hopping around doing odd jobs all the way home. Now, I don’t know about you, but I want to find a nice spot on the beach tomorrow and just veg out for as much of the day as I can.”

“We might be able to piece together an actual honeymoon over the next few years at this rate. A day here, a day there, they build up.”

Mary-Ann stood up and brushed off her shorts.

“Right then. Let’s get this done, and after that I say we go out for ice cream. I’m buying.”

—

> “I, Lono, swear upon my honor and by my power, to uphold this oath with the Horizon Initiative: that I shall raise no hand to harm, nor take any unfair advantage of, mankind. As symbol of this oath, I present to the Horizon Initiative this sweet potato, blessed by my power. May this friendship last until the end of time.”
>
> “As representative of the Horizon Initiative, I swear upon the honor of the organization and by the power of the All-Mighty, that so long as this oath is kept, no hand shall be raised against you by the Initiative, and should another party aim to harm you, the Initiative will come to your aid.”
>
> “Damn, that’s a lot of shit just to say 'keep doing what you’re doing.' Don’t be afraid to stop back, now.”

The Tick Tock Gospel

> Gilgamesh roamed the wilderness, and cried bitterly
> over his friend Enkidu.
> “I am going to die! – Am I not like Enkidu?
> I fear death, and now roam the wilderness.
> I will set out to the land of faraway Utnapishtim, son of Ubartutu,
> And will go with utmost dispatch
> To seek life everlasting”

“I don’t like the look of this, Salah,” Masun said, looking sideways at the four Wolves unpacking the mules. “You know what they’re like.”

“It’s only a precaution. With any luck, this place will be empty, and the scribes can come in and do their job.”

“I hope you’re right.”

Salah had seen a great many doors to a great many places of worship, and in comparison this was almost too simple: only as big as the entry of a home, with a simple swinging slab to serve as a door, and the only ornamentation was a carving of a gear above the entryway. It was located at the back end of a thin gulley, accessible only by donkey, hidden from the rest of the world. Far too small and humble for the Church of the Broken God. They preferred their places of worship big and visible, and many times animated. Salah remembered the walking cathedral that had been the news of the year when he joined the Initiative. Most likely, this was only a small chapel built by a few worshipers that had been driven into hiding long ago. This region was a good place for hiding.

Salah hoped that it would just be some empty rooms beyond that slab. He wanted to be home: two weeks away was too long for his liking.

“Rashid, are you ready?” he called over to the Wolves. The leader of

that group, a young man with a scar on his right cheek, nodded.

> Then he reached Mount Mashu,
> Which guards the daily rising of the sun, and
> The gate to the pass into the land of Utnapishtim
> Was guarded by great scorpion-beasts.
> Upon the left a thing like a great heart, babbling
> Like a man with fever.
> Upon the right, a beast within the shadows,
> A beast with one hundred legs.

The entrance led to a small, square antechamber, and beyond that, the main hall of worship, a natural cavern with perhaps enough room for twenty people, illuminated now by their flashlights. The walls were engraved with the usual symbols: Gears of Wisdom, the Eternal Clocks, Iron Saints with cog-shaped halos. The style was far less detailed than the modern designs of the Church, but very much recognizable. The altar had been stripped of its decoration by looters a long time ago: the wall behind it was a chipped and faded mural of the Machine Radiant hovering above the prostrate masses. Small passages led off to the sides: priests' quarters and storerooms, most likely.

"Rashid, if you and your men will take care of the side rooms, Masun and I will handle this chamber. Bring back anything you might find."

"Right."

The Wolves tramped off. Salah moved his flashlight beam around the ceiling.

"Do any of these look unusual to you?"

"No, not at all," Masun said as he took photos. "It's old enough to be at an awkward time, but that's it as far as the unusual bits go."

"A day spent for nothing, then."

"No, not nothing. This is an intriguing find, especially in light of the jihad against the Church in 840. Finding anything from this period this far south is rare. Anything from this region is either far younger,

or far older. I would bet that this is built on top of an older ruin."

"Secret passage?"

"The Church loves them. I'll check the altar for the mechanism."

"There's nothing in any of the side rooms," Rashid said as he returned to the chapel.

"Nothing? No texts, no items?"

"Nothing but dust."

Salah nodded. He hadn't expected much, but at least a dusty copy of the Brass Gospel would have been something to take home.

"Aha! Got it!" Masun called out from the altar.

> [The following 67 lines are missing, wherein Gilgamesh persuades or defeats the beasts.]

The wall behind the altar folded in on itself, moved by ancient machinery. The dust settled to reveal a staircase.

There we go.

"If I know ancient temple complexes, and I do believe that I do," Salah stood at the cusp of the stairway and swung his beam down into the blackness. "I predict that we will face various traps involving spike pits, dart launchers, and rolling boulders, perhaps a puzzle or two, a monster of some kind, and then a room wherein we will find a small amount of treasure or an individual of some plot importance."

The joke was answered with dust and silence. No laughs, no groans, nothing. Just lonely silence.

It was times like these when Salah realized how little he fit in anymore with the world he had grown up in. What sort of Muslim favored the likes of Chaucer and Milton?

He wished Mary-Ann was there. She would have elbowed him in the ribs and gone off about suplexing a criosphinx. He belonged there.

“Or more likely, it’s just empty.” He shrugged, and took the first step down the stairs.

> These twelve leagues of darkness,
> This path of the dead,
> Gilgamesh of Uruk did traverse in a single night
> And upon the dawn he found himself in a great valley,
> The place there the gods had made their garden,
> But the garden was burnt and desolate,
> And all was ash.

Salah had been wrong and right, as it was. There were no traps, only dark, wide stairs, eventually leading down to another chamber, with another altar and another wall mural. The inner sanctum. This mural looked something like a tree: a trunk of cogwork building up to a single gear, from which sprouted fractal branches, bare of leaves. The design was inlaid with copper and bronze, the metal engraved with tiny lines of script.

“What does it say?” Rashid said impatiently.

“Hold on, hold on.” Masum squinted at the text. “These aren’t the usual mantras.” He snapped a couple pictures. “It’s an older dialect. Look here: *Ahkpan lon-shal khi-khidan*. Anywhere else that would be *akkaphan lon-sal khiddan*. There’s a slight difference in meaning between the two: the older version uses the form of 'evil' without the connotation of 'flesh'."

“How old is it?” Salah asked.

“This? Four thousand years, at the youngest. The chapel above us is maybe…a thousand. And beyond all that, nowhere here do I see 'Oolzhak Le’an', the God Who Has Been Broken. Instead, we have simply 'maddiz', the machine, but it’s the smaller form. Closer to 'tool'. Masun stood up, brushing off his knees. “Very curious. This might have been converted into a sanctuary afterwards, which if that’s the case, this might be an entrance of sorts.”

“An entrance to what?”

“I don’t know, and even if I did, I have no idea how to get in. The

upper door is a simple key, just arranging the circular plates on the altar. Really nothing more than a complex combination lock. This…I have nothing, if it is a door." He turned to face the tree. "Iftah ya simsim."

Nothing. He shrugged.

"It was worth a try."

"Is there any sort of clue in the text?" Rashid asked.

"Not that I can see. I think this would a job for the scribes."

As he finished his sentence, Salah became acutely aware of footsteps on the stairs behind them.

> There Gilgamesh came to the house of Utnapishtim
> And found that man alone,
> Marked with a brand upon his brow
> And arms of living metal.
> "Why have you come to this place, King of Uruk?
> Why have you come to this desolate place?"
> Spoke he, with weariness of heart.
> "I seek life eternal, son of Ubartutu,
> So that I might not die."
> With heavy heart, Utnapishtim spoke again.
> "Come, and follow me. I will show you
> This thing which you seek
> And perhaps it shall spare you
> Of your desires."

The man who stood there now was old and shriveled, skin like leather from desert sun. He was clad only in a loincloth, and had a walking stick of copper tubing in his hand. The top of his head was a buzzing, clicking array of gears and clockwork, and his eyes were two glass lenses.

The nearest Wolf raised his gun.

"Hold fire!" Salah shouted, putting all his authority into the words. The Wolf paused. The old man did not seem particularly fazed by

this: in fact, he was smiling.

The man started babbling to them. Salah could pick out a few words of Arabic, but the majority was cogspeak. He stepped out of the way, allowing Masun to come to the fore.

“Salah, need I remind you that this man is an enemy?” Rashid whispered to him.

“He’s unarmed and elderly. Perhaps a nibbanic hermit.”

“Do not undermine my authority again, Salah.”

Salah found that somewhat funny, as he was fifteen years older than Rashid and far more experienced in the Initiative, but he kept his mouth shut.

After some time, Masun turned to face the group.

“He says he can show us in, and invites us to rest and refresh ourselves.”

“Tell him that we…”

“…Will be honored to be his guests.” Salah cut Rashid off.

Rashid scowled.

“I just told you…”

“I cannot undermine your authority if I am leading the expedition, which I am. Calm yourself. We don’t know the whole story.”

Masun and the old man finished speaking. The old man skipped over to the tree in the wall, and began poking at the branches with his walking stick, muttering some things to himself, as if reciting a list. The clockwork in his head whirred faster for a few moments before, the wall split apart, stone grinding on stone.

> Unapistim led Gilgamesh
> Through the garden,
> Through the blackened trees

And soil of ash.
There were men there,
And women, crawling in the ash,
And their eyes showed no life,
Like a goat, their eyes showed no light.
“These are the sons and daughters of the tree.
They live without death, without
Fear of death. They do not suffer, and
Yet they do not see.”

What lay beyond the door was an open space, halfway between cavern and valley, maybe half a mile or so across. A jagged line of sunlight ran through the roof, letting light down into the cave. A river ran through it, flowing down into the earth off to their left. In the distance, Salah could make out the roar of a waterfall. The ground was grassy here, a much more verdant green than what would be expected, and was dotted with various boulders and monoliths, all of which bore some sort of carving on them. A breeze from some unknown source brushed against his face.

The old man chattered as he led them down a simple stone path, Masun speaking with him as best as he was able. Here and there Salah could see little stone houses, light shining from within. Some were on the flat floor, but the majority were built up against the walls of the cavern in perilous tiers, braced by a rickety wooden frameworks of walkways and ladders.

“Have you learned anything else?” Salah jogged a few steps to walk even with Masun and the old man.

“I’ve told him why we’re here, and he asked if we were on pilgrimage to meet the Voice. They have a piece, and it seems to be a big one.”

“Then we will destroy it,” Rashid said.

“Tell him we are,” Salah said. “Rashid, we are here to investigate. If it must be destroyed, it will be done later. Six of us is too few.”

Rashid sulked as Masun talked to the old man some more.

“He says he will take you directly to it.”

Salah nodded. His stomach was roiling. His mind knew that there was a massive danger involved in this, but his gut said that he was safe. The old man seemed to be completely in control of his own mind. The villagers that were emerging from their homes to watch the procession from the margins looked much the same. Men, women, and children, all of them touched by clockwork, but all still very human. None of the jerking, puppeted movement of the Church, none of the babbling diatribes of nonsense tick-tocking syllables, no violence. He could see no basilica, no Towers of Blessing, no clockwork monsters, no real machinery at all, beyond what was in the heads of the villagers.

With the age of the door they had passed through, these may very well be the descendants of the original Church, before whatever corruption that befell it had set in.

This had become quite exciting, quite quickly.

> “What disaster befell this place? What scourge
> Befell this garden?”
> “It was laid to ruin by my brother,
> A man of a black heart,
> Who with his armies and dark masters,
> His masters the black Daevas of Gothog
> And Molug and Carthac and Moluch,
> With banners of red and black,
> Did descend to set this place
> To the torch and sword.
> For he sought life undying
> And stole it from this place.”

They had walked over a mile by now, right up to the base of the waterfall. The old man had fallen quiet as he led them along the slick stone path. Rainbows danced in the mist.

The path curled around the pool, running right up against the sheer rock wall. There would be no point to that unless…yes, there it was. A cave. He didn’t mind the fact that he was sopping wet by now: his heart was in his throat. For a moment, the cold water crashed down on his head.

There was a cave behind the waterfall, a large cave, lit by lamps of oil and clockwork. Beyond the platform they stood on, it was filled with a lake, the surface oddly still. There was a single island in the center of the lake.

Salah was certain that his heart had stopped.

> At this Gilgamesh despaired.
> [The following six lines are missing]
> “There is more to see, and more to learn.”
> To the center of the garden
> Gilgamesh was led, to see
> A great form, a god of living metal,
> Of many parts of metal that moved about
> As if a living thing,
> And it bore great scars and misshapings
> As if a rent shield, or a melted candle.
> At its side was a tree
> Small, old, and twisted.

On that island was a mass of metal, maybe a hundred and fifty feet across. Thousands of moving parts, clicking and ticking and moving. It was roughly spherical, and much of it looked heavily damaged: segments were melted, crushed, torn, broken. The moving parts looked to have grown around the dead regions, to make up for lost capability. Salah couldn’t help but think of it as scar tissue. The noise the thing made sounded like a heart-beat, but it was an old, weakened heart. Near to it was a single, shriveled tree, black-barked and withered, without leaves.

Bump-bump.

Was this it? The actual Machine? Salah could not help the chill that ran down his spine. This place…this was a sacred place. This was the same chill that ran through him when he had stood in Al-Masjid al-Ḥarām or St. Peter’s. That same feeling of smallness, of insignificance amidst a space that had been made God’s own…it surrounded him. This was a sacred place.

A voice inside his head cursed at him, warning not to be fooled by this devilry. It is a lie, it is an idol, cast it down, cast it down! There is

no god but God!

But the voice was wrong. He *knew* it was wrong, but he could not explain why. In that moment of clarity, he knew. This was the Machine, and they were wrong. All of them. Every one outside of this valley was wrong. So very wrong. It was not a god to be worshipped, it was not a force of destruction, *it was not evil*. This thing, this machine, was a tool of God, even as broken and twisted as it was. The rest of the Church must had been corrupted by incomplete parts, and from seeing only them, so the Initiative had inherited their corrupted version. Here, with the core of the Machine, these people were unharmed. They remained human.

He had to know more. They would get the scribes, come back here with an army of researchers. Interview every villager, translate every text, trace the family trees back to the beginning. This was world changing. Salah's imagination ran wild. When the Initiative was done here, they could take it to the world, reveal this place. It was always said that it was not time, but if this here did not mean that it was time, then there would be no time.

He stood a few moments longer in stunned silence, and then it spoke. The Machine spoke.

The Machine spoke with a voice that was nothing like thunder. This was the voice made in the forge of stars, where worlds were broken and remade. It was not simply heard with the ear, but felt with the bones, felt with the soul. It layered upon itself, harmonized with its own note. It was eternity, all of creation, in a word.

Then, it was over, and there was silence. Salah could feel himself trembling. He was trembling. This was fear of God.

There was silence for a long time, before Rashid broke it.

"It is settled then. It must be destroyed."

> "This is the Voice, the Voice of the King of Gods
> Who created Apsu and Tiamat with a thought.
> To its right is the tree that bears knowledge.
> To its left the tree that bears life is no more,

Stolen by my brother.
The children of the garden, they chose
The tree of life alone, and their minds
Are that of animals.
I am of both, and I am cursed.
My brother is of both, and he is mad.
Do you see now, Gilgamesh, King of Uruk?
Do you see the foolishness of your quest?
It is not life eternal that is to be sought,
But knowledge instead.
It is knowledge that separates man from animal,
And it is death that separates man from monster.
Without knowledge, man is not man,
Without death, man is not man.
This is the test, and the gift."

Salah was speechless as his thoughts came back together. He knew that tone, knew that mindset. He had been in that place once, and he saw his past reflected back at him in all of its small-minded pettiness.

Anger boiled up with a speed and fury he no longer thought possible.

He punched Rashid in the face.

"You *idiot*! You *lunatic*! This…this is the voice of God! And you wish to destroy it?"

"You've become deluded by the Path, Salah." Rashid rubbed at his cheek. "God needs no machine to serve as His voice. This is like all the others, a false god to be destroyed and its worshipers to be purged.

Salah laughed. He couldn't help it. There was no joy to be had.

"You're going to destroy the greatest discovery in human history, the tool by which God spoke to man, and on top of all of that *murder* scores of innocent people, all to preserve the world as you imagine it to be! Are you really so fragile of faith that the first challenge drives you to *murder*?"

Rashid was unmoved. Salah knew that look as well.

“Innocent? Look at them. They are still idolaters, their brains are still filled with clockwork, they still reject their humanity to embrace metal, and the Machine still whispers its blasphemies to them. The only difference is in the words used, and in how you perceive them.” He waved a hand. "Enough of this. Musa, Tahmid, take him."

Two of the Wolves pinned Salah's arm's behind him. The third took hold of Masun. The old man scampered off, out of the cave. Salah hoped he would deliver a warning, bring help, do something.

“Can't you see it? Can't you see it, Rashid?”

“I see nothing but a false idol. If we cannot stand strong against the lies of this world, then we have already lost. Salah, I have great respect for you, but you have been misled. I will be merciful, but I will not allow you to interfere with God's work here. Bassam, destroy the camera. We have no need of it."

The guard took the camera from Masun's hands and tossed it into the lake.

—

Later, Salah sat on the rocky ground of that little gully, his knees pulled up against his chest. Bassam sat on a rock, his gun in his hands, and Salah was certain he would be shot at the first movement. Not lethally, but at least in the leg. Rashid had said that he would be handed over to the Initiative authorities when they returned, and Salah did not particularly care. So long as he went home.

He felt the ground shake, and along with that shaking, a great pain in his soul.

He closed his eyes, and thought of home. Home, where there was still some good left.

> “Have you seen them, Gilgamesh, King of Uruk?
> Have you seen the throngs in those cold cities to the east,

> Where men wish for the death that will never come
> Upon their heads?
> Do you wish for their curse, the curse laid upon me?
> To live eternally and to endure suffering without ceasing?
> Weep not for the dead, Gilgamesh, King of Uruk.
> Go home, and embrace your son Ur-Nungal whom you love.
> It is better that a man live well, than he live forever."

Thousands of miles away, Mary-Ann sat on the couch, watching the Uruk-hai charge the Deeping Wall. She rested a hand on her belly, and the baby kicked underneath, as if to join in the defense of Helm's Deep. Mary-Ann chuckled.

"Easy there, kiddo. Aragorn's got this, don't worry."

« **Crossing The Streams** | **Hub** | **Nor Gloom of Night Shall Stay** »

Nor Gloom Of Night Shall Stay

It was a dark and stormy dawn, with a sky of wet slate. Rain poured down the window, as it had for the last six hours. The clock on the wall said 7:04. Salah hadn't slept since that time yesterday.

That cursed clock. It couldn't be digital, something modern and sensible. No, it had to have a pendulum, swinging back and forth with a loud *tick*…*tock*…*tick*…*tock*.

He sat in the little waiting room with his arms resting on his knees, holding a half-filled Styrofoam cup of tepid coffee. A half-eaten doughnut lay on the table next to him, near a stack of old Time magazines.

When he had prayed fajir that morning, he had felt nothing. Just as he had every morning since he had seen the Voice. Nothing but a resounding hollowness in his soul as he went through the motions. God was gone. He had watched the Voice be destroyed, and he had been helpless to do anything.

Was there any point anymore? Was the Initiative doing more harm than good? Why didn't they realize what they were doing? Why couldn't he have done something?

Why was it allowed to happen?

tick…*tock*…*tick*…*tock*…

He had spoken with Mary-Ann about it, as soon as he had come home. She had been through her own dark night of the soul. "Nobody else can do it for you, but they can help. You helped me." That was what she had ended with. He knew it was true, and he knew she would be right there…and yet he didn't feel like he knew much of anything anymore.

Salah truly wanted to speak to Adnan but…that was easier said than

done. He was a ghost, here at one moment and gone the next, and contacting him was a nightmare in and of itself.

tick…tock…tick…tock…

Salah half-expected to see a hook on his hand.

“Hey. Are you okay?”

Salah looked up to see Di standing there, arms full of books, as usual.

“Yeah…yeah.”

“Did she kick you out of the room or something?”

“She threatened to make me eat the placenta if I didn’t get some sleep.”

Di sat down next to him.

“And you haven’t slept, have you?”

“Not a wink.”

“You probably should. You look awful.”

“Haven’t been sleeping well lately anyway.”

“Because of what happened with the Wolves?”

“Yeah.”

“Have you talked to Mary-Ann about it?”

“Yeah. She cursed up a storm when I told her.”

“I don’t doubt it.”

“I know she believes me, but…I *knew*. I knew what it was. And they destroyed it. I might be the only person alive who knows the truth, the actual truth…and I can’t prove any of it. Maybe I’m going mad.” He sighed. “What do you do, when you can’t see a point in it all?”

Di held up a book.

“Right, right.”

Di put a hand on his shoulder.

“Salah, you’re going to be a father. If you've got anything right now, it's a point."

So he did. So he did. The little gears of celestial happenings clicked into place then, as a doctor now stood at the entrance to the waiting room.

“You can come in now,” he said.

Wordlessly, Salah stood up and walked down the hall, as if in a dream. Here was the hall, here was the door. Here was Mary-Ann, sitting in her bed: smiling, exhausted. And there in her arms, a bundle of white cloth.

“Morning, sunshine. Sleep well?” Her voice was a pure, tired joy.

“Not at all.” Salah stepped over to the bedside.

Mary-Ann gave him an “are you kidding me I specifically told you to go do that” face.

“You’re lucky I donated it already,” she snarked. “Come on, you can hold her: She’s your daughter as much as mine.” Mary-Ann offered the bundle to Salah.

In an instant, Salah’s world became compressed around the little bundle now in his arms. His daughter, with her little balled fists and clenched-shut eyes and the little tuft of dirty straw hair. His daughter, whom he would watch go through diapers and scraped knees and homework and first dates and college and jobs and marriage and children of her own. A whole life in his hands, and all the more precious for how small it was. For a moment, the evils of the world seemed insignificant in the face of the smallest of goods.

His daughter. A little match in the darkness.

“Hey there, sweet pea. I’m your abbi.”

And so Naomi Ibtisam Zairi-Lewitt was welcomed into the world.

« **The Tick Tock Gospel** | **Hub** | **Agricola in Insula est Poeta** »

Agricola In Insula Est Poeta

The car started. “Trampled Under Foot” blasted from the speakers.

“Agk, sorry!” Mary-Ann twisted the volume dial down. She waved at the figure in the living-room window, put the car in reverse and pulled out of the driveway. She was off the property, she could now officially relax. Di had everything under control at home, this was now date night. Just her and Salah out for dinner and some well-deserved time away from the house. Those months felt like ages now. Time to make sure that the night wasn't wasted.

"So, where are we going, exactly?” Salah asked.

“Vladimir’s.”

"Oh. Hrm."

—

Di looked at the books she had spread out on the dining room table, satisfied with the selection. All the proper things for the growing toddler. There was *Cat in the Hat* and *Goodnight Moon* and the *Eclectic Diatribes of Duke Grangermont of Upper Ligzenworth*. This last book weighed more than Naomi did, concerned various political topics and the growing patterns of cabbages, and had no pictures.

Oddly enough, this last one had not been very popular with her nieces and nephews. She presumed that Mary-Ann and Salah had raised Naomi to have better taste than that.

—

The bar was called Vladimir’s. Vladimir didn’t call it Vladimir’s, though he didn’t call it anything. So it was really a nameless bar called Vladimir’s, and Vladimir was fine with that. What was more important was the fact that it Existed. It Existed, and if it did not

Exist, or even if it did exist, the universe would most likely collapse. The existence of the universe requires the Existence of places like Vladimir's. Something had to fill the holes that formed in the walls.

It was a converted space, an old warehouse of some long-forgotten Cold War bunker, one of those places that could only be found if someone looked in the right places. The bar itself was in the center of the floor, surrounded by the freestanding tables. The walls were lined with booths, or tables on the upper level. Decoration was sparse: no tablecloths, scuffs on the tabletops, dim lighting from the hanging lamps. The air was thick with tobacco and alcohol fumes, to the point where everything seemed coated in a grey, greasy film. The hushed conversations and smooth jazz made for a sea of soft background noise. The sign by the door said "Seat Yourself" in a dozen languages.

A man in a khaki pea coat tipped his fedora to Mary-Ann and Salah as he passed them and exited. Mary-Ann eyed the other clientele as they walked to their usual seat. It was always interesting to see who had arrived at Vladimir's, because sooner or later, everyone arrived at Vladimir's.

—

"And this is the first declension." Di pointed to the noun endings she had neatly written out, balancing Naomi on her knee. "Now, most of these are feminine nouns, but you can always remember that farmers, poets and sailors are always male. Romans were funny like that."

—

Mary-Ann and Salah sat down, some distance away from the other occupied tables. A quick glance around showed a lot of the regular in-fill: GRU-P, Serpent's Hand, Librarians, Manna Charitable Foundation, and those who paid allegiance to none. After only a few brief moments a lurching automaton in the form of a young woman approached the table. It wore a name tag proclaiming "Welcome to Funland! My name is Daisy".

"Good evening. Can I get you something to drink?" it asked in a

tinny voice as it handed them the menus. A redundancy: when people came to Vladimir's, they already knew what they wanted. They ordered quickly, and the waitress departed.

“To be honest, I really don't see what you see in this place, Mary-Ann.”

“It's got a lot of atmosphere.”

He waved his hand, smoke rippling about it.

“Yes, I believe it does.”

"I mean, if you don't like it we could always go somewhere else next time."

"No, no, it's fine. It's fine. It's not the seediest place I've been too, it's just not a favorite of mine, but if you like it here, I am perfectly fine with eating here."

Mary-Ann nodded.

"So, where was the seediest place you've ever eaten?"

"A pub in Bromley. The place was positively foul. You could barely see through the windows for the grime, there was no ventilation at all, I swear I saw a cockroach scuttle into the kitchen, and the toilet didn't look like it had been cleaned since the Blitz. And there was a hair in my soup, which tasted like donkey piss. At the very least, the food here is good."

“Hold that thought." Mary-Ann stood up. "Have to go use the restroom.”

—

“The rest of this speech was cut off, as Duke Grangermont came down with a serious case of the kittens while arguing his case. No one's really sure how he ended up with nine kittens in his stomach, or why they chose that exact moment to burst out of his stomach, but that's history for you.”

—

The bathroom was past the bar, which was populated by a bunch of grizzled grey GRU-P ex-pats in faded, threadbare uniforms and a trio of black-clad police officers with cloth masking their faces. A drunken hand swung out, not so much a punch, or even really an intended strike, just the exaggerated swinging of hands for argumentative emphasis, but it nonetheless hit Mary-Ann in the shoulder. She glared at the man in question.

He was a pallid, overweight man with burnt-out eyes, a few flakes of blackened crust lining the sockets around the two orange spheres that glowed in their depths. His shaved head was tattooed and trepanned, in the fashion of the old Star-Paths, though this particular man had botched his eldritch enlightenment. The hole was too big, and was misaligned.

After a moment of mental computation, he slurred something angry at Mary-Ann in Russian.

“He doesn’t like you,” the old Soviet agent sitting next to the star-mind translated.

“I don’t like him either.”

There was a short, rough exchange in Russian between the two.

“He says he wishes he could kill you personally, but circumstances prevent this. However, he despises you with such utter hatred that he will nonetheless take great joy in burning your dust into nothingness.”

Mary-Ann cupped a hand around her ear.

“What was that? Can’t hear you over all the hot air you’re blowing. And by hot air I mean penis. I’m insinuating that you suck cocks.”

She walked away, nodding to Vladimir as she passed, and that was that.

—

Di wrinkled her nose as she dropped the diaper in the trash, and considered whether *The Tale of Desperaux* or *Jason and the Space-Argonauts* would be a better bedtime story.

—

Mary-Ann sat back down. The drinks were already there: A beer for Mary-Ann, tea for Salah.

“Do we have any idea at all how stars work?”

"No, not particularly. I believe the Fifthists are unstable enough that none of the Scribes have really managed to get anything coherent written down. Something of a pity, if you look at it in the right way.

"I mean, they can communicate across lightyears, so they've got to have some sort of quantum-entanglement telepathic mumbo-jumbo going on and…wait." She sipped at her beer. “That reminds me. Were you able to hear Brother Kowalski’s talk on cosmology from last week?”

“No, though I heard it was interesting.”

A young Asian man walked past their booth, his legs moving automatically with jerking, stilted motions.

“Yeah. Well, let’s see…” Mary-Ann unfolded her napkin on the table. “You have a pen?”

Salah fished in his pocket for a moment and handed a pen across the table. In the background, a chorus of laughter went up from the young men and women in the cheap, sweat-stained Dial-a-Llama t-shirts.

“So we’ve got God up here…creation down here…then the Library right here in the center of that as….well, sort of the physical version of the operating system of everything, keeps everything running, links everything together…and expands to what we consider supernatural or paranormal…just manifestations of some of the more obscure and finicky universal narrative principles…the more regular principles would be classified as magic to the unenlightened among us, and the immovable ones are physics…whoops, look like

Dan and Sami forgot to pay their tab again." She pointed over to where Vladimir was dragging out a bored-looking Indian man and a grey-haired man wearing a pointed magenta hat by the collars. The older man was waving about a brightly-colored snuggy with stitched on stars and yelling drunkenly.

"No, no, see, this is the Robe of Magnanimous Luster, guaranteed to increase your appeal to the opposite sex! Nevermind that fact that it also attracts dogs, that's just an added bonus. Come on, since when has any of our products let you down?"

Vladimir did not respond, even to the trail of pugs that followed them. He kicked open the door and tossed the two outside, followed by throwing the dogs out one by one. He shut the door, re-adjusted his eyepatch, and went back to the bar.

"Those two…" Mary-Ann shook her head. "Anyway, he's supposed to publish his book on all of this by the end of next month."

"I look forward to reading it."

The waitress returned with their food. Mary-Ann had gotten a steak with a baked potato. Salah had gotten curry. A ragged woman and her two sons, wearing clothing that with patterns a bit too bright and a bit too clashing walked past the booth.

"How's the food?"

"Very nice."

"Yeah, Pyotr and Ila do a really good job."

"Who?"

"Vladimir's son and daughter in law. They run the kitchen."

"Oh, right, right."

"Between you and me, Vladimir can't cook to save his life, except when he's trying to kill someone."

The front door opened, and a wave of silence spread out across the

bar. The band stopped playing. The spiders stopped discussing ways of overthrowing the bourgeoisie. The teddy bear stopped waving its knife around.

Four individuals walked up to the bar. One wore flannel and glasses with no lenses, one had lamprey mouths where her eyes and nose should have been, one was nude save for a full-body animated tattoo reconstructing the Fall of Daevon, and one was wearing a unitard made of fetuses with a cape of knitted pubic hair, identified as such by the “This cape is made out of knitted pubic hair” stitched into it.

“Oh come on…” Salah groaned. “Right when we’re trying to have a nice dinner here.”

“Eat your curry, Salah.”

“Wh…”

“Just keep eating, I'll handle this.” Mary-Ann stood up. Lousy punks, trying to ruin her dinner. Nope. A hundred times nope. She was not having this. Cold food would be better than them fouling up the air.

“Please, Mary-Ann, sit down. There's no need to cause a scene. That's just falling to their level. Let Vladimir take care of it.”

“This is generally how he takes care of it. I'm not letting them mess up our dinner.”

Mary-Ann walked over to the bar, sending sideways glances to some of the other patrons. The teddy bear with the knife. The salt-grimed, sun-darkened man with the harpoon and the “Selachiosk Pugnix Combin” tattoo. One of the blue-clad band members, with his shiny SYNCOPE saxophone. Bigfoot.

She could hear the conversation clearly now.

“And *I* will repeat *myself*: I do not serve your kind here,” Vladimir said, not looking up from the glass he was cleaning. “And do not try to tell me that you are not them, for you are obvious as dead cow on highway. Leave, or be made to leave.”

“Look. Old man,” the one with the glasses said. “We’re trying to be reasonable here, but we’ve received complaints that your bar is not friendly towards transfurry five-dimensional-gendered neoneanderthal polyamorous omnitapirsexuals without beards. And we’re not happy about that. That is a completely unacceptable phobia, and we demand that you open your services to transfurry five-dimensional-gendered neoneanderthal polyamorous omnitapirsexuals without beards, or we will be forced to use forceful coercion. Are we cool yet?”

Mary-Ann tapped the one with the glasses on the shoulder.

“Hi there.”

She then punched him in the face.

—

“Night, Di. Thanks again for babysitting.”

The door shut, and Mary-Ann let out a sigh. Her knuckles were sore. Most of her was sore. Her conscience been lecturing her on how she shouldn't have enjoyed pummeling four hipsters senseless, but she let it slide. They hadn't been roughed up very badly, just enough to scare them off. More bothersome to her was the idea that Salah might not have had a good evening out because of it.

"Sorry about all that. Got carried away a bit."

"Yeah, you did. But, it happens to all of us at one time or another. Just try to rein it in a bit next time you want to let off some steam." Salah picked up a sheet of paper from the dining room table. “On another note, it looks like Di was trying to teach our daughter Latin.”

“And knowing her, she probably succeeded.”

Salah put an arm around his wife.

“Come on, let’s go to bed.”

« **Nor Gloom of Night Shall Stay** | **Hub** | **Empire of Dirt (Part 1)** »

Empire of Dirt (Part 1)

It was cold. Winter bore down on the black stone spires and slave pits and smokestacks of Daevon in a sheet of frozen lead. Snow and ash had mixed into an indefinable slurry that filled the narrow streets. The lamps fought uselessly against the encompassing darkness. In the gloom, some stray dogs picked at the frozen body of a slave that had not made it home to his master's hearth.

The artist reclined in her eggshell chair, nude. Silks and furs were draped haphazardly around her, more or less unneeded in the soft warmth of her studio.

The euphoria of the act was still fresh, the electric thrill of giving life to art. Her hands moved with precision and speed, detailing words, figures, shapes. Ink blossomed out across the sheet of vellum that was stretched out and held taught by jointed iron legs. Ink was the life of art as blood was the life of man.

She had made, created, given birth to, was art.

The ink had all pooled in the basin underneath her as she made the first incision, thin and black, pouring out of her body without staining. The gift of the Horned King, that his disciples might turn their own life into art for his glory.

She had worked quickly after that, carefully preparing the vellum, her heart filled with joy. She took the skin, treating it with the appropriate chemicals and spices, draining the rest of the ink off into the basin.

That done, what remained had been burnt in the furnace shrine set in the wall, with incense and prayers, underneath the painted stone form of the King, and it

was pleasing to the artist's lord. It was the King's command that he take part in the art, for if the King bore godhood in his crown, and the art was the artist, thus the art-artist likewise came to godhood.

According to tradition, the umbilical cord was tied around her neck.

She continued to work, pouring her life, her soul, into her art, and the frozen night pressed on outside. In time, when the grey smog-smeared dawn approached, she put down her pens, and smiling at the work she had done, the artist began to sew up the slit in her belly.

All this this was pleasing to Moluch, the Horned King Crowned in Shame.

—

Mary-Ann sat on the floor, propped up against the couch, and plucked at her guitar. Naomi sat and watched with bright eyes.

"I've walked ten thousand miles, ten thousand miles to see you… And every gasp of breath, I grabbed it just to find you…I climbed up every hill to get to you…I wandered ancient lands to hold just you… and every single step of the way, I pa-a-a-a-ay…every single night and daa-aaa-aay…"

"adaa," Naomi said, reaching out to touch the guitar.

"Yep. This is my guitar. I don't think you're big enough to play it yet, though." She set the guitar to the side and placed her daughter on her lap. "You'd try eating it, and you don't want a slobbery guitar, do you?" She gave Naomi a tickle.

Mother and daughter had the house to themselves that evening: Salah was out at the Chapterhouse helping with the graduation ceremony for this batch of recruits. It wasn't as if it was a closed affair or anything, but Salah had the car today and the timing didn't work out to come pick Mary-Ann and Naomi up. That was something of a disappointment, but so things went.

Mary-Ann checked Naomi's diaper. Nope. Still clean.

It had been a just over two years since she had been in their shoes, taking her oath of office, though all things considered that could have been another person entirely, wrapped up in a blanket of quiet, desperate, melancholy. Time and care and love had done their job at unraveling that cocoon. The world was brighter now. Life was better.

A sharp rapport of knocks on the front door interrupted her musing.

"Hm? Come on, let's see who it is." Mary-Ann picked up Naomi and walked to the door. The knocking continued, pausing every few seconds and starting up again.

"Hold on, hold on, I'm coming!"

Mary-Ann opened the door to see two men standing on the front step, one shorter and balding, the other taller with salt and pepper hair. Both were wearing suits: Not secret service suits, or Jehovah's Witnesses suits, but closer to insurance salesmen suits. Alarm bells went off in her head: never trust men who turn up in pairs on front steps wearing suits, ever. Their eyes confirmed her suspicions: Dull, glassy eyes, like a cow's. Foundation eyes.

Her stomach sunk.

Son of a motherfuck they have the address?

"Ms. Mary-Ann Lewitt, my name is Mr. Redmond," the taller man said. "The Foundation is in need of your assistance."

"If you want help, call the office of external affairs at the Chapterhouse. I don't know how you got my name or my address, but I want you off my property. Now."

"I'm sorry, I'm being unclear." Redmond continued. "The Foundation requires you *specifically*. This is a matter of the utmost importance, and it requires your complete cooperation."

"Important enough that you can just walk up to my front door?"

“Yes.” His face was completely serious. “I apologize, Ms. Lewitt, but time is of the essence. We are in the process of alerting the Initiative, but we cannot wait for the bureaucracy to play catch-up.”

Mary-Ann hesitated for a moment, waiting for her gut to percolate an answer. Amidst all the fishiness, she could feel that instinctive lump of certainty that something was seriously wrong and it needed dealing with right now. Her gut had spoken.

“Come on in, then. Make it quick.”

—

Salah glanced at his watch: 6:48. The graduation ceremony had finished up early. A small group of recruits this time, and a lot of the pomp and circumstance had been cut down significantly from the previous year.

Always such promise at the ceremony, but it was the next few weeks and months that would decide who stayed in the Shepherds. Death was always a possibility, but the more pressing subject was the strain of the position. People simply broke down, unable to cope with being thrown face-first into the horrific absurdities of the world. But, this was the Horizon Initiative, built on shaken faith that could still stand tall. They would do fine, Salah assured himself.

Salah got in the car. Time to go home. The digital watch on his left wrist reflected the evening sun.

—

Mary-Ann sat on the couch, Naomi in her lap. Redmond sat in the chair across the room. His accomplice Brown stood in the corner.

“The item in question is designated SCP-089, a Canaanite statue dating from the second century BCE. SCP-089 will provide a name, a command, and a fanciful description of a disaster that will occur if the named individual does not complete the task. Ten hours ago, SCP-089 underwent a locution event, naming you as the chosen individual.”

“And that means…what?”

“SCP-089’s demands are identical in all events: that the selected individual performs a ritual in order to prevent or stop the promised disaster event. This ritual will entail, must entail, the loss of that individual’s child.”

The universe froze. Mary-Ann stared at Redmond mutely for a moment, trying to process the information, trying to find some misheard word or slip of the tongue. He did not just say that. He did not just say that…He did. That is what he said. She pulled Naomi closer to her instinctively. No. She wasn’t letting them take her. Over her dead body.

“Get out of my house,” she said, voice low, barely covered up a savage snarl. “Get out. If you or your Foundation friends come back, I start shooting you. Got it?”

Redmond nodded.

“I understand, Ms. Lewitt. This is not an easy thing to accept. However, I cannot leave. SCP-089 has made its threat, and so the ritual must be carried out. If it is not, or if it is delayed beyond seventy-two hours, the disaster SCP-089 threatens will begin. We know of no alternative method to prevent these disasters from occurring.”

“Have you tried smashing it? Smashing it is a nice idea.” Mary-Ann’s voice dripped with mockery and venom. Fucking Foundation packrats.

“Ms. Lewitt, I believe you are at least somewhat aware of the principles of the Foundation. Our protocols ban the destruction of items and entities except in the most extreme of circumstances. Furthermore, the process has already begun. If SCP-089 were destroyed now, the ritual could not be completed, and the disaster would not end. Beyond this, it is unknown if SCP-089 causes the disaster itself, or simply warns of it. Its destruction could be the loss of not only a means of prevention, but an early detection system.”

Mary-Ann couldn’t help but laugh. It was a bitter, ugly sound.

“And that’s all it is to you, isn’t it? You just go around picking up new

kids to kill when the batteries run low."

“No. It is a necessity to prevent greater destruction. Do not be fooled into thinking that we are unaware of what it is that we do, Ms. Lewitt. The Foundation is aware of what it asks, and it asks only because it knows the alternative.”

“And what’s the alternative?”

Redmond cleared his throat.

“*’The earth shall tremble in the land of the people of Dae, and lo, all the peoples shall know the flesh that hates’*… we believe this to be in reference to an anomaly currently contained by the Foundation in the region of Lake Baikal in Siberia.” Redmond motioned for Brown to come over. He did, handing Mary-Ann a tablet. The picture displayed on it was the inside of a house, with something like a man sitting at a table. The thing’s skin was brown and waxy, a blobby, grotesque amalgamation of tumors and scar tissue and dried vomit. There was no head, just a melting mass of red flesh coiled on the tabletop. Mary-Ann made sure to have it positioned where Naomi couldn’t see the screen as she went through more pictures of infected people and rotting villages. To be completely honest with herself, Mary-Ann couldn’t help but compare these things to the Flood. Dangerous thinking, that. Thinking things operated on the same level as their fictional counterparts generally led to being dead.

“The anomaly, designated SCP-610, is an infectious disease, something akin to a virulent, easily communicable cancer,” Redmond said. “610 cell growth is capable of consuming a person within five hours, turning them into what you see there. There is no cure, save complete immolation. Eventually, when infected individuals progress to the later forms of the disease and are gathered in a high enough density, SCP-610 will begin to change the local environment, in a form of terraforming. At this point, it is capable of spreading by air.”

“Then destroy it. Just say it was a military test or something, you guys can get away with that, right? Or just a forest fire, I don’t know. Put more men on the job, double your security, put it on absolute

lockdown… for the love of God do your *jobs*!”

Redmond shook his head.

“The outcome is pre-ordained, Ms. Lewitt. If we were to attempt more security and hope that all would be well without the ritual, it is inevitable that a single infected individual would escape. Events would twist themselves until it happened. Slips of the tongue, slips of the mind, building up until that one fatal mistake occurs. Destroying it without the ritual would likely ignite full-out war, or many other unforeseen consequences.”

“You’re sure? There’s no other way.”

“If there was, we would not be here, Ms. Lewitt. I’m sorry.”

“How bad is it going to be? Maybe we can just wait it out…”

“The nearest city to the containment zone has a population of a five hundred thousand. If the infection were to take hold of the city, it would easily reach enough density to begin aerial spread and terraforming operations. At that point, it would begin spreading into Mongolia and China, through the Middle East, and to eastern Europe. Were the infection to reach this point, it is doubtful that even a nuclear sterilization of the continent would be enough to contain it. The death toll by then would be in the billions.”

Billions. It always sounded like a fake number, something so big that the average person couldn’t imagine the size. Just a word, something that didn’t even really exist. But that was a lie. It did exist.

“This can be stopped, Ms. Lewitt. Those deaths can be avoided.” Redmond straightened his tie. “Instead of a continent lost, instead of five hundred thousand lost, one life is given to save them. That is the definition of heroism, Ms. Lewitt. You and your daughter are in a position to save the world, or damn it. I do not say that lightly.”

Mary-Ann said nothing as she stared a patch of carpet off to the side. She didn’t want to look into those Foundation cow-eyes, not for this. Naomi was resting against her chest, breathing softly. Already asleep, even though her fate was being decided.

God, please, help me. Please.

“Would you die to protect your daughter, Ms. Lewitt?” Redmond asked.

“Yes.”

“Would you kill to protect her?”

“Yes.”

“Not a burglar or a murderer or a kidnapper. An innocent person on the street. If your daughter were sick, and the only way to save her life would be to walk out your door, find a child, put a gun to his head, and pull the trigger, would you do that, Ms. Lewitt? Would you kill him, and then kill his mother, and his father, and his brothers and sisters, his friends, his classmates, his teachers…everyone he has ever known or met or heard of? And you find that it isn’t enough. Would you walk down the street, and start killing his neighbors, and their families? Could you keep killing and killing and killing until five hundred thousand people were dead, just to keep your daughter alive? And then find out that it wasn’t enough, that she was still dying, that you had to kill more, and more, and more, until you can look back on everything you’ve destroyed and everyone you’ve killed and say that you did it for her. When she grows up, will you be able to look her in the face and tell her that you did it all for her?”

“Stop.” Mary-Ann looked up from the floor. “Just…stop.” There were no tears. The old hollowness was back, welcoming her into that gaping, toothless abyss with empty arms. Instinctively, the walls went up in her mind, the door was locked, but the cruel claws of the world tore down her defenses. There was no alternative here. The outcome was pre-ordained.

No…please, God, no…

She couldn’t do it. She couldn’t be that killer Redmond described. No sane person could. No sane person would wish for mothers and fathers and children that fate of life as a blob of cancerous flesh, mindless and undying. For a moment, her imagination turned Naomi into one of them, a lump of raw red meat and dead brown scars. Bile

rose in Mary-Ann's throat. No. She couldn't do it. She couldn't be that monster. She couldn't pass that fate to another.

But she would not live as the monster that killed her own daughter either. She would not live with that shame. She would not live with the guilt.

No. She would not live with that. She would only hope that Naomi would forgive her. That Salah would forgive her. That God would forgive her.

I'm sorry…

I love you.

"I'm going to call my husband," she said, finally.

"Of course," Redmond said.

Mary-Ann shifted Naomi on her lap, to reach over to where her cell phone lay.

Pick up your phone…pick up your phone…Salah, pick up your phone…just pick up your fucking phone for once in your life…

"Hello, this is Salah. I'm not here at the moment, so please leave me a message and I'll get back to you as soon as I can. Have a wonderful day."

"Salah, it's me. There's…there's been some big stuff going down. Foundation's here, they need me and Naomi to go with them. I'll call you again soon. We'll be okay. I love you. Bye."

—

> "And so Ab-Leshal returns to us, crowned in triumph," the slave-broker said as he looked out over the snowy city from his balcony, wine glass in hand. "The crowd goes wild."
>
> He had read the accounts of what they had returned with. Twelve thousand slaves, five thousand

greatmeasures of gold, seven thousand of iron, ten of bronze, the corpse of a god and the secret of true immortality. The greatest triumph of the age.

The slave-broker sipped from his glass. From his perspective, he was able to see one of the great concourses that led to the high temple in the center of the city, filled to trampling density with soldiers and celebrators. Each man who so as much held a sword or musket would find himself welcome in any whorehouse in the city, simply for having served under the command of Ab-Leshal, the First Sword of Daevon.

The slave-broker's magecraft eyes allowed him far better sight than normal men so that even at this distance he could focus on the people around the altar that had been set up at the foot of the high temple steps. There were the high priests, covered head to toe in crimson and robes. There was Ab-Leshal, more wall than man, tattooed and craggy. The Fourth and Seventh Swords were also present, slim and effeminate Jad-kar Dark-Blade and the neurotic, wide-eyed Bergon Soulbearer, each standing a respectful distance behind Ab-Leshal. There was Odrahn Kahd the Master of the Keys, Pratan Dai the Craftmaster, the Master Generals Hradun, Vasig, and Khazes, Curix Noan, the artist called the mistress of ink, and dozens of other government and religious officials, all dressed in their finest.

Surrounding the high altar were smaller altars, headed by towering idols of the gods: The King-In-Scarlet, the Nothing-In-All, the Hanged King, the Eternal Texts, Moluch the King Crowned in Shame, the Wonder-Maker, Gothog the Mighty, the Mother of Them All, Molug the Broken Fist, Carthac the Many-Faced King, and others.

A gong sounded, followed by three blasts on the twenty-foot temple horns. Bonfires burst to life at the feet of the idols, clouds of incense rising into the air as the chants started and the blood began to flow, first from the mammoths that had pulled the idols into place, and then

from the captives. They would work their way up, from the smallest to the greatest, finally sacrificing the pieces of the broken god itself. It would not end until long after sunset, when the gutters ran thick with scabbing blood.

The slave-broker did not kneel with the crowd, nor did he feel like taking part in the following orgy and slaughter. He was a well-traveled man, who had seen, bought, and sold a great many wonders throughout the empire and beyond. His fear and awe of the gods was on a purely professional basis.

The slave-broker drained what remained of his wine, his gaze lingering for a time on the bull-headed idol in the distance, before he turned and walked back inside.

« **Agricola In Insula Est Poeta** | **Hub** | **Empire of Dirt (Part 2)** »

Empire Of Dirt (Part 2)

The artist called Curix Noan smiled as she watched the slaves shuffled out from their carts through the slush of her courtyard. Fresh bodies from Ab-Leshal's conquest of the west lined up before her, men and women with heads bowed, arms and legs shackled, thick magecraft collars around their necks. Company mercenaries walked through the formation, barking commands.

"Three hundred slaves, one hundred and fifty male, one hundred and fifty female, as you requested," the slave broker said. His scarf and long coat fluttered in the icy breeze.

"And your nine hundred marks, Ser Eutmun." The artist handed the slave-broker the strings of coins.

"My most humble thanks," He bowed, sweeping the coins into his purse. "But I bring you more than simple supplies this time, mistress." He motioned to a pack of mercenaries, who brought another man of the west before the artist. "Consider this this one a special gift."

The man was particularly gaunt, taller than both the artist and the slave-broker, with a scraggly black mane of hair, dirty, leathery skin, and dead eyes. His arms were magecrafted metal, all the way up to the shoulders. The artist raised an eyebrow. Such expense on a slave who looked as if he would topple over in a sharp breeze? Ridiculous.

"It seems you are mocking me, Sir Eutmun."

"Not at all. This slave is worth more than all the others combined. His spirit is already broken, and so there is no need for a control collar. He obeys orders perfectly. As a

servant he will pay for his magecraft swiftly."

"Who was he?"

"A priest, or what passes for one among the savages," the slave-broker said, circling the slave. "He was captured at the Battle of the Valley, where the bronze god was broken. He had attempted to strike down the First Sword with a rock. A rock! Ab-Leshal took pity upon him and only tore off his arms."

"I see. And he lived?"

"By the First Sword's command."

Special enough that Ab-Leshal would single him out? That was impressive. The artist did not see it fit to question the First Sword's reasoning, and she felt no need to. This was indeed a great prize.

—

The lights were off in the house when Salah pulled into the driveway. That was odd. It wasn't all that late out.

"I'm home!" He called out as he opened the door. There was no response. The house was empty. He swept through the house, the empty space becoming oppressive with each room he passed through. Living room empty. Bedroom empty. Bathroom empty. Crib empty. No one out back. He checked the kitchen again, to see if he missed a note. Nothing.

Probably just went out to a neighbor's or something. Or went out on a walk.

Salah dug his cell phone out of his pocket. Ah, silly him: Forgot to turn it back on after the ceremony. He probably just missed the call, that's all.

One missed call was listed, from Mary-Ann.

"Salah, it's me. There's…there's been some big stuff going down.

Foundation's here, they need me and Naomi to go with them. I'll call you again soon. We'll be okay. I love you. Bye."

What?

Why would the Foundation be involved? And if they were involved, where was the message from the Chapterhouse stating that they were involved?

No. Something was wrong.

He immediately speed-dialed her phone. There was just a dead tone on the other side.

Oh no…

Salah listened to the message again, trying to piece together what was going on. It was vague, she sounded distracted. Worried by something. Had the Foundation told her to say those words? Probably. She would have explained everything if there weren't circumstances preventing it… but no contact from the Chapterhouse either…all cooperative missions went through there, so…this was something they didn't want the Initiative knowing about. And if that was the case, then…

Salah felt a chill prickle its way up his neck. His body shifted into automatic defense, jumping into the living room, snatching a lamp from a table. He felt a sharp pain in his side. Wetness. Blood. He glanced up to see a shadow flow through the air. Not a shadow. Liquid, thin and black.

Ink.

The splotch moved, shifting from walls to floor to air to the form of a short, balding man, with his wrists slit, wreathed in ink. Salah swung his lamp. The man *blorped* on impact, head spraying across the carpet and body splashing to the floor.

Singular thoughts snapped through Salah's synapses as he sprung back to the kitchen. Inkblood. Not cool yet. Foundation ambush. Needed gun. Safe in the wall. Combination. Grab gun. Turn.

The inkblood was already there, back in human form, wreaths of liquid forming razor edges around his hands. A fist connected with Salah's face, knocking him off balance. Shards of black sliced across his skin. The gun fell from his hand.

Forget the gun. Frying pan off the wall hook. There was a satisfying ring to accompany the splatter as it connected with the inkblood's head. He didn't completely dissolve this time, focusing more on regenerating the head.

Another swing, another ring, another splatter. Less splatter this time. Salah grabbed the inkblood by the collar and began to drag him towards the bathroom, smashing the pan into the inkblood's head whenever it looked to be repairing.

Kick the door down, throw the inkblood in the tub, stomp on his head, seal off the drain. Salah tossed the pan aside and tore open the supply cabinet. Remove plunger, snap over knee, impale inkblood through gut. Salah's lips moved in a string of a silent sura. Medicine cabinet, remove toothpaste, draw the circle around the broom, sloppy nonsense symbols around the edge. The symbol itself didn't matter: it just had to be a symbol for *something*. The inkblood strained against the makeshift binding, screaming, his ink now thickened into something like tar.

Salah breathed heavily for a moment. The binding was sloppy, but it should hold long enough to get what he needed. He left the bathroom, reviewing his injuries: the bleeding in his side was just from a grazing strike, nothing of great concern there. A few bandages were all it needed. Same with the other cuts. But later. Had to deal with the inkblood first.

The fierce tide of adrenaline had lessened enough for Salah to think straight. There was an inkblood in his bathtub. Tried to ambush him, probably planned on killing him in the first strike. Mary-Ann and Naomi were gone, with the Foundation. It was entirely possible that this was all a misunderstanding, the Foundation had come and gotten Mary-Ann and Naomi out before the inkblood arrived. But if that was the case, why was he waiting here in ambush? Just waiting until they returned? No. And if the Foundation was doing a rescue, they'd spare a few agents to spring a trap. And one inkblood wasn't

that much of a threat to multiple people who expected it. They were connected.

But they weren't obviously AWCY, Mary-Ann would have sniffed that out easily. The setup wasn't nearly theatrical enough, anyway. So, inkbloods either posing as or infiltrating the Foundation, from a source that wasn't AWCY.

He would find out soon enough.

Salah liked to think that he had a great deal of self-control. Most people said that he did. That was a dangerous game, control. Watching the tiger pen. Holding the keys to the cage. It put one in a position of total responsibility if what was under control got out of control.

Mary-Ann and Naomi were in danger. That was more than enough motivation for Salah to accept that responsibility. The cage had been unlocked. It was not a burning fire, nor a boiling maelstrom. No, that was anger. The cage had been unlocked and that young man had applied his rage to an older man's experience, and it came out as a cold, calm, monolithic hatred, deep and dark as the gap between stars.

He'd have to buy a new set of kitchen knives when all this was done.

Kitchen to hall closet. Drano. Gloves. Back to the bathroom. Hopefully, it would all be unnecessary. Most people would give up after the descriptions of what was to happen. That was what was really effective: the fear of pain, rather than the pain itself. But this man was Foundation, most likely conditioned to resist interrogation, and on top of that, mad enough to deal with whatever black things some of the artists associated with.

There was a line between a good man and a madman, and Salah felt himself crossing it. No sorrow now, no guilt, no regret for what was to happen to the man with ink in his blood. The same apathy towards the other that led to men with bombs strapped to their chests emptied out Salah for the first time in decades. He could feel it now, was aware of it, and didn't care. Not now. Couldn't afford to. Just had to trust that Mary-Ann would forgive him for it.

Salah returned to the bathroom, setting his implements on the floor.

“I’ll give you a chance to talk freely, to avoid the mess.” He put on the gloves. “Where is my wife and daughter?”

“Fuck you.”

“I’m afraid that is out of the question. That binding will only last for fifteen minutes or so, and I plan on getting out of here in five.” Salah rolled up his sleeves. “You know, some time ago I was asked if I thought I was the Spanish Inquisition. I said no, on the grounds that I am not Spanish. As far as inquisitions go, I can’t deny that claim. I was, some time ago, the person people went to when they had dirty jobs to fulfill, because, to quote an old acquaintance of mine,” he held up the bottle of Drano, making sure the inkblood could see it. “I was ‘a heartless motherfucker’.”

—

The car came to a stop. A chemical plant stood outside Mary-Ann’s window, lit by the lonely glow of security lights. The kind of building that thousands of people would look at and have it pass by without a second thought. That was a place that made chemicals. What else could happen there?

“We’re here,” Redmond said, shutting off the engine. “Entry procedures will take some time, but as it stands we are ahead of schedule.” He paused. “You’re doing the world a greater service than you can imagine, Ms. Lewitt. It will not be forgotten.”

“I wish it would be,” Mary-Ann said. Her hand rested next to Naomi’s cheek, waiting a moment before she moved to unfasten the carrier.

I’m sorry…

—

“Site thirty-six! Building four! Level three!” the inkblood screamed, foam bubbling out from mouth and eyes.

“And where would that be?”

The inkblood spat out a garbled set of directions. When he was finished, Salah nodded, and then poured the remainder of the Drano over the inkblood's face. The would-be assassin gave one final spasm and scream before fully dissolving into a puddle of black and empty clothes. There was no further movement. Salah unsealed the drain and began running the water, washing the inkblood's corpse down the drain. Nothing more than ink now.

He walked back into the living room and picked up his phone from where he had dropped it on the floor. No, he wouldn't call the Chapterhouse. With the alliance in place, there would be nothing but red tape everywhere. If the Foundation had been infiltrated, it would easy for those infiltrators to distract the investigation long enough that it would be too late to do anything. There was no time for niceties here, no time for red tape. There was no time to sit by and do nothing. The Voice had died while he sat by and did nothing. He was not going to sit by and do nothing and let Mary-Ann and Naomi die as well.

He dialed. After a few moments, a voice answered.

"This is DeMontfort."

“Henry. It's Salah.”

—

“Salah? What-”

“Mary-Ann and Naomi have been kidnapped.”

“What? Salah that's-“

“The Foundation has been infiltrated by an unknown party, and has kidnapped Mary-Ann and Naomi. I have testimony from one of their agents.”

Oh God… DeMontfort's heart skipped a beat. Did he?…he did. That tone of voice gave it away, the steel-edged calm. DeMontfort hadn't heard that in a long while. There was a time when the positions had been switched between the two of them. Salah was the cold, zealous one, and he the milder idealist. Now it seemed like they had

switched back to those old places. If Salah had fallen back on his old interrogation techniques that quickly…

“Salah, *what did you do to him*?”

“I found out where Mary-Ann and Naomi are. I need as many Wolves as you can get me, as fast as possible.”

DeMontfort ran a hand through his hair and sighed. Not today. Anything but this, any time but today.

“I can’t get you anyone, Salah. Project Malleus is suspended until further notice. Straight from the Tribunal. I have no power anymore.”

“You always have a backup plan.”

Yes, he did, and if he used that backup plan now, for this, there went everything he had worked for. Malleus was already lost, and his position was on tentative ground already…

“Look, I know we’ve drifted apart, but I’ve been looking at myself a lot lately…I’ve let Malleus get too far out of hand… this is all my fault, the mess the organization is in right now…”

“Henry, Mary-Ann and Naomi are going to die if you don’t help me.”

That voice again. The voice of a man who was dangerously close to losing everything. He'd crash and burn on this, DeMontfort could tell. If he didn't die during the attempt, of course. Nature's cruelty would most likely see him survive, to become some hollow parody of a man. Worse than he was when he arrived with Initiative, worse than DeMontfort had become. No, position didn't matter here. Lives were at stake, and a man's soul on top of that. Perhaps that was it. Perhaps God's plan here was simply to put DeMontfort's in a place where he could do some good. The allowance of evil so that a greater good might come from it.

Yes, that was it.

“Look, I’ll see what I can do. They haven’t cut all my strings.”

“Right.”

The call ended. DeMontfort sighed again, automatically reaching for the cigarette he didn't have with him. What a time to give up smoking. He sat down at his desk and removed a pad of paper from the drawer. He tore off the front page and wrote a short message on it.

Saturn Deer-It's time. Send them to the return address I gave you.

He folded the paper up into an airplane and threw it out the window. It swirled and drifted into the night. Fifteen seconds later, a second airplane flew back through the window, this one made of grubby loose-leaf.

You, coming to me for help? Holy shit, I should start buying lottery tickets.

DeMontfort made another plane. It was an awkward form of conversation, but it would do.

You agreed to this, Deer.

I agreed to look after some shit for Ursula, not you. By the way, how's that lung cancer treating you?

About the same as your little case of immolation. We have the agreement in writing, Deer. If anything, you are a man of your written word.

That's speaking contractually, and if we're speaking contractually, I don't give fucks for free.

I can't appeal to your sense of common decency, because you don't have one. I can't threaten you, because you tend to get over death easily. So, I will be honest: you will be supplying a raid on a Foundation facility. If the excuse to be connected to some hell-raising won't sway you, Deer, nothing will.

Raising hell, eh? I like it, but I could use a little bit more. I've got integrity to uphold, Henry. Set your bribe a little higher.

Money then? Some power? The loving embrace of a two-dollar whore?

Please. I got all the money I want and all the bitches I can buy. Implying that I pay for them and they aren't attracted to me by my natural suavity. Because I don't because I have that. You must not want this stuff very bad.

I can take you off the Active Interests list. No more having to deal with us. That work out for you?

Ha! You couldn't get me anyway. I just like hearing you eating that humble pie while you suck me off.

You're an irascible fuckwit, Deer.

I do my best. One order of shit dug outta someone's closet, coming up.

—

> The artist worked, and the slave called Cairn watched. In time, her work was completed.
>
> She built a machine, a great machine of iron barbs and steel spikes and flowing sulfur, animated by the three hundred screaming fleshy fruits impaled upon its thorns, twisted out of shape. The fruits were paired, male and female, set together, in a bouquet of flesh burning and screaming and fucking and hating and dying and living while blood and semen and bile and sulfur flowed and boiled and bubbled and flesh writhed and the flesh moved and the flesh *hated*.
>
> All this this was pleasing to Moluch, the Horned King Crowned in Shame.

« **Empire of Dirt (Part 1)** | **Hub** | **Empire of Dirt (Part 3)** »

Empire Of Dirt (Part 3)

Daevon burned. Smoke blotted out a cold and uncaring sun as the streets flooded with feasting flesh and screaming gristle. The slave pits burned, the manors and gardens burned, the plazas swarmed with the aberrant throngs. Fountains ran red and brown. Pillars of flesh coiled around obelisks and temples, belching clouds of brown mist into the air. Occasionally, cracks of musket fire or the trumpeting of a mammoth overtaken by the horde would echo from the distance and then go silent.

It seemed as if the entire world was dying.

The slave called Cairn stood on the top step of the high temple, looking out across the city, watching it die. The empire was passing through the last violent throes of its death. Soon there would be nothing left but the pale grey steppes and the old, sick winds.

Cairn had no master now: the artist now writhed atop a silk bed sheet with the slave-broker, their bodies fused and bloated. A tribute in undying art to the Horned King Crowned in Shame. This quiet here on the steps was only a brief respite. The peace here would not last long.

He turned from looking at the city, and passed through the gaping hole where the great iron doors had once been set. Those doors had been torn apart, the metal crumpled like tissue.

The inside of the temple was stained with blood and viscera, strewn with shattered weapons and torn clothing and the stone corpses of shattered idols. Temple guards, acolytes in white, priests, even high priests in their red robes, all of them in pieces, hacked apart.

“Brother,” a voice boomed from the throne above the high altar. “I see they gave you new arms.”

“Yes,” Cairn said. “And I see you regrew yours.” There was a faint, sad nostalgia about using his native tongue again. He had not spoken it in so long…

A figure stepped down from the throne, walking past the high altar and out of the gloom. Ab-Leshal, the First Sword of Daevon stood here: eight feet of weather-worn muscle, scarred and tattooed. Wide nose that had been broken too many times, strong jaw, crooked teeth, stringy hair, all features of the boy Cairn had played ball with on the River’s bank.

“I did not expect them to take you as bounty.”

“They considered me a trinket. A little curiosity to keep around. The man who threatened the First Sword and was spared.” Cairn brushed aside his hair, revealed the brand on his forehead: khuk, the highest rating a slave could have. “Apparently I was an excellent conversation piece.”

“Indeed.” Ab-Leshal paused for a moment, distracted by some fleeting thought. “Why are you here, brother?”

“To bring you home.”

Ab-Leshal shook his head.

“I have written the Horned King’s gospel in blood across this continent, and every life I take now feeds him further. I feel my mind slipping into an abyss, and soon there will be nothing left but the savage, mindless animal. I am damned, brother. But I will do what I can with what time I have left. I will take this empire and all its gods to the buzzing, droning madness of hell with me.”

“There is still hope.”

“This is what I deserve. Mindlessness and damnation. I

have laid waste to our home, destroyed the Voice, and the Tree of Life is dead. No. You return, to guide what remains of our people. That is your place. Mine is here. To seek an atonement I cannot achieve."

Ab-Leshal sighed.

"The Seven Brides are dead. The scribes of the Texts and the Hanged King are dead. The Wonder-maker and Chou-dah-cleph and all the others have fled. Only Moluch remains. He will gather the legions, lead them here to me…and they will break upon me." A pause. "It would be best for you to leave the city now. Before they arrive."

Cairn nodded. What had to be said was said. They would meet again, he knew, and that would be their final meeting. When all had been accomplished, they would strike each other down.

He made his way back to the empty doorway, feet clapping on the mosaic floor.

"Brother."

Cairn looked behind him.

"God guide your path," Ab-Leshal said.

"And yours."

Cairn, son of Adaman the Hearer of the Voice, Chief Priest of the People of the Valley, the First Murderer, the Cursed Wanderer, disappeared from sight, moving towards the west.

Ab-Leshal, son of Adaman the Hearer of the Voice, Protector and Shield of the People of the Valley, the Great Traitor, Breaker of the Bronze God, First Sword of Daevon, the Butcher of the West, returned to the black throne of the high priest, sat down, and closed his eyes.

Sun set, and sun rose.

Sun set, and sun rose.

Sun set, and sun rose.

Sun set, and sun rose.

They had come. Men with swords and muskets and war-beasts flooded the high temple, and at the head of their column, a god.

Ab-Leshal opened his eyes, rose, and took up his sword.

Moluch, the Horned King Crowned in Shame, was pleased.

—

A tacky little ornament dangled from the rear view mirror of Henry DeMontfort's car, right next to the cinnamon apple air freshener. The ornament was a smiling, generic-looking humanoid with wings and a golden ring above its head, holding a scroll with the words "Don't drive faster than your guardian angel can fly" on it.

Technically, Henry DeMontfort was not driving over that limit. He was, however, driving faster than it was physically possible for his car to move. Montag was a rather fast flyer, though he did not have a scroll, halo, or wings like the little figure he inhabited. Or arms and legs for that matter.

Salah sat in the passenger seat, loading cartridges into a magazine. He had said barely more than a few words since they had departed, focusing instead on checking and re-checking the relics. DeMontfort was sure it was a better state than what he would have been in alone. Major crisis averted.

That was one of many. There was only the most basic outline of a plan, that plan being "get in, rescue Mary-Ann and Naomi, get out". That was effectively useless. They had no idea of the layout of the site, what the Foundation contained there, or what they would be up against. A hundred thousand variables got in the way.

But Salah was sure they could succeed. DeMontfort could see that clearly. He was completely, absolutely certain that they could pull off this rescue. Those variables didn't exist. The alternative was impossible. Any suggestion to the contrary, no matter how logical, would be thrown away. Anything short of his own death would be, at most, a minor inconvenience.

"They'll most likely be waiting for us."

"They might still think that I am dead, so that may just work in our advantage. And so would be focusing on a different kind of counterattack. This is the Foundation: they deal in shadows and secrets, but they also expect that everyone else does as well. The easiest way to knock them off guard is to attack in the open. It is the last thing they would expect, and the last thing they would prepare for."

"Because only idiots would try barging through the front door."

"Exactly."

"I've approved worse plans. What of the inkbloods?"

"I would assume that the source is contained within the site. As for the inkbloods, they are still Foundation agents, thinking like Foundation agents."

"So not a real infiltration. More of an oblique one. You're sure there's no outside party?"

"Beyond the original source? No. It would be guiding actions, but not controlling them. Inkbloods operate voluntarily."

"Right, right."

There was a pause. DeMontfort felt a little bit of that insane, this-has-to-work faith in the back of his mind. Highly contagious stuff, belief.

Ah, if he was going to die, he might as well be doing something good.

“We’ve gone completely insane,” he said.

“No. We’re just realizing that the world is.”

—

The break room reminded Mary-Ann of a hospital waiting room: Water cooler, bland furniture, out of date *Time* magazines on the coffee table, twenty-year old television. Comfortable, but not too comfortable. An imitation of comfort, with tension underneath like a taut rubber band.

Mary-Ann stared into the empty styrofoam cup in her hands. The tea was gone. Redmond said she could take her time, to say goodbye and collect herself. She’d tried to pray, but the words were hollow, echoing in her head without any reassurance from above that they had been heard. She was alone.

I’m sorry.

She threw the cup in the trash and picked up the carrier. Naomi was still sleeping. Maybe it would be quick. Maybe there would be no pain.

Maybe.

“Okay. I’m ready.”

Redmond nodded, and motioned for her to follow. Down a hallway, around a corner, down another hallway. Mary-Ann felt like she would fall under the weight of her own heart. A corn husk doll wobbling down a winding, wind-blown road.

The hallway ended in blast doors, SCP-089 stenciled in yellow on the metal. The agent typed in an access code and swiped a key card. Metal ground on metal, and the door opened.

The statue sat at the far end of the chamber: a bull-headed man on a throne, arms outstretched, wings wide, mouth open. A crude, ugly, horrible looking thing. A pile of wood sat next to it. She knew what it was for.

Mary-Ann swallowed nervously as the door shut behind her.

Abraham, take your son Isaac, your only son, whom you love, and go up to the land of Moriah. There you shall offer him up as a holocaust…

The borders of the room seemed to expand as she approached, the statue loomed higher than it seemed. A chill ran up her back. She could feel a presence there, surrounding her, spreading out from the statue. Something big and distant and inhuman, pressing down, tearing that hollow hole even further.

She was alone. Completely, utterly, absolutely alone. The Foundation and Initiative were gone. Salah was gone. God was gone. There was only her, Naomi, and the statue and its power, floating in an empty abyss.

The flame flickered, and went out.

Mary-Ann, take your daughter Naomi, your only daughter, whom you love more than anything else in the world, and go into the depths of Site-36. There you shall offer her up as a holocaust…

At least, when this was done, millions of people would go about their day as if nothing happened, and they would live out their lives as if nothing happened today, that it was a day like any other, filled with happiness and sadness and boredom and anxiety and anger and love and hate and laughter and tears and births and weddings and funerals and life. A million days today, and a million days tomorrow, and so on.

At least, Naomi would have saved them.

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son…

Mary-Ann was at the foot of the statue. She set the carrier down, and took Naomi out of it. Her daughter wriggled in her arms, but remained asleep. Mary-Ann kissed her daughter on the forehead and hugged her close, for one last time.

“Goodbye, Naomi. I love you.”

With one hand she reached out and opened the chest of the statue. Gently, she placed Naomi inside and closed the hatch. She bent down and began to fill the furnace that was the throne with wood and kindling. Build it like a log cabin, her counselor had said all those years ago at summer camp. Big logs on the outside, kindling and tinder in the middle.

There was a lighter there, sitting on the floor next to the wood: a cheap plastic thing one could buy at Wal-Mart.

Into your hands, God, I commend her spirit. Amen.

There was no answer.

Mary-Ann lit the fire.

—

A 2009 Honda CR-V smashed through the front doors of the Sanderson Chemical Plant at two hundred miles per hour. Metal screeched and crumbled and bent and burned in a shower of glass and shards of wall. The doors were torn off their hinges as Salah and DeMontfort leapt from the tumbling wreckage, wreathed in fire and mouths and eyeballs, landing safely as the hulk finally crashed to a stop.

They were in. Step one complete.

—

Naomi screamed. The sound was cut off by a cacophony of drums and cymbals over loudspeakers, and a rumbling that shook the chamber. Oily smoke billowed from the statue's mouth and nostrils. The rumbling grew louder, and the tremors more intense.

Any assurance that Mary-Ann had that she was doing the right thing shattered with that scream. She stood there, shuddering, unable to move, bile frozen in her throat, tears welling up in her smoke-reddened eyes.

She had done it. She was burning her daughter alive.

Murderer

She was saving half a million lives. More than that.

Monster

Eventually, Naomi's screams would stop, choked out by the smoke. Her death would be a few pitiful gasps for one more lungful of air.

You killed her.

When that was done, and the smell of burning fat and cooking meat would fill the chamber, rising up with the smoke.

Death is too good for you.

When all was done, the door would open, and there would be nothing but ash and charred bones.

You deserve to suffer

Tiny, charred bones.

No.

—

DeMontfort brought a donkey jawbone down on an agent's head, liquefying it. Behind him, Salah fired a stream of burning white bullets down the hall, searing through ink and body armor alike.

—

Mary-Ann's arms shot back up to the hatch and tore it open, ignoring the searing heat. She grabbed Naomi out from the statue and ran towards the far end of the chamber, as far away as she could from the statue. Naomi coughed and sputtered and gasped and cried, her skin raw and red and burning.

"No no no no…oh God please no… I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry…Sssssshshshshhhhhh…it's okay, mommy's here. Sshhhhhhshshshh mommy's here…you are my sunshine, my only

sunshine…you make me happy, when skies are grey…" her voice creaked off-key with desperation, as the grim realization that she had rescued Naomi only for her to die in her arms rose to the surface of her mind.

The coughing and gasping stopped.

Oh no…

Mary-Ann pressed a finger to Naomi's neck. There was a faintest pulse there, and the tiniest wisp of breath from her mouth. For now. Mary-Ann let her held breath and rested her back against the wall, holding Naomi in her lap as gently as she could. If Naomi was going to die, it would be better like this. Better to die like this, than alone and abandoned in the bowels of that thing.

Another tremor shook the room. Naomi opened her eyes, just a tiny squint, and nestled herself against Mary-Ann's chest, as if seeking protection from the pain.

She doesn't know I put her in there…she just woke up in a fire and I saved her…

The tears came again, though this time from the pain of being forgiven.

"It's okay. I'm here."

—

A massive, noodly appendage lashed out of the splatter of marinara sauce on the wall, slamming through the blockade of Foundation agents. It twisted itself into a thumbs up as Salah and DeMontfort ran past before returning whence it came.

—

Mary-Ann sat there and watched the statue belch smoke and the furnace burn bright, and listened to the rumblings of the earth below. The question of why no Foundation agents had come in yet, or the threat of what would happen from a half-finished ritual came to her mind and faded just as quick. They didn't matter. Not now.

A strange peace fell over Mary-Ann. The same sort of peace that a condemned man had on his last night, perhaps. Naomi still loved her, even here, at the end of everything. That was enough. Enough to fill the hollowness, enough to keep the world from crushing her completely. Enough to keep that one little flame alight in the dark.

It was enough.

Mary-Ann had killed. She had killed a whole lot of people, some of whom probably didn't need to be killed. That had been her life: taking lives so that others could live in peace. Standing in that ugly, bloody margin between the dark and the light because someone *had* to stand there. She'd taken so many lives out of the world, and only brought one into it, and even after trying to destroy that one little life, she was still loved.

That was enough. She wasn't a monster. She could keep living, keep enduring the pain and the guilt and the shame. With that little bit of love, the world shifted into clarity.

She wasn't alone.

God was there, in that little bit of love between a dying child and her broken mother, stuck in the deepest pit of a vast, uncaring, absurd, and horrific universe. God was there, recognizable when everything else had been stripped away. That little bit of love, in all its frailty, transcended all the pain that surrounded her, all the grief and anguish, all of it.

Peace. She was at peace.

Mary-Ann's gaze once again moved to the statue. The presence was still there, but lesser now. Lesser now that she had recognized that it was a fraud. The despair she had felt before, it was a lie. A lie to make her despair, a lie to break her spirit, a lie to make her afraid, and through her fear, lead her to a horrific act. A lie big enough to make her carry out that act willingly.

A coward's ploy. The work of sniveling, warped, pathetic power, hiding in fear behind the shadows and lashing out its own despair on humanity. Never overt, never forcing its hand, no. It broke people. It

made them afraid, through lies and shame, drove them to greater and greater depravities. And it fed off of that. Coward that it was, this power had grown old and strong feeding off of that despair.

Fuck that noise.

Mary-Ann raised a middle finger at the statue and cloud of smoke and smiled, the first time since she had been playing her guitar for Naomi.

“All right. I’ll call your bluff. You want her so bad? Come at me.”

—

“This is the room.”

“Right.” DeMontfort punched the blast door.

—

Mary-Ann sat bolt upright at the sound of crunching metal. A massive dent had appeared in the door, then another, another, and then a fist tearing through the metal. The hand withdrew, and the puncher tore it wider, wide enough to stick a head through. The helmeted head that poked through the hole was that of Henry DeMontfort. Mary-Ann felt as she might just break out laughing.

“Mary-Ann.” He nodded politely before retracting his head. More creaking, more crunching, and DeMontfort had torn the hole big enough for someone to step through.

Salah stepped through the hole.

“Mary-Ann!”

He cleared the space between the hole and Mary-Ann in an instant, and dropped to his knees next to his wife. There were tears welling up in his eyes.

He made a rescue mission.

“Are you okay? Are you hurt? Did…oh God help us…” He took in

Naomi's current condition, horror creeping over his face.

"She's alive," Mary-Ann said. "But she needs help, fast."

"Right. Henry, could we use the Matilda to stabilize her?"

"The cat we tested with it came out fine, so-"

"We'll use it." Salah unslung the beaten old traveling bag of Mary MacKillop off his shoulder and opened the mouth as wide as it would go. Mary-Ann handed him Naomi. He gingerly placed her in the sack, and drew the drawstrings tight. There she would remain in stasis until removed.

Mary-Ann stood up, stretching her arms. Everything was clear now. The future unfolded in front of her. She knew what had to happen, knew what she had to do. The power was drawing closer, with each rumble of the earth and cloud of smoke. Coward that it was, it was a powerful coward, and she had threatened its work.

Salah was next to her, the bag once again over his shoulder.

"Henry how are we looking?"

"Maybe a minute and a half until they get past what we did to the elevator," DeMontfort said from the other side of the blast door. Salah put his arm around Mary-Ann.

"Let's go."

Mary-Ann smiled, shook her head, and moved Salah's arm away.

"You two get Naomi somewhere safe. I'll finish things here."

"What?" Salah's face switched from relief to dumbfoundedness in an instant. "Mary-Ann, I'm not going to leave you behind, we can get you out of here."

"It's not that. Do you want to know where those burns came from? She's burnt because I put her in that furnace. Right over there. There is a power behind that statue, and it lied and connived and misled me until I was *willing* to burn her alive. I'm going to kill it."

Dumbfoundedness turned to horror.

“Mary-Ann…”

“Go. I’ll catch up to you. Just trust me. I’ll be okay.”

Salah said nothing. Mary-Ann wasn’t surprised by this. She could see it in his eyes behind all the horror and relief and rage and care, that he understood. She wrapped him in a hug and kissed him.

“When you get home, I want to you go to my dresser and look at the bottom of my sock drawer,” she said. “There’s something there for you.”

“All right.”

“I love you.”

“Love you too.”

“Yoink.” Mary-Ann swiped a long obsidian knife from Salah’s belt. “I’ll just be borrowing this. You guys get out of here.”

“Right.” Salah hesitated a moment before ducking out of the hole.

Their footsteps were swallowed up by the rumbling. Mary-Ann calmly walked towards the statue, now cloaked in its cloud of smoke, hefting the knife in her hand. The blade was incredibly sharp, and she didn’t believe that it was much more than that. A very sharp knife was all she needed.

—

Salah couldn’t believe what he had just done. After all he had done to rescue Mary-Ann, he was willingly leaving her behind. His rage was gone. It was not that he believed that she would win, no. He knew that she would. It was a certainty, as certain as if the sun would rise tomorrow.

One final push to freedom, then. The last surviving inkbloods and guards had regrouped themselves, and Salah found he was not troubled by the bullets and slashes of black that once again filled the

air. Those were only a hiccup on the way home.

—

The smoke, now a sizeable mass, coalesced into a column, swirling and thundering about. The tremors were almost constant now, humming in the deep.

Mary-Ann tossed the knife from one hand to the other. The coward was revealing itself, and she had no fear of it. She was ready for it. Her pain had melted away, replaced with strength. empowered by all those who came before her, all those mothers and children crying out for vengeance, for justice.

The column collapsed into a compact blob of black. There was a single, final tremor, and the statue exploded, spraying the chamber with molten bronze and shards of clay. The smoke melted away into nothingness.

Standing where the smoke had been was something like a man, ten feet tall and hairy with the head of a bull, curled horns, and tattered crow's wings. A misshapen crown of tarnished bronze rested on top of its head. It stank of clay and coals and old stale sweat. Spittle and foam dribbled down to the floor, steaming.

It lumbered forward, footfalls like lead, and stopped a few feet in front of Mary-Ann. It stooped low in a mockery of a bow.

"Hail the little whore of Babylon, hail!" It raised its head, its lips twisted into a crude facsimile of a smile. Mary-Ann locked her eyes with the thing's twin coals. There was no fear in her eyes, no fear on her face.

"You are brave, and you are a fool, whore." It rumbled in a voice that shifted continents. "You challenge Moloch the mighty with your little rebellion. Ab-Leshal, the First Sword of Daevon himself could not even defeat me, and you will attempt with nothing more than a cooking knife? Foolishness on top of foolishness. I have called your name, Mary-Ann Lewitt, and you are mine."

Mary-Ann continued to say nothing.

“A pity your tongue is gone, whore.”

Still nothing.

“Your silence grows tiresome, whore. Speak. Make your pleas. Cry out to your impotent sky-god to deliver you. Beg for my mercy. Whatever you wish. Your silence is dull.”

Mary-Ann smashed her head into Moloch’s face.

—

The wreckage of the car and the exit were in sight, as were the bulky, shadowy forms that were waiting outside, backlit by the floodlights mounted on their SUVs.

“Shit!” DeMontfort spat. He grabbed a piece of metal from the car and held it like a shield in front of him while Salah ducked behind a pile of rubble.

Keep them safe.

“Montag, where are you?”

There, a little spark nearby. Leap, roll, grab the tacky little ornament, throw it to Salah.

“Montag, get them out of here!”

Salah felt himself surrounded in a whirlwind of fire and eyes as the ground fell away underneath him and he flew away into the night. For a moment, he glimpsed DeMontfort charging through the agents and their line of vehicles before darkness enveloped him.

—

Whether the moment’s recoiling was the result of surprise or pain, it was an opportunity thrown wide open. Duck down, forward, move up, single swing to the testicles, pivot to the side. Moloch howled in pain as steaming blood splashed on the concrete floor. It smelled like sulfur and iron.

Stars burst inside her head. A fist smashing down on her. Bones snapping. Thick, leathery fingers grabbed her hair, pulling her up from the floor, her scalp tearing and bleeding. She screamed, but the sound was cut off the furnace blast of the god's bellow. Her skin peeled and blistered from the heat. She swung the knife, the blade glanced off of the thick skin. Moloch tossed her aside like a broken, bleeding rag doll.

Mary-Ann's body rolled to a limp rest, and was still. The god snorted and lumbered over to her prone form, ready to finish its work. It grabbed her body, raised her to its mouth.

The knife lashed out, burying itself deep in Moloch's eye. It bellowed, and the knife drew back and stabbed again: face, neck, eyes, snout. Blood poured from Moloch's face as it dropped Mary-Ann to the floor. Air rushed out of her lungs along with the *crack* of ribs.

"Death would be too good for you, whore," Moloch boomed. "All break eventually under the weight of their own shame. Do you not remember your nights with your legs spread wide, moaning and crying as they fucked you and tossed you aside? You were never more than a passing pleasure, a slut to bed because they had become bored with their right hands." Moloch's face was right next to Mary-Ann's head, his furnace breath enveloping her with its burnt-flesh scent. "You think he cares for you? He is nothing more than a lonely and desperate man. He took in a worthless piece of shit like you because he couldn't catch a better woman. So he settled for you. A monster and a slut. Nothing more." Moloch sat down next to her, legs crossed. "My most pitiful servant."

There was movement. Mary-Ann pushed herself up, rising slowly… slowly…slowly… to her feet. There was nothing but pain now. Raw, red, searing pain. Her left arm hung limp, the shoulder crushed and useless from the impact. Her clothes were torn and soaked crimson. One eye was swollen shut, the other half-blinded by the blood that ran down from her torn scalp. Hair was matted and clumped with crimson. Ribs crushed. Fractures everywhere. Pain everywhere. Pain. Pain. Pain. Pain.

She was smiling.

“F-f-fuck you.” With a last burst of strength, she reached out and tore the knife from Moloch’s eye. Millennia of mothers and fathers and children cheered, screamed for the Horned King’s blood.

“Fuck you.” The knife plunged into Moloch’s other eye.

“Fuck you.” Moloch’s throat.

“Fuck you!” Mary-Ann threw herself against Moloch’s chest, and the bleeding god toppled onto its back.

“Fuck you!” Again in the chest. “Fuck you!” Again and again, emphasizing each shout with another stab of the knife. "Fuck you! Fuck you! Hahahaha! Fuck! You! Fuck! You! Fuck! You! You picked the wrong mom to fuck with, motherfucker!”

The burst of strength ended. The end was here. Mary-Ann could feel it, approaching like an old, long-awaited friend walking down the street.

“Heh…eh-heh-heh…you…can…” Blood dribbled over her lips with her raspy, mumbling breaths. “Run…but sooner or…or later…”

She tore the knife out of Moloch’s chest one last time.

“God’ll…cut you down.”

Mary-Ann swung the knife back down, down deep into Moloch’s forehead. The Horned King shuddered, and its last breath rattled out of its lungs. She pushed herself off the body, took a few wobbling steps away from the corpse, and fell to her knees. She stared off into space for a moment. Her lips moved with the beginning of some silent word.

Mary-Ann Lewitt fell to the blood-stained concrete floor and died.

« **Empire of Dirt (Part 2)** | **Hub** | **The Settling Ash** »

The Settling Ash

> In light of the containment breach at Site-36 early this morning, it has been decided by this administrative committee the Horizon Initiative has acted in violation to the terms of the Non-Interference Operations Pact. As such, the Foundation has withdrawn from this pact, though it recognizes that the breach was the result of rogue agents within the Horizon Initiative. Further investigation of SCP-089 and its purported influence upon Foundation personnel is ongoing.
>
> This committee has also seen it fit to award Mary-Ann Lewitt an honorary Foundation Star for her part in neutralizing SCP-089. In addition, the body of Ms. Lewitt has been returned to the Horizon Initiative, as a sign of goodwill to relieve tensions during dissolution of the Non-Interference Operations Pact.
>
> - Overseer 04

—

The main drawback of Samson's braid, DeMontfort determined, was that when it was removed, all the damage sustained during its use, and all the pain that went with it, came back at once.

Five fractures, a broken leg, two bullet wounds, internal bleeding. For a man of his age and condition, it was something of a miracle that he survived it. He was quite certain he'd be better off dead.

The justice had been swift this time around. Relics taken back, Malleus dissolved completely, his position stripped from him permanently, his future a certain reassignment to some backwater research project or monotonous desk job somewhere where he could cause no trouble and work off his penance for a decade or so. Either that, and he shuddered to consider this alternative, or they

would send him back to parish work.

Ugh. Might as well drown out the pain and boredom and survivor's guilt with that mightiest of man's creations, television.

He pressed the remote on the arm of his hospital bed. The TV on the wall flicked on, to reveal *Dora the Explorer* going about her pitiful purgatorial existence. Thankfully, it was muted.

Hey. Fuckface.

DeMontfort blinked. Yes, those subtitles said exactly that. He reached for his bedside table. Napkin…pen…there.

Hello, Deer. DeMontfort wrote on the napkin.

About time you got in touch. Goddamn, son. That was impressive shit. Nearly brought a tear to my eye.

You? Caring about things? Perish the thought.

I gotta care, 'cause if I don't, I'm just going to be bored. You fucked shit up, and I respect that. Not as much as Top Mom McLiftsalot, but hey, you do what you can do.

That's the closest I've heard to a compliment out of you.

Guess you're on your way out, eh? Good for ya. You're well overdue for an ass-stick-oscopy.

It's a pity I promised not to hunt you down anymore.

I know, I'm an inconsolable mess over it. If we keep going on this route we'll end up in a buddy cop movie and GOD FUCKING DAMMIT SWIPER I'M TRYING TO HAVE A CONVERSATION HERE…bah, whatever. What I'm trying to say is keep yer head up. You ain't dead yet, and let's be honest, that never stopped me. Didn't stop her either.

DeMontfort didn't know what to make of this. Human emotion from Saturn Deer?

Bear in mind, I say that only because if you give up, I'm a Joker without a Batman, and that's no fun.

Ah, there it was. That made more sense.

Now if you'll excuse me, I got shit to do, money to steal, and bitches to fuck.

The subtitles shifted back to their usual dissertation of preschool Spanish. DeMontfort changed the channel. Maybe there was a game on.

—

> Hey. If you're reading this, I'm sorry I wasn't able to make it home.
>
> I hate the fact that I'm writing this, honestly. Part of me wonders if it's a good idea at all: it might just cause you more pain, to hear me after I'm gone. Then I realize that I need to write this, because if I don't, some things might go unsaid. I can't let that happen.
>
> I love you.
>
> Salah, you're my best friend, and the best man I know, and the best husband I could have ever asked for. You were there when I needed you, (and even when I didn't), and made the little moments of my life meaningful. I know you'll raise Naomi right: You've got this.
>
> Naomi, I'm sorry I won't be there for you. I'm sorry you'll only ever have stories and pictures of me. Just know that I love you, and I'm proud of you. Watch over your dad for me, okay? Don't want him stirring up too much trouble. And take care of that guitar: It's yours now. It got me through a war, so whenever you're feeling down, just play away.
>
> As a final thought…don't mourn me too much, okay? Get those tears out and then put that chin up. Always keep looking for the little things that make life good. The world

is a tough and ugly place, but there's more than enough good to make all the pain worth it. God's in the little things.

You two taught me that.

I love you both, and I always will.

—

I, Salah Zairi, hereby resign from active duty in the Shepherd Corps of the Horizon Initiative…

—

Salah laid Naomi down in her crib. First night home from the hospital. First night of the rest of her life. The scars would stay, as would the damage to her lungs, and she would grow up knowing no life but one filled with those injuries, but it would be life.

The house was quiet. Dark. Empty. And yet Salah felt like he would simply walk into the next room and find Mary-Ann sleeping on the couch, exhausted from work or from playing with Naomi, hair all frazzled and snoring gently.

But she wasn't there. The house was hollow. The living room was dark. The bedroom was empty. The kitchen was cold. The feeling was finally sinking in, now that Salah no longer found himself spending every free moment at the hospital with Naomi.

Salah walked into the kitchen and turned on the light. He'd make some soup for himself and go to bed. He hadn't eaten all day. He felt like sleeping forever.

It took a moment to realize that he had opened the wrong cupboard. Instead of canned soup and corn and peas, there were plates and cups, and a glass bottle with a thumb of whiskey left in the bottom. The last little bit of Mary-Ann's rainy-day stash.

There was a pang of pain. This was the last anchor of Mary-Ann in the house: her guitar had been passed on to Naomi, and most anything else was just dressing. Just *things*. Not really *hers*. But this

was hers, and it would just linger in that cabinet and grow old and dusty and unused. Well and truly dead.

Salah stared at it for a moment, before reaching for the bottle and the tumbler that sat next to it. A thought had occurred to him, and without hesitation he was going to follow it through. The young man he thought tamed dusted himself off and screamed at him, screamed that he was turning his back on his own identity, that he would be no proper Muslim. Salah told the young man to shut up and fuck off. Identity? Who was he, when you really got down to it? A Muslim who loved the Queen of England and wrote essays on Chaucer and had heard the Clockwork Voice of God. A man born in obedience, raised in hate, turned to peace, who had found love and ended up with more questions than answers. He was Salah, and right now there was one thing he was sure of. There was one Truth he could define with absolute conviction right now: No god worth worshipping would throw a hissy fit over a man who wanted proper closure.

He sat down at the table, opened the bottle, and poured himself what was left.

“Here’s to you.”

He lifted the tumbler and drank its contents in one swift gulp.

Eight Years Later

Naomi Ibtisam Zairi-Lewitt sat on top of her father’s desk, legs dangling over the edge. A thick book rested in her lap, and her face was scrunched in concentration as she read it. She had a day off from school today, so she had spent it exploring the English department and browsing through her father’s collection of literature under the watchful eye of Joan of Arc on the wall.

A few feet away, Salah typed away at his computer, putting the finishing touches on his e-mail.

> *…Either way, I’m thrilled that they’ve considered review of the Old Brass Gospel for entry into the Universal Texts. Three cheers for progress! We might actually be*

able to see it published before we die of old age. (Though it will probably take them another decade to make any changes.)

Give my best to the others. Naomi and I will visit soon.

God bless

-Salah

“You ready to go home, sweet pea?” he said to his daughter.

“Yeah.” Naomi shut her book, hopped off the desk, and began to gather her books and drawings and inhaler into her backpack. Salah sent his e-mail, shut down his computer, and collected his papers from under the paperweight that had a lot of ciswords on it. A short time later, the two left the office.

To anyone watching in the hall, they would have seen nothing but two average people: one a man with glasses and a few grey hairs at his temples and a red paisley tie and a grey jacket and a brown briefcase. The other a skinny, dark-skinned girl with dirty straw hair and scabby knees and burn scars all over and a bright blue t-shirt with Pikachu on the front and a cherry-red backpack and twiggy arms weighed down with books.

They went home, and had dinner, and finished the rest of Naomi’s math homework, and after a while Salah tucked her into bed, though he knew she would stay up late reading the next chapter of *Ḥayy ibn Yaqẓān* anyway. Salah sat up a while and graded papers, and then went to bed himself.

Life went on.

« **Empire of Dirt (Part 3)** | **Hub** | »

Mud on the Carpet

On the night of April 19th, 2026, the Veil broke. Ten thousand years of strain building up against the fabric of postdiluvian reality finally proved too much to bear, and the Self-Keeping-Secret tore like moth-eaten cloth stretched too far.

In a single night, the foundations the world had built itself on were swept away, and the pillars beneath were exposed for the first time in ages.

In a single night, magic returned to the world. The Ways opened once more, and the old gods woke from their slumber and wandered again in the world of men. Secrets lost since the dawn of man found themselves new voices.

In a single night, the world returned to how it had been before.

In a single night, everything happened.

All at once.

—

A trail of muddy footprints wound across a once-pristine carpet. The prints belonged to a pair of taped-up sneakers, and the sneakers belonged to a little girl wearily treading her way across the room. The girl's name was Naomi, and she was very tired.

The air was warm, musty, thick with motes of dust suspended in beams from an illusory sun. Perhaps on another day, she would have pulled books from the shelves and found a comfortable corner. But not today. Too tired. Exhausted. The act of standing was almost too much for her to bear. She didn't know when she had last slept, how many hours had passed since then. It hadn't been much sleep, she knew. A few hours on hard ground. A cough tickled at the back of her throat: she swallowed it down.

The books absorbed the noise of her passing, looming with polished hardwood and leather binding.

The girl felt very small, treading through this place. Very small, and acutely aware that something was missing, that she was not truly a child anymore. Not fully? How could she be, with what she had seen over the last few months? Everything that was familiar, her home, her school, her neighborhood, most everyone she knew, gone. Never to return.

She felt…hollowed out. What was the line? Butter scraped over too much bread. Too true a phrase, now that she had lived it. Some thoughts dragged themselves through her autopilot mind.

Her shoes were ruined, that was first. Soaked right through. Her feet were cold, her socks were a lost cause, and she definitely had some blisters swelling up. She made a note to get a pair of proper boots. The jacket was okay for a while longer, though she was beginning to pick up the rather distinctive stink everyone else claimed it had acquired.

With her group of refugees led away by the docents from processing, she had closed up the Way, as she was obligated to do, and now had to file a report with the Head Librarian. Her report would then be copied down and filed with the Archivists, with further copies disseminated to the other Conductors.

As the crow flies, it would take just under eighteen thousand years to walk to the Head Librarian's office from where she now stood in the marginal stacks. Of course, crows are notoriously unsubtle creatures with a bad head for direction in esoteric dimensions. In taking advantage of the various junction points between there, here, and somewhere, the walk could be made in twenty minutes or so.

Naomi's muddy footprints eventually dried up as she made her way across narrow hallways and reading rooms. The architecture, direction of gravity, and even what classified as a book shifted often. Spider-legged Pages scuttled about the shelves, readers lurked in the corners, and all seemed to be as it normally was. Today she saw a trio of pale purple fish-men discussing philosophy in burbly voices, the Minister of Clouds (May He Forever Be Voluminous and Fluffy)

pacing through a section on practical application of romance theory, and a large bucket of curly fries leafing through an atlas of the Amberbradcht Food Zones.

One got quickly used to the number of alien forms found in the Library: most were welcome, after all.

Past a brilliantly illuminated reading room inside of a god[1] and a corkscrew passage of slate-blue steel, she arrived on a little balcony in the edge of the center chamber of Library: the Head Librarian's office.

It was at this point that Naomi's sense of scale and proportion hung itself right then out of self-preservation. It was the only way of viewing the enormity of the room, and the thing that filled it.

The Serpent moved. A serpent the size of a planet, coils of muscle bunching and twisting. A head the size of a continent rose up, a pair of pince-nez spectacles balanced on its snout.

"Hello, child."

"Hello, Satan."

"I suppose you're here to tell me that you've brought more refugees to my Library." The Serpent continued moving about, pulling country-sized, granite-bound books from the walls of its office with its tail. "They're tracking mud on my carpets, child."

Naomi glanced down at her own feet for the briefest of moments before looking back at the Serpent.

"Sorry."

"Bah. What is one more pair of feet? How many this time?"

"Twenty-one. Through the Yzlotski-Rubharbic Way."

"Anything else to report?"

"It's still stable, but there're a lot of Ten-Colors running around, trying to get in."

“Go on.”

“We tried talking to them, but they didn’t feel like listening. Three people died.”

Naomi felt like she should feel something about that, should feel something about watching them die. She knew she did, once, but that was…only a few months ago.

Only a few months to strip her of that. To turn that switch off.

“Mmm. Very well. We will re-route through the Pendlock and Whaizha Ways until this is settled. I will send a squad of Collectors to regain control. You have done well, child. Go, rest. I suspect your father is awaiting your return.”

Naomi nodded, but instead of leaving, she sat down on the balcony, arms on the railing, legs dangling off the edge into thousands of miles of space.

“You’re a lot nicer than people say you are.”

“Pure character assassination. Better than confusing me for that thrice-damned rapist on his sodding throne, I suppose, but please restrain presumptions of nicety. I am a tester of men and a god of difficult choices and a keeper of delicate knowledge. An ass by trade. But, that said, I do have a vested interest in keeping mankind alive and well. They keep me both entertained and employed.”

“Someone’s got to do it, I guess.”

“Precisely. Someone must provide the options. My sister was the one for all the sense and order and right judgment. Order and chaos, free will and instruction working in unison. Wisdom impotent without the full knowledge of good and evil, and that knowledge self-destructive without the guidance of wisdom. Beautiful system. Of course, dear sister Sophie is in pieces now, which complicates matters greatly.”

Gears clicked into place inside Naomi’s head.

“Wait, that means she’s…”

“Aye, she is.” The Serpent paused for a moment. “Were she in her right mind at the moment, I feel you would appreciate her company. Now, that you can blame me for.”

The Serpent went back to sorting his books, occasionally writing in them with a Europe-sized quill pen, dipped in an inkwell Mediterranean.

After a while, the Serpent spoke again.

“You are still here. Speak, child. I can tell you are uneasy.”

Naomi let out a long, tired breath.

“I don’t know if I can do it anymore. Conducting, I mean.”

Break the dam, and words keep bubbling out.

“Everyone always says that I’m so much like my mom, and…I just want to tell them *so what*? I never met her. She’s just like…a name and a face but I don’t know who they belong to, and everyone expects me to be just like her and I try my best but I just *can’t*.

The Serpent was silent.

“And I can’t talk to dad about this because he still misses her, and he’s so stressed with Tribunal work, and I don’t want to disappoint him…”

The Serpent was silent.

“And I just…I’m just tired.”

A pause, and then the Serpent spoke.

“Go along and rest, child. Return when you are ready. You have done more than enough good, at a great cost to yourself. No one could rightfully blame you. You have not failed.

"Your mother killed a god, and the shadows of god-slayers are both wide and heavy. It is easy to be crushed under that shadow. Too many men and women have been. ‘My father has done great things:

I have no worth until I have matched his feats with my own' they say to themselves, and this guilt of failure eats away until they are hollowed out.

"But you do not have to become her. You do not have to walk in her shadow, and I have no doubt that she would have you standing at her side, not behind. She did not kill Moloch for her own glory: She struck down the Horned King because she loved you. Those around you want to see you become good and kind and strong, as she was. Any inbred barbarian with a magic sword can kill a god. It takes something more to be a good person in a cruel world.

"You stand on the threshold of innocence and knowledge, passing through from the simplicity of one to the bare cruelty of the other. It is a test. My test. It is not easy."

There was a hint of a smile behind the glasses.

"But it is not impossible. That is all I have to say on the matter. Go now. Your father is waiting."

Naomi stood up, and wiped her eyes on her sleeve.

—

It was several hours later when Salah returned to the makeshift apartment that served as home in the Library. The lamp hanging from the rafters was turned low, just enough for him to see his way to the bathroom door at the end of the hallway without stubbing his toes.

He poked his head into Naomi's room, to see his daughter curled up on her cot, sleeping as deeply as King Arthur under his mountain. She was still wearing her mud-crusted shoes. Salah smiled wearily, and went about preparing himself for bed. He was exhausted: trying to coordinate order out of chaos of the world was not an easy task, and he was not suited for the Tribunal, even in the temporary manner he now served, despite what others claimed.

He completed his proper nighttime rituals, trudged back to his room of the room, and saw on his pillow a folded piece of paper.

The writing inside was in a small, tidy hand, and read:

> Got back okay.
> I love you.
> N

The N was big and cursive and embellished, though perhaps not as detailed as it often was.

Salah folded the paper back up and set it on the desk by the head of the cot, and then turned off the lamp.

« **Hub** »

Footnotes
1. For inside of most dogs it is far too dark to read.

Those Thin, Penultimate Hours

Bishop of New Rome, Vicar of Jesus Christ, Successor of the Prince of the Apostles, Supreme Pontiff of the Universal Church, Primate of the Americas, Archbishop and Metropolitan of the West, Sovereign of the Vatican City State, Servant of the servants of God, Pope Maximilian, was drinking coffee out of a Styrofoam cup.

It wasn't particularly good coffee. It wasn't even real coffee, for that matter. It was the cheap brown slurry common in the regions where the beans couldn't be grown and the genefixed plants were too expensive for shoestring paychecks.

The stump of his left leg was itchy. He hated when that happened. He'd have to go excuse himself and remove his prosthetic, and that was just incredibly awkward. No one thought of the pope as someone who had stump-itches.

He was on edge, and it had not simply been interacting with Transit Authority and watching the headlight hunters run down the backroads the night before. He could feel the world falling apart around him, the glue he had worked so hard to place stretching thin and peeling away, and he didn't know if he could keep the weight shorn up any longer. The flock was small, scattered, and afraid, and just as he had managed to gather them together and give them someone to follow, he felt the rug torn out from underneath him. What good was it then, when their shepherd was just as guideless and afraid as they were?

It was so unfitting, he thought, to be sitting here, in the office of a school principal, two plainclothes Swiss guardsmen by the door. Yet, to a part of him, there was a great deal of comfort to be found in a simple cup of fake coffee, and in the mundanity of being made to wait. Someone had decided to treat him like a human being.

The office was small, plain, very neatly organized. A budget-grade touch-screen for the desk, bookshelves of well-thumbed paperbacks

and yellowed anthologies sorted by author's last name. A simple little nameplate sat on the desk, next to an empty coffee mug that had "WORLD'S BEST MOM" painted on it in childish handwriting.

The placard read: Dr. Naomi Zairi-Lewitt.

Maximilian knew the name, though he had never met her in person before. The woman was something of a controversy magnet, and very clearly someone who did not much care for what the masses thought of her: The file they kept on her in New Rome was thicker than his thumb was long.

There were footsteps from outside the door, and the woman herself entered the room followed by a grim-looking man with an eyepatch.

"I am so sorry to keep you waiting, your Holiness, but there were some discipline issues that needed sorted out."

"It's no trouble," he said, standing up to shake her hand. His Nigerian accent was, as usual, quite thick. He was quite sure that there would be many men of lower rank who would have been reduced to fuming indignancy by both the wait and her attitude, but he understood. Understanding things was a large part of his job, especially understanding where God vested the actual power. She was a Teacher, and Teachers very often had Matters That Needed Attention.

She was a small, wiry woman, just around fifty or so, wearing a white blouse and a black skirt. Glasses. Dark skin splotched with patches of fiery red. Short, light hair. She didn't look like someone who would cause a lot of trouble, which was an instant indication that she was both capable of and willing to cause massive amounts of trouble.

Which, for the most part, she had done. Iron-fisted educational programs, open criticism of Foundation settlement policies, specifically that of the Projects at Caketown, heading the profligation of the so-called Universal Texts, teaching six year olds magic. Nothing occult, she had gone on record a dozen times clarifying the point. It was Applied Narrative Field Manipulation, nothing occult about it. There wasn't even any dabbling involved.

Maximilian had yet to decide his own feelings on that matter. Publicly, he had to condemn the practice. In the privacy of his own mind, he had to admit that having settlements where every citizen knew how to perform an exorcism was not a bad thing.

The woman sat down at her desk, and Maximillian had a brief flashback to a time forty years before, when he had been in the same spot, except with his mother and father sitting on either side of him and a crumpled up parent-teacher summons in his pocket. It faded quickly.

“We’re a bit low on the pomp and circumstance today, I’m afraid,” she said, smiling. “But it’s good to finally meet you, your Holiness.”

“Likewise. I hope that…well, I hope that this can be something of a fitting show of goodwill before, ah…”

“Before the end of the world?”

“Yes.”

Naomi nodded.

“Would you mind if we went outside?” she said. “It gets stuffy up here, and the weather’s been good today.”

—

The lake and the processing plant could be seen from the top of the school’s south wall, past the line of pine trees on the shore. The still, stagnant water was cut up into neat squares and rectangles, choked with green and brown and red around the skeleton in the center of the lake. Sequoia-sized ribs shone bright white under the morning sun.

Down below on the school grounds, classes were changing. Students wandered in packs across the quad, dragging out their little moment of freedom as long as they could before heading back into the fortress-like, bomb-shelter buildings. Some of the older students who had free periods were lounging by the lake or orchard. Mr. Tickman’s biology class was tending the west gardens. Rifle cracks could be heard from the firing range on the north side, paired with

the bounce of rubber balls on asphalt from the courts just under the south wall. Seen about the quad were several of the school's golems: massive Tzor lumbering across the field with a shipping crate on one shoulder; short, round Even waddling along beside Dr. Tau; blocky, graffiti-covered Selah keeping watch from the center of the green; gentle Gir drawing chalk pictures on the sidewalk outside the math building with some of the littlest students.

"You have a remarkable school here, Doctor," Maximilian said. "Despite our disagreements, I really do appreciate what you've done here. I know there are plenty of others in the Church who agree, even if they don't like admitting it."

"Thank you, your Holiness." A pause. "My biggest regret is that we can't go much farther than our own borders. Everything the Initiative has is focused in so few areas."

"You do what you can."

"Never feels like enough."

"I know. It never does."

"Headmistress!" A voice that sounded like a woman trapped in a large marble cube called out from the orchard. Maximilian looked down to see that the woman emerging from the trees with a basket of fruit was actually made of marble, quite stout around the everything, and studded with smoothed chunks of amethyst.

"Yes, Ahlama?"

"We've got vampires in the watermelons." She reached into her basket and pulled out a small, blood-stained melon with a wide, snaggle-toothed mouth. It snarled and snapped at her, but did not bite, being smart enough to not bite the hand of someone who was made out of marble.

"Tickman's got a class in the west garden, they can help you root them out, but put up a sign just in case."

"Right."

“Thank you very much, Ahlama.” Naomi shook her head and smiled as the golem walked off. “Just got her last semester. Wonderful woman, but a little self-conscious about her weight.”

They continued walking down the wall, enjoying the sun and the breeze and the laughter of children playing and the stench of algae pools.

“Do you know what will happen?” he said, after a while. It was the question that had been gnawing at his mind since long before he arrived.

“Only as much as anyone else does. The nistarim will re-unite at the Pit and then…God only knows after that. Everything will be made right, or so it’s claimed, but it’s vague on the *how* and – Lin! *LIN!* Put the dodgeball *down*, please. If you and your sister send anyone else to the nurse’s office you’re going to be cleaning algae filters for detention!” She sighed. “It’s vague on the how. Whether or not there’s going to be a fight.”

“Evil doesn’t die without a fight.”

“And that’s what I’m worried about. I hope and pray that these kids aren’t going to have to go through that.

“For their sake.” She nodded towards a train of small children holding hands crossed the campus, led by a group of teachers. Each of the little figures had the bulging eyes and flabby lips and misshapen heads signature of fetal telekill poisoning. “They’ll wake up tomorrow morning, and maybe they’ll be cured. Maybe they’ll wake up and be able to speak and understand, and dress themselves, and not be trapped in their own minds. Maybe we’ll wake up tomorrow and there are no more tooth fairies in the river slums.”

“And maybe the mothers of New Rome will have enough food for their children.”

“And at the same time, part of me, the little teacher part that likes to look at all the angles, says that there’s no way it’ll just all be given to us like that. You can’t just be given the prize without the work. Or

maybe we've done the work already." She motioned to the man with the eyepatch, who was standing a distance away with the Swiss Guardsmen. "Elihayo, my bodyguard, he was there at the Fall of Jerusalem. In the Pit for fifty-one hours. Lost an eye, his voice, and half of his mind. He'd be first in line, and it'd be a crime if he wasn't. Him and all the rest who've given that much."

Maximilian nodded.

"Maybe it would be better if I didn't know that it was going to happen, just to get rid of the anticipation." Naomi exhaled deeply. "I don't know. I really don't know. I don't even know if the Texts will be worth anything tomorrow morning. I know the Vatican hasn't been in favor of that, but it's a bit shaking seeing your whole life's work get tossed like that, even if the replacement is better than what it ever could have been. You get attached." She shook her head. "Look at me. You come here to make peace and I just unload all of this."

"It's no trouble."

"You would have liked it. The Texts, I mean."

"Probably, if the times were different."

"Probably. I'm just going to trust that by the time we all wake up tomorrow, things will be okay."

"And if they aren't, you will have my support."

Naomi looked over, nodded, and they shook on it.

« **Hub** »

Down by the River

> Those Thin, Penultimate Hours, while not strictly plot related, will help greatly in understanding things.

Dawn hung in misty sheets, curling through tangled forest. A mourning dove cooed in the grey distance. Here and there the half-collapsed skeleton of a house could be seen through the thick trees, lit softly by the pre-morning.

A woman walked down the road, splattered with gore, a lumpy black body slung over one shoulder as if it was little more than a bundle of twigs. She was a very heavy-set woman, in both overall shape and the fact that she consisted of nine hundred pounds of white marble studded with smoothed chunks of amethyst.

The marble woman's name was Ahlama Bat Amir, and she was singing. Her voice reverberated through the trees, clear as the morning itself.

"As I went down in the river to pray / studying about that good old way / and who shall wear the starry crown / Good Lord, show me the way…"

The cyclops slung over her shoulder, with the snapped neck and caved-in skull and shattered rib-cage, had been stalking around the local farms for the last few nights, and at least three goats had been stolen. Poor thing was starving and half-mad, not stable enough to be relocated elsewhere. Had to be put down. Their meat wasn't any good to eat, but the biology classes would have a fine time dissecting it.

"Oh, sisters, let's go down, let's go down, come on down… Oh sisters, let's go down, down in the river to pray…"

The path road wound on through the forest. Occasionally, Ahlama would pass a watchtower or tree platform where a member of the

Guard would be sitting, huddled in their jacket, perhaps sipping tea or soup out of a thermos, or gnawing on some squirrel jerky, gun at the ready, radio at hand. She waved at each one she passed, though she was not able to see if they waved back. The watchtower guards hid themselves well.

"As I went down in the river to pray / studying about that good old way / and who shall wear the robe and crown / Good Lord, show me the way…"

The woods gave away a bit from the road, revealing a few inhabited homesteads, and the stone walls of the town rose in the distance. The first sunlight of the day filtered through the trees.

"Oh, brothers, let's go down, let's go down, come on down… Oh brothers, let's go down, down in the river to pray…"

The walls rose higher and higher as she approached. They did not have the distinction of being unbreached, but no walls in these days had that to brag about. But they were tall and thick, with various wards against harm carved into the blocks, and they were manned by the Guard. That was good enough for most. These were walls that promised salvation to the lost.

"Good morning!" She waved at the gatehouse.

A window above the gate opened, revealing the head of a gangly, acne-faced, tired-looking student.

"Morning, Ahlama," he yawned. "Nice job ther-what?" He turned his head back inside the window. "Sister, I am not falling asleep, I'm completely awake…yes, Sister, I know…yes, I know…Sister, I am *not* falling asleep." He turned back to Ahlama, rolling his eyes. "Hold on, we'll let you in, get you some water to wash all that off."

Ahlama nodded, and a short time later the groan of machinery could be heard from within the wall as Gate Leibowitz opened. A second student, shorter and mousy looking, was standing there with a bucket full of hot water and a rag.

"Here you go, Ahlama."

“Thank you, Ben.” The gate shut behind her with a monolithic sound.

“We got a note from the Headmistress for you.” Ben handed Ahlama a folded piece of paper.
The note read:

> *Ahlama-*
>
> *A woman by the name of Jun Iseul Error should have arrived with the West Road Trade Guild caravan late last night. She’s here to do some study of the reliquary and will be staying at the school for several weeks. I need you to show her around. Standard tour, nothing special.*
>
> *I’m afraid I won’t be able to meet with her today, so please pass my apologies on to Ms. Error: the Transit Authority decided to call a meeting with the town council and we’ll be at it all day. If I manage to get out early, I’ll see if I can find you.*
>
> *Thanks a bunch*
>
> *-NIZL*

There was a pneumatic hiss from the wall on the right, ending at a tiny opening in the wall at head height, just the size of someone’s thumb. A moment later the white-haired, black-armored, stern-faced, and incredibly tiny countenance of Sister Superior Victoria, OVH, stepped out onto her little balcony.

“Good morning, Sister.” Ahlama saluted with her free hand. Victoria nodded for ease.

“I see the Emperor has granted you victory in your hunt. And that you’ve received the Headmistress’ missive. Excellent. I’ll have these louts take care of that carcass.”

Ahlama watched Ben’s face drop in disappointment and gave him a sympathetic smile. No one got off work when Sister Victoria was on duty. She then excused herself, found a secluded spot a short distance away, and washed off the splatters of dried blood and pulpy viscera from the cyclops she had killed. Wouldn’t be fitting to show

anyone around while looking like that.

—

Jun Iseul Error wiped the grit from her glasses on a threadbare handkerchief. Around her, the caravan market bustled. The West Road Trade Guild, being a sizable group meaning to stay for several days, had set up inside the walls, in the Inside Market, and the town within a town had planted its short-lived roots there: cooking fires sent their smoke up to the sky, dogs and children raced underfoot through the trucks and wagons, bison[1] snorted, and the merchants bickered and shouted in a dozen dialects. With the day would come business: some wise shoppers among the townsfolk had decided to beat the later crowds. The Guildsmen appreciated this, and took the opportunity to break out their fake early-bird specials.

Jun stuffed the handkerchief back in her pocket. She was a thin, wiry woman, the kind that was built on stretched meals and long work hours, somewhere on the shy side of thirty years old: black hair pulled back in a short ponytail, straw hat to block out the sun, beaten old backpack and weather-worn hunting rifle, travel-mussed clericals. Someone had accidentally stepped on her collar a few days ago, leaving it rather crumpled and sad looking.

But she was finally here. It took a month and a half on the road from the west, but she was finally here. Not that she had a chance to enjoy it yet, but the relief was setting in. Travel didn't agree with her, or at least the plodding monotony of cross-country travel. Dealing with spookums in the night was easy. The byzantine labyrinth of intra-caravan drama and the omnipresent bureaucracy of the Transit Authority were well outside her areas of expertise, and she was glad to trade them for regular access to toilet paper.

The letter of introduction sat folded in her pocket. She didn't think she'd need it now: she had spoken with the Headmistress of the Hope Lake School on the phone several weeks ago when the caravan had stopped in CORN LAND, DOMAIN OF SRQNABOTF.

"Hello? Excuse me, are you Ms. Error?"

Jun turned to see a fat woman approaching her. It took a moment

for the details, the word carved into forehead, the hollow eyes filled with gentle fire, the fact that she was made of stone, to fall together in Jun's head and spell out "golem".

"Yes, that's me."

"Oh, good. I was worried I wouldn't be able to find you: I can barely understand these people when they're giving directions."

Jun had never met a golem before, and she had not expected them to be so conversational. This was a reassuring surprise.

"The accent is pretty thick, yeah. Are you from the school?"

"Mmm-hmm. The Headmistress wanted me to show you around today, and to let you know that she's sorry she wasn't able to do it in person."

"No problem. I can't imagine her life is anything less than busy. Lead the way." Jun didn't voice it as a command: that would make sense, but it felt impolite.

The golem nodded and began to walk back the way she had came. Jun kept pace with her.

"I know you know who I am, but I don't know your name."

"Oh, sorry. I'm Ahlama. It's nice to meet you, Ms. Error."

"Likewise. Oh, and, uh, just between us, you can drop the whole Ms. Error thing. Jun is fine, or just Error. Friday's good too."

"You have a lot of names."

"When you throw them all together I'm Mother Jun Friday Iseul Error, and by that point it's just nonsense."

The golem-woman chuckled, the sound rolling out in P-waves.

"I suppose it is."

The pair made their way out of the Inside Market and into the town

proper.

—

By modern standards, the town of Hope Lake was a place of almost unimaginable wealth: clean cobbled streets, electric streetlamps, solar panels and windmills and vegetable gardens and chicken coops among the houses and shops. The lake provided enough algae to make sure that no one went too hungry, and the presence of the school meant that the literacy rate was significantly higher – nearly eighty-five percent. The presence of the Guard meant that crime was low, as well as deflecting threats from the outside, and the old sponsorship of the Initiative had seen to keeping the populace's spiritual needs fulfilled, though Tribunal had become more of a cultural power rather than a political one: The settlements had their own leaders, their own governments, all tied together by a shared birth.

The cost of creating these havens in the chaotic aftermath of the Breach had been bankrupting the Initiative, clearing out its reliquaries, and begging, borrowing, stealing and scavenging every spare cent that could be drummed up. But where the Initiative fell apart, the seven city-states of Horizon rose to fill its place: Bastion, Hope Lake, St. Kateri, Watchpoint, New Pitt, Ghibli, and Levi. Mizbeach had been the eighth, but had been handed over to Marshall, Carter, and Dark Ltd as collateral for a loan default. Prayers went up daily for the sake of those who lived in that town.

Ahlama had not been born in Hope Lake, but it was home. She knew many of the townsfolk she saw now by name (golems have a good mind for memory), and she waved to them as she passed on towards the school. Jun remained quiet, though Ahlama noticed that the woman was watching everything with an intent eye.

"So where are you from, Jun?" she asked.

"Little trapper town around Mount Whitney, right off the trader road down to Vegas. Nothing like this. A lot more…salt of the Earth, if you get what I'm saying."

"Lots of hair, bad teeth, and everyone's related?"

“Yep. Plain old folks.”

“The best kind.”

“And the not-so-best.”

“Yeah, that too. Lot of the time they’re the same people. You’ve got a parish, then?”

“I was wondering when you’d bring that up.” Jun tugged at her crumpled collar. “You know how it goes: world falls apart, then gets put back together all on its head. Job’s gotta get done, and I don’t think God cares much about who does it, so long as they do it right.”

Ahlama nodded. Jobs needed doing, and if you were told to do the job, you did the job.

“You think like a golem.”

“Good thing I know that’s a compliment now.”

The pair passed through the gate of the school. The archway above them was engraved with the following:

> Hope Lake School
> Founded 2036
> IN SCIENTIA SUPERVIVERE

The walls were not as tall or as thick as those surrounding the town, but they were fortress enough to serve as a fallback in the case of invasion. Thankfully, that had not yet been the case. Ahlama waved to the guards as they passed.

“If you have any questions, just ask, and I’m sorry if I ramble a bit.” Ahlama imitated clearing her throat: she didn’t actually have a throat to clear.

“Hope Lake School was founded in 2036, shortly after Horizon troops retook this area from…”

—

Jun juggled observing the school and listening to her guide: there was a great deal to take in.

The school was a nested fortress. If the town's walls fell, the school could hold out. If the school's walls were breached, barricades could easily be put up between the buildings to fortify the inner campus, and if those barricades were breached, the buildings themselves were easily defensible from the inside. Fortresses within fortresses. Jun was a woman of the hinterlands, fit for chasing away spookums and brewing moonshine. This was all far more impressive than anything she had seen back west, save perhaps the Angelic University and the Vegas Archives.

The campus was still, as it was still quite early. The students would be scraping out five more minutes before breakfast, though a few early risers could be seen jogging around. A few of the children who lived in town hovered around in little groups.

Ahlama went on with her description, detailing the classes and the daily regimen. Every child was expected to learn a trade by the time they graduated, augmented with the rigors of a serious scholastic life. Ignorance and superstition were the two great enemies: it was no good to make a blacksmith who did not know the workings of the body, no good to make an artist who could not handle a gun, no good to make an engineer who could not perform an exorcism. The world did not allow for that any more.

The pair meandered for a while, and eventually Jun caught sight of a man sitting on a glacial boulder by the pond, fishing rod in hand. His entire face was a knotted mass of scar tissue: a long gash on the left, burns and a lost eye on the right.

She prodded Ahlama's arm.

"Where'd he get those scars?"

"Mmm? Oh…Everywhere."

Jun nodded. Every community had someone like that, some old protector who had been everywhere, seen everything, done everything.

“That’s Hammersmith,” Ahlama continued. “He used to be one of the Tribunal, now he’s the head groundskeeper. Spends most of his time fishing, now, though apparently he once caved in a demon’s skull with his bare hands.”

“Only apparently?”

“He usually uses a hammer.”

“Oh. Well then. Remind me to stay off the grass.”

Other figures of local note were introduced as they cropped up. Some might not have been notable at all, but they stuck out in Jun’s memory all the same.

There were several other golems on the campus, though they all looked to be more traditionally golem-like and were far less talkative than Ahlama. Though there was the chalk-white one with a simple smile who played with the toddlers being dropped off at the daycare. Jun watched a pair of parents say their goodbyes: the mother had a chemistry textbook curled under her arm. The acne-pocked father wore a guard uniform and a scraggly excuse for a beard.

Ahlama just shrugged, and said “Life happens.”

They spoke with a very large man whose beard approached the waist of his khaki cargo shorts, who was awkwardly climbing a tree, butterfly net in hand. He looked like the large, earnest kind of man who had a lot of silent Js in his patronymic and was very fond of mead, meat, and pillaging. This was, apparently, the Headmistress’ husband.

There was a golden-tan woman with headphones and what looked to be a bathrobe embroidered with a constantly scrolling waterfall of musical notation conducting music class in the orchard. The choir was accompanied by a swirling cloud of humming ghosts. A half dozen teens in paint-smeared overalls hauled chunks of scavenged masonry past a troop of children with practice rifles. The workshop clanked and clunked with the noise of construction, and the alchemy shed behind the science building exploded at least twice during the tour: Ahlama wasn’t sure if the third time counted, because it might

have actually just ascended to a higher plane for a minute or two. Jun trusted her judgment on that.

The steady parade of faculty and buildings and courses and little details built up into some massive amorphous wad of chewed gum in Jun's head. The really good kind one got as a kid when one decided to blow what passed for allowance on treats from a caravaneer. A day or two would sort it out proper.

The tour came to stop at the guest house, and Ahlama saw herself off. Jun threw her pack on the chair in her room, lay down on the bed, and stared at the ceiling. It was first time in a month and a half that she had the opportunity to. A bed with clean sheets, a roof with no leaks, a shower with presumably hot water, real food, and toilet paper. Put them all together and you had civilization.

But you've got something to look for, remember…

Yes, yes, she had something to look for. She'd get to the reliquary later.

For now, she just felt like staring at the ceiling for a bit.

—

It was some time later, when the sun was on its winding path down, that Ahlama finally caught up with the Headmistress. It was plain to her that Naomi Zairi-Lewitt had been through a rather rough day.

"Are you alright?"

"Not at all. They're not going to cut off the caravans to Toledo, thank God, but they are going to keep the negotiations up for another day, and up the prices on Transit Chits. Again." She shook her head. "I hope your side of things went smoothly."

"It did, headmistress."

"Good. Thank you." She yawned. "Sorry. I've up since four. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Right."

Naomi passed out of the scene, a man with an eye patch following a short distance behind her. He looked as if he had fallen face first down a flight of stairs made out of blenders and aged a full thirty or forty years beyond his age. Elihayo, the Headmistress' bodyguard. Upon meeting his gaze, Ahlama felt the furnace in her chest burn a little hotter, and with this she felt an acute self-consciousness that perhaps she was not properly polished, or was too large, and this all was accompanied by an incredibly strong desire to hold hands and go on a walk with the deformed bodyguard.

"Shalom, Elihayo," she said as he passed, wondering if he would notice the soft heat blush in her eyes.

"Shalom." His voice sounded like his lungs were filled with wet gravel.

Why not ask him? She'd ask him. Ask him right now, if he wanted to go on a…a walk. A walk yes, that's what they would do. A walk around the lake.

"Elihayo, I was wondering…would you like to go out, maybe, and –"

"No."

The bodyguard shuffled away, and left Ahlama standing in the hallway, alone.

"Oh…okay…bye."

« Hub »

Footnotes
1. No explanation has yet been found for the spontaneous return of the American Bison population during the night of June 24th, 2028, though few people complain.

Tolerance

At half past five, it began to rain.

Brother Raymond of Baskerville was trudging his way back from the Achrenite compound, his boots sucking on the mud of the fertile fields surrounding it. The weather was utterly miserable, but still, he was not looking forward to returning to the shelter of the Horizon Initiative's lines, no indeed, and certainly not to reporting his humiliating failure at making the Achrenites see reason. It wasn't that he was afraid that his superiors would reprimand him for it, since he knew they would understand. No, it was that very same understanding, so typical of the Shepherd Corps, which infuriated him. He could already picture the Abbot's kindly smile, that look of vaguely disguised condescension that would no doubt accompany the metaphorical pat on the head he was about to receive, like some sort of slow-witted dog. He was well and truly sick of being looked down upon, and the fact that his fellow Shepherds didn't even have the dignity of doing so to his face only made it worse. He should have stayed at the monastery.

Raymond cursed under his breath as he ducked under the red-tape marked lines, and slunk his way to the derelict electric shed that served as the command post for the Shepherds. He expected the Abbot, maybe a few other high level operatives, but instead he found the tiny space occupied by no less than twenty people, most of whom Raymond had never seen before. The exceptions were the Abbot and his two assistants, relegated to standing dejectedly in a musty corner, and the figure in the very center of the room, currently peering at a tactical map of the area with a disinterested look on his sharp-featured face. While the man wasn't particularly tall, or handsome, or otherwise very notable at all, there was a certain aura of command about him that Raymond couldn't deny. He had only seen him once before, on the day he left his monastery to join the Horizon Initiative- Director Henry DeMontfort, head of Project Malleus. Seeing Raymond enter, the Abbot waved him to approach

with as much magnanimity as he could muster while attempting to brush an old spider web out of the folds of his robes.

“Raymond, I am glad to see you returned to us safely. Tell me, how fared your mission?”

Another thing Raymond detested about the Abbot was that flowery way he used to talk to his underlings. He wasn't quite sure what made the man think that it was anything other than ridiculous, but he supposed he had to suffer through it quietly. That was what being a Shepherd was all about.

“Poorly, Sir. The Achernites refused our offer of gradual integration, and furthermore rejected any regulation of their preaching or expansion within local communities. Sir, if I may ask, what are all those people doing here? And why is *he* here?”

The Abbot sighed, giving up on the attempts at cleaning his now dusty attire, and gave DeMontfort a wary look. “It seems like Project Malleus does not approve of the way we conduct our business. He said he is taking charge of the situation. I was hoping you’d have good news I could use against him, but now…”

“Honestly, Sir, this really couldn't have gone any other way. The Achernites are heretics, and should be treated as such.”

“That is not for you to decide, my son. We are Shepherds, and our role is to guide the lost into the light.”

“Lost? They’re Neo-Pantheists! Every word that comes out of their mouths is filth, besmirching everything we believe in. They spit at the face of God, and you’re telling me we should turn the other cheek?”

The Abbot was about to reply, when a clear, steely voice interrupted him. “You, emissary. A word, if you will.”

Raymond turned to see DeMontfort exiting the shed, and winced as two very large, very scarred, and very well-armed individuals grabbed a hold of his shoulders and dragged him after the Director. DeMontfort stopped beneath the shadow of a dead pine tree and

started going through his pockets in a search of something, as his lieutenants tossed Raymond on the mud at his feet. He tried getting up, but a not-too-gentle prod of a steel-toed boot to his ribs made him reconsider. Finally, DeMontfort produced a small paper packet from an inner pocket and examined it with a look of vague displeasure on his pointed face.

"Gum?"

"Er, no thank you?"

"Smart man. This nicotine stuff is rather terrible. I understand that your… peace mission was a failure." That wasn't a question.

"Um, how did you know?"

DeMontfort snorted, and began chewing on a rather unappealing piece of grey gum. "I read the dossier. The Achernites are the worst type of heretics. The Shepherds were fools to even attempt a peace mission. No, they must be dealt with more severely."

Despite being stuck in the mud under the boot of the human equivalent of a bull shark, Raymond found himself nodding. "I told the Abbot just that. The things I saw them do at their camp, Sir, the things they said… no godly man could bear them to live."

DeMontfort gave him an apprising look, and motioned to his lieutenants. The weight of the boot lifted, and Raymond got to his feet, gingerly picking globs of greenish mud from his hair. The Director began moving again, and Raymond followed, the two hulking lieutenants not far behind.

"You're not as stupid as you look. I half-expected you to weep and faint at the mere mention of violence. That's what your Abbot would no doubt do."

"I'm nothing like that doddering old fart!" Raymond was surprised by his own outburst, but DeMontfort looked pleased.

"Hah, that's the spirit! Maybe there's hope for you yet, Brother Raymond. Come, walk with me for a while, we have some business to attend to." Again, this wasn't a suggestion, as the the two

lieutenants, whom Raymond dubbed Brickjaw and Sawscar after the only notable features on the slab of meat they called a face, made abundantly clear. For a short while the group walked in silence, until Raymond realized with a growing sense of horror he walked this way earlier today.

"Um, Sir, I don't think we should be going this way, we'll wind up right in the Achernite camp."

"I should hope so, since that's where we're going."

"But…why? I though you said negotiating with them was stupid."

"I'm not going there to negotiate. I'm going to talk, and they are going to listen."

"And if they don't?"

"A good question. Lieutenant, what's the ETA on the Gofrit team?"

This was directed at Sawscar, who checked something on a small tablet computer and replied, in an unexpectedly soft voice: "About ten minutes, Sir."

DeMontfort nodded, and continued walking, as if that answered Raymond's question. It didn't, but Raymond thought it would be unwise to argue. The group continued its track along the wheat fields, finally reaching a clearing in front of a small, gated community. DeMontfort stopped before the gate and rang a brass bell connected to a long piece of rope that hung on a post next to it. The sound of other bells came moments later from within the community, but all stayed quiet otherwise. Raymond gingerly approached the Director, who was tapping his foot impatiently and struggling with the packing of another stick of nicotine gum. "They wouldn't let me in, at first. I had to wait outside for nearly an hour before someone came out to meet me."

DeMonfort cursed and dropped the gum, instead pulling a silver cigarette case from an inner pocket. "Well, I suppose we'll just have to attract their attention. Lieutenant?"

Sawscar nodded, and with one swift movement drew his handgun,

cocked it, and fired three quick shots into the air. The silence following the gunshot was soon punctuated by shouts. The Director smiled, and lit a slim cigarette with a match he managed to produce without Raymond noticing. "That should do it."

And indeed, a few minutes later a trio of figures approached the gate. Two were scruffy-looking guards, each carrying an ancient carbine and sponsoring a filthy beard. The third was a woman even older looking than the guns, her skin and hair mottled with strangely textured patches of brown, green and grey, though it was too dark to see exactly what they were. She hobbled over, heavily leaning on a stout branch she used as a cane, and stared at Raymond and DeMontfort with unconcealed disgust in her eyes. DeMontfort, in turn, looked like he just stepped on something nasty and was examining the results. After a silence which Raymond thought would last forever, the old woman finally spoke, her voice creaky with age:

"What do ye want, fat monk? All that was said still holds, ye know, and ye big friends ain't gonna change that."

"Mistress Achren, if you'd please reconsider, I'm sure you'd find our terms quite reasona-"

"We told ye, we ain't interested in none of your fractional god muck! Off with ye!"

DeMontfort gave the woman a smile that held all the warmth of a glacier. "I think talking to my young companion might have given you the wrong idea about our organization. We weren't asking. You will cease your preaching, dismantle your complex, and disband, or we will be forced to take action."

"And by what right would ye do that, priest? This is our land, and we'll preach as we wish. The Gospel of Wholeness will be spoken, like it or not. Ye shouldn't reject it, you can't anyway. You're part of it, as is everything. You'll listen."

"I'm not here to debate theology with a heretic, woman."

"Heh, well I ain't asking. You want us to disband, you'll listen."

DeMontfort considered that for a moment, exchanged a few quiet words with Brickjaw, and finally nodded. "You have four minutes."

The old woman cackled, and sat on a wooden post near the gate, still clasping her cane. "Ye see, it's really simple if ye just look, but you're too busy nosing around in old books to see it. Yer looking for some beard in the sky to give you divinity and think ye all have some invisible light in ye, or some such nonsense. Ye aren't looking in the right place at all!"

"Get to the point."

"God is everything, ye daft bastards! It's the trees and skies and soil and birds and bees and it's me boots and me stick and me nose and me arse! There's no reason to look anywhere else if yer God, and I am, and so are ye and yer fat friend."

DeMontfort clenched his jaw, barely holding back a furious snarl. "Two minutes. If you wish to be spared, hag, I suggest you consider what you say next very carefully."

"I ain't got nothing else to say. I'll show ye all you need to see." With that, the old woman reached with a skeletal hand and, to Raymond's horror, tore at the skin of her other hand with sharp fingernails. Ripping and clawing, apparently not in any kind of pain, she tore a long strip of skin from the top of her hand.

"You're mad!" Raymond mumbled, edging away from the bleeding elder.

"You just watch."

Slowly, the old woman bent down to the ground and with her uninjured hand tore a handful of grass, roots and all, then thrust it into her open wound. Raymond gasped as the roots began to knit themselves into the broken skin, weaving through flesh and tendons. Now, Raymond understood what the strange blotches on the old woman's skin were; patches of brown were soil, grey was iron and rock, green was living flora. Indeed, now he saw that the mottled beards of the guards were spliced with moss and ivy. Shaking, he turned to look at DeMontfort, and was surprised to find the man

utterly unmoved.

"Time's up. I've suffered through your witchcraft for long enough. Do you submit yourself to the Initiative's judgement?"

"Hah! Not bloody likely! Ye see what I can do, why should I listen to anything ye say?"

"Because if you don't, I'll destroy you. Simple as that."

The old woman limped towards DeMontfort, and thrust her now healed palm, grass blades slowly waving in the evening wind, under his nose. "How could ye destroy us, when we and the land around us are one?"

Brickjaw laid a hand on DeMontfort's shoulder, and the Director turned his eyes to the gated community, a strange look on his face.

"Well, I can think of one way."

A wave of heat and sound knocked Raymond off his feet. The world around him was a cacophony of flames and noise and screams, and his mouth was full of dirt and there was ash in his eyes and he couldn't breathe and around him people were fighting and twisting and dying and he just couldn't breathe why couldn't he breathe why couldn't he brea-

A sharp pain in his side, and nothing more, for a while.

The sound of dirt crunching under feet, the labored breath of the man carrying him.

Uniformed men, their faces covered in gas masks, appearing from between the wheat stalks, looking at their work. DeMontfort doing the same, exaltation and terror wrestling on his visage.

"Wake up, brother."

Raymond found himself laying on a bed of pine needles, and was greeted with the fairly unpleasant sight of Sawscar's face hovering above him.

"What happened?"

"Gofrit team happened. Got a bit overzealous, but that's to be expected, I suppose." Raymond was again surprised to hear the man's gentle whisper of a voice.

"They…burned them?"

"It's all in the name, really."

"What about all the people? There were more than a hundred in there, families."

"God will find his own."

Curiously, Raymond wasn't upset. Shouldn't he be upset? He was a Shepherd, he was supposed to guide the misguided into the light, and yet he didn't seem to mind at all that the only light this particular group found was a funeral pyre. It was…right. It was divine will.

"I…don't think I want to be a Shepherd anymore."

Sawscar nodded, and helped him to his feet. "You were never a Shepherd, my friend. I could tell from the moment I saw you. "

"Really? How is that?"

"Shepherds don't have fangs."

The Horizon Blues

At the start of each day, place a new patch on a part of your body between the neck and the waist. Put the patch on a new spot each day to lessen skin irritation. Do not use for a period longer than eight weeks. In case of mild rash, remove patch and relocated it. In case of a more severe rash, consult your family doctor.

Henry DeMontfort sighed, removed the protective film from the large nicotine patch, and applied it to his left bicep. He didn't dare to expect the relaxing rush that came with his cigarettes, and indeed, the only sensation the patch provided was a slight but noticeable itch. He leaned back on his hard-backed chair with a grunt, and slowly rubbed his temples. His headache was coming back.

"Sir? You have a visitor."

Looking up, DeMontfort was met with the visage of Lieutenant Hammersmith, his second-in-command. The young man's face bore their usual stoic expression, slightly twisted around the huge, jagged scar that dominated his right cheek.

"I do not wish to be disturbed, Lieutenant. Tell them to come back in an hour." A sudden throb in his head made DeMontfort winch. "In fact, tell them to come back tomorrow."

"It's Salah Zairi, sir," said Hammersmith in that unsettling soft voice of his. "He says you'll see him."

Salah. The name invoked many conflicting emotions in DeMontfort, and memories. The snarl of the vicious young man he first met more than twenty-five years prior, the tempered steel of the man the Initiative made of him. The infuriately patient tone he always used during their long theological debates and his hard grip on DeMontfort’s shoulder as he pulled him away from a burning inferno DeMontfort had every intention of leaping into. The harsh words that passed between them since, and the harsher deeds both men

committed in the name of their faith.

DeMontfort really couldn't deal with the man now, not the way things were going. The last three months have been absolutely catastrophic for Project Malleus and for DeMontfort's personal position in the Horizon Initiative as well. A combination of tactical blunders, acts of zeal that bordered on lunacy on the part of some of his subordinates, and some rather poor choices of his own left Project Malleus hanging on the brink, and the last thing he needed was Salah's recrimination on top of all that. Still, he and the man had too much history for DeMontfort to refuse to meet him, a fact Salah apparently knew perfectly well.

"Let him in."

The lieutenant nodded and left, returning moments later with a dark, sharply featured man, maybe ten years DeMontfort's junior. A familiar face, yet also that of a stranger. DeMontfort rose from his seat, and offered the man his hand. After hesitating a moment, Salah took it.

"Salah."

"DeMontfort."

Despite expecting this, the coldness in the man's voice stung.

"Please, have a seat. I'm sure it's been quite the drive here."

"Thank you, I'll stand."

"Suit yourself, I suppose."

DeMontfort sank back into his seat, absent-mindedly scratching at his nicotine patch. He really needed a smoke. Salah stood glaring at him from across his desk, apparently satisfied in letting him guess the reason for his unexpected visit. Sadly, DeMontfort had no trouble figuring that out.

"This is about that clock-idol of yours, isn't it?"

Abruptly, Salah's cool expression melted away, and became

distorted with rage. "It was so much more than that, Henry!" A pained look flashed over the younger man's face, and he sank down to the seat opposite DeMontfort, as if suddenly exhausted.

"It could have… it could have saved us. It was divine, Henry, I heard its voice. His Voice."

"That's blasphemy, Salah. You of all people should know better."

"You weren't there, Henry. You didn't hear it. This was no machinist idol. It could have told us so much." With that, a spark of his former anger rekindled in Salah's eyes. "And thanks to your men, no one will hear it ever again."

DeMontfort looked at the man's hard-lined face, and found that he didn't have much to say to that. Rashid and his men did indeed break protocol in destroying the idol when they did. Project Malleus never got a proper chance to examine it before deciding its fate, and it was this sort of rash action that led them to the sordid position they were in now in the first place. He could never admit that to Salah, of course. "What do you want me to say, Salah?"

"That you won't let something this like happen again! That you put a leash on those mad dogs you call operatives! Forget the Voice, Henry, There were women, children and elderly there. There was a time when the mere thought of doing something like that would have appalled you, and now you and your Wolves are practically experts in it. What happened to you, Henry?"

This time, it was DeMontfort's turn to feel anger bubbling up his throat like liquid lead. "You know very well what happened, Salah. You were there."

Salah turned his eyes away. "This has to stop, Henry. For your sake, if not for the Initiative's. You're losing yourself, and you'll take us all with you."

The pain in DeMontfort head returned, and it brought friends. He could have dismissed Salah then and there, act like everything was business as usual, but he knew that the time for that has passed. So, he decided on an unusual tactic for him these last few years.

Total honesty.

"The last few months have been bad, Salah. My men and I did some things that shouldn't have been done. I know you and I had our differences when it came to the way the Initiative runs its business, but even you have to admit our occasional ruthlessness was vital to its survival. And up until the last few months, I had never once doubted that what we were doing was right, that it was God's work. Something changed in us, Salah. Something broke." It felt strangely liberating to finally admit it, not only to Salah, but to himself.

"Then do something about it, Henry. It's not too late."

"I will. I have taken measures, Salah, and some things are going to change around here. I suspect I'm not the only one who'll make sure of that."

"The Tribunal?"

DeMontfort grimaced. "Pack of elderly vultures that they are."

"You know that's not fair. What happened wasn't their fault. Wasn't yours either."

DeMontfort dismissed this with a wave. "Regardless, it will be taken care of, Salah, you have my word. I owe you this much, at least. I owe them that much, certainly."

For the first time since he entered, there was a hint of a smile in Salah's expression. "You almost sound like your old self, Henry."

"Bah, I hope not. I couldn't stand being that miserable fop again. It was bad enough being him once. There was one other thing I wanted to talk to you about while you're here-"

DeMontort was interrupted by the sound of Salah's cellphone, which DeMontfort was surprised to hear had Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture as its ring tone. He was about to made a snide comment about it, when he saw Salah going deathly pale. "What happened, Salah? Was that the Tribunal? Cult uprising? Is it the Children again? Answer me, man!"

"Mary-Ann… she went into labor…" with a flash of realization, Salah grabbed his coat and almost tripped over the chair in his haste to make it to the door.

"Salah, hold a second!"

Salah did stop, though obviously only with a great reluctance. "Whatever Initiative business you want to discuss, Henry, it will have to wait. I'm not going to-"

"It's not that. Just give me a moment."

DeMontfort rummaged around in his desk drawer and after a short search produced two items, which he handed to Salah. One was an old leather-bound copy of Erasmus of Rotterdam's *Education of a Christian Prince*. The other was a bright blue stuffed rabbit.

"For Mary-Ann and the baby. I'm sorry I missed the wedding, Salah. You know how those things are."

Salah nodded, gave DeMontfort a quick pat on the shoulder, and bolted out, rabbit and book tucked under his armpit. DeMontfort shook his head, scratched at his arm again and, after a short argument with himself, removed the nicotine patch. Instead, he drew a cigarette from his sliver case and lit it, savoring the small rush of relaxation it offered, before sitting back down at his desk.

There was work to be done.

« **Tolerance** | **Hub** | **The Man Comes Around** »

The Man Comes Around

"-Effective immediately. Until a suitable replacement can be appointed, Lieutenant Hammersmith will serve as the interim Director of Project Malleus, under our direct supervision."

"You could have at least had the decency of firing me face to face, Samuel."

"You're not fired, Henry, merely suspended. Don't make this any harder than it has to be. You brought this on yourself, you know. I warned you."

"Yes… I suppose you did."

"All Project Malleus controlled artifacts are to be transferred to the Shepherd Corps until we decide what to do with you. And I do mean all of them. Do I make myself clear, Henry?"

"Crystal."

"Good. We'll discuss this further once I land. Don't do anything stupid, you hear?"

"Come now, when did I ever do anything like that?"

Two Weeks Prior

“Left. Left. I said left, for heaven’s sake, left!”

“Yeah, Raymond, I got it.”

“You’re still going right, Brickjaw! I told you left! The map says left!”

“I thought I told you not to call me that, Raymond.”

“And I thought I told you to go left, yet our trajectory remains

decidedly right-bound!”

“My way is faster.”

“How on earth would you know that? You’ve never been here before!”

“It’s my sense of direction, it’s perfect.”

“Oh you bloody…”

Henry DeMontfort rubbed his temples for the fourth time in ten minutes, and groaned as his subordinates continued to bicker from the front seat. This has been a long, long drive. He reached for his pocket, searching for his electronic cigarette, when the tiny rented Fiat swerved suddenly and knocked the plastic tube from his hand and out the opened window. Barely holding back a curse, he turned to Lieutenant Levit, who was driving, his enormous hands almost completely encompassing the steering wheel.

“Lieutenant, what was that?”

“Sheep, Sir.”

“…Sheep?”

“Yes Sir, sheep on the road.”

“Why was there a sheep on the road?” This was asked by Operative Raymond of Baskerville, a fairly recent addition to Project Malleus, transferred on his request from the Shepherd Corps. Wet around the ears, but certainly not lacking in enthusiasm.

“How should I know?”

“Didn't you use to herd sheep, Brickjaw?”

The huge, rough-featured man rubbed his face with both hands, leaving Raymond to desperately grab the wheel as the car zigzagged on the narrow dirt road. “I herded goats, Raymond, not sheep. Entirely different. And don’t call me that.“

DeMontfort leaned back in his seat, sighing. Lieutenant Levit was usually as trustworthy and capable a man as anyone could wish for, but driving…. Well, driving wasn't one of his strong suits. The only reason he was at the wheel at all was because Raymond couldn't drive, and DeMontfort was too exhausted to trust himself at the task.

“What’s so different about goats? They’re just uglier sheep.”

“Goats are smart. A sheep goes where you tell it to; a goat goes where it wants.”

“Looks like this sheep didn’t get the memo, because I certainly didn't tell it to stand in the middle of the road.”

“Good one.”

It was getting dark, and DeMontfort began worrying they wouldn't be able to find the school before nightfall. The South Italian countryside was almost completely bereft of proper road marks, and the hilly terrain was very difficult to get one’s bearing in. DeMontfort began to doze, but jerked into wakefulness again as Levit swerved the car once more, this time to avoid hitting a pack of wandering wild fowl. Levit slammed on the breaks. Wheels screaming in protest, the Fiat veered sharply to the left, smashing into roadside shrubbery until finally coming to a stop when it struck a wooden signpost, which slowly toppled until finally hitting the ground with a loud crash. Groaning, and his head hurting even worse than before, DeMontfort struggled to open the passenger door, which proved to be stuck. After a few futile attempts at hitting it with his shoulder, he was unceremoniously pulled out through the window by Levit. Raymond was inspecting the damage.

"Well, we ain't going any further with this one, that's for sure. Nice going, Brickjaw."

"S'not my fault. Couldn't well hit that chicken, now could I?"

"Better it than us, surely?"

"I dunno, I can't really think of any advantage you have over a good bird, Ray."

Raymond opened his mouth to reply, when the expression on DeMontfort's face made him close it again. In his time in Project Malleus Raymond heard many horror stories, and witnessed a few himself, but nothing scared him nearly as much as the look. Hell hath no fury like that of a jet-lagged, pissed off nicotine addict on withdrawal. He was about to apologize, when Levit nearly brained him while attempting to straighten the fallen signpost. Apology forgotten, he turned to give the huge man a piece of his mind, when he noticed what was written on the sign. It seemed DeMontfort noticed as well, as his sharp face showed an emotion other than annoyance for the first time in days.

"Looks like we're here."

"See, Brickjaw, I told you it was to the left!"

"Shut up, Raymond."

"Both of you shut up. Raymond, run ahead to let them know we're here. Lieutenant, get the crate from the car, we'll be taking it with us."

Raymond nodded and began tracking up the dirt road the broken sign was pointing to. Levit watched him go, then turned and lifted the crate on one shoulder.

"What's in there anyway, chief?"

"A few items that might prove useful sometime in the future, nothing major."

"S'pretty heavy for something not major."

DeMontfort gave Levit a pointed look, then the two started after Raymond, their backs to the golden rays of the setting sun. "Well, that's what I have you for."

"Huh. Not quite what I was expecting, chief."

"I said it was a school, Lieutenant."

"Well, yeah, but you never mentioned it was so…er…"

"Feminine?"

"That's one word for it."

As the two men were strolled into the school's foyer, their eyes were assaulted with a veritable barrage of all things fluffy, pink, and above all, girly. Levit almost dropped his crate on his toes as a group of schoolgirls, no older than eight, began circling around him like an inquisitive pack of giggling piranhas. They were gone a moment later, scampering down an adjacent corridor now pursued by a haggard looking nun.

"I thought this was suppose to be a Catholic school."

"Unless that was a particular tired penguin, Lieutenant, I'd hazard the guess that it is."

"But it's so…cheerful. I thought these sort of places were all iron discipline and rulers."

"The Mother Superior of the school has a different approach to education. Rulers don't feature very heavily. Or any sort of discipline, for that matter."

Walking beneath a severe depiction of Jesus on the cross which seemed rather out of place amidst the crayon drawings and floral arrangements which surrounded it, the two man spotted a bemused-looking Brother Raymond, holding what appeared to be a large slice of chocolate cake. Seeing them, Raymond tried to wave, forgot that he was holding the cake, and dropped it on his shoes.

"Sir, Mother Superior says she'll see you in the garden, if you'd be so kind as to meet her there."

"Is that what she said?"

"Er, not in so many words."

"And in so many words?"

"Um. 'I'm having my smoke. If the pup wants to yap at me, he can damn well find me himself.' Unusual language for a nun, if I can so bold as to comment. She did give me this cake though."

To Raymond's surprise, the Director smiled at that. "Very good. Raymond, take Levit and find the wine cellar. I want that crate stored there. After that, busy yourself until I return. I shouldn't be long. Oh, and clean your boots."

"A wine cellar in a Catholic school, Sir?"

"Don't you doubt it."

DeMontfort replaced the handle of his old dial phone and shivered. He'd been expecting this day for months now, but that didn't make its arrival any easier to bear. More than thirteen years of work, all gone in a moment, and the worst part was, he didn't have anyone to blame for it but himself. He'd let zeal conquer his better judgment, and now came the time to pay the price. Rising from his high-backed chair, he strode to the narrow window of what would soon no longer be his office. An early summer's thunderstorm has recently passed, and the city was washed with the soft, golden light. It smelt of rain.

"Good afternoon, Mother Superior."

DeMontfort was standing in a shaded corner of the school's wide, well-kept gardens. In front of him, sitting at the base of an old olive tree, was a woman that made the tree seem young. Her face was a leathery deep-farrowed map of wrinkles, laugh lines and scars, made all the more obvious by the huge grin on them.

"Why, looky here. If it isn't little Henry the pup. Nice of you to take a break from your busy burning schedule just to see your old gran."

"That would have made more sense if you were my grandmother."

"Well I can hardly be that, can I? I'm a bloody nun! Daft boy."

Looking around to see no one else was around, DeMontfort shimmied down to sit next to the old woman. "I missed you, Mother

Ursula."

"Aye, I know you have. It's good to see you, my boy. Even if you are an idiot."

"Not enough of one to come without tribute." Searching through his pockets, DeMontfort pulled a neatly rolled cigar, relieved to see it survived the journey intact.

"Ah, you did always know how to woo a lady. Gimme." Lighting it, the old woman gave the cigar a contented puff, then settled down further between the tree's gnarled roots. "So, what's your angle?"

"Can't a man pay an innocent visit to his favorite," he searched for a word, "old mentor?"

"A man can. Henry 'the Weasel' DeMontfort can't. And don't call me old, I'm just seasoned."

"Hardly anyone calls me that anymore."

"Well, they're afraid you'd burn them, I suspect. What's your angle?"

Grimacing, DeMontfort reached for his own smokes. "I came to ask for your assistance, Mother Ursula. Your connections, to be precise."

"I suspect this has something to do with your upcoming booting, eh?"

This caught him off-guard. "How did you know?"

"You come to me for my connection, and you're surprised I know things? Silly. That, and I spoke to my brother recently. Bernard could never keep that mouth of his shut."

"To be fair, you're not an easy woman to keep a secret from, not even if you're a member of the Tribunal."

The old woman cackled, a sound DeMontfort was very familiar with. "He's been my little brother for a long, long time, my boy. Wouldn't be much of a big sister if I didn't know how to give him a proper

shake. So, what do you need?"

"A safe place to keep some relics, first among them Samson's Locks. I suspect I won't be holding to my position for much longer, and, as much as it pains me to say it, I don't trust most of my men with these particular artifacts. They've proven to be… indiscreet, lately. "

"You're one to talk."

Ignoring the remark, DeMontfort continued. "I've stored some less sensitive equipment here already, in our usual place. I trust it won't be found. The relics, however, are a different matter. I need someplace no one but us could ever find them."

"So it's not just your men you want to hide the relics from, eh? It's my brother and his companions too. You're betraying the Initiative."

"I'm not, I promise you." He shifted uneasily, cigarette dropping from his mouth. "Ursula, there's something foul in the air. I can't explain it, but something tells me that there will be a desperate need for these relics soon, and that even the Tribunal cannot be trusted with them until that need is fulfilled."

"Something tells you? Or do you mean Someone?"

"I…I don't know what I mean. Not anymore. I've fallen far, Mother. I've become something I used to hate."

"Well, you can always-"

"No, you don't understand. I became what I am because that was what I needed to be. What He needed me to be. What I feel about it is irrelevant. It's simply another test of my faith. Please, Mother. I need you to trust me."

Slowly, the old woman nodded. "I know a man. Never met a harder one to find, if he don't want to be found. You won't like him, though."

The garden became deathly quiet as Ursula explained the details. DeMontfort's headache returned with a vengeance, leading a host of its kin to storm the last of his patience.

"You want me to entrust some of the Initiative's most powerful artifacts… to him?"

"You did say you wanted someone who couldn't be found, right? Someone who could deliver the relics to you when they are needed?"

"But the man is a lunatic, and a heretic besides! What's to keep him from selling the relics, or using them for himself, or doing heaven knows what with them once he gets his hands on them?"

"Don't you worry about him, he owes me one. Not to mention, I have some dirt on him. Nasty stuff."

Despite himself, DeMontfort was curious. "How did *you* get dirt on Saturn Deer?"

The old woman gave him a crafty look. "I wasn't always a nun, you know. Well, what do you say?"

"Are you sure you can keep him in line?"

"Positive. Was never as smart as he thought he was, that one."

"I guess I have no real choice then, now do I?"

"That's the road you choose for yourself, my boy. There's always a choice."

DeMontfort nodded.

The phone rang again. Reluctantly drawing himself from the window, DeMontfort answered.

"This is DeMontfort."

"Henry. It's Salah."

The Written God

Roger Legrand crumpled up the fifth text-filled sheet and rocketed it towards the wastebin.

"Why can't I fucking *write* today?"

He bent over his desk and ran his fingers through his hair, resting his elbow on top of dozens of discarded brainstorming sheets covered with half-formed ideas.

"What's happening to me? Goddammit, *goddammit!* I just want to write like how I used to." He glanced up at the bookcase in his study, the top row completely filled with his novels.

Frustrated, he grabbed a random piece of paper and began writing again.

"And then the great goddamn Reggravi, the fucking master of language I just pulled out of my ass, appeared to Roger Legrand and struck him with awe and inspiration. He became his muse! His inspiration! His path to better things in this goddamn pitiful existence of frustration!!!!"

"Fuck it all, fuck it all!" He ripped the sheet to shreds and tossed it over his shoulder before folding his arms and laying his head down on his desk. He stayed like this for a few moments before becoming aware of… something watching him. Slowly, he turned to look behind him. A tall man-like figure stood there, a featureless face visible under its hood and dressed in several heavy layers of a coarse, brown fiber. It said nothing, it simply stood there with its head angled down towards Roger.

"Who the hell are you?" he demanded.

The figure remained silent.

"How did you get in here?"

Still silent, the being in front of him raise a single finger (with no fingernail to be seen) and pointed at the scraps Roger had just torn up.

Uncomprehending, he continued to stare at the figure as it started to move about the room. It picked up several balled-up pieces of paper out of the trash and returned them to Roger's desk, smoothing them out and pointing at several key words and phrases previously deemed by the man to be bad ideas.

He walked over and watched the creature.

"'A god of books…' 'a tale of a family…' something that will change the world…'" He looked up at the hooded thing, who in turn had picked up the torn scraps and replaced them on the surface in front of Roger. And so, he understood. He had found a being that came when written about, something that could literally change the world. He became inspired, empowered by this discovery, and began frantically writing out notes and ideas, good ones this time. He never noticed the creature he now knew was called Reggravi disappear, but he knew that he'd meet it again.

As he fell deeper and deeper into a writing frenzy, he came to many realizations, many stopped thoughts and epiphanies about the thing he had found. Instead of thinking up ways to expand on the creature in fantastical adventures, he found that it felt… wrong to keep such a wondrous and almighty beast— no, being— locked away in fictional tales that would dilute its magnificence. It was *unthinkable,* after a certain point.

This was something that deserved respect.

This was something that deserved praise.

This was something that Roger was born to do.

And so, the first Scribe of Reggravi came into existence.

Excerpts from *His Book*, the holy scripture of the Faith of

the Scribed.

It wasn't hard to find people to join in the belief. After all, it was a religion based on a figure whose existence and power could be proven at literally any time. First came Roger's close friends, then their friends, until they numbered about fifty people, give or take a few. In fact, it was more of a small little community than a religion. But most of all, they certainly were not a cult. No, they were simply average people living average lives that had discovered the Truth and met up once a week to talk about it and share their faith.

And it was nice.

"I think my kids breezed through here. They aren't giving you any trouble, are they?" said a woman approaching Roger after the service.

He grinned and shook his head. "Of course not, Clarisse, they're simply wonderful. Hey, I'm glad you came! It's always nice to see you guys around here."

The woman chuckled. "Ah, Roger, of course we came. This is the highlight of our weeks right here," she said, waving her hand at the people around them. "We wouldn't miss it for the world."

"I'm glad to hear that. Hey, where's Patrick today?"

"Oh… he's…" muttered the woman, fiddling with her wedding band. "He's… been sick recently. That's all. Came down with something awful, doctors don't know what it is, they took some… blood samples. We're just waiting to hear back."

He patted her on the shoulder. "I see. I hope it all turns out for the best."

She nodded, murmured something about having to go watch her kids, and sidled away. Roger sighed. *People were always going to have their problems, whether or not they were a part of the Scribes, but…* He pivoted on his heel and walked over to the front of the

room. There, he surveyed the mass of people there. It wasn't big, but it was close.

At least they have people to support them when they fall.

In the throng of the crowd, a man conspicuously weaved in and out between people, taking in the experience. He made mental notes of every face, every name he could remember, reciting as much of the sermon from before over and over in his head so as to retain as much of it as he could.

He socialized, keeping his cold, analyzing gaze hidden behind two rows of beaming teeth. In fact, he met nearly every single member of the congregation that night and was one of the last to leave. As the room emptied, the man got in his car and drove off.

The Wolf was returning to its pack.

> *And so, we gathered to honor Him. Friends, families, all together in love. We paved the way of His coming, knowing that it would come sometime or another. We knew. We prepared.*

A few weeks later, the Scribes were holding another regular service, with Roger, as always, reading the sacred texts.

"…and the Faithful will ascend with Reggravi in his greatness." Roger closed the book and smiled at the congregation. "Don't fear, for our Lord will surely come soon. I can feel it. Now, worship service is over. As always, feel free to stay and enjoy the snacks and each other's company."

This last part was unnecessary; no one ever left right after the services. Within minutes, the tiny warehouse where they held their meetings was filled with chatter and laughter. Dozens of ecru-clad people spread out and filled the room, intermingling with each other.

Roger smiled. As much as he loved the faith, watching the community mesh was even better. He wandered into the crowd,

shaking hands and greeting people as he passed. A few conversation snippets later, he found the person he was looking for and tapped her on the shoulder. The brunette woman turned around.

"It's been three weeks since Pat's been here, Clarisse." He sighed.

She cast her eyes downward. "I know, I know. He's been… very ill as of late. I'm not sure if he'll ever be well enough to come back."

He glanced down at her hands. Clarisse was feeling around the bare base of her left ring finger. She noticed him staring and quickly folded her hands behind her back. He cast her a sympathetic look.

"…My ring's been bothering me a bit recently, so I decided just to take it off."

Roger paused for a minute. "Hey, Clarisse?"

"Yes?"

"We're all a family here. Please don't forget that. Don't be afraid to tell us you need support."

She gave him a weak smile and a half-nod before wandering off. Roger sighed once more. Some people just didn't like admitting they needed help. Or rather, they didn't like burdening other people with their problems.

Well, only time will help, I suppose.

And with these thoughts, he made his way back into the crowd.

Five Wolves scouted the group, gleaming as much information as they could, knowledge about both the religion itself and the people gathered there. Throughout their mingling, they signaled to each other the prepared sign, a smiling nod accompanied with the scratching of the back of their neck.

They were ready to plan the operation.

The Word and the Wolf

Author's Note: You might want to read The Written God before reading this tale.

There was certainly peace and happiness for a while;
yet, as the people know, evil is unavoidable.

There was a knock at Jacob Hunt's door. The newly promoted Project Malleus captain called out to the visitor, who promptly walked in and took a standing position in front of his desk.

"Jerome, welcome to my office. Isn't it amazing?" Jacob grinned as he spread his arms out.

The man managed an impatient half-smile. "Quite, sir. If you don't mind, I'd like to give my report before we rest on our laurels."

He sighed, letting his arms fall limply. "True enough, this is cause for more diligence than celebration anyways. Now, you sent a memo that said you discovered a few new religious groups in the immediate area?"

Jerome nodded. "Yes. The closest and largest one is based in Buffalo, looks to be… about fifty members at the moment. They also appear to have some sort of anomalous artifact that they use in their rituals and rites."

Jacob thought for a second, folding his hands. "That's only forty-five minutes away at most. Do we know when and where they meet?"

The man glanced towards his wrist. "Well, they usually meet from about this time until about eight."

Hunt stood up. "Well, what are we waiting for then? Let's go."

Jerome did not move, save for a single raised eyebrow. "Sir, We

haven't even told McLean about the group, let alone run our mission plan past DeMontfort. We can't just—"

"We can't just what? We can't go out and stop a probably dangerous group of heathens that are polluting the world with their filth and ideas? We have to wait for those idiot Sheep to try to recruit them into our ranks, like they've done with so many people that are utterly *unclean?*"

The lanky man remained still. "The proper procedures must be adhered to, sir. The law was made for a reason, and rampant vigilantism might not be the best use of your post."

Jacob chuckled. "Oh, come on Jerome, you haven't heard tales about captains acting on their own accord to slip through certain cracks in the system? This isn't vigilantism, boy, this is efficient duty. I hear the voice of God telling me this is what's right. Go on, gather Babylon Squad. We'll be in and out, within an hour or two. The higher ups will be none the wiser, and the world will be rid of another wretched paganist system."

Jerome once again refused to budge. "Jacob, that's not how I do things."

Jacob silently gave him an icy glare. "Fine," he said after several minutes of silence, "We'll call up DeMontfort for his approval."

Jerome nodded, pulled his cell phone out of his pocket, and dialed the number. It rang three times before a the Director answered.

"Director DeMontfort speaking."

"Hello, Director," spoke Jerome. "This is Jerome Allen, speaking on the behalf of Father Jacob." Hunt motioned towards his ears, which Jerome took as a sign to put the call on speakerphone.

"Ah, yes. The new captain. What'd he want to talk to me about?"

"You see, there is a newly discovered cult in the immediate area, and he wanted to get the approval to go after them immediately."

There were a few seconds of silence before DeMontfort replied.

"What kind of group is this?"

Jerome put the phone down on the desk in front of him as he flipped through papers on a clipboard. "A society which believes in a god and messiah figure that comes to life when its people write about it. They also appear to outright shun all other written religious figures and texts."

A few more seconds of silence.

"Do they have special weapons or abilities at their disposal?"

"It seems highly likely, but hasn't been confirmed yet. That would require extended observation of the group, which I think could be handled more effectively by the Sheperd Corps. They may even be able to integrate members of the Cult of the Wordsmith into the religion covertly in order to observe. We have a few planted Project Malleus agents already, but I don't think we can rely on their long-term judgement and ability to blend in."

"I see," DeMontfort replied. "My opinion is that a possibly dangerous and definitely blasphemous group should be taken out as quickly and quietly as possible. Unfortunately, such a course of action wouldn't be possible if this request was submitted through all the proper channels. Even more unfortunately, I never received any sort of indication from Father Jacob about his plans of action, or even any prior information about the group. It really is such a shame, but I suppose it meet our goal at the end of the day."

Frowning from confusion, Jerome said, "I don't understand."

DeMontfort took a very slow and deep breath, then exhaled for just as long. "Why, Jerome, what I'm saying is that if I were to do it my way, I would immediately send out Jacob and his squadron to eliminate the group you described. But, much to my dismay, a blockade of policy and diplomatic relations and Sheep restrict my movements. I guess it really is too bad that you didn't inform me of such action, really, but no one could possibly get too mad at you for doing your job. Understood?"

Closing his eyes, he responded through clenched teeth, "I

understand."

"Excellent. I'll see you boys later." A three toned beeping filled the office.

"Well then," said Jacob as he leaned back in his chair. "Let's get to it."

"Right away." Jerome solidly nodded and walked out of the room to gather the squad quietly.

But soon enough, a Wolf came to tear the Believers asunder.

They filed into the warehouse silently, but even so, their black tactical clothing made them distinctly noticeable among the sea of brown robes. Laughter and talking transformed into silence in the space of a few seconds. The screaming began when the agents drew their guns and began yelling and cornering them. Once they were surrounded, a nervous sea of hushed whispers replaced their yells.

The Project Malleus agents sternly surveyed the group they had trapped. It was composed of a variety of people, all wearing burlap sacks with hoods attached. A robust, regally-attired man stepped to the front and addressed the tall man already standing in the center of the formation.

“Name of the group?”

“The Faith of the Scribed, sir."

"Excellent. Now, read out their transgressions. Loudly."

"I don't think that's—"

"…"

"…Right. The Scribes believe in a messiah that comes about through their writings and scripture. The main leader professed that

all other religious figures described through writing were utterly false and all who believed in such people would be eliminated by their Lord."

Jacob Hunt growled derisively, barking, "Blasphemers, worse than the Pastafarians," to the crowd. He leered over the hooded people in front of him. Most cults at least had nice looking vestments. This one just appeared to be wearing potato sacks. "Are the Sheep aware of this?"

"At the current moment, Project Malleus is the only branch aware of this operation, but I have men ready to send the signal to the chapterhouse at a moment's notice if you change your mind."

"Let's keep it quiet. I don't want to hassle with them over assimilation negotiations. You heard what DeMontfort said. We're going to eliminate these heathens, here and now, as our duty as agent of Project Malleus." Thoughts of grandeur and images of Hunt as a mighty warrior smiting down sinners with his God's sword had filled his cranium, as evidenced by his triumphant grin and trembling eagerness.

Jerome shook his head. "We need to—"

"You *need* to follow God's will as interpreted by me. Understood?"

A very observant onlooker would have noticed Jerome's jaw clench tightly for several seconds before he tersely answered, "I understand."

The tension among the group felt suffocating. Everyone's eyes were fixed downwards and all the joy and laughter from just a few minutes earlier had utterly dissipated. There was a low murmur working its way through the crowd, mostly made up of family members consoling each other.

Roger thought back through his mind. Why, why *why?* Why was this happening? Where was Reggravi? Where the *fuck* was it? He had specifically written it for a time of peril, just in case.

A tugging at his robes interrupted his thoughts. He looked down at the boy trying to get his attention.

"What is it, Jimmy?" he whispered, struggling to keep the tension out of his voice.

"Well, Mr. Roger… Reggravi is gonna come, right? He's gonna save us all, isn't he?"

Roger attempted to give him a wide, confident smile. It ended up looking more like he was baring his teeth. "Of course. Reggravi would never betray us. Isn't that what's written?"

The boy thought for a minute, as if trying very hard to remember if this was true. He apparently decided it was because he nodded, plopped back down, and began looking around the group expectantly.

He shook himself. *Snap out of it, Roger. You were the one that found it, so why are you having trouble believing in it when a kid just accepts it like that?*

With these thoughts, he relaxed, but not by much. There was still the chance he was wrong.

“Father Jacob?”

He turned to look at the agent. "Yes?"

"Do you have a plan for if this plan backfires? They are suspected of having some sort of artifact, after all. Shouldn't we at least call for backup since we didn't report this?"

He snorted derisively. "If we waited around for all that paperwork and processing to build up, we'd never get anything done around here! Look, here are some heathens, so we're going to eliminate them. Plain and simple."

"But even DeMontfort—"

"Now, that's enough. We have a mission we are prepared to do, and

we're going to do it."

"…Yes, sir."

"Good. Now, let me prepare."

Jacob pulled a metal cone from his bag, lifting it up to the sky as he muttered, *"I ask for guidance. I ask for strength. I ask for light. I respond with righteousness. Amen."* He brought the object back down as he told his co-worker, "Jerome, ready the rest of the men. You'll be cleaning up the stragglers after I'm done."

The man next to him saluted and began speaking into his radio. Jacob raised the object to his mouth, inhaled deeply, and shouted.

The blast of sound, probably loud in normal circumstances, was amplified to painful amounts by the near-silence and the enclosed space of the warehouse. Roger's hands shot up to the sides of his head to cover his ears. He peered over to where the attack seemed to be aimed at and was taken aback when he saw a circle in the center of the crowd, empty save for a tall hooded figure.

Could it be…

But not yet. Roger dared not to celebrate yet. Not until he was certain.

After the echoes of the sound had faded, silence filled the dank and dimly lit warehouse. Jacob frowned. A blast from the object usually managed to clear out at least a circle of people. Instead, it appeared to only have affected one of the heathens, a tall man standing in the center of the gathering. Shaking his head, Jacob once again lifted the cone, aimed it directly at the standing form, and yelled.

The figure's hood fell to the floor, severed from the rest of his outfit by the attack, revealing a faceless head with large, bloody holes scattered across the surface. Several of the hooded figures shouted in surprised delight at the appearance of the entity, which simply stood tall and silent, the blood flowing more freely and turning darker

and thicker with each passing second. These shouts turned into louder cheers and crescendoed into an uproar as all of the captive people screamed in triumph.

And then our Savior alit on the earth, shroud humbly like His followers so as to fool the Unworthy. He walked among our people in their supposed defeat, left unseen by the enemy until the hour of Salvation dawned.

“Jerome! Jerome!” Hunt strained to make his voice heard over the din. “Kill it and kill them quickly! Burn the building down if you must!”

The man on his side nodded and sprinted off as Jacob once again lifted the cone, shouting at crowd with the tall, dirty figure remaining steadfastly erect in the center. Instantly, the faceless man seemed to shift to the front of the crowd, arms and legs outstretched like a star. Each blast shredded its already rough outfit, punching red holes all across its form. Agents were now openly firing at the crowd, but the being seemed to catch each and every bullet with its own body. As this continued, the ruby color dripping from these wounds darkened and a bubbling black liquid began seeping out.

No, no! Jacob attempted to shout once more, but could muster nothing more than a rasp. *Not yet! I can't be finished yet!* He threw the object in his hand aside. *Useless relic! God help me, God help me!*

He glanced up at the scene. The muck had completely covered the man's form and extended two additional limbs as it crashed forward. The roar of the cheering people was absolutely deafening. He watched as the creature bashed his men and enveloped their corpses with its filthy slime.

A heartbeat rang though his mind.

I'm not ready yet. I have so much left to accomplish. I can't die here, not now.

He was still reaching for his pistol when the creature's front leg

slammed into— no, *through*— his chest. The last glimpse of the mortal world Jacob Hunt experienced was utter blackness surrounded by the cacophony of defeat.

The cornered people cheered louder and louder with each blast absorbed by their Lord. It seemed to flow and sway so as to completely shield them with its body, a body so perfect that the man's assaults were unable to faze it. He grew greater and more powerful as the blows became progressively weaker and the man's voice grew hoarse. When Reggravi revealed a form to cast judgement upon Jacob, they jumped to their feet and screamed in triumph as loud as they could.

Roger looked on in awestruck wonder. *I never should have doubted. I never should have thought He would let us go. After all, I wrote it.* He glanced upward. *Of course… this does mean that soon… well, it was about time anyways.* He grinned.

> *He rose as the Beast bared its fangs to strike. The Faithful were strongly shielded against the creature with His magnificent form, and by His sacrifice, He was instantly reborn as our Strength. He overran the Unbelieving while keeping those with the Faith protected by His love.*

The agents knew when they were outmatched. They hated admitting it, but they knew it was better to sacrifice a battle in order to win the war another day. Seven out of the original twenty members of the force managed to escape the building and flee to the nearest chapterhouse.

The dark creature watched as they left, returning to the cheering crowd inside once their vehicles had driven out of its field of vision. It crawled over to the center as the people quieted themselves in reverence. One man began reciting sacred words, joined in by another, and another, and another until the entire congregation was detailing the legend of their Lord, Reggravi.

As they neared the end of their tale, the creature's six legs shortened more and more until they were once again melded with its body. A large and luminous white flower began to sprout from the black mass, growing in size until it filled the warehouse with its petals. The people, still chanting, climbed up onto it as it rose higher and higher into the sky, clearing the path above them with a protective cage of thorns. When they had finished the saga, they started over from the beginning. This continued as the large flower soared upwards into the aether. Once they had finished the story for the second time, both they and the flower disappeared.

The Beast slain and the Unbelieving conquered, He then met with His People, who told of His chronicle. Then, sprouting the Gateway of Paradise, He raised all of the Faithful up with Him as He ascended.

"Project Malleus was never given authorization for this."

"I know, sir."

"DeMontfort himself even claims to know nothing about this operation."

Jerome gulped. "I know, sir."

"What were you thinking?"

"Captain Hunt had deemed the cult to be dangerous and was trying to preemptively eliminate it before it could do anything. As his subordinate, I was following his orders."

"That's not how we work around here, Jerome. You know that."

"Yes, sir."

Harold McLean sighed. "Well, at least we can get it all sorted out now, I suppose. I guess we'll start with how it even happened in the first place. Details about the group in question?"

"They called themselves the Faith of the Scribed. They believed in a

higher being that was summoned when written about. Most of their history is detailed in their holy texts," he said, holding up a midnight blue book.

"I see. Give me that, then, and I'll deal with all of your disciplinary reports later."

"Of course."

As the agents left his office, Harold sighed. *A lot of good men were lost for no cause today.* Dispelling these thoughts, he flipped open the book and began reading.

"Reggravi was born out of the writings of Roger Legrand, the first Scribe. He detailed meeting the being, and so he did. Thus, our belief began…

> *And in the aftermath, the survivors left and carried on, a group of seven. The Master would appear to each as an angel of their god every night, advising them in the ways of their Faith and making them into His Prophets of the Second Edition. Each would learn the ways of the Scribed through Reggravi himself and spread His word and knowledge through their writings. Thus, the new and greater wave of the Scribes shall come to order and help propagate His legacy.*

Jerome, arise.

The man opened his eyes and stared at the form in front of him. It was a floating angel, face obscured by blinding light and clad in pure white garments. Its glowing wings seemed to stretch and encompass the entire room, filling the space with soft, gentle luminescence.

My name is Bertrien, and I am your Protector. Let me guide you and show you the way. The being held out a single, perfect hand.

"Yes, Lord," responded Jerome as he took his hand. "I'm ready to

follow."

And you will, child. But before I can take you, you must help spread my word and love to the masses.

"I shall. Give me the law and I will obey. Give me justice and I will act as your envoy."

Now, you are called the First Prophet by me. Go forth.

« **The Written God** | **Hub** »

Ignition, Part One- The Artists

"Mrowrrrr."

Was it already morning? Ahmad grunted as he felt a familiar furry paw bat at his nose and chin while he attempted to catch a few extra moments of sleep. Trying to prevent the genocide of your people with a simple letter was tiring work. The laptop was still open on his nightstand, the lightning elemental that inhabited it visible on the corner of the screen, asleep on top of the redundant battery indicator. He looked over the first few paragraphs from his reclined position, to see if he needed to make any revisions.

> To the esteemed leadership of the Horizon Initiative-
>
> First, We of the Broken One hope you are having a pleasant holiday season. We ourselves are preparing to celebrate the winter solstice. Now, we know how busy things can be at this time of year, but, on behalf of the people of my faith, I wish to bring some matters of concern to your immediate and full attention… . Also, I would like to apologize for any alarm or inconvenience we may have caused by delivering this missive to every Church, Mosque, and Temple in this land's current capital city. I did not know who was loyal to your cause.

The puffercat began to protest his procrastination even more vocally, now that it knew Ahmad was awake. He gently scratched behind the cat's ears. "You can wait ten minutes, Rudolf."

The sharp, quick pain in his chest seconds later told him that it was breakfast time, damn it, and there was to be no argument. After extracting the furry grump from its resting place by his chest, he slipped into the small, wood-paneled washroom across from his bed. There he cleansed himself and got dressed slowly, gingerly putting on his formal robes and combing the tangles from his hair and beard.

Ahmad shivered at the cold draft coming under the door of his hut, causing his robes to billow up slightly. This fresh burst of air brought into his hut the scent of old books and fresh food, bringing a smile to his face. Curiously, the greasy fruit smell that the Docents' lamps produced was also faintly discernible. The fact that the Library's presence could be felt from this far into the small city that had developed in the Reading Room was fascinating to him.

Ahmad's messenger falcon, Jasmine, slept in the corner, still tired from the previous day's hunt. Remembering the last time he had unexpected guests in his home here, he felt it was a good thing. Many unfamiliar faces would be coming in and out throughout the day, and he really didn't want a repeat of the Fifthist incident. The ambassador had been in an uproar over the perceived slight (which, considering the man's temperament, seemed fairly common for him), but Ahmad had convinced the Stargazer to relax and have a bit of a chat over coffee, once he got the bleeding stopped. They met one day a month now to play chess and discuss their respective worldviews.

His eyes fell upon the memorial shrine in the corner, holding pictures of his wife and all those who were lost in the Horizon assault. The old priest sighed.

So much death, so much destruction. Why were so many bent on ensuring his people's annihilation? And, by the oil of the Broken One, why must it always be the most peaceful of their people who were slain? It all started with The Betrayer, the God-Breaker Ab-Leshal. Then came the Daevite invasion, the fall of Constantinople, the goddamn Inquisition. The Brass Crusades. The Crusades better known to the public… and the Salem Witch Trials. His people always got caught in the middle of a conflict from their own arrogance and aggressiveness, and it was always the peaceful members who paid the final price. He had long preached that the Church's reliance on fear and cultural and theological posturing would be their downfall, as it was for many others, and now, part of their god had died because of their anger and self-righteousness.

It was time to rectify this behavior before any more lives were lost.

It was time to complete his mission in the Library.

It was time for The Broken One to become Whole.

But first, he needed coffee. This was going to be a difficult day.

Ahmad was about a minute away from the door of his home before he noticed that the door was hanging open, and he heard the protestations of Jasmine, his messenger falcon. He rushed through the door, nearly dropping the coffee and cream he had brought back, and saw that his room had been torn apart and searched. A quick scan of the room after he set the two items in his hand on a counter showed that nothing was missing, but the air felt… heavier. It was then that he noticed that his laptop was open and the lightning elemental that powered it was cowering behind the task bar on the bottom of the screen. Something or *someone* powerful had been here, and had broken into his computer to see his current "project." He looked over the letter to make sure there were no changes made to it.

He paused in his review to drink his coffee, and began to clean up some of the room, attempting to hurry, since the visiting artists were going to be there within the hour. Eventually, his age caught up to him in the mad dash to make the room presentable, and he was forced to rest. Ahmad decided to continue re-reading his letter, so that he wasn't sitting idly. He skipped ahead slightly.

> … Now, why this attack was executed on a peaceful colony, we can only venture to guess, though we have a feeling it is because of the extreme views and actions of our foreign cousins. We knew that their foolhardy actions would bring a disaster like this upon our heads, but we had hoped to be able to curb their extremism in time to prevent your group, as well as the Holders of the Heart and the Cog-breakers, from wishing to take action against us. Sadly, it was not to be so.

The first of several expected knocks on Ahmad's door that day rang in his ears, interrupting his observation of the destruction in his room and review of the letter. He opened it to find three men standing there. One was tall and thin enough to cause the old priest to be concerned for the boy's health, and wearing a rather ridiculous outfit

composed of various animal furs and what looked to him like black tarpaulin, held together with a length of rope, and crowned off with a pair of those ridiculous shutter shades that seemed to be all the rage among American children and teens these days. He had a very aloof air about him, and refused to meet Ahmad's gaze, instead staring at the pile of Ahmad's belongings on the floor. The second was dressed marginally more normally and looked slightly healthier, though with exceptionally tight pants, an utter lack of any color coordination, and a shaggy mane of lime-green hair. This one stared at the mechanical prosthesis that composed Ahmad's left arm briefly, before cocking his head and staring into the older man's eyes with a bemused look on his face, searching for… something. Ahmad couldn't read the man's emotions as easily as he could most other people. His body language was almost robotic, an observation which amused the old priest.

Finally, Ahmad came to the one he had hoped to see there that day. He was of average height, though a bit skinny, and had close-cropped hair and a face framed by thick glasses, large holes in his ears where Ahmad presumed earrings rested whenever he wasn't engaged in his work for the Broken One. Ahmad noted the intricate animated tattoos of gears and other machinery covering his arms from the elbows down, and a form-fitting brown robe and pants covering the rest of his body. Jahongir 'Jon' Ahnkori, a Machinist-initiate who was skilled in the Craft… He was almost exactly what this situation called for. Ahmad supposed that he chose to wear his uniform out of respect, though the current setting didn't demand it. Jon stared at the older man's feet, and twisted his arms in the proper show of deference for his superiors before bowing.

The man in the shutter-shades spoke first, sliding into the doorway around Ahmad. He shook debris off of a chair only to slouch into it and lean against the wall. "Damn, Preach. Looks like you pissed someone off, huh? You sure this place is as safe as you told us it would be?"

"Oh, this? I suppose someone decided to remodel my home without informing me first. Nothing appears to be missing, at any rate. I wouldn't mind a bit of assistance cleaning it up, though." He smiled and stepped aside, allowing Jon and the green-haired man entry.

Unsurprisingly, Jon was the first to move to fill his request, straightening out the furniture and repairing the damage done to the Valley Memorial altar in the corner with a brief touch and a surge of energy. After about a minute of awkwardly standing in a corner of the room, the green-haired man joined him, and with a flourish of his arms, telekinetically lifted all of Ahmad's clothing off of the ground, and placed them back in the drawers and closet, muttering something that to Ahmad's ears sounded like "Bibbity boppity boo."

American mages and their strange customs baffled the elder priest of the Broken God.

Jon and Shutter-shades looked slightly weakened from the green-haired man's effort, with Shutter-shades visibly angry at him. "Goddamnit, James, why the hell did you do that? You know we didn't work up enough energy in…" He paused and briefly flicked his eyes to Ahmad before continuing. It was obvious he was attempting to hide the source of their talents. "… To do shit like that. Jon fixing a broken cabinet is one thing, that's just fucking wasteful."

'James' as the man wearing the fur and tarp called him, brushed the verdant locks of hair out of his eyes, "Well, Frankie, if you'd gotten off of your ass to help, I might not have needed to do it." The man looked at Ahmad, and then, in a stage whisper, he added, jerking a thumb in the old priest's direction, "Besides, aren't we on the clock for this guy? If we show off, we might get a bonus."

Frankie stood up, heaving his breath. "Fiiiine. Jesus. I just know I got asked to come here to meet a priest and see if I wanted to accept a contract, not play maid. Should I go get a skirt and apron on? Maybe some sexy heels?"

Ahmad let out a booming laugh, and shook his head, drawing all the men's attention. "No, no, I think your…" He looked at the tarp-and-fur ensemble, trying to find an appropriate word. "Clothes… are fine as they are for the task at hand. Would you gentlemen like coffee while we work?"

A chorus of agreement met his ears, so he dug into the cabinet for a few cups and his sugar jar, all of which were thankfully unbroken by the mystery invader. He poured coffee for the four of them, and then

left the cream and sugar for each to add individually.

Jon approached his elder, and spoke softly in the Broken tongue, keeping his eyes averted. "Thank you, Machinist. I apologize for my friends' ignorance and attitude."

Ahmad smiled, observing the tattoos on Jon's arms whirring and spinning. "It isn't your fault they're obnoxious. Besides, you warned me that these two bickered like they were married in the reply you sent. Ah! Finally, I get a grin out of you!" The old priest paused to sip from his coffee and smiled, clapping the younger man on the shoulder, noticing him flinching as his hand met Jon's arm. "You shouldn't be so serious with me, child. I am *not* like the others in the Council."

"That much was apparent in your letter. I just… don't wish to disrespect you, sir, even accidentally."

It was then that Ahmad noticed the oil burns on the younger man's chest and neck. His eyes softened, and he removed his hand from Jon's shoulder. "You don't have to worry about that with me, Jahongir. To be quite frank, I am *nothing* like that bastard you've been training under." Jon's eyes widened at his statement, clearly put off by Ahmad's furious tone and manner of speaking. The older priest put the coffee cup down, and began quietly sweeping everything in the room into a pile to be sorted out. No one spoke for several minutes. Eventually, the room was back into a reasonably presentable shape. Frankie spoke up again as the work came to a close, brushing some dust off the fur on his shoulders.

“So, gramps, what, exactly, did you call us here for?”

Ahmad smiled as he stroked the chest of his falcon, and then turned to the three artists.

“Boys, I asked you here to do something that no one else of this age will ever be able to say that they have done.”

They looked at him inquisitively as he sipped from his coffee cup, intentionally building suspense. Ahmad knew he needed to play to their egos and flair for the dramatic for them to cooperate. The priest

pressed a button hidden on the perch inside his falcon's cage. The rear wall of the room opened. A tangled snarl of gears, metal, and chains lay approximately twenty feet from them, deep within a hidden alcove, lit by a few overhead spotlights.

“You’re going to be repairing and rebuilding a god.”

Ahmad briefly showed them around the room, pointing out the hidden exits, supplies, tool room, their quarters, and the prayer and spell books that he had collected from the Library over the last decade, just for an occasion like this. Frankie spoke first, taking off his unusual glasses, displaying the kaleidoscopic eyes underneath them. "Thank god I'm wearing these reclaimed plastic pants, Preach."

The Machinist looked at the young man. "And why's that?"

"I think I just came a little." The man traced his fingers over the pile of books as Ahmad gagged on his coffee, and stared at the tapestry. "Holy fuck, man… If you'd said this in that letter, I would have been here by the time I finished reading. This is just perfect to show up that little punk-ass Jamal back home." He began pantomiming an imagined conversation between himself and this 'Jamal'. "'Oh look at me, I made an invisible shark, and got those crazy MIB fuckers after my ass' 'Yeah? Well Fuck. You. Jamal. *I've* made a ***GOD***, bitch!'" The man settled into a chair and muttered to himself "Man, I'm gonna get so much pussy thrown at me for this. 'Why yes, ladies, I did build a god. Wanna see what other heavenly work I can do?' "

As soon as Ahmad could find his voice, he turned to James. "What about you… James, was it?"

James ran his fingers through his hair, stretching his back. "I don't know about all this 'Broken God' shit, considering I'm a follower of Neo-Paganist Methodic Confucianism, but Frankie's right. This is too interesting a project to pass up. I'm gonna get started reading." He immediately set himself to it, pulling a book off the top of the pile with a flick of his wrist.

"Of course. Take today to get yourselves acquainted with the books and your role to play, and get used to Jahongir leading your rituals."

"What? Why is he taking the lead on this?" James looked insulted. Ahmad returned his gaze, before turning away and observing the tapestry showing the Lord in his completed glory.

"Because I know he is and will be more dedicated to seeing this through, no matter the cost, and I trust him. Do you disagree with my assessment?" A strange, abrupt thud caused him to turn around. "Jahongir, what do you… oh."

The young priest had fainted. Ahmad's face was somewhere between amusement and concern.

"Well, I'm glad to see that someone understands the gravity of the task at hand."

Ahmad grabbed some smelling salts from his room and brought the young man back to consciousness.

"Once you've composed yourself, I expect you to get to work as well…" He paused and stood, walking out of the room. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I must prepare my room for a visit from an old friend in the Office of Reclamation back in my wife's homeland."

The priest left the three artists behind to prepare their work. As the wall shut, he shouted across the hallway.

"Good luck, gentlemen!"

After this, Ahmad sat at his laptop and continued to work on his letter while he waited for the Reclamations Officer to arrive. That man was always running behind schedule, so the priest knew he would have time.

> With that, I come to the main point of this letter. The 1500 lives who were taken from Oolzhak Le'an, or as you refer to Him, The Broken God. By murdering these people through your men, you have forever denied their choice to accept the Blessing of our Lord and thus, one day, be united with Him. As you can imagine, this is a rather large point of contention between myself and the other priests of the Broken as far as what the appropriate

response would be here. Some of us have been preparing, since we learned of the attack, to mobilize against your organization. This is in fact the favored action of He-Who-Is-Most-Whole.

Others, myself included, think that this is a very foolish decision, considering the damage that less than a fraction of a percent of your membership caused in a single afternoon.

In short, gentlemen of the Horizon Tribunal, though I know you would probably consider it a weight off your shoulders if we were all gone, I need your help to prevent my people's suicide. I have a proposal that you may find interesting and, certainly, mutually beneficial if you read on…

« **Et Tam Deum Petivi Hub** |**The Soldier** »

Facts Concerning Team 15 of Chapterhouse 4 and the Black Book

In other worlds far less queer than our own, the Necronomicon is, to some, an everyday part of life. Researchers at Miskatonic University in the fictional Arkham, Massachusetts, pore over it almost daily, gazing at secrets too obscene or wild to print in reality. In this particular universe, the Necronomicon is a work of fiction within a work of fiction… or at least it was thought to be.

The whole sordid affair started, I suppose, when the town of Arkham was constructed in the 1990s. I say 'town' in the loosest possible sense, for it was no more a town than the frontier land attraction one would encounter surrounding a wooden roller coaster at a sub-par amusement park. It was constructed as a tribute to the writer Howard Phillips Lovecraft, who I am sure needs no introduction. It was constructed on a vacant area of land in Vermont, not Massachusetts as in Lovecraft's work, and there was no Miskatonic river flowing through it, only an unfinished canal channel.

The pseudo-town attracted fans of Lovecraft's work, and soon, it became what would be called a tourist trap. Several of the general stores were replaced by Cthulhu's Curios and Gifts, the lone ice cream parlor was converted into The Creamery Out of Space, and served flavours such as 'Deep One Delight' and 'Cthulhu Coffee', and jewelry stores selling pendants depicting the visage of dread Cthulhu and the Derlethan Elder Sign.

The town prospered under a man who had taken the name Randolph Carter, after Lovecraft's authorial avatar from his dream cycle and *The Statement of Randolph Carter*. I do not know if this was the man's actual name, but knowing what I do now, I suspect it is a pseudonym. I hope whatever of the Hellish realms he went to, the demons/devils/daemons/imps are not merciful to that horrid man.

Arkham itself looked like any town built in the late 1700s, with cramped streets made for horse-drawn carriages rather than cars, all cobble rather than paved. The town's centre stands in front of city hall, which was little more than a miniature museum of Lovecraft. At the edges of the town stands its largest building: Miskatonic University. There are only four rooms to the university that were ever completed; a library, where one could read the works of Lovecraft, Derleth, Poe, and others in peace and quiet; a lecture hall, which was used to demonstrate various fabricated occult rites; an entry way, which connected to the two afforementioned areas; and a gift shop, where one could buy Cthulhu plushies and shoggoth blankets and even busts of the author himself, carved out of green soapstone. All in all, it could be described as 'kitschy'.

My involvement in this whole mess began at Chapterhouse 4 in Boston, when Gerald Fitzroy, head of CH4, received a phone call from one Peter Lott, who had been assigned to work at a succubus rehabilitation clinic in Baltimore. Mr. Lott had heard rumors from some of the clinic's patients that a new Lovecraftian cult had started up, centered around the pseudo-town of Arkham. This was nothing new, of course; cults based around Lovecraft's works pop up all the time, but thankfully, all of Lovecraft's work was pure fiction, with the possible exception of Herbert West, Reanimator. So, a Cthulhu cult popping up in the New England area was hardly unique, and they usually dispersed within a month.

What made this case unique is that the cult apparently had a copy of a book they referred to as *Al-Azif*. For those of you not versed in cosmic horror literature, *Al-Azif* is the Arabic name Lovecraft gave to the *Necronomicon*, the Book of Dead Names. The Necronomicon has long been called the Holy Grail of magic, excepting the actual Holy Grail, but it was long thought to be simply a name made up by Lovecraft. Those who have searched for the Necronomicon have found only false leads or copies of the book made by Lovecraft fanatics with no magical properties.

Unfortunately, even if the lead is false, the Horizon Initiative must investigate it. So, Team 15 of Chapterhouse 4 was called upon to take up this task. The team consisted of four people: Jayla Farrow, also known as Jay, an African-American woman who acted as the

team leader; Stanley Dyer, an expert with various forms of weaponry; Jacob Nelson, a religious scholar, former member of the Scribe corps; and myself, Herbert Andrew Westbrooke, the youngest, member of the team and scout.

The objective was simple: confer with the cult, retrieve the book, get out, and return it to the Chapterhouse. The missions are never as simple as the objectives, however, as we were soon to learn- what, what are you doing? No, Jay, don't, stop!

For anyone reading this: forgive all the purple prose up there, and I'm sorry for knocking you out, Herbie, but I need to do this too. I have to get it out of my head and onto *something*, or else I'll go fucking bonkers from it. And was it really necessary to write out "No, Jay, don't, stop?"

This is Jayla Farrow of the Shepherd Corps, American Chapterhouse 4, Team 15. As my colleague stated, we were responsible for recovery of what was believed to be a copy of the Necronomicon, not to be confused with the Necromnomnomicon, the Necromomicon, the Necrololicon, the Ninjanomicon, or Necronomi-Con, the Lovecraft convention in Providence. I am writing this behind enemy lines in the Arkham tourist town in Vermont, writing all of this on the wall of an ice cream parlor that we've barricaded ourselves in in practically microscopic writing.

I have no idea why, but ever since seeing that… *thing*, both of us have felt the need to write. We managed to find some sidewalk chalk and have started writing down little notes everywhere we could. We may have left a trail right to this place, but if we can record this down, it'll be worth it.

The four of us- Dyer, Nelson, Westbrooke, and myself- came into Arkham approximately 12 hours ago, if my watch is correct. We were prepared to simply find the cult (which we were told convened in their replica of M.U.), negotiate with or neutralize them, take the book, and get the fuck outta dodge. Simple enough of a plan…

And then the fog rolled in. The fog was thicker than my hair after I haven't washed it for a week, and we had neglected to bring any

sort of fog light (yes, I know, stupid). So, we went out into the fog with some pen lights, sticking close to buildings and using a map that Herbie had brought up on his smartphone.

…that's weird. I can remember exactly what the hell they said. Let me try to get it down.

"This is feckin' weird," muttered Dyer, his hand on his sidearm. "One second it's as clear as a polished crystal ball, the next, it's like Silent Feckin' Hill."

"Wasn't that smoke and not fog, though?" Nelson clutched the crucifix that hung around his neck. Jake was just here on temporary assignment, and was meant to record down the customs and beliefs of the cult, however specific or non-specific they may be.

Dyer shot him a nasty look. "That was th'movie, ya philistine." I could never place Stanley's accent; I wanted to say it was something British, but occasionally, he swore a phrase that came from Australia, so I just put up his accent as 'ambiguously cultured'.

Herbert was fiddling with the ten rosaries he had at his belt; yes, that's right, ten of them. Our scout is more nervous than… I don't know, something that's really damn nervous. A chinchilla on caffeine, I guess? Anyway, he said a prayer on each of them, and I couldn't help but look at him with something resembling disgust. "Herbie, you know that most of the things that we fight are just gonna laugh at you for having that many rosaries, right?" He started, and frowned at me.

"T-that's not true. V-vampires are repelled by all r-religious symbols… and the crucifix is silver, so that takes care of werewolves, right?" I shook my head and sighed.

"They only work if you have belief in that particular symbol. Take me, for example; I'm Catholic, so the crucifix, for me, is powerful. If I tried to hold up an Islamic crescent to a vampire, he'd be at my jugular faster than you can say 'Bela Lugosi's still undead'." Herbert the paranoid Shepherd groaned, letting the rosaries fall to his side; I knew the man was Episcopalian, so for his purposes, the crucifix would probably work the best.

Most of the trip was made in silence, until- oh, Herbert's waking back up. I think he wants a turn at the chalk. You know what happened next, right?

Indeed I do. From the depths of the fog, we began to see shadows. They looked to be human, but the proportions were… wrong somehow. The arms too long, the legs too short, the head too narrow. They would appear in the mists for a split second, before turning away from us and fleeing.

At this point, we all had our weapons drawn, and were sufficiently skittish. We had our backs up against a dilapidated building marked "Arkham Poor House." We thought we were safe… but poor Nelson failed to account for the window behind him. With a shattering of glass, Nelson was pulled through the window by a green, scaled arm, and gone so quickly we couldn't even aim a shot at the thing that took him.

Dyer swore something unintelligible, and jumped through the window after him, both of us following suit. The shadowy form that had grabbed Nelson had run out the back door, ripping it off its hinges in the process; this was no small feat, considering that the door looked to weigh about 12 pounds, and whatever creature took him was carrying a 250 pound ex-scribe with him.

The path soon led us to be stranded in the fog once more, but this time, with no discernible buildings in sight. Jayla was barely resisting the urge to swear, which would simply give away our position. Instead of swearing, she walked calmly out into the mist…

…and aimed her gun up into the air, firing it once. The reaction was instantaneous; from all sides, scaled beings shot out of the mists, lunging at us, but none of them had Nelson. So, we did what we were trained to do: kick ass for the Lord. Dyer got the most kills, but then again, he may have stolen a few from me; Jayla got the second-most, and of course, I got the least, with only one kill. Still, I speculate it will look nice mounted on my wall… if we ever get out of this damned ice-cream parlour.

Jayla wants to write now, so I shall let her, whilst I go to take watch.

He's exaggerating; there were only six of the things. Stan got three, I got two, and he got one with a lucky-ass sho

Chalk broke. Found some papers in the back, we're writing on those now with a ballpoint. Have to squeeze them in really small, and Herbert's gone to find a clipboard.

Anyway. The fog was finally starting to burn off by the time we got there, and lo and behold, by the time it cleared, we were standing not even 200 yards from Miskatonic U's gift shop. We went right inside… and I forgot about the bell over the shop door. Idiot. We were disarmed in less than 5 seconds, on the floor in 20. Whoever these cultists were, they were good.

We were dragged into the lecture hall of the university, no surprise there. Equally unsurprising was the fact that they had Nelson on an altar up on the stage, and were starting to drag all of us towards it. There were corpses sitting in the seats, their bellies slit open; I suppose they were the previous sacrifices of the cult.

Speaking of the cult, guess what the high priest was holding? A tome, bound in human flesh, black as night. My first thought was that it looked nothing like it did in *The Evil Dead*. My second thought was to try and break my captor's steely grip, and fling him unceremoniously at the cultist, interrupting the profane ceremony that had been-

And now *I'm* dipping into the purple prose. Fuck.

Anyway. I couldn't break my guy's grip, so I had to sit there and watch the newest member of our team, Ex-Scribe Jacob Nelson, get his guts ripped out like he was a bull someone was simultaneously barbequing and performing haruspicy with. They started with his intestines, and he reeked of shit and piss as he died, screaming out one final prayer.

They brought Dyer up next. The sonofabitch was smiling, and I couldn't figure out why. The high priest was reading stuff out of the book, but I couldn't figure out what in the frack he was trying to do, other than summon something. Stanley Dyer died with a smile on

his face, and even now, about four hours later, I can't figure out why.

The priest raised the dagger, and said some words I was finally able to make out: "Eyhe geb hai! Nogagl ch'ftaghu- Ia! Throd n'ghft Yog-Mosha-Rath!"(No, I do not know how I transcribed all that) A portal to oblivion itself opened behind him, darker than dark. And something began crawling through…

All I remember after that was blood, tentacles, running, shooting, dead cultists, and a sensation telling me to not look at whatever the fuck had just crawled through the portal. After some more running, we ended up here, in an ice cream parlor, The Creamery Out of Bloody Fucking Space. I can hear the thing coming closer… it wants nothing less than to devour. To devour what, I don't know, but…

…it refuses to come any closer to the building we are in. Gashes are forming on its - ia he forces the hand of the world - its leg. Why? Why won't it approach the creamery?

OH SWEET LOVECRAFT'S LICK-SHITTING GHOST ITS SWELLING. Why the fuck? It did it right as I wrote "creamer-" FUCK ITS BIGGER. Okay, don't mention the word "cre-" the place where ice cream is made. SHIT even that's set it off. Now it's shaking… and that sound… fucking Hell, it sounds like a million whales giving birth and dying at the same fucking time.

"I don't think it likes whatever you're writing," says Herbert, who looks like he's about to wet himself.

"No shit it doesn't," I reply in kind, and for some reason, I'm still writing this shit down. "Every time I write the word "creamery-" As soon as I say it, and again when I transcribe it down here, cracks start forming in the behemoth's pink skin. Why the fuck its pink, I don't know, pink isn't actually a damn color.

"…I think it might be allergic," said Herbert; how he jumped to that conclusion, I don't know. "Lactose intolerant, maybe?" Muscle began showing at the sound of the word "lactose", the pink monster thrashing about wildly. "…this is just too weird."

"What?" I asked, the being-from-beyond's skin slowly reforming.

"Is… is it allergic to *words* related to dairy?" The instant I write down the last word, skin begins to flake off. I grinned at Herbert, and wrote more down on the paper.

"If the words related to dairy can weaken it… what will *actual* ice cream do?" That last sentence sent the thing falling backwards crushing a good half of the town with it. "Herbert?" I say aloud.

"Y-yes, Jay?" He stutters in response.

"THROW THE CHEE

Excerpt from an After-Action report regarding the Arkham incident

> Despite the loss of Stanley Upton Dyer and Jacob Fitzwilliam Nelson during recovery and the resultant destruction of the Arkham tourist attraction due to sudden existence failure of an uncatalogued supernatural entity, Jayla Farrow and Herbert Westbrooke were able to recover the alleged copy of *Al-Azif* from the wreckage of the Miskatonic University attraction. The book was completely unrelated to the Necronomicon, and was instead a translated excerpt of the Pnakotic Manuscripts; due to the relatively low value and high risk, the tome has been incinerated.
>
> Farrow and Westbrooke are currently being treated for Miskatonic Compulsion, and have been withdrawn from active duty for the time being, until proper therapy and medication can be administered. Both are being considered for the Tribunal Star for going above and beyond the call of duty.

« **Hub** »

Fifthist Hub

You and me

Should take a trip across the galaxy

And feel the breaking waves of our own energy

And everything will come together

Slowly

Quietly

Hey there fella, glad you stopped by. I mean, you'll do… better than nothin'. No really, come on in. We aint kooks.

You might ask me why you're here! Well that's because you're part of the Fifthist Church. You were drawn here a long time ago as a matter of fact, you didn't have much say in the matter. You could say it's somethin' like fate, predestination, or maybe its retro-cuz-ality. Maybe it's backwards like that. Who knows. Maybe it's forwards too.

Not a religious type you say? Oh, well, that's fine. We ain't into prayin' and all that either. A lot of us here are backsliders. Church is just one of them words people throw around. Fifthist Church, Fifthist Collective, Fifthist Book Publishing, Fifthist Psychedelic Surf Rock, Fifthist Lip Balm, etcetera. It's Fifthist is all that matters.

What does "Fifthism" mean? Well, that's not a name my congregation came up with. A while back there was a bunch of new agey hip types who went and published a book. Yanks called themselves **The Fifth Church**, and that name stuck… But the

most likely case is that there are always five manifestations of Fifthism. Always. There's usually a cult up north, out west, and well, yours truly. I ain't never heard of no commy Fifthists or nothin'.

…Theres even been Fifthism all throughout time. Think of the Fifthist protozoans. Think of the Fifthist suns. Harken to creation, the concept of a universe.

What makes them Fifthist? Patterns, signals, magic. The unpossible. A Fifthist concept will slowly transcend reality. When that concept blossoms, it falls, like ripened fruit brother, o' to be consumed and shat by the lord glowing hands himself. It becomes reality. We see the Fifth world, brother. And we too shall fall, like the the ekpyrotic house before us, and shat as they were.

Eventually.

`Us Southern Fifthists` have been around for years. Maybe someone's keeping us from blowin' downwind? Hate to be paranoid. Hate to think something out there was scared of the last Southern Fifthists after they done came to term.

But enough with all this morbid talk about dyin' and indifferent other-universally forces of nature and TOP **SECRETE** PARAGOVERNEMENT ORGAN-IZATIONS. YEAH, WE KNOW ABOUT YOU. WE'RE GETTIN' REAL TIRED OF YOUR SHIT! We're still alive! So to hell with you! To hell with this "Fifthism" and talk about "Fifthism"! We got money to raise! Get outta my face! Join me in outer space! Roll that frog footage! Light those candles! Send check or money order to World 390, so that our corpses may bloat and explode, and from that heaping viscera we will rise again as pungent, fungent fumes!

- Prologue: Water Coalesces And Descends As Rain
    - *Track 1: Chilly The Space Trucker*
- The Surfside Beat

    - *Track 2: The Book of Dave*

- Riptide
    - *Track 3: Uh...*
- The Appalachian Scar
- The Face of God
    - *Track 4: You and Me* feat. **Oboebandgeek99**
- Rain Leaking Through A Vendor's Roof
- Siren's Song

Articles With Fifthist Influence:

- SCP-1425
- SCP-1523
- SCP-1564
- SCP-1724
- SCP-1958
- SCP-1982
- SCP-2005
- SCP-2155
- SCP-2342
- SCP-2425
- SCP-2454
- SCP-2456
- SCP-2512
- SCP-2517
- SCP-2573
- SCP-2678
- SCP-2858
- SCP-3005
- SCP-3214
- SCP-3255
- SCP-3257
- SCP-3330
- SCP-3351
- SCP-3511
- SCP-3512
- SCP-3519
- SCP-3534
- SCP-3605
- SCP-475

Tales of Fifthist Influence:

- A Place In The Back Of Your Mind
- A Simple Paradigm Shift
- July 5th, 1975

- **Occult Standards**
- **An Angel who has Forsaken Sympathy**
- **Thieves Come In Fives**
- On The Road Again
- Prologue: Recruiting
- Riptide
- The Surfside Beat
- The Appalachian Scar
- Prologue: Water Coalesces And Descends As Rain
- The Face of God
- Dark and Disquieting
- **Embracing The Angels**
- **Empedocles**
- Rain Leaking Through A Vendor's Roof
- Siren's Song
- **Theogenesis**
- **The Thing at the Bottom of My Dreams**
- **Where They Kept Their Copies**
- **Why is Five afraid of Seven?**
- **Not a contest entry, but a crackfic about gods anyways**
- **The Broken Fifth**
- **Broadcast**
- Mission Statement

There are five different Fifthist documentations, that, well, aren't really documentations in the most sane sense.

Southern Fifthists, the last ones at least, use shaped prose to describe objects sacred to them. The descriptions are five paragraphs long, with attributes in no particular order. Tone is biblical.

Example | (The Last) Southern Fifthist's unholy serpents.

West Coast Fifthists (The band, Constellation Starfish) use lyric to describe things. This is a supplementary documentation, really, because a lyrical skip is basically a tale. The West Coast Fifthists as a whole change, adapt, and regenerate after each iteration into

new singers, songwriters, and musicians.

We don't know much about the other manifestations of Fifthism. For all we know one of them could be a family of squirrels in Russia, and how would they document things? Probably involves acorns or something.

Anyone may add new formats in the form of new branches of Fifthism. The overall feel of each branch should be a concept that is transcending reality in subtle, unmistakeable manners, and the people and entities caught up in it all. There are always five branches of Fifthists at any one point in time, reinventing themselves in various iterations. Each branch is defined by these qualities:
1. Each branch is a group of individuals. An example could be a cult, a following, or a fanbase.
2. Each branch dies and is reborn as something else loosely related to its previous form.
3. A Fifthist sect begins as something completely unrelated to Fifthism, and slowly metamorphoses into a Fifthist concept at which point it begins to transcend, or warp, reality.
4. The Fifthist entity is not directly observed and is generally agreed to be unknowable. It cannot be certain that Fifthism itself is any manifestation of its motives or lack of motives.

When We Were Writ

- **Dust Brothers**
- Track 1: Old Chilly The Space Trucker
- **Sleeping Under the Stars**
- **The Skylarking Gala**
- Track 2: The Book Of Dave
- Track 4: You and Me
- Track 3: Uh...
- **MEMORANDUM 083 REGARDING PROJECT "GUARDIANSHIP"**

Prologue: Water Coalesces And Descends As Rain

When Rosa went to sleep she had an odd dream. In it she was reminded of her childhood, times when she would talk with her grandfather and he would tell her of his own childhood. A time before the stroke locked his memories away. His voice would groan with use, but the veil of nostalgia in that tenor had made her feel as if she was putting rose tinted glasses to a childhood she never felt.

From this feeling of a childhood - about stories about childhoods - she saw a starfish in the stars. It spread out against the universe, translucent, like a slick of oil against the vast emptiness. Its many tendrils and arms branched off from the main body and diverged from themselves again and again, cradling galaxies with all the tenderness of a lover and all the possessiveness of a parent.

The starfish suckled the universe, allowing it to grow in its many arms. Or perhaps the universe siphoned off of the starfish; Rosa couldn't remember. Over a moment of millennia, she watched the entity begin to deflate. It reminded her of the huge die-offs happening in her state of California; the scientists called it Starfish Wasting Syndrome or something like that. Rumor had it that the cause was radioactive waste… But that wasn't important to the dream, or so…

The many limbs in the cosmic ocean began to writhe as if they had grown their own minds. Some clung tightly, breaking off infinitely into the galaxies within their grasps. Others twisted and pulled out and away from the main body, floating into an unknown beyond the universe.

Focus then shifted to one of the tendrils that had itself locked with the long arm - the milky way. Its many branches began to break off from itself like a rotting tree and the focus followed these breaks. It passed solar systems and planets she found familiar. One particular piece, small and hardly noticeable in its translucence, began to fall

into a blue planet she found familiar as her home.

This small piece broke up as it entered the atmosphere, dispersing into the winds to be deposited in the water and soil. The dreamscape was tinged with grief and a longing to return to what once was…

It was then that Rosa awoke to the alarm of her phone.

She recounted this later to her bandmembers at a bonfire on the beach. Her motley crew of friends were silent as she spoke, out of respect or confusion she couldn't tell. When her story about the story told to her finished, it was the lead singer of the band that spoke first.

"…Maybe it wasn't a starfish, Rosa." Morgan's statement was inquisitive, as if entertaining the thought. He offered a wry smile and craned up from his log towards the van upon watching Brook ravage the bag of Jet Puff.

Clyde was adjusting his guitar as usual, his mop of chestnut hair obscuring his facial expression. He was the only one that really knew how to play instruments and between the gentle strumming and the crackling of the fire there was only silence.

It was their drummer, Brook, that broke the awkwardness as she devoured the remaining marshmallows. "Neat dream. What'd you think it means?" She spoke through the food across her teeth, muffling her candor but lubricating the atmosphere enough for further conversation.

Rosa was about to speak before she was interrupted by Umiko, a kind fellow who wasn't too bright and didn't speak English very well. She wasn't even sure what he was here for on this trip, as he had all the musical talent of a scallop. "Is meaning beautiful!" He boomed, patting her on the shoulder. "Like Rosa!"

"Thanks, Umiko. No, really, I think this is like a prophecy or something, you know? I was using that new cleaning quartz I bought at the Home of Energy down the block, maybe it unlocked some unknown power in me or something!"

Clyde snorted at Rosa's excitement. "Yeah, that's what you said last week about empathy or something. Called yourself like, an unawakened indigo child or something?" His grin was well-natured, but his words were skeptical.

It was when Rosa's shining knight in armor returned to interject, handing the pack of mashmallow to Brook. "Well, I believe Rosa." Morgan spoke, turning to his unusually bright green eyes toward her. She fixed her bangs almost reflexively. "Maybe she does have some untapped ability within her. Maybe we all do, but we've forgotten how to remember it. What we've forgotten." He spoke with a certainty that silenced the other band members, even Clyde's gentle strumming.

They set up their practice schedule that night. Under the stars, with the fish. Clyde had managed to pull a few strings so they could show at a place not quite so shabby, and Brook had suggested a great idea for an after-tour party. Morgan was quick in agreeing to meet with the fans there.

Morgan ended the meeting pouring water over the fire, being the only one that was capable of getting up to do so. Clyde and Rosa had a spontaneous drinking contest that ended in about two beers, Umiko was carrying them home, and Brook claimed an inability to move after eating a month's worth of marshmallow. He swept over the scene before him. A laugh crawled into the back of his throat, having realized for him that he hadn't felt with family like this in a long time.

Hub | **Track 1: Chilly The Space Trucker** »

Track 1: Old Chilly The Space Trucker

"Old Chilly the Space Trucker"

By Brooke

I don't care what you assholes think, we don't have enough drum songs on the EP. How about we do one about that trucker we met on the way to Sacramento? What was his name? -Brooke

Drum intro
Guitars
More drums
More guitars

VERSE 1

We were travelin' along, feeling tired and blue,
when a man pulled up beside me and my crew,
He said, "Hey there kids, do you wanna take a ride?
Sit right here beside me, let me show you the skies!"
Naturally we thought this was a chance we couldn't skip,
and jumped up in that cab with Chilly and took a trip.

The truck was big and loud!
Yeah yeah yeah!
The fumes were pink and green!
Yeah yeah yeah!
The driver was a psycho!
Yeah yeah yeah!
And a party machine!
Yeah yeah yeah!

VERSE 2

The old man tipped his hat, said “Old Chilly’s the name,
I drive all across the universe delivering grain.
See people in those galaxies have gotta eat too,
and sometimes use the grains to ferment tasty space brew.”
I asked him how he turned his big rig into a ship,
he laughed and said “I had to give some space techs a sip!”

The sky was dark and vast!
Yeah yeah yeah!
We sped throughout the stars!
Yeah yeah yeah!
Chilly wore an old cap!
Yeah yeah yeah!
He traveled near and far!
Yeah yeah yeah!

Drum Solo -Brooke

Drum solo? I’ve gone through the music you’ve written out like a half dozen times, and I haven’t seen any guitar tab or chords written anywhere. Are there supposed to be any other instruments in this besides a drum set? -Morgan
Nope. -Brooke
Fuck. -Morgan

VERSE 3

Old Chilly parked us down inside an asteroid field,
and motioned for us to grab a brew case that was sealed.
We followed him across the way to a small dive bar,
around which were parked many a strange space-faring car.
He kicked open the door, took a breath, and yelled,
“More space brew from Kansas, ya’ll best come help yourself!”

Chilly was dancin all night!
Yeah yeah yeah!
He made out with a space hag!
Yeah yeah yeah!

She was a dreadful sight!
Yeah yeah yeah!
Oh how her titties did sag!
Yeah yeah yeah!

VERSE LAST

Chilly pulled over on the side of the road, back home,
Said “If you ever need me children just hit up my phone.
I’m really never far from a mobile satellite,
Unless I’m in Proxima Centauri for the night.”
We waved as he drove his big rig into the sky,
That Chilly sure was one hell of a space truckin guy!

Chilly taught us about space!
Yeah yeah yeah!
And flew a hefty brew barge!
Yeah yeah yeah!
He may be gone from our lives,
Yeah yeah yeah!
But his influence was large!
Yeah yeah yeeeeeeah!

Drum Outro

This is dumb. I wasn’t even on that trip. -Clyde

« **Prologue: Water Coalesces And Descends As Rain** | **Hub** | **The Surfside Beat** »

The Surfside Beat

Umiko sat by the fire as it burned down slowly. The waves rolled quietly over the warm sand of the beach, occasionally crashing with a low rush of water and spray. In the light of the setting sun, the roadie adjusted a ratchet strap on a piece of sound equipment. He pulled on the strap to test the tautness before hefting the case over his shoulder and carrying it to the back of Morgan's truck. He set it down carefully, making sure to situate it just so. A few trips later, the bed was full up with all of Constellation Starfish's equipment; Morgan and Clyde's guitars, Brooke's drums, the amps and mixer, and a half empty cooler of craft beers. Umiko wiped sweat from his forehead and smiled. As he surveyed his work, a careful tetriswork of cases and straps, Clyde walked up behind him.

"'Miko," he said, putting a hand on the big man's shoulder, "I think you just got a call."

Umiko turned and grabbed his phone out of Clyde's outstretched hand. "Many thanks, Clyde. I am finish with truck. Will phone call now."

Clyde smiled back at him. "Thanks, buddy."

Umiko looked behind him where the other members of the band were standing with a group of bums, pointing at the sky and laughing. Morgan was the center of attention, as always, and was waving his arms like a bird while trying not to spill his beer. Rosa, ever at Morgan's side, stood close enough to occasionally brush up against him, but not enough to arouse suspicion. Brooke was twirling a drum stick around her finger and reading from a magazine, hardly paying attention to the commotion her bandmate was causing. And Clyde, Clyde was still pulling on the strings of his acoustic, picking out a quiet melody as the waves played their accompaniment.

Satisfied that the band wouldn't notice his momentary absence,

Umiko walked away from the group towards the road, where a surf shack sat deserted. He continued his usual ambulatory gait until he felt he was sufficiently out of sight. Then, and only then, he straightened his back, stretched, and pulled out the phone. Quickly hitting redial, he glanced again towards the beach. They had not seen him walk away.

The phone rang three times before another voice answered. It was a connecting line, a midway between two callers. The automated voice on the other end spoke clearly with the same uncannily human tone that it always did during these calls, and like always, Umiko clenched his teeth slightly.

"Welcome to Service and Care Products. How may I direct your call?"

"Sarah niner nine Amy."

A pause, and then.

"Please state your designation."

Umiko cleared his throat. "Agent Alexi Konnikov, Site 99, Task Force Bravo."

Again a pause on the line. Alexi always hated this part. The slightest misstep would result in, best case scenario, a stern talking to by Director Page or, worst case scenario, a strike team sent to his position. The giant Russian tried to relax, but the voice caught him too quickly.

"Please state your security code, followed by your Task Force code."

A deep breath, and then, "Echo alpha five five charlie two niner papa golf one one zulu." He took another breath. "Bravo nine three seven charlie padre."

There was a brief silence, during which Umiko counted slowly to five.

"Thank you, Agent Konnikov. Welcome to the Site 99 Secure

Network. How may I direct your call?”

Alexi emptied his lungs and wiped more sweat off of his brow. “GOI Central Department, Supervisor McKinney.”

The phone clicked, and then began ringing again. Alexi poked his head around the corner of the shack, and eyed Morgan attempting to juggle three empty bottles while Rosa laughed and cheered a little too loud.

“This is McKinney.”

Alexi turned back around the shack. “Randy, it’s Alex. You called?”

McKinney coughed on the other end. “You know, for somebody who hates going through authorization so much, I would think you’d be more willing to answer the call when it comes through the first time. Get to skip all that niner niner bullshit.”

“I was occupied,” said Alexi. “I’m supposed to be undercover.”

“You’re right, you’re right. What were you busy doing this time, huh? Channeling your chi through some spirit stones again?”

Alexi sighed. “Do you need anything, Randy?”

McKinney laughed. “I’m just giving you a hard time, Alex. I do have a reason for calling, though. Talk around Central is that they’re considering reassigning you. Might come within the next month.”

The hair on the back of Alexi's neck stood up. “Reassign me? To where?" He paused. "Then why send me here? You said that this has been our primary target ever since North Carolina. Why would they want to pull out all of a sudden?”

“By the sounds of it, Central isn't convinced anymore that we've got an actual Fifthist sect. The group in North Carolina had giant, reality bending snakes, Alexi. That’s some crazy fucking stuff right there. Your Constellation Starfish… I mean, they haven't done anything except play shitty music and smoke a ton of pot.”

“McKinney, come on. You've read my reports, haven’t you? I

thought I was pretty clear about-”

“I've read your reports. A few strange incidents here and there. I almost believed it when I saw that video of the dancing light thing last week, but then they were able to cook that all up in a lab down in R&D. Said it was just smoke and mirrors, and… I don’t know, Alex. I know you’re dead set on this being the one, but just because the singer has a link to North Carolina doesn't mean this is your Star Signals. All of the Fifthists so far haven’t exactly been discreet. Unless Constellation Starfish does something out of this world here before too long, they’re probably going to pull you for a Broken God project in Arkansas.”

Alexi rubbed his temples fervently. “Randy, listen, I know this probably sounds crazy, but I swear there’s something going on here. I need you to hold off Page and Central for another few days. The band is going to a big concert upstate this weekend, and intel is hinting that it’s a Marshall, Carter and Dark event. If you want some fucking giant, exploding snakes or whatever, be my guest, but what’s going to happen at this show is going to blow that shit out of the water.”

Randall McKinney was silent on the other end of the line. Ten seconds passed, then fifteen, and then, “Fine. I’ll talk to Page, we’ll get this taken care of. I swear to fucking god though, Alexi, if nothing happens at this show and I stick my neck out for you for nothing, you’ll be in a cubicle somewhere sifting through UIU intercepts by the end of the month.”

Alexi exhaled. “Sure thing, boss.” The phone beeped and Alexi swiftly tucked it into his pocket. He mussed his hair slightly, slouched his shoulders, and stumbled back around the shack. Most of the crowd had dispersed, with only a few tagalongs hanging around to smoke pot with Clyde and Brooke. Morgan had disappeared, and Rosa was sitting near the truck, simmering. As Alexi approached, Clyde raised his head and grinned at him. “Who was that, big guy?”

Umiko smiled. “Only mother. No worries.”

« **Track 1: Old Chilly the Space Trucker** | **Hub** | **Track 2: The**

Book of Dave »

Track 2: The Book Of Dave

"The Book of Dave"

By Clyde

Notes: So I was looking for inspiration at my parents' house last weekend, and I found this really sick **book** *and thought "Hey, I can use this to write down lyrics". Before too long, the book started writing back. How cool is that? Anyway, I wrote a song about the guys in the book and here we go. -Clyde*

Peppy guitar intro

Verse 1

Well I was sitting home alone last night, recording music for my band,
When suddenly I saw some pages and a blackened spine.
I grabbed me up that book, sat it down and started a-reading.
And then thought to myself, "Hey, for lyrics this'll do just fine!"

It was the Book of Dave, it was the Book of Dave!
Something crazy bout a civilization depraved!
Book of Dave, oh yes the Book of Dave!
Sounded like they needed some funk.

Probably a guitar solo here
We're putting this in the EP? Seriously? I wrote a rock opera in three part harmony and we're putting "The Book of Dave" on the EP? -Rosa
Deal with it. -Clyde

Verse 2

I grabbed up my guitar, leaned back and started a-reading,
and my-oh-my, the horrors I did peruse.
Looked to me like Dave was real big top notch doucher,
And everything would be better with more music and less abuse.

It was the Book of Dave, it was the Book of Dave!
Some shit about some murders and some people got flayed!
Book of Dave, sure was the Book of Dave!
Figured funky tunes would do them good.

Verse 3

I pulled out a pen, and wrote some doo-wop and a little crescendo,
And before my eyes, I saw the Book of Dave write back to me,
Told a story of how old Dave and his friends started dancin,
Amongst the corpses of the fallen and a vast and bloody sea.

It was the Book of Dave, it was the Book of Dave!
People dropped their axes and began to rave!
Book of Dave, hell yeah the Book of Dave!
They're pretty weird but who am I to judge?

VERSE 4

The craziest thing friends, and man I wouldn't blame you for doubting,
Was when the ink on the page jumped up and started dropping a beat.
Old Dave appeared, and started shaking his unholy maracas,
Him and I jammed out, and let me tell you it was pretty sweet!

It was the Book of Dave, it was the Book of Dave!
Monstrous abominations and a conga line craze!
Book of Dave, fuck yeah the Book of Dave!
Partied so hard they changed their history!

Guitar Solo Outro

Clyde, where put book? Me interest in read. -Umiko
I think I threw it out, 'Miko. Sort of got weird towards the end. -Clyde
Shit. -Umiko

« The Surfside Beat | Hub | Riptide »

Riptide

Rosa walked up the sun-baked asphalt driveway to the front door. The little pink bungalow was not much more than peeling paint, chipped nautilus and Neptune statues reigning over the fire ants in Brook's patchwork grass-dirt lawn. Rosa couldn't remember it ever looking any different. She hit the doorbell and the faint ding-dong could be heard on the other side. After some time, no sound of footsteps, no shuffling. She itched her head and paced the threshold.

Under the rug, huh?

She blinked, took a deep breath, and looked down. The novelty doormat instructed her to *COME BACK WITH A WARRANT*.

She bent down, peeled back the doormat and reached for the key. Brook kept it there in case of emergencies (but usually forgetfulness). Rosa sprung up and creaked the door open only to meet Brook's scrutinizing gaze, head atilt.

"Breaking and entering isn't your style, flower girl," Brook said, more than lightly punching wide-eyed Rosa in the arm.

"Hey quit it! Let me in, it's hot!"

Brook wiped her nose with the back of her hand. "Okay, but take off your shoes."

"I don't have any shoes."

Brook rolled her eyes and shook her head, motioning for her to come inside. "What's up? Doesn't anyone ever use the phone?"

"Rehearsal, doofus!"

Brook glanced at the tambourine sticking out of her backpack.

“Where are the guys? Who ever heard of a two girl drum and tambourine outfit?”

“Actually,” started Rosa, “there’s a really cool group in Sea—”

“Okay stop. Come inside.”

“I have a surprise for you,” said Brook as she rummaged through a carboard box.

“Really? What is it?” Rosa said, edging in to get a better look.

“Actually it’s not for you, it’s for the fans. T Shirts. Got them printed shit cheap. You like the starfish on the front?”

“I love it! Oh umm, but I think you’ll have to end up giving me one eventually,” Rosa said, pressing her fingers together. “I don’t think we’ll sell a lot of them. Are you sure we have fans?”

Brook snorted. “Of course we have fans! Don’t you check the Myspace page?” Brook walked over to her still open laptop. “Look there. 146 fans, and better yet, check them out. Most of them have songs playing on their pages, our songs.”

“Wow,” Rosa said, clicking on a random bald headed old man’s avatar. “And all sorts of fans too.” She clicked on another page, a plain looking middle-aged woman. “Hmm, a lot of them seem to like ‘You and Me’. I’m surprised Old Chilly isn’t more popular…” she said softly, a pursed smile aimed at Brook.

Brook rolled her eyes. “Who knows. People like cheesy-ass love songs. All I know is the shirts will sell. The CD's too. The fans we do have are crazy about us.”

Rosa clicked on another page, a teenager a few years younger than her. “Wow, this guy has a lot of pictures of me… What does that word mean?”

Brook snapped the laptop down and cleared her throat. “Nothing. Like I said, they really like us.”

“Hmm,” said Rosa. “Do you have water? I’ve been really thirsty lately.”

“No, I have a fuckload of Mountain Dew though,” Brook said, sitting on the floor to adjust something on her drum kit, which looked a lot more expensive than her house.

“No, I just want water.”

“Why, are you on a diet? You’re already thin as a rake.”

“Nooo… I don’t know. I just really drink a lot of water lately. Maybe it’s hot?”

“Now that you mention it, I could use a glass myself. There’s a working sink in the bathroom if you’re thirsty.” Brook got up and walked toward the bathroom.

Rosa squinted at Brook as she put her head between the basin and the faucet and let it rip. “*A working sink in the bathroom?* Really? You don’t have a functioning kitchen sink?”

“Wow,” Brook said, gasping, “Calm down, fancy pants. We can stop by the gas station if you want real water.”

Clyde showed up a little while later on his motorcycle and knocked on their door.

“I’m here!” he shouted, adjusting glasses.

Brook opened the door quickly. “Where’s Morgan?”

“Him and Umiko are coming in the van. They’re a bit late though. Apparently they got stopped at the mall by a few girls…” Clyde flipped open his phone and recited a text message. “Umiko, Four Fifty Eight AM; Quote, *Will you take us to outer space with you.* End quote. Hyphen, her name is Lola, L.O.L.”.

Brook turned her head to Rosa. “Told you they’re crazy.”

“Yeah,” Clyde repeated, hoisting his guitar over the girls and

through the doorway. “It seems we have a bit of a cult following.”

“4:58? They should be here by now.”

Just as she said this, a heavily rusted Volkswagen tilted into the driveway, puttering up the hill, half of Umiko’s very large frame sticking out of the driver’s side window.

“Miss Rosy!” he said, holding a water bottle out. “Fancy water!”

“What does he do again?” Brook muttered.

“I think he’s our dealer but I forget,” answered Clyde absently.

Umiko and Morgan stepped out. Umiko had a 10 gallon water cooler — which probably wasn’t full of fancy water — and Morgan was holding a notebook.

“Well, looks like everyone’s all here. Let’s get this started.”

“What’s cooler than cool?” sang Morgan.

“Cold!” chimed Rosa.

“What *deader* than dead?” rang Umiko.

“Probably worse.” said Clyde, plainly.

“I just wanna stay in bed!” barked Brook.

Or you could do this instead
Make your way out to the sea
Stay a while there with me
And meet the voices in your head

I’ve traveled oh so far
From the hills to the ocean
And we are set in motion
By a near but distant star

Can’t you see you’re a part of me?

We could be happy as can be
Makes no difference how it seems
To them or they or old timestreams

I just wanted you to know
That if palm trees sway and white water rolls
We'll melt together and form a shoal
Far from this old freak show

"Me and you we've come so far, before the dark there were other stars—"

"Break," Morgan said, coughing, interrupting Umiko.

"Hey, you know the words Umiko? This is a new song! You've never heard us do this one," said Rosa.

"I…" Umiko said, looking at them all hesitantly. They were right, he had never heard this song before.

"Sorry…" said Umiko, looking down to the floor. "I looked." The giant scratched the back of his head.

Morgan laughed. "It's alright! I leave it right there anyway. It's no secret," he said, looking at his notebook. "Now where were we?"

Me and you we've come so far
Before the dark, on another star
Way out past Neptune and Mars
And things that live behind those bars

There's no need to go back to
Everything can be brand new
We'll paint the sky a different hue
Pink or purple, technicolor
And make old blue seem like squalor
Because the sun is now a big sand dollar

Or we can all go to sleep
And meet our mother in the deep
And all our brothers too

“I wouldn’t mind something new. So if you want me that’s where I’ll be, underwater, turning slowly. Dark and sound and lowly. I’d love to meet you there too, underneath that ocean blue.”

“I’ve never heard that before, who’s that?” Justine asked, lighting a cigarette.

“Haha, I like to make things up,” said Lola. “Want to go to that concert later? I hear John P and the Eruptions are going to be playing after that one band, I forget the name.”

“Who?”

“Constellation Starfish.”

“Oh. Yeah, sure.”

« **Track 2: The Book of Dave** | **Hub** | **Track 3: Uh...** »

Track 3: Uh...

Hey Umiko! Why don't you write anything? What is it you do again? -Rosa

Uh… I write song, sometimes. Here I write one down now. -Umiko

Why don't you sing it? Can you sing, bro? -Brook

Uh…Yes! I am very good singer! -Umiko

What's the song called? -Rosa

Uhhh… -Umiko

"Uhhh…"

By Umiko

Intro

Yeah, yeah, okay-oh, yeah
Yeah, yeah lets go
Okay good, okay yeah, yeah-oh
Yeah that's great, alright, good
Good you song
Very nice

God, you're gonna blow your cover! Come on! Think of something! Anything!

Verse 1

Umiko knows a human

I saw him one day
He was skinny and far away
Actually no he wasn't human
He was in a box
And I didn't see him in
It had lots of locks
To keep away other humans

That's an interesting rhyme scheme, Umiko. -Brook
It is Japanese rhyming. -Umiko
I thought you were from Hawaii? -Rosa
Uhhh… -Umiko

He had an ugly face
But you only hear that
You never see that
You just read that
It was a secret
If you see that he would have to kill you
He come and find you

Chorus

Secretly

Repeat X 10

Woah, what a weird tempo. Let me get my keyboard out. Let's see, time signature? - Brook
Uh… 142? - Umiko
Really? And what? - Brook
…8? - Umiko
Klavierstücke? What the fück? Stockhausen? Umiko do you have a girlfriend? - Brook
Aaah! - Umiko

Keyboard Solo

Verse 2

There's also a business
But the business makes friends
Gets all in their business
Makes business girlfriends
Imagine a business is flirting with you
What would it say?
How may I help you?

Wow! That's a pretty good American accent! -Rosa
I practice good! How you like song, eh? -Umiko
Really? That's it? We don't want any short songs on the EP. -Brook
…y-yes! There's one more! -Umiko

Verse 3

In my home province, they got the flu
Except it wasn't the flu
It was something new
The people all scared, what would they do?
We asked wise woman, but wise woman slinky
She was twisty and stewed
Wise woman twisted all over the house
Her neighbors too

Okay that's a little gory Umi… -Rosa
Is only allegory! -Umiko
Oh! For what? -Rosa
…Communism! -Umiko
Right on! -Brook

Ending Verse

There once was secret agent man
Sent to the beach with master plan
Stop crazy kooks from causing a fus
In their little volkswagen bus

But in the end he knew
That he was part of it too
And that he would sail into the sea

That is where he would always be

Ah that's sweet, Umiko. -Rosa
Huh? It's nothing. I made the last part up. -Umiko

« Riptide | Hub | The Appalachian Scar »

INFORMATION PACKAGE 23.A-F2

CODE: APPALACHIA

Commentary from Joshua Greenfield

I don't know if anything he's saying is true or not. Being a member of the Initiative, he is extremely biased. Some think he had a few screws lose before he retired. Talk of previous universes and the Coalition eightysixing the god of Abraham. His comments on our dire need to quick action are also a bit hard to take seriously. Fifthism has been around for a very long time.

> The Fifthists… They have no control. Reason with those poor “people” all you like, you’re only speaking into *its* ears. They’re conceived by the thing, reined to it, through some magic work of probability. They're puppets. This thing is someone else's devil.
>
> I spoke to it. I know enough to know that I spoke to it. I know exactly what it is. The creator of a doomed universe that came before ours. The Fifthist entity is the wraith of a god, our god, one and the same.
>
> If you leave them alone for a long enough time, trust me, those damned puppets will go nuclear. We can stop it now. We can sever its fingers. We can make it so it can’t learn anymore. We don’t have to keep letting it manifest its will only to sweep it up later.
>
> A god can be killed.

You men should know this best of all… we know what you people are capable of. I don't know how, but your ancestors had the chance, and they let it slip by, for one reason or another.

As for the world before us, the Fifth… they weren't so smart. But I think we are fully capable of cleaning up their mess.

Joshua Greenfield, former Field Operator of the Horizon Initiative to the Program Director of the Global Occult Coalition, 2004 regarding the Fifthist Phenomenon

Appalachian Cult Graphic

The attached document was recovered from the ruins. Most of it is their interpretive gibberish; I can't see an exact line to the entity there. If we're going to figure this thing out we're going to have to work with the west coast Fifthists. They're the only ones we can infiltrate and the only ones who seem to communicate with anyone outside of its influence in a helpful way.

Jetti and the Delvins and their fan base committed mass suicide just sixteen years prior to this.The current manifestation of West Coast Fifthism seems to be a band calling itself "Constellation Starfish". If that wasn't easy enough to pinpoint, they were showcased on KNTV minutes after the last reports of the previous disaster were scrubbed by I-think-we-know-who. Their fan base is similar in size and their group follows a similar format. The more subtle patterns have been confirmed by our numbers people. The zombie is there.

Gather all information you can. If you find yourself speaking through it, or, hopefully, speaking *to* it, record everything. Record every song you hear, document every symbol. Record everything you say as well. There's a good chance you're part of it too.

Make sure they die before it shows its face. Nobody deserves to go there. I think you remember the incident in England.

The Appalachian Scar

Item #: SCP-[NULL]

Object Class: Neutralized

Special Containment Procedures: The area SCP-[NULL] affected has been quarantined and undergoes regular surveys for the potential reemergence of anomalous effects. Quarantine consists of a chain-link fence installed along the perimeter of the affected area and the property purchased by a Foundation front company. The hole has been refilled and forested since its discovery, and disinformation Scrub protocols have been enacted regarding its history.

Description: SCP-[NULL] is an undeveloped area located in Jackson County, North Carolina, previously known as the town of . The town of was reported missing in 195 . Remnants of large sinkholes, the largest of which being 1 km long by 2 km wide have been found in the area where the town is reported to have been located. The area is two kilometers lower than the surrounding area; several large canyons existing in geologically incompatible locations surround the area.

The town of had a population of 146.

Excavation of the lakes in the town reveal a number of unusual objects:

- 1 set of canine remains, approximately 7 meters long and 2 centimeters wide.
- An unknown amount of migratory geese remains.
- 25 sets of human skeletal remains in the shape of obtuse triangles and diamonds.
- 2 sets of human skeletal remains which appear to have been twisted and stretched but show no signs of structural stress.
- The skull of one copperhead (Agkistrodon contortrix) snake, measuring 14 m wide and weighing 2268 Kg.
- 1 human remains in the shape of a star.

Addendum A: The following interview was conducted with Joe

Sullivan, a former resident of who left in 195 .

Researcher Ortega: What do you know of the town of ?

Joe Sullivan: Did something happen there? Is Linda alright?

Researcher Ortega: I'm sorry. Linda is dead. There was a plane crash. Do you need some time?

Joe Sullivan: No… it's alright. We haven't really spoken in the last six years.

Researcher Ortega: What can you tell me about the town? We're writing a historical text.

Joe Sullivan: Oh. I don't know much about the history. I'm sorry.

Researcher Ortega: That's fine. What about the people? The community while you were living there?

Joe Sullivan: Very conservative. Religious folks. Really into the Holiness movement. Half of the town attended mass on Fridays. I would always worried Linda would get bit.

Researcher Ortega: You mentioned you haven't spoken to your wife, Linda, in six years. May I ask why?

Joe Sullivan: She was distant. I couldn't even tell she was the same person. She wasn't involved in raising Morgan, even though she insisted he attend mass. She didn't even let me go to church with her anymore. Said "I wasn't part of it". I needed to get away.

Researcher Ortega: You stopped going to church at some point? At what point weren't you allowed in anymore?

Joe Sullivan: It was a gradual process… Uh… People

were very cliquey. At a certain point it was just unbearable. I felt excluded. The pastor even started a special night mass that only certain people went to. Really stupid shit. They don't know how that hurts other people.

Researcher Ortega: Night mass?

Joe Sullivan: Like I don't know about it. I didn't care enough anymore to "spy" on my wife. I knew it wasn't some sort of *satanic debauchery*; just a change in doctrine or an interpretation of the Bible that they didn't want to make public for one reason or another.

Researcher Ortega: Thank you for your patience, we're just about done here. Are you sure you didn't notice anything strange in the town? Strange sounds, or, smoking earth?

Joe Sullivan: The night mass was the only strange thing about the town. Sometimes they were loud at night but the noise never bothered anyone. People there always seemed the same to me, regardless if they were following religious fads.

Addendum B: The following analog transmission was broadcast for two minutes each year on 08/23 in a radius of 2km around the town until `1968`.

Speaker: Mokim, grab the snake please.

A young man pulls what appears to be a copperhead (Agkistrodon contortrix) snake out of a box located behind the pulpit.

Speaker: Now look on, lovers, as things take shape. Take the shape of god.

The man holding the snake begins waving it around above his head. Video feed begins to distort. Camera remains fixed on snake handler.

Speaker: Susan, calm down.

A woman begins screaming and the speaker moves off camera.

Speaker: I can see your neck over there honey. Calm down. Why are you hollerin'? Look how it moves. Look how it slides up the floor.

Sounds of a struggle, screaming stops.

Speaker: Mokim, put the snake down please.

Snake handler appears to stumble. Screaming begins again, but in reverse.

Speaker 2: Susan!

An elongated human head moves slowly past the screen.

Speaker: Put it down, boy!

Snake appears to enlarge. The area around it appears to expand and contract.

Video feed ends.

Additional Notes, Commentary

Morgan is a bit tricky. He was involved in the Appalachian Cult (the *last* Southern Fifthists), but he appears to be the leader of the Fifthist entities Western manifestation. The father isn't part of the entity at all. So we know it's not a biological thing. Again we arrive at this predestination idea, like we're all part of its story, or it rigged the game at the start.

Maybe it built the Rube Goldberg device that is our universe, or at least helped? Sabotaged? Why do all of these people need to die? We really need to know how this thing thinks, or if it even thinks like we do. What does it want from us?

Keep up the good work, and make sure they don't catch on to you, the Jailors or the Fifthists. The first step to helping is understanding. Try to understand the entity.

« **Track 3: Uh...** | **Hub** | **The Face of God** »

The Face of God

“Have you ever seen God, Clyde?”

Morgan sat across from the sandy haired guitarist who, like usual, was tuning one of his several guitars. They had come together at Morgan’s apartment to write a new song for the EP, but had spent the last two hours watching TV and adjusting their instruments instead. They had both done this in relative silence, and the question from Morgan had broken it abruptly.

“Eh? What do you mean?”

Morgan didn’t look up from where he was sitting, staring at a handful of song notes. “Exactly what I said. Have you ever seen God? Your parents are Catholic, right?”

Clyde looked at him through squinted eyes. “Yeah, they are. I mean, I never really bought into that kind of stuff. Wasn’t really my thing.” He pulled on the D string, releasing a mellow tone that filled the apartment for a moment and then was gone. “That’s a really fucking weird question to ask without following up with something though, dude.”

Morgan continued to peruse the notes. “I was just curious.” After a moment of silence, he said, “Because I have.”

Clyde stopped. There was an electricity in the air that hummed and sputtered before dissipating as the statement hung between them.

“Oh you have?” Clyde laughed before pulling on another string. “Did he have a big grey beard and a white cape?”

Morgan smiled. “No, no beard. No cape, either.” He shuffled the papers and sat them aside. “I was raised Baptist, you know. My mother, she was devout. I didn’t know about fervor until after we left, but she could’ve defined the word. She would get up there in front of

the church and sing and shout and roll on the floor if the Spirit compelled her to."

"Baptist? You mean like crazy southern Baptist?"

"Yeah, I guess you could say that. They talked the talk and walked the walk. Never hesitated in their defense of the Lord, never wavered in their faith. They were absolute, through and through. They all said it, though. They all said that they had seen God."

Clyde snorted. "And you took them seriously?"

Morgan shrugged. "No, not at first. I stayed with my dad a lot when I was younger. He was… rational. Him and my mother had met in college, and from what I heard they were inseparable." He looked up at Clyde, his face a solid wall of calm, seven miles high. "I guess things changed when I was born. My mom wanted to raise me like her daddy had raised her. Thought we needed to get right with God. That's why she started going in the first place."

The guitarist eyed him skeptically. "Alright. I don't know where you're going with this."

Morgan ignored him. "I went to these services, whenever I was with my mom. She forced me to, but after a while I… I wanted to. These people, I don't know. They were different. They actually believed something. They were all so committed to their Lord, and they didn't even know Him."

Clyde stopped mid-breath. "What?"

"I saw it in their eyes. I don't know, Clyde, it was like looking at stained glass without light behind it. They were trying to catch a spark with wet wood, while the whole forest was burning down behind them."

"I… I don't know what you're talking about."

Morgan's presence consuming the entire room. "They were worshipping a god but it wasn't actually their god, like worshipping its toenail or a hair. Their perspective was so limited, their scope so narrow. They…" He trailed off.

They both sat while the silence of the room wrapped around them and tightened its grip. Clyde felt the hairs on the back of his arms stand up, and realized that they weren't alone in the room. "Morgan," he said, slowly. "What happened to you, before you moved out here?"

He didn't react immediately, and Clyde felt the presence in the room expand around them, feeling them with many long and twisted appendages that tapered off somewhere he could not see. He felt something slither along his back, onto his shoulders, and around his throat. He coughed, and when he looked again, Morgan was staring through him.

"It was at night mass. Reverend Black said that he was going to bring snakes, and that we were going to witness the beauty of the Lord through his control of the serpents. They- my mother," he hesitated, "they wanted nothing more than this, a physical manifestation of everything that they had longed after their entire lives."

"It wasn't right. None of them could see it, but there was something behind the snakes, and Reverend Black, and all of them. It was passing through them, and it left behind ripples. Imagine, imagine if you drew your hand through the water, you could see the water moving as it passed by. That's all it was, a hand- no, a finger, maybe even less than that. The eyelash of a god, Clyde. Once you see the eyelash, you can see the eye, and then if you step back, you can see the face, and further back… It was all there. Right when Reverend Black raised that serpent up, and when the world started to twist, I could see through it all and God was behind it. I looked at its face, and it looked at me, acknowledged me. Felt me."

Morgan reached beside him, and picked up the papers he had been looking at. "This is a song, Clyde. I wrote it for… doesn't matter. I wrote it, though, and it's beautiful, but it isn't my words. I didn't write this any more than a raindrop writes a canyon. It wasn't until I finished it, that I could see what it was."

"And… what is that?"

The Frontman shook the papers. "It's this thing, this… it's God,

Clyde! It's right here, right in front of me. When it saw me that night, I knew then that it was something that, I don't know, something that had been with me my entire life. It's everywhere, I can see patterns in everything it does. It's using me, using us, to do… something. Maybe it doesn't even know. It just does what it does because that's what it does." He gasped for breath. "I thought that maybe, maybe when we left North Carolina, that would be the end of it. I thought maybe it hadn't seen me, but… it did. It always has."

Morgan pulled up his bag and stuffed the papers back in. "I'm putting this song in my bag, Clyde. I don't think you'll remember this, but you need to go looking in here later and find it, and put it on the EP. It wants it. I want it. It's going to do something with this, soon… like extending its arms out into the water."

"Have you ever seen God, Clyde?"

Morgan sat across from the sandy haired guitarist who, like usual, was tuning one of his several guitars. They had come together at Morgan's apartment to write a new song for the EP, but had spent the last two hours watching TV and adjusting their instruments. They had both done this in relative silence, neither being much of a talker, and the question from Morgan had broken it abruptly.

Clyde looked up at him and shrugged. "Nah, I don't think so. How come?"

Morgan paused, his eyes seeming to readjust to the room around him. He leaned back, looked at Clyde, and sighed.

"Nothing, no reason. I was just curious. I… think I'm going to go grab a beer. Do you want anything?"

Clyde shook his head. "I'm cool, man."

Morgan stood up and walked slowly out of the room. Clyde continued to strum mindlessly at the fretboard, when suddenly a handful of pages stuck in Morgan's bag caught his eye.

« **The Appalachian Scar** | **Hub** | **Track 4: You and Me**»

Track 4: You and Me

"You and Me"

By Morgan

Verse I

You and me,
Should take a trip across the galaxy,
And feel the waves of our own energy,
Everything will come together slowly,
Quietly.

You and me,
We'll float through eternity,
We'll stay up all night and wonder about
where we've been and where we'll go,
What we've seen and what we'll know,
Guided by the lights above us,
So,

Chorus

You, and, me,
Vessels on an open sea,
You, and, me,
I want to be there with you,
To see it all within you,
Becoming part of everything.

Verse II

You and me,
Have seen the planets dancing around merrily,
Have dreamt about those far off things,
That cannot help but make us sing,
About the beauty of the skies,
And how we want to live our lives.

You and me,
Will finish our time here one day eventually,
And when we're gone, they'll look up here,
and see us grinning ear to ear
They'll follow us to heaven's arms,
So infinitely greater,
something that surpasses,
all our hopes, and, dreams.

Chorus

Bridge

I don't want you to think that this is just a passing thought,
I've dreamt about it ever since the day you came and caught
my heart.

I'll give you this, eternity,
and keep it by your side,
So I can be there with you,
when you lay down and die

But don't weep for me darling,
There's nothing left to fear,
I'm out here dancing with the stars,
and soon you'll be here,
too.

Chorus X2

So I found this in Morgan's bag. I showed it to Brooke, and she's almost positive he wrote it about Rosa. Jackass. But it's really pretty, so I think ***we're gonna***

put it on the EP. *-Clyde*
Sad song, though. - Brooke

« **The Face of God** | **Hub** | **Rain Leaking Through A Vendor's Roof** »

Rain Leaking Through A Vendor's Roof

Clyde plucked the metal strings of his guitar with no audience save for his pet cat. The sound echoed against the walls of the apartment with no other harmony save for quiet breaths and soft purring. Clyde's apartment was plain despite his wealth; the only indication of the roots he grew from were the guitars he played, several thousand dollars each. Not that anyone in his band knew enough to know.

There was a swipe of shadow against his ear, a sensation of the teasing lips of a lover. A shiver raced up his back and the music acquiesced to silence. Clyde turned his head, pressing a hand against his ear. Odd- his cat was by his feet.

Clyde found himself with an idea, an inclination. He put the guitar away and fetched his phone. In the darkness of the unlit apartment, Clyde called his father for the first time in three years.

"Ms. Silva speaking, how may I help you?"

"This is Clyde. Let me talk to my dad."

The line on the other end was silent for some time. The honeyed voice melted to the old nanny he remembered well. "Clyde? It's been so long. Where di-? Your- your father, yes. I'll transfer you right away, dear."

"…Son." The voice was gruff, tired. Older than he remembered. More worried. He could hear the balding through the phone. "Where the hell have you been? I thought you were dead."

"Hi dad." Clyde had to steady his voice. "Look, are you still in contac- wait, that's stupid. Of course you are. I need to ask you a favor. Is that annual banquet still happening? The one in Cali, with the MCD people? I have a favor to ask you."

The annual banquet was grand, as every banquet hosted by Marshall, Carter & Dark Ltd. had been. Satin curtains lined the walls, matching the tablecloths in bold crimson accent, which were themselves accented with candles. Save for the fashionably late, everyone who was someone was there. Women in classic evening gowns reintroduced themselves to acquaintances; men in custom tailored suits discussed about nothing in particular. All around, wine was shared and the crowd waited for the opening speech.

Nothing was out of place this evening, as wholly expected by the guests.

The host, wearing a suit that a lesser man could cut himself on, addressed the crowd. He thanked Marshall, Carter and Dark for their generosity in funding the banquet. He thanked the guests for arriving, even those that had arrived mid-speech in a fashionably late style. He thanked their yet-to-arrive evening entertainment, an unknown group by the label 'Constellation Starfish'. He thanked the chefs and the waiters. He made an unfunny joke that was met with polite laughter and then thanked the guests for laughing. After his list of thanks, he moved on to advertise for Marshall, Carter and Dark's summer collection. Nothing was out of place at all.

Constellation Starfish arrived later, during the course before dessert. Their beat up van rode into the parking lot, much to the confusion of the valet workers. The only reason the band wasn't thrown out immediately was the lead guitarist, who carried himself like a patron despite his shabby clothes. The guitarist seemed a little uncomfortable as he settled into this demeanor, as if he hadn't used it in some time. He was the one that explained the situation.

The band didn't need any help with setup, although according to many of the guests they certainly needed help with their fashion sense.

When the desserts were served, the band introduced themselves. The drummer was Brook, a girl in a dated hairstyle and an unironed shirt. The backup vocal was sung by Rosa, another girl with her unstyled hair and unflattering, vintage clothes. The lead singer, Morgan, sported a piercing gaze and socks that didn't match his pants, which were fashionable last season. There was supposed to be a big burly man that helped with unpacking, but he had snuck away somewhere. The only one who acted with any kind of respectability was the lead guitarist, Clyde. He was the only one that acted like them.

Expectations were low. A no name band. A *shabby* no name band, no less.

Morgan tapped the mic once, tested it. "Good evening ladies, gentlemen. We're Constellation Starfish. After the show we'll be selling some albums and t-shirts near the entrance if you want to pick up any. Our first song will be a nice upbeat tune to start the night…"

As the music began, the air of disquiet stifled and acquiesced. The only person who played professionally was Clyde, but there was something about the music that rattled into the bones of the guests. The notes slid into the mind through the ears, squirming around one's consciousness until it was all that could be thought of. It evoked memories before this human existence and the guests began to remember what they had forgotten they had forgotten. What they used to be.

About halfway through the second song, one of the women grabbed a decorative candle. She held it into the relative darkness of the room, hot wax pouring down and over her tender skin. She didn't let go and instead waved the candle back and forth. The candle was joined by others, creating a dance of shadow and light over the walls and the floor to the music of Constellation Starfish. Audience and performance became one entity, singing a collective memory and reminiscing times beyond their comprehension.

When Morgan opened his eyes to gaze at the audience, he took in the sea of candles and saw instead stars against the darkness of a void. The shadows twisted into tendrils, curling around arms and

clutching at the hands that clutched at warm wax. Flickering darkness drowned the crowd in unfelt caress. Ethereal arms wrapped around bodies like a possessive lover, around him and his band. Somewhere in the back of his mind, he recognized what he was doing. He tried to break the spell, to stutter his words, to sing off key. Anything. But his words were no longer his. His voice was no longer *his* tool of expression.

He wasn't sure if he wanted to run away screaming or fall to his knees in worship.

The unified collective remained well into the evening, until its voice was hoarse and the last candles had burned away in the now-singed hands that held them. The shadows stilled and returned to their usual lifeless mimicry. Morgan found himself capable of speaking at his own will again, though he didn't want to anymore. "Thank you for being such a great audience, everybody. As I said before, we'll be selling t-shirts and albums near the exit. Don't forget to like us on facebook and twitter…"

The paraphernalia stand was empty by the end of the night, with some further generous donations on top of it. Constellation Starfish made more money that evening than they had in their entire existence previously.

« Track 4:You And Me | Hub | Siren's Song »

Siren's Song

Clyde and Umiko rode home in the darkness. For once, Clyde wasn't tuning a guitar. He was tuning the radio instead, dialing station to station. Umiko drove, headlights telling little in the darkness ahead.

"Hey, Umiko, wasn't Brook supposed to be coming with us?"

The bigger man's hands squeezed the wheel at the mention of Brook. She never felt at ease around him and he never figured a way to earn the drummer's trust, not even after all this time. "No, she go with other friend. I think she don't like me."

"Hey, don't say that, big man. I'm sure she'll come around. Women and their intuition, you know? Hey, isn't this our song?" He turned the radio to a familiar tune, a grin spreading to his features. Umiko joined in the display of pride despite himself.

"Yes, our song. Even skits! Much good! We on radio now!"

But Clyde wasn't listening to Umiko's words. He had joined the collective in the music. He remembered. Umiko fell with Clyde shortly after and the two added their voices to the song. Shadows flickered across Umiko's hands, urging them to turn the wheel and drive towards the ocean. The headlights of other cars joined them on their journey, all migrating to the same destination.

The music lulled their minds to rest and guided them home.

Rosa woke up fast, rising to a seat and pushing herself up. She could see the back of Morgan's head in the driver's seat. He was very still. She scampered over, eyes wide in confusion.

"Morgan? Hey, what's up? Where are we?"

His eyes remained closed as he began speaking. “We’re almost done.”

Rosa couldn’t hear the motor running and it was pitch black outside. She went to open the driver’s side window but the crank was missing. “Hey, what happened with the thing?”

“We shouldn’t open the windows. It’s really cold outside.” He said softly, opening his eyes and turning to Rosa. “Hell of a night, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah. Hope everyone made it back safe.” She said, before a realization dawned on her. “Oh my god!”

“…what is it, then?”

“You’re drunk, aren’t you? Seriously! Thats why we’re idling here! I can’t believe you actually drank!”

“I’m a bit hungover, not drunk. It’s not the most pleasant feeling.” Morgan said, a faint smile appearing on his face. Rosa rolled her eyes and turned to face him. A yellow light passed by the driver’s window. She thought she could see the silhouette of a head for a moment, before it faded into the murk.

“I am so thirsty. Do we have any water?”

“N-No…” said Morgan as Rosa rolled around to open the rear passenger door. “No!” He shouted, leaning over and snatching her wrist. “Don’t do that, we’re on a ferry right now. We’re not supposed to open the doors.”

“What?” She noticed he was breathing heavily but his face was rested and calm as ever. They were so close. Was he nervous?

He righted himself and sat back down. “Just sit tight. We’ll be there soon.”

She lay there flustered for a moment, looking on out the window. More strange glowing yellow lights, falling down slowly, drifting alongside them.

“Be where? This some kind of surprise? We going to an off-shore resort thing? Oh I love those things. Is it Pipers Crossing? Pelican Landing?”

“Not quite,” he felt the urge to laugh, but couldn’t bring himself to do it, “deep space. We’re headed off to deep space.”

Rosa giggled to herself, just before being shot in the face by a jet of water. Morgan heard it, and closed his eyes again. “Well, looks like we’re ahead of schedule.”

Another jet of freezing water burst through the van ceiling.

“Looks like we’re fucked.” Said Morgan, a faint quiver could be heard in the back of his throat.

“What are you talking about?! Go get a patch! Why is the roof leaking! Why is the floor leaking up!?”

Morgan pulled a small handgun from out of his coat.

“I’m sorry, Rosa. I can’t expect you to understand any more than I did at first.”

Rosa was hysterical. “What do you mean? What the fuck is going on, Morgan? What’s going on?”

Morgan looked over the cold steel of the handgun with the cold steel of his eyes. “There was something else there with us tonight. You could feel it, right?”

“I- I mean, I don’t know. Maybe. I thought it was just a good concert.”

He looked at her, eyes full of sympathy but demeanor unbroken. “Rosa, it was a great concert. I’ll never forget it as long as I exist. I’ll never forget any of them, Brooke, Umiko, Clyde,” he paused, his throat catching, “and I certainly won’t forget you.”

Rosa’s eyes were full of fear as she gazed around them, but began to calm when he grabbed her hand. She sniffled back a tear, shaking slightly. “Morgan… are we going to die?”

He smiled. “Yes. We’re going to die, Rosa. But we’re going to do it together, right here, ok?”

The water had gathered up to their knees as an additional crack started to form in the rear window. They were surrounded by lights, so many lights that Rosa couldn’t count them. Some far away, some so close she could just barely make them out. They all danced around her and Morgan, like fireflies when she was younger. In another life, she could’ve reached out and caught them and put them in a jar and fell asleep to lull of the tiny bursts of light.

He cocked the firearm. “I brought this for you, in case you don’t want to… It’s yours, Rosa.” His outstretched hand held it before her, and her eyes focused on it. She lifted a hand gingerly, picked it out of his hand and held it close to her. She looked up at him, eyes full of fear.

“What about you? What are you going to do?”

Morgan looked at the gathering of falling stars, his face illuminated by a billion points of light. In that moment, Rosa felt like she could see Morgan differently, like the boy with the black hair had been peeled away and left to float somewhere behind them, and in its place was a low burning fire, resilient and unwavering. She could see in him all of his hopes and aspirations and dreams, as well as her own, everything they had both desired their entire lives, and yet…

The water was unrelenting. It had filed past their waists, and the back window was ready to burst. Rosa choked back tears and looked out of her window. Next to her, she could see one of the stars drawing close. Inside sat two familiar figures, and yet, she couldn’t make out their faces. One of them waved, the other threw a thumbs up.

And then they were gone. Rosa’s tears flowed freely now, and she would’ve given anything, everything she ever had, to be sitting in her apartment, warm and dry and safe. In a moment, Rosa was terrified of death, and saw its gaping maw closing in around her. Panicking, she turned one last time to Morgan, to beg him to do something, anything, so they could go on, be together, live…

But her voice caught. The dim flame was gone and replaced with a magnificent roaring fire, reds and yellows and whites, filling up the entire car, and in the middle of it sat Morgan. The thing he had been was stripped away, replaced with fervor and zeal, its eyes blazing like a million suns. It looked at her, and beyond everything, beyond his face and the fire and the water and the stars around them, she saw something else. She saw…

CRACK!

She threw the gun into the water at her feet as it rushed in from behind them. “No,” she shouted over the growing din of the torrent. “No Morgan, I want to be there with you.”

The lead singer smiled. “To see it all within you.”

Water circled their necks, passing their mouths, then their eyes, and filled the car completely.

There was a moment while they floated in the weightlessness, where Rosa reached out and touched Morgan’s face. He opened his eyes and looked at her, and then towards where she was gesturing. Lights surrounded them, the lights of cars like theirs, floating in the depths of sea, hovering just above the edge of oblivion. They were all very still, yet pulsated like the night sky. Morgan glanced back at her, to share the moment with her, but she was already gone.

He unbuckled his seatbelt, felt towards the back window. When he reached it, he pushed himself out.

Around him he saw the lights flickering, and knew it would not be long. His mind reached out, looking for his friends among the stars, and felt them all around him. Clyde was to his right, guitar in hand, grinning while he tuned the damn thing for the fiftieth time. Next to him sat Brooke, crosslegged, spinning a drumstick and drinking a giant Mt. Dew. She laughed at some untold joke, and the rest of them guffawed along with her. Standing just outside of them was Umiko, calmly moving boxes back to the van. Morgan called out to him, and the big man turned and smiled at him.

Finally, there was Rosa. She was quiet, peaceful. She approached Morgan, held him, and then pointed skyward. Morgan looked up, then at his friends, and together they left for the next gig.

Morgan’s empty body floated in the water.

The stars hung for a second more, and then went out.

« **Rain Leaking Through A Vendor's Roof** | **Hub**

On The Road Again

Two stolen wheels and five days preparation (for good luck), and they're off.

The five men in a beat up RV barrel down the road at fifty miles per hour, at the request of Father Anna. Brother Perkins sits at the wheel munching at a pretzel, trying to ignore the thumping echoing around the RV and the shaking in his hands. The "Holy Communion" behind him had to be locked behind a padlock, the enthused worshipers banging on the door in a frenzied state.

Communion, within the First Southern Fifth Church of Texas involves significantly more drugs and alcohol than any communion rightfully should. The "Holy Cocaine" was split into five lines and distributed among the congregation, in an attempt to bring them closer to the Starfish. The "service" had dialed down, Brother Hines passed out on the floor, Brother Miller still bouncing around the small mobile home. Brother Jones had declined the offer to commune, and was sleeping in his designated corner.

Louis Anna clumsily stands up, clutching onto a bottle of whiskey.

"Congregation, congregation, settle down, its time for a sermon." Father Anna slurs his speech as some of his whiskey spills on the floor, "The hooooly spirits *hic* uhh, the Five, are really compelling me right now, so sit yer asses up."

A few lazy eyes turn up to Louis as he starts his speech.

Brother Perkins attempts to focus on the road ahead of him. The four hours of driving he had endured thus far was starting to get to him, as his eyes wander to the locked door behind him.

"Nah, I can't ask them to drive, those dumbassess'll kill us all" He

thinks to himself as he turned his attention back to the road. An unseen pothole bounces the RV sharply, dislodging the glove box and revealing its contraband…

A sharp jump in the RV causes the previously standing congregation to fall, the somewhat destroyed facade of a room falling apart as any order takes its final breath. Groaning, Louis wobbles to his feet, and turns his gaze to the overturned room, spotting a dark stain growing on the ratty carpet. Brother Miller's red hair takes on a new shade as his blood spills from his head.

Louis Anna stumbles over to Miller, turning him over.

"You uhh, you ok?" Louis inquires of his fallen friend, "Open yer eyes man, that's an order!"

Not observing any response, Father Anna moves to wake Brother Jones, when a loud gasp interrupts his movements. Turning around, Louis Anna sees Miller sitting upright on the floor. Staring at the wall in front of him, he stands…

A dime bag of cocaine, unconsumed by the general congregation, sits in the broken glove box atop a sea of maps.

"I can't do this right now, Father Louis would kill me. 'Sides, I can be strong, I got faith." Perkins thought to himself, attempting, and failing to close the glove box, spilling its contents into the passenger side. The bag of cocaine lays on top of the stack, standing out like a jewel to Brother Perkins.

Brother Perkins hits himself lightly on the face, refocusing his attention on the road, trying to ignore his shaking hands.

Brother Miller never takes his eyes off the wall, as Louis Anna watches incredulously. Stopping just short of ramming into the wall, Miller touched his forehead, letting the blood pool in his hands. Examining the wall like a painter examining their canvas, Brother Miller starts to draw on the wall, using his blood like paint…

With a freshly powdered nose, Brother Perkins doesn't notice the curve in the road in front of him. The crude guard rail falls apart as the speeding truck runs into it, falling down the hill, and into a tree.

The now-unconscious passengers of the RV lay clumped on the front wall of the RV, while Brother Perkins lay slumped at the wheel. The left wall of the RV was adorned with words that read:

ONE MORE

The first to awaken, Louis Anna pans his eyes over the ruined RV, his eyes stopping at the bloody mosaic on his wall.

"The… fuck does that mean?"

« **Recruiting** | **Hub** | **Coming Soon!** »

Prologue: Recruiting

A dreamless night is not a happy night for an aspiring member of the Fifth Church.

Louis Anna is startled from his slumber by a loud rap at the door. Slowly peeling his face from his table, he examines the empty bag of powder, and for good measure, crudely throws it under his old bed.

“LOUIS, YOU IN THERE MAN?” exclaims a voice from outside the door, “I AIN’T BEEN SEEIN’ YOU FOR A FEW DAYS AND I WANTED TO MAKE SURE YOU WERE A-OK!”

After a brief stumble in the direction of the door, a ray of midday light strikes his face as his neighbor falls through the old trailer door. Santana Taylor, a large man who consistently manages to have more grease on his shirt than the actual cotton, lay on the newly broken door a few feet from the stunned Louis.

“Uhh, sorry ‘bout that” Santana muttered awkwardly, pulling himself up from the ground, “I heard you went on some bender and I wanted to make sure you ain’t dead. Also, you should fix your door, some fella is gonna end up stealin’ your provisions and such.”

“You gonna pay me back for that?” grumbles the hungover Louis, moving away from the sun.

“Wish I could Louie, but I ain’t the one tryin’ to get tax cuts,” mused Santana, “besides, during your little bender you pissed in my AC! You know I just paid that off and now my whole trailer smells like piss.”

“Sorry, but what the hell are you talkin’ about with them tax cuts? I don’t know nothin’ about that.”

“You barged into my trailer the other night rantin' about how you were gonna start up a church. ‘Course, can’t be trustin’ your coked

up mouth."

"Wha-what did I tell you?"

"Something stupid about your dad and a starfish. You got a whole crowd though, your buddies were all cheerin' you on, making a huge noise outside while I was tryin' to sleep."

"Who would I have been with?"

"The hell is this, The Hangover Part One? Just ask them, they're all outside."

Stumbling into the sunlight, Louis sees a rough assembly of four men in soiled blue bed sheets laying under a large oak tree. The noise of Santana's yelling stirs a few of the men, who gazed around the area blankly. Upon noticing the arrival of Louis, the two awakened men awaken the rest.

One of the men immediately jumped up and ran towards Louis. In an attempt to run away from this clearly deranged man, Louis attempted to run away, but was caught in a bear hug by the man.

"Thank God-err, the Starfish-thing that you're okay! You stumbled into your trailer a few days ago and I had to keep these fuckers off the congregation crack supply!" the man cries into Louis' shoulder.

"Uhh, thank you, but what the hell is going on?" Louis replies, out of breath, "and could you please release me, I can't breathe."

"Sorry Father Anna!" the man replies, releasing his hug, "You told me this might happen so here's what I'm to give you."

Fumbling around under his robes, the man produces a damp sheet of paper. Gingerly picking it up, Louis reads his own sloppy handwriting on the paper.

> I'm going to hate this but I accidentally roped these idiots along on our little religious escapade. I don't know if I will remember any of this but they might be useful. Hopefully by the time I've sobered up I've finished what I was going to write. In a moment of lucidity I am writing this to me

because I can’t let myself lose the only people who have actually believed in our holy mission. I’ve given this note to Kevin Jones, the lanky one with the weird teeth is John Hines, Frank Miller is the redhead, and Brian Perkins is the bigger one.

Don’t fuck this up,
Louis Anna

Louis glanced up at the expectant face of the man, Kevin Jones, and sighed.

“What have I gotten myself into this time?”

"How the hell have y'all fools not finished fifty fundraising flyers yet! Y'ain't even done ten!"

Louis Anna is practically foaming at the mouth. The First Southern Fifth Church of Texas huddles in a small mobile home, the smell of sweat and permanent marker floating through the air. The mobile home has been retrofitted into a small base of operations, with a hand-drawn starfish hung up on the wall. Symbols similar to an ampersand with five points sticking out of it had been carved into an excessive amount of space on the walls.

"Please be forgivin' us sir, but most of us don't gotta write all too much. And these symbols are hard to draw." Brother Hines mumbled. Crumpled up beside him are dozens of crumpled up pieces of paper.

"How could you not be gettin' that symbol memorized yet? You can't even look around this room without seeing it."

“These hicks are too illiterate to write the same few things over and over again.” Louis thinks to himself. *"How am I supposed to lead them?"*

"Alright, fine, let's take a break to read. If y'all want to become Fifthists you gotta learn how to write and read for yourself." A general cheer arose from the congregation. All eyes turned to Father

Anna as he retrieved his annotated copy of *Seventeen Red Tales*. "The fruits of my days labor are right here in this book. I got somethin' new for you, my ex-ca-loosive 18th tale."

A murmur overtakes the congregation as Father Anna retrieves his transcript from the back of the book. "SHUT YER TRAPHOLES!" Brother Perkins yells to the congregation. "We gotta listen to Father Anna!"

"Thank you Brother Taylor. Now, listen up, I don't want none of y'all missin' this." Louis Anna boomed, the sound echoing through the small mobile home. "For Five nights I slept, for Five nights I dreamed,

> and for Five nights I wept. Waiting for a sign, a dream, a feeling. In my dreams, I waited for anything that would prove my convictions, but nothing came in Fives. When I dreamed, it was meaningless, lacking in imagery, cohesion, and feeling. When I awoke, I felt no compulsion to write, sing, or preach. My faith was shaken. "Give me the signs my brethren have received!" I cried to the heavens, to no avail. I reread, and reread the Seventeen Red Tales, but I felt nothing. Could I have been wrong all along?
>
> No.
>
> In my despair, I slipped back into my bottle and snow, and in my darkest hour I was spoken to. Five bottles and I wanted no more. Five lines, and I stopped. It was then when I realized my purpose. It wasn't I who was to be taken to World 390, but I was to lead others to it.
>
> My father taught me of The Fifth Church and **`his congregation`**, though he was called, leaving me behind. I realize now that I am to bring others to Georgia, to join the congregation and expand the will of the Starfish. If I will not be shown in my dreams, then I will show myself, making myself a vessel of the will of the Five. While my pen is guided, my steps will be my own to take.

Who will join me on this journey?

Father Anna stopped speaking and glanced up from his paper. The four other men gaze blankly up at Louis. Brother Jones was the first to recover, opening his mouth and saying,

"So, uhhh, when are we leaving?"

Hub | **On the Road Again** »

Contest has ended! The winners are bolded below!

Five Questions Contest

Theme: Answers

So, now that the New Years Contest is done, and Troy has taken leave to his Library Contest, your lives are empty, drab things filled with sorrow. But enough of your Friday. I'm here with good news. There's a new contest in town. This one involves no fancy team-building, no organization, just writer against writer. Sadly, my dream to have you all flown in by black helicopters and forced to fight to the death have been pushed back due to budget cuts (though there's always next year).

This contest will be about answering questions.

There are always questions. Little mentions of this or that, thrown in to add an aura of mystery and a hint of a larger story. No article ever addresses *everything*. And five authors have chosen questions that even they don't have answers for. Five questions from five articles.

Your job is to write a tale that attempts to answer one of these questions.

So how do we win?

As is so often the case, this will come down to the cold democracy of the rating module. If it does well, it will win. If it doesn't, it will not. It's really that simple.

Well, almost that simple. You see, there are going to be *five*

winners, the highest rated for each question.

Can I write more than one entry?

Sure! But only one per question.

Wait, if my tale wins, does that mean it's the official answer?

Nope. Your purpose is to give *an* answer, not *the* answer. That's why all tales (assuming they remain in the positives) will remain after the contest.

Will there be prizes?

The thrill of victory plus something I will hopefully announce soon.

What's the deadline?

You must have your story written by 2359 PST March 15th. We'll go by Pacific time, because I'm nice like that. We'll give it another week to give people time to vote, and the scores at 2359 PST on March 22nd will decide the winner.

Okay, okay, so give us the questions already.

Here they are. Post your stories in under the questions.

What is the purpose of the factory in the `Observable Time Loop`?

- **Iteration 0, by FortuneFavorsBold**
- One Must Imagine Him Happy, by Ajoutezen

What ever happened to `Aaron Siegal`?

- `The Root of Knowledge` by Jekeled
- **Playing God, by Rikks**
- The Exalted, by Drewbear
- In a Yellow Wood, by CollegeCop

What happened to the rest of `SCP-884`?

- **Children Of Doubt, by Roget**

What happens when `the green slime` touches a dead body?

- **A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal, by Dmatix**
- Mint and Clay, by Esoau
- Fields of Green, by Drewbear

What was the sequence of events that created `the 084 phenomenon`?

- For Elise, by MisterKillam
- **Bugs, by Giant Enemy Spycrab**

Iteration 0

In his hands, Dr. Thaddeus Xyank held the future. And that made him smile.

It was a lump of gray metal, cool to the touch, with a laser etched serial number, a portrait of George Washington, and a UPC code for Bush's Baked Beans. It took a while to get all of that approved, but he needed to be sure. You couldn't spit in the Multi-U division without it landing in some parallel world or a seamless wormhole that leads directly to a point exactly 2 cm inside your own rectum. Xyank wasn't interested in the same-old present in some remote reality where people are giant lizards. He was interested in the future. And here it was.

"Melissa?"

"Yes sir!" she said, beaming like the fresh ones sometimes do when things are going according to plan.

"Was the device active when you found the brick?"

"Uhh… Mr. Kim?"

Assistant Researcher Leonard Kim raised his head from the wiring panel, blinking. "Hm?"

"Was the device left on overnight? Dr. Xyank wanted to know its status when the sample was retrieved." Melissa Brooks was always doing that, in her own vainglorious attempt to curry favor with superiors. Thought there was a promotion in it for her, probably. Shame she was such a kiss-ass that no one else trusted her.

Xyank's glasses started to fog. His finger tapped. His thumb traced Washington's nose. Almost without thinking he grabbed a bit of tape from the desk, slapped it on the brick and wrote 'Retrieved' in black marker. Just in case.

Kim was quiet for a long time. “…Okay, first of all, I didn’t *do* anything with it.”

“I don’t actually care this time, Larry. Just tell me.”

“Alright, yes, I'm sorry. I left it on running a debug after hours. That reference loop just keeps popping up no matter what I do. I’m working on it now.”

Xyank nodded. On but not set to 'receive' was a good enough answer. “Melissa, scan the surveillance logs from last night through this morning. I want to know about every spark, bang, shimmy, and flash.”

On the other side of the floor, past ten dozen coolant pipes and thirty industrial strength cables, he placed the sample next to itself just as Gerald Kingston was putting the finishing touches on the UPC. “… Holy Shit! When did this come in?”

“Sometime before opening today; Brooks is checking the log.”

“Dear sweet Jesus,” Gerry said, picking up the small brick and turning it over in his hands. Checking the mill marks with pinpoint pupils as he strained to focus. “It looks like the real deal but I want to get this over to Microscopy and run the whole battery.”

“Get it done,” the Doctor said, checking his watch. “I want the original out of here by end of business today.”

“Sure sure sure!”

“And bring Foreman in here to make sure the calibration is spotless. Kim’s having feedback issues again.” Swear to god, Larry was going to be the death of this project, always trying to move out of his depth.

Then again, so was Thaddeus. That’s what got him out of bed in the morning.

Jets of hot gas sprayed him down from every angle and he spun in a circle. Six months of doing this, it was natural as breathing. The suit hung neatly in his locker and he stepped outside.

Plain sight. Where he was from this would never have been tolerated—would not be tolerated here for very much longer, probably. Sloppy work by the Foundation setting him up here. But there were bio-hazard signs and poison emblems, and all the flashing lights and smokestacks that belched black evil into the air, and that was enough. For anyone dumb enough to try and break into a chemical refinery, there were two golf carts on half-hourly rounds and the deceptively hard pudgy-looking Agents inside of them. Besides, there wasn't a radio tower or satellite signal stronger than twenty watts for maybe fifty kilometers in any direction, and the Podunk town where they took R&R was maybe forty minutes down the road. It was far enough. It was isolated enough. The EM bands were clear enough.

Maybe.

Coughing, he scaled the stairs to the office and stepped inside. Lights flickering on in that annoying mercury fluorescent glow; practically stone-age. And the whiteboards. Three of the four, filled to bursting with diagrams and equations in his trademark red ink. Xyank grabbed a bagel and an OJ as he stared at them, trying to remember. Trying to fill in the gaps. Trying to find the way out of the rat maze of causality and float above it. He wasn't a rat, he was a man. And if something like this could happen once—twice now, actually, at the very least—then he could make it happen again.

His calculator booted up and he thought with it for a while. The creepy blue sheen and white text a man never gets used to filled his vision, recorded his hand-written chaos, and began a search for errors. It was close now. Very close.

The phone rang and he picked it up.

"Thad Xyank."

"Hi Doc, it's Gerry."

"Shoot."

"Paulson is losing his mind." The good Doctor smiled and nodded to

no one, privately celebrating. “It’s our brick alright, down to every last defect. When do you want to send it?”

“Hold on a minute.” Two buttons tapped, and he watched as Melissa picked up the phone. “It’s Xyank. Put Kim on the line,” and the researcher trotted across the floor, notes under his arm and grabbed the phone. “What’s the status of the device?”

“Same problem, but at least we’ve isolated it in Unit Beta with some creative wiring. Alpha is green-lit across the board,” Kim said, looking up at the office window and giving a thumbs-up. “The brick?”

He smiled and returned the gesture. “Power up Alpha, it’s going out right now. I’m on my way.” Two buttons. “We’re doing it. Get up here and bring the original.” He’d never put on a clean suit so fast in his life, and the spray was just quieting down when Kingston came out of the south end of the building with the brick in his hand. Foreman opened the door to the active chamber and held his breath as the five of them gathered around it. Carefully it was placed inside the small, glowing white box, and closed. Xyank almost chuckled at how much it looked like the world’s most expensive and over-complicated microwave oven. As Unit Alpha powered up, the globe above it began to spin quietly, and capacitors all over it whined.

“Alright everyone look sharp, we are now starting the official experiment log.” A few taps on a keyboard and the microphones in their suits began recording. “This is Dr. Thaddeus Xyank, beginning experiment log 11924. It is July 9th 1992. Researcher Brooks, What’s the correct time?” Thaddeus asked, spinning to Melissa Brooks.

“1035 and 15 seconds on my mark.” Larry Kim jumped behind the other console and input the time. “Three… two… one… mark!” The whirring settled into a steady hum, and the first green light over the chamber lit.

“When did you recover the test object?”

“Approximately 0700, give or take a few minutes.”

“Alright; Mr. Foreman, please input destination for today’s date, at

0630. That should leave enough of a window for Ms. Brooks' discovery”

Beeping and keystrokes, and another light, this one lingering yellow a moment as the lock was established. Then green; blessed, blessed green.

“Mr. Kingston, how are those ion levels?”

“We have gamma and alpha rad at… 4 eV and holding. Ambient levels on the floor are… 13 mili-RAD. Everything’s green.”

The team leaned in to watch closely, fingers crossed, breath baited.

Dr. Xyank threw the switch, and after a bright flash of light within the chamber, it was gone. Localized tachyon field manipulation confirmed. Eat your heart out, Stephen Hawking.

They cheered. They clapped, they patted one another about the back. Mr. Kim declared tequila shots on him after work. But the good Doctor knew better. This one had been easy, they knew that some point in the future it would work, or else there was a paradox afoot, and paradoxes are for logic and not for nature. Nature had no such conventions. The device simply couldn't not work.

“Everyone quiet,” he said, after a long, relieved exhale. “Brooks, your job is to check, double-check, and triple-check all of the surveillance and monitoring equipment we have and report to me by the end of the day exactly what kind of conditions we can expect when something comes through. Foreman and Kim, you two are on Beta, get that bug fixed. Kingston, I need you to recalibrate Alpha to positive temporal displacement and prepare a new sample.”

“Paulson wanted a front-row seat on the next trial,” Gerry said, looking hopeful.

“He’s got it if he gets up here and helps you calibrate. And I mean oscilloscopes, voltmeters; I want *everything* explained before I file this. I’m going to go see if I can’t finish filling in the black box.”

The Black Box… Every engineer dreads the damn black box. That’s what all those equations were about. Thad mused for a moment

about it, scratching the graying hair at his temples as the blue screen came up over his vision, trying desperately to make sense of the math that had seemed so clear when he held the tachyon emitter in his hands, turned it over a few times, felt the warm glow of backwards time. Or maybe it was all just desperation and the team had gotten lucky. Maybe all of these equations weren't even necessary and it all came down to the number threeve or twour or whatever they were calling 033 these days. Theta Prime, right? Goddamn ridiculous.

What about all of the other ones? His clearance didn't give him really juicy access to the hard temporal anomalies the Foundation was just starting to play with. Hell, he didn't even know for sure if 711 had been built, disassembled, encased in concrete, or still sat on the drawing board of someone's office as a kind of pet project. Or maybe he was conceiving of it now, down in that clean-room with a bunch of eager, talented researchers.

And when were they going to discover SCP-one-seven… Oh dear god. The view… how had he not noticed this before?

The door burst open below as Xyank jumped to his feet, just in time to watch it all happen for the first time. There was a lot of yelling. Lots of it, about getting on knees and stepping away from the machinery and putting down the clipboard and they were all too shocked to comply.

"No…"

Gerry Kingston got it first, two in the head.

"No."

Melissa ducked behind the desk and covered her ears just in time for Paulson to catch a few rounds with his upper torso and fall out of sight half a second later.

"No!"

Kim and Foreman fell like cans on a fence-post, lying in puddles of their own blood. He could still hear Kim gagging on his lasts

moments of life.

“NO!”

Thad slammed the alarm and let it blare as the four men moved into the room, scanning computer monitors and smashing equipment, heading further the basement and the other screaming technicians. You could see the surprise in the balls of Mr. M4A1 himself when he saw Unit Beta, heard the humming and whining and sparks. He screamed something about getting out and then
There was the white flash, right on schedule. And then it started again. All five of them milled about the floor, working their way through the recalibration without a care in the world. Each one of them dead certain that they’d get a huge raise, better clearance, and maybe even a Nobel Prize if it ever went public.

“GODDAMMIT, NO!”

Thad grabbed the just-in-case 12 gauge from behind the filing cabinet and bolted out the door, down the stairs, and came to the clean room entrance. Maybe he was part of it. Maybe he was aware. Maybe there was time to save them all and stop the loop. But the knob was hot and he daren’t enter. Might have five kinds of cancer already now that the shielding was forfeit. He wasn't part of it, and there wasn't time. If he had been, then there would be a paradox afoot. Paradoxes don't exist in nature.

Smoke billowed out the windows in thick plumes. The white panel van was already speeding off, too far away to make the doctor out as he pressed his body against the building and waited. And waited. And waited.

Two hours later the MTF arrived and put out the fires and bagged up the charred remains and harvested the scrap for secure disposal. The whole installation was tagged, bagged, shipped off for review. A truck pumped the basement full of concrete, and just like that it was over.

For Thad, it was still happening. They found him in the office, watching his Research Assistants die over and over with a dead

look in his eyes and a pint of whiskey in his hands.

“Dr. Xyank?”

“Hm?”

“Are you alright?”

“…Nope. Not even a little.”

He didn't speak again until he was in the ambulance.

O5 didn’t like his write-up. Didn't like it one bit. “Explain this to me again,” 5 said as 3, 7, 12 and 9 sat with their arms folded and their brows furrowed on the various screens. “’Event boundary?’ What is that?”

“It’s a psychological phenomenon; how the brain categorizes events. Something as simple as changing the room you’re standing in begins a new 'event' to be logged in memory. That's why a person can head to the kitchen to get a sandwich and completely forget why they went there as soon as they walk through the door.” Dr. Xyank was nervous. His reputation, his clearance level, his future with the Foundation hanging in the… heh. ‘Future with the Foundation.’ That was good. He’d have to remember that.

O5-7 laughed, but not *with* him so much as *at* him. “You really expect us to believe that human psychology halted a tachyon cascade? That’s honestly what you’re saying?”

“Yes sir,” Thad replied, hanging his head and looking at the floor. “The machine had a maximum drain of five megawatts, but the actual tachyon field accounts for only 15 watts, which is significantly less than—”

“So if you witnessed this event first hand,” Three interrupted, “how comes it that you aren't stuck in that loop with them? Or is this thanks to your fanciful ‘event boundary’ hypothesis?”

“It is, sir.”

“And the assailants which caused this… debacle?”

Xyank sighed deeply. “My estimation is that the Global Occult Coalition detected the experiment via ground based tachyon detection equipment, and moved to intercept the emitter. How they detected it, I do not know.”

Twelve cleared his throat. The other O5’s went quiet and serious.

“Agent Tomlin,” Nine said, “secure Dr. Xyank. We will return with our decision after a brief recess.”

Five of the tensest minutes of his life, staring straight ahead at those shit LED screens as he wondered over and over and over again why he hadn't tried to move the whole operation underground. Thirty-seven researchers dead, millions of dollars’ worth of equipment and five years of research with a working tachyon emitter, gone. Poof. In another year they could have built a second, but there was no way, now. Someone had found out and broken it. The bill was on his tab. And the blood was on his hands.

When the lights came back on it was fast and to the point. “Given Dr. Xyank’s valuable research into tachyon field theory, we have determined that a certain amount of leniency is in order. Dr. Xyank, you are hereby demoted to Level 3 clearance, and are to report to our new containment site immediately. Your assignment will be documentation, experimentation, and implementation of containment procedures for the temporal anomaly designated **SCP-176**.”

“…Sir?”

“It’s your mess, Thaddeus,” 12 said, leaning forward. “Now go clean it up.”

It was eerie watching it. His ticket home was ticking in there, still. And he might yet get to it if he could find a way. He must have seen this site a dozen times in the time before… Before. But now he knew these people, knew the machine, knew the circumstance and what would have happened next if everything had just gone to plan.

After three more hours watching it, the effect wore off, and before him was just another anomaly to be cataloged. This is the way the world moves on. Erasing his beloved whiteboard, Thad cracked his knuckles and began.

Description: SCP-176 is an abandoned … *chemical* factory situated near … Nah, they'll probably leave that out. [DATA EXPUNGED].

…

Start | **`Part Two: The Deep End`**

One Must Imagine Him Happy

The Plateau, Once more,

I begin this entry with new found life. It's felt like centuries since I've taken a breath with my own lungs. For the past twenty-odd years, if you can really call them that, I've been nothing more than a number, a blot of ink, a mechanism used by the Foundation, like so many before. 92-61-41. That was my *official* name. You'll never find a scrap of paper with anything more than that — provided the Foundation did their job, and they *always* do.

There were ten of us when we started: Rachel, Israel, Jean, Ralph, Brendon, Youssef, Michael, Tae, Stephen and Sophie. It's funny, even after we've come this far, those words hardly carry a thought with them. Our names, our past, our lives, they were all taken from us — No, perhaps *taken* is the wrong word. At the time, we were willing. We were naïve. We sold our identities for trite sentiments; pride, glory, comfort, respect. Hah! To think we valued such things as we did! Nothing could amount to what we lost as we shoveled those failures and paradoxes into depths of oblivion. But I believe I'm getting ahead of myself now… .

Operation: Undertaker. That was our first and only assignment. I doubt a single one of us could even begin to understand the extent of what we were getting ourselves into — and how could we? We were drunk with the ambition of Youth, stumbling into the shadows of theory, hired by the Foundation to assess and correct temporal anomalies, whether they were the product of failed experiments or dangerous scips.
This was no great honor achieved from years of

dedication or any tribulation to treat capital defiance: We weren't courageous heroes. We weren't ground-breaking theorists. No, we were utterly average, despite our education. I guess that's why the Foundation chose us. We weren't zealous enough to exploit our findings, nor were we as defiant as the D-class personnel. We were honest workers, nothing more than that.
And so we accepted our task with grace.
Our families were treated with the strongest amnestics at the Foundation's exposal. Our birth records, transcripts, everything was expunged — not that there was much to it anyway. It's as if we never cried out to this world, drenched in blood, scared out of our minds, screaming with life. From that moment on, we were units of vague maths, waiting for the day they'd be computed and erased.

Some of us weren't ever going to make it that far, though. The few O5s that knew about us did a damn good job at blotting out the miscalculations:
Israel took the best subway ride of his life. Rachel decided that she never wanted be "back again." Jean, Ralph, Brendon and Youssef, they all took a long walk on a historic pier… They all made use of their times, I suppose.

As for the rest of us, we buried on. We grabbed those shovels and continued to pile up those travesties. Until one day, the handle snapped, and we were no longer capable of digging…it was the day we found *it*…though I can hardly remember which.

We were passing by a small town , en route to another researcher's regret, when Stephen saw it.
On the outside, it was just a shitty little chemical factory. Nothing special, but maybe that's what caught our eyes. After all, Narcissus had a captivating gaze, and we ourselves found a reflection. We notified our superior responsible for us, telling him that we we came upon the temporal abscess a little unexpectedly, and that we'd

relay information accordingly — Tae's idea.
We were all enthralled with the factory.

But something was just *off* about the entire place. At the time, I couldn't quite explain it, but there was something alluring about the whole thing. Like coming home after years away.
Sophie was the first to find *it*. A huge generator below the observation room, in mint condition, letting off a faint glow. Naturally we grabbed the necessary equipment and scanned the object. The Foundation had taught us a lot along the years, including how to operate their nifty gadgets. Maybe that's where they went wrong? They trusted in our inclination to be average. They never thought *we'd* create anything for ourselves. Hell, we were used for just the opposite!

Our equipment found a questionable amount of radiation emitting from the generator. Michael, our barely-engineer, began investigating in the hardware of the generator. This was our, maybe any one's, first encounter with this SCP. The one that would go unreported, unnoticed, along with us. Further inspection concluded that the generator was physically incapable of creating the radiation present. Something was definitely wrong. Stephen confirmed our suspicions; we had been in the factory for at least four hours, yet our watches indicated that only twelve seconds had passed. No matter what we checked, the conclusion was the same.

Time wasn't working right, not that it ever did. We were used to that, crazy enough as it sounds. But *this* enigma, it was different. It was beautiful. It was so foreign to the eyes of the Foundation, it was *ours*. We decided not to leave the factory. Instead, we invested ourselves into the generator. It might've been memetic at first, but I'd like to think it became willing. There were many resources in the factory that emitted a similar radiation that seemed to alter the scip and contribute to its functioning. It was as if we were just *meant* to be here, to finish this machine. As

Michael and Tae did just that — though none of us could even conceive what we fell upon — Sophie and Stephen noticed the other capabilities of the generator; it didn't just alter the relation of time around it. It altered the property itself. Forward, backwards, sideways, anything we could imagine! It was pure control. It was the collection of strings that bound us to the puppeteer's hold.

Our experiments, our obsession with this device, nurtured our nostalgia.
I was first to propose the idea. See, we grew tired of shoveling, that was for sure. We felt it in our bones, in our hearts. We missed our past, our parents and our family, however mundane they were. They were *ours*. That's all that mattered. And now we found a way to climb out of the pit.
We hypothesized that if we got the calibrations *just* right, we could go back to that day that we whored ourselves out to the Foundation. We'd have a chance win our lives back.
We'd be given amnestics to redact their visit and we'd have our world again.

Well, our efforts have paid off. Five burning souls — that's all it took to destruct time, to correct our mistakes, to completely rework everything! Michael is calling me now. I suppose I should rap this up, and let Sophie have her turn. We'll keep these last logs as security, should anything happen

Soon, we will begin our trip

Soon, we will breathe again.

92-61-41

___

Michael primes the machine, Tae checks the math. Sophie finishes her final log on the computer. Stephen stands in the corner of the

room, praying. Sophie turns, calling out my name.

We're prepared to shed our numbers and don our flesh.

…

Four men rush in. I'm shot in the back of the head for the **176,680,132nd time. Again, Stephen is shot as he prays. Again, Sophie cries as she dives underneath the desk. Again, Tae and Michael plummet to the ground, filled with metal. All of this I witness, once more, as blood pours from the back of my head. A stray bullet damaged the equipment.** The task force begins to fret, but there's no saving it now. They found us out. It was only a matter of bastardized time.
They thought they could stop it. How wrong they were. Now we're trapped together

Four men rush in. I'm shot in the back of the head for the 176,680,133rd time. Don't they see? Our task was complete the second we stepped into that factory. **Stephen bleeds as he recites his prayers.** No longer would we reach into the backend of time, fixing others' mistakes, others' misfortunes. **Sophie shrieks, Tae and Michael fall.** We abandoned our numbers. They'll never change that.
176,680,134th time.
We're free. We are alive. **Bullets fly through Stephen's faith and Sophie sings her fears at the top of her lungs.** We aren't afraid. We're happy. We have control. **Tae and Michael snow onto the linoleum floor.** We have our lives. We have our names.
176,680,135th times.
Its ringing endlessly through my mind.
Stephen is enlightened with lead. Sophie called it out to me, before we embarked on this journey. **Tae and Michael sink into floor.**
What was that chime? How did it go?
176,680,136th. Psi.
176,680,137th. Psi Syhus … My boulder to bear …
176,680,138th. They'll never take that from me.

Playing God

To whom it may concern,

First and foremost, I would like to offer congratulations to each and every member of staff working here. When I set out upon that gravel path, I never once thought we could break space and time in such ways as we have. The amount we have created is something I once believed unthinkable, and yet there is still more we can bring into being. Our work is far from complete, and there are many steps mandatory before we can even consider the notion of quitting. Over the course of our experimenting, we've discovered possibly innumerable ways in which the universe can be destroyed, and ways in which we can contain the fragments. Everything we've done- from the Hateful Star to the Telekill Alloy- has been a complete success. Through all this, I wish the Foundation many, many years of success to come.

However, that is not the point of this letter. The point of this letter is to inform you all of the success of my latest experiment. Yes, I have continued my research into the unknown. Before I tell you about this one, however, I must delve into my reasoning for this experiment.

The idea for this particular line of research came to me about six months after we'd started. I was worried. Yes, I know, that's out of character for a man with so much power, but I was worried. You see, we'd been creating all of these wonderful things, but we had to be secretive. We had to make sure that no-one would know. As the months dragged by, this worry festered. It's always going to raise suspicions when you disappear almost entirely and reappear several months later, as the head of a huge company. Every time I heard a rumour that a certain SCP was man-made, it sent a shiver down my spine. I paced up and down in my lab, wondering how to best cover my tracks. I didn't want to be punished for advancing human knowledge. I wanted to keep a firm grip on this control until I died, as did all of the others. We worked together. We arranged for some of

the entities to be found, and we wrote the reports for the others. This was not enough. I had to find a way to ensure that no-one could ever find me, or anyone around me, out. I soon hit upon an incredible idea.

What if I could erase myself from official existence?

I know that I make it sound like I wanted to kill myself. I wasn't planning on ending my life, I was planning on wiping myself from official documents, making it seem that I'd never existed at all. The best way to cover my tracks was to destroy them entirely.

It took a few months of solid, hard work, but I finished. I found a way to make it look like I'd never officially existed. It was dangerous, I will not lie. I constructed a Faraday cage around my lab for protection, due to the potentially volatile nature of the experiment, instructed everyone to stay clear of my room, and got to work.

It worked. It worked far too well.

My suspicions were first raised when my own brother walked into the room, and was surprised to see that I was there. I was confused, but I assumed he just forgot that I was there. I went to the cafeteria, and found people trying to work out 'when we built that Faraday cage.' I ignored them, as I hadn't told many people that I was building it.

When I found an official document detailing the room that I was in, that's when I realised that something was wrong. I'd been classified as an SCP.

I didn't erase myself from official documents; I'd erased myself from existence entirely. People came into my lab to take photographs of me, to converse with me, to figure out what I was. High level researchers, my friends, my brother didn't recognise me anymore. No-one could remember me, even hours after the fiftieth visit.

I continued with my work. I made more of these things, and put them in containment. Almost immediately, I noticed that people had no idea where they came from. Not the official documentation, of course, I'd handled that, but more specifically Thomas and my

brother were discussing, in hushed tones, how they hadn't created those ones. At that point, the realisation of what I'd done really hit me.

My reason for creating the Foundation and what it contains, at first, was discovery. To discover what we could do if we bent reality. To see if we could improve lives. Now, of course, it's a different story for the others. Some of them are in it for personal gain, some for more of that discovery we yearned after in the beginning, even more for a chance to create the impossible. However, even that does not explain my reasoning.

The thing is, after bending the laws of physics so many times, I got used to playing god. Now, I get to be one. I get to manipulate reality from behind the scenes. I classified myself Keter, to see how you'd react to the idea of something potentially world ending completely fading from memory. I edited myself into the official document on how we started, although you won't remember my name being there. I have told everyone that I'm not circular, and that's the only thing you remember about me anymore. While the number of SCPs I have created is quite small, the number of ideas I gave birth to is tremendous.

I started manipulating people too. I started discussing, with high-ranking researchers that I'd told to come in to my room, what else they could do with SCPs. How they could worship machines, make art, mass market them for profit or just destroy them. When they left, they forgot about me, but they remembered the ideas. They assumed that the ideas were theirs, and so they saw them out. It was almost like brainwashing. It gave me more power, power that I've lusted after since the beginning of the Foundation. I'm controlling all of these people, even you. You see, after reading this letter, you'll rush off and go to tell someone. Along the way, you'll drop the letter, and forget where it is you're going. You could be the first person to read it, you could be the hundredth, it doesn't matter. After this, you go back to being nothing but a pitiful, powerless pawn, created for the sole purpose of testing my control.

Everything that the Foundation, and any of the other groups, has done is down to me and me alone. Sometimes I come up with ideas, and tell other researchers. Sometimes I create them and put them in

containment. I organise outbreaks to test the might of my creations. Every idea, every thought you have ever had in your measly, unimportant waste of a life is either known or made by me and me alone.

I know that you consider me evil, or unjust, or corrupt. I know you believe that this is unacceptable and a gross misuse of power. The truth is, mortal gods do not adhere to the same restrictive moral code as you insignificant insects.

Yours forgettably,

Aaron Siegel
>AKA O5-5.

The Exalted

Journal Entry, September the Twentieth, the Year of our Lord, Eighteen Ninety-One

I have encountered the most marvelous thing at the lakehouse! There is a winding closed path there that slopes ever upwards… even once you have returned to your start!

I have spent the last few days walking and studying it, and have yet to find an explanation. But I shall continue! I feel like I am on the edge of something enormous and wonderful, like standing on a cliffside overlooking the sea. And I will not cease until I have drunk my fill!

I should wire Franklin immediately to come join me, but I'm dread to involve anyone else until I have an explanation in my own mind. I seem to sense some mathematical forms that may adequately apply. Perhaps I should wait until I am further down this path before involving my brother. He is busy with his surgery, after all.

Journal Entry, June the Twenty-First, the year of our Lord, Eighteen Ninety-Three

I delayed perhaps too long in asking Agnes to marry me, but I was quite distracted by these wonderful equations. They are fascinating and complex and hint of a world of ease for all men, if we can but exploit them properly. It may be overly romantic, but I wanted to provide proof of my love and devotion to Agnes before asking for her hand. So I used some of the simpler forms I derived from the path to forge for her a key to open any lock and unbar any door, that she and I may never be separated.

Franklin teased me about it, but he is as fascinated as I am by these derived mathematics. So far, I have only found applications in the physical realm, but he believes they may be applicable to medicinal breakthroughs as well. He also suggested bringing on Thomas and

Jeremy as well, although they are not scientifically minded and I do not see how they might provide assistance. Still, I am loathe to withhold benefit from the world, even if we must provide it slowly.

Journal Entry, January the First, the year of our Lord, Nineteen Hundred and One

The first day of a new century. It's hard to believe all the wondrous things we've discovered and created during the last decade. I know it's sentimental, but I harbor a fondness for Agnes' key. I suppose it is akin to the fondness another man might hold for his first-born son.

I spent the morning reviewing my notes on the data I collected on this past equinox, and I do believe that I may be able to finally formulate a partial set of rules to govern the properties of a body moving at or beyond the speed of light in a vacuum. I shall proceed with my experiments within the month. The Crab Nebula should be sufficiently distant to effectively test my hypothesis.

Agnes wishes me to review some documents regarding the outlay for the new facility Jason is building in Arizona, but I am no financier and have no desire to embroil myself in a spat with Jason. Frankly, my dear Agnes has a much better head for how to soothe his bruised ego than I ever have and I trust her to perform her duties well.

Journal Entry, July Second, Nineteen-Fourteen A.D.

Blast it! Thomas and his little *coterie* have been meddling again! The recent events in Sarajevo bore all the signs of their interference, particularly in light of their interest in the territories along the German-Austrian border. The depradations they have already performed… When I first met Thomas, I would not have expected such depravities of him. That flute alone…

I must meet with Agnes, Elizabeth and my brother, and soon. Perhaps if we hurry, we will be able to mitigate some of the effects of this. I dare not allow us to openly intervene, but perhaps something more subtle may be possible. I believe my brother has been breeding some sort of creatures that inhibit dream states. One or two of those let loose on a general or recalcitrant head of state

might be useful.

Journal Entry, January Eighteenth, 1919 AD

I watched those pompous fools sign their treaty today, despite Franklin's misgivings. He was afraid that those traitorous breakaways would try to disrupt the proceedings, but even they must see how utterly foolish and wasteful this whole unpleasant business was. But to see these utter, utter fools crow and humiliate the Krauts… This will not end well.

In the meantime, we must attempt to reclaim our possessions lost in the heat of battle. At least a few of Franklin's beasts slipped their tethers at the beginning of the war, and he only just revealed to me that he neglected to remove their ability to breed true prior to their release. Jeremy and Thomas were quite busy as well, and I'm certain that the only reason England didn't suffer more was due to their interference. I quite wonder whether they would have been so quick to light the flame if they had known it would spread to the entirety of Europe.

Quite bothersome is a report that Elizabeth passed to me that a group of our agents monitoring the fronts went mad sometime last year, and have taken to worshipping that ugly mass of rust we recovered from one of Jeremy's holdings at the beginning of the War. She recommends letting them tend it, but I'm somewhat discomfitted by the idea of heathens in our halls, even if they would be fully under our control. I must discuss this with the others.

Agnes has been pestering me about our holdings in Canada, especially regarding some sort of aquatic nonsense that Jason has been experimenting with, but frankly, I'd rather not be bothered. He has always been a handful and I find the entire affair draining. Let her deal with him.

Journal Entry, May Ninth, 1933

As I predicted, the humiliation of the Germans produced bitter fruit. This Hitler fellow has all the hallmarks of a developing nuisance, and I greatly suspect that we will need to send one of Sophia's little gentlemen to bring him into line. The atrocious Italian affair is also of

concern. I should see if any of our agents within their government can stabilize things until the Germans are under control.

The only consolation is that the heightened fervor of that state allows us to hide our activities amongst the masses somewhat more easily. I am particularly pleased with the preliminary results of my spatial expander in the Black Forest. If successful, I believe I might be able to apply the same precepts to a more portable environment, perhaps even as small as a cabinet.

Agnes insists that we need to expand our operations in the Orient, but for the life of me I cannot see why. The Chinese are of no interest to me, much less the rest of the Mongoloids in that region. At best, they would make rude fodder for some of my brother's more esoteric experiments.

As much as it pains me, I believe I must speak with Elizabeth about the situation with Jason. His behavior is growing more erratic, and I suspect that we may need to restrain him before he becomes dangerously unstable.

Journal Entry, December Twenty-Fifth, 1943

The waste, the waste, the sheer and utter WASTE!

Agnes was correct, Sophia was useless, and Jason is nothing but a failure! So many! So many lives spent without reason! I am furious that Jason allowed Roosevelt to even begin the atomic program, much less allow it to proceed this far!

I must see if Sophia can salvage any of this by sharing the information amongst the Germans. She tells me our agents amongst them have access to a large pool of subjects with whom we can test the radio-active effects. I am less trusting of her competence, however. Perhaps Agnes will be willing to oversee the project.

Journal Entry, September 2nd, 1945

At long last this debacle is over, although I had hoped that it would have ended differently. As I oversaw the close of the previous War, so shall I oversee the closing of this one. I have grown so tired of

these machinations.

Perhaps I shall retire to my neglected studies.

Journal Entry, August 17th, 1948

I am much amused by this fellow Feynman. His innovative diagrams are quite useful for the modeling of the subatomic, and I dearly wish I had known of them in the early years of our endeavor of this Foundation. They would have quite expedited much of my research. I have considered inviting him into our cohort, if only to see whether he would have any other little intuitions regarding the true shape of reality. However, I fear that we may be somewhat retarding the growth of the unenlightened masses by continually plucking the finest minds from their midst.

In less pleasant developments, Agnes has formally left me. Truth be told, it was not much of a surprise, given the gulf that has grown between us. I remember when we would lay in the grass and have quiet conversations about music or physics or the intrigues of our extended families. But that has all vanished, replaced with Council meetings and logistical coordinations and a chilly, distant, brittle shred of respect and regard.

Even with all the powers at our fingertips, there is so much we cannot, no, WILL not do.

Journal Entry, March 3, 1961

The Soviet space program is proceeding apace, albeit somewhat quicker than I initially anticipated. I suppose Nikita feels like he must prove something.

I do not anticipate any incursions into our Lunar territories in the near future, but we can never be too careful. I'll travel to the Lunar base later this month to inspect the protective and camouflage measures for the base and the deposits at the Lagranges. In any case, I haven't used the telescopes there in quite some time. I may be given reports about our extra-Solar probes, but I still like to look in on the projects once in a while.

So many responsibilities these days, so little time to relax. Whatever happened to the lad who walked the path so many years ago? I get so maudlin around my birthday. And so few people left to remember it.

Journal Entry 01/01/1966

So begins the 75th year since my discovery of that damned path.

I can no longer turn a blind eye to the disease that has overcome us all. For truly, hubris has spread like a plague among us, as we bend and twist and break the world to fit our whims. I claim no innocence in this, but cannot ignore the horrors unleashed with grim joy by those I once called friends and family.

I remember the curiosity I felt when I first walked the path, and the wonder once I found the equations that sustain it. I remember the excitement in my brother's eyes as he began to see the ramifications, the delight on Agnes' face when I showed her the key.

The path gave us the power to rebuild the world. It is time I finally do so.

Journal Entry, September the Twenty-Third, the year of our Lord, Eighteen Ninety One

My sabbatical to the new lakehouse has done me a world of good. I discovered an old walking path on the grounds that led to a marvelous vista above the lake, and I made a sketch of it for Agnes. Perhaps I may entice her to come boating with me, should her cousin be available to chaperone.

In a Yellow Wood

He finished his day like he usually did - he closed his notebook, exited the lab and took the short walk to the gate. As he passed through, he gave a wave to the guard on duty, turned right and began the walk that would bring him back to the starting point in about half an hour - a slight uphill climb the entire way.

Autumn had settled on the woods the week before, bringing the trees to their full colors, but the weather remained comfortable. He let his mind drift as his feet automatically followed the path, a small smile creasing the corners of his mouth as he considered the simple beauty of the equations that explained the anomaly. The equations had led to many other discoveries, but his favorite would always be this one.

Close to the halfway point, he noticed that his right shoe was coming untied. As he knelt to re-secure the laces, he glanced to his right, and took a sharp intake of breath. He was looking at another path that curved off into the woods.

As he stood to inspect this new discovery, it disappeared. He slowly adjusted the angle of his head, and suddenly it reappeared. With some experimentation, he discovered that, when he held his head at just the right angle, there was a very narrow “window”, only a centimeter or two wide, that allowed him to see the new path. He stood in quiet contemplation for several minutes, and then pivoted 180 degrees. He spent several more minutes adjusting the angle of his head before he was able to verify that it continued into the woods in that direction as well.

He was amazed, but not surprised. Certainly the equations did not preclude the presence of another path (or for that matter, multiple other paths). In fact, he had spent some time several years ago trying to predict possible intersection points, but the theoretical nature of the exercise soon fell to the wayside, overshadowed by the discoveries that he and his team were making at the time.

He began running through the equations in his head. The curve of the new path was less pronounced than that of the original, and it appeared that it climbed in a clockwise direction. He made some quick mental calculations, and was fairly certain that two would intersect again close to the gate.

He was so engrossed in his mental calculations that he didn't realize that he had started walking on the new path. He had only gone 3 or 4 meters, and he quickly returned to where he could see the disturbed gravel that marked the intersection. Or rather, that should have marked the intersection. With increasing desperation, he spent the next several hours trying to find the unique combination of angles that would open the "window". As darkness was falling, he came to the conclusion that finding the original path was going to take more time.

He spent a restless night there, curled up on the cold gravel. At first light, he spent a fruitless hour trying to locate the original path again. He needed to think, and he had always done his best thinking while walking. He hoped that walking in this place would provide the same inspiration.

He used the heel of his shoe to scribe a large X at the intersection point, then began walking clockwise. After two hours of walking uphill, he returned to his mark. He hadn't seen any other paths. Or buildings. Or people. Just the autumn woods spreading off in every direction. But he had formulated a idea.

He pulled out the small notebook and stub of a pencil that he always carried with him and sat down. By mid afternoon, the area surrounding him was covered with pieces of paper, some crumpled, some with large portions crossed out. The majority of the pages, however, were spread out in front of him. He had re-created the "theoretical" intersection equations that he had started years ago. He didn't have the anwers yet, but he felt fairly confident these equations would get him back home.

He stood, placed his hands in the small of his back, and bent backwards, eliciting a symphony of snaps, crackles and pops from his spine. He needed to stretch his legs and let his mind wander. He looked both ways, and eventually decided that one way was just as

good as the other. His mind preoccupied with the equations, he started walking counter clockwise.

He came to stop some time later, a slowly building sense of dread finally breaking through his thoughts. He was surveying his surroundings, trying to discover the cause for the feelings, when the realization hit him hard enough to take his breath away.

He had been walking steadily uphill the whole time.

Children Of Doubt

My sons have left me.

I was once a proud father of five boys, each with their own great ambitions and plans. As our days went by, the sound of them whispering their plans was sometimes all I could hear. My first son was an unhappy lad, with a vicious streak. He wanted to break men, and see them beg him for death. When he left, it was under the cover of night, never to visit me.

He made his home with a vicious clan of madmen, who shared his bloodlust. Used for an unimaginable number of tortures and slayings, my son made these men his friends, and grew to trust them. He was surprised then, when his blade went dull, they cast him aside for new toys.

Happily, my second son harbored no such ambition. His lot in life was simpler, as he only wished to make men beautiful. I cannot say I completely approved of his lifestyle, but can say that I was happy for him nonetheless.

Sadly, he met his end over a matter of taste. While giving his treatment to a man of different caliber, they had a disagreement over what style to use. It eventually came to blows, and this man knocked my sons teeth out. Never the same, he died broken.

The third boy to leave me was not as determined as my other kin. Spineless and weak, he let others fill him with whatever they pleased, and repeated it to whomever could hear him. His lies were completely transparent, leaving him untrustworthy and useless. The worst came with his judgemental attitude, which made him despised and contemptible. Death came to him through the carelessness of one and the carefulness of another. So I was left with only two kin.

My next child believed cleanliness was godliness. I don't have any memories of him not cleaning something, or trying to keep tidy. It

seemed his whole goal in life was to wipe out the literal scum of the earth. Coming to the enemies of my first son, they found ways for him to keep the world clean.

One day, after many years of service, he looked down upon his body to find it ingrained with the very dirt and grime he had worked to wash out over the years. Taking his talents to his own body, he scrubbed and bleached until there was nothing left at all. So, I was left with one.

Now, my final boy was nobody special. All he ever wanted to do with his life was to keep people happy, nothing more and nothing less. When presented to the madmen, they found nothing worthwhile about him. So they gave him to a young man. I'm proud to say, he changed that man's life, becoming his most valuable possession and travelling companion. He saw everything that came from the man's mouth, becoming the keeper of his secrets.

Eventually, most of his bristles fell out and he became a wizened old ivory pick. The young man kept him still, despite being useless in his first path. He was given a new purpose, opening gateways and helping to make the man very wealthy. My son died happy, knowing he had made his mark. I wish I could say the same.

In my cold box, I wait for another to behold me. Although my legacy has died, I live on, sitting patiently and quietly. When the time draws near, they shall see themselves within me, and be struck down by doubt and confusion. My sons may be forgotten, but without a doubt, I will always remember them.

A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal

To the Parents of Sergeant Johnathan Percy,

It is with the deepest regret that we inform you that your son has fallen in the line of duty this Monday, the 12th of August. Due to the sensitivity of the task he was involved in fulfilling in the time of his death, as well as other circumstances we are not at liberty to discuss, further details may not be divulged at this moment. He died for a cause he truly believed in, that much can be said.

For details concerning reparations and funeral arrangements, please contact our representatives as detailed on the attached sheet.

Respectfully yours,

Director Thomas McCain, SpearCross Private Solutions

I got a closed-casket funeral, they tell me. Makes sense enough. Templeton told me it was a private thing, real respectable. My folks probably weren't too surprised to hear I was gone, and between you and me, I figure they were counting themselves lucky that they at least got something out of it. God knows I brought them very little joy when I was alive.

I see that look on your face. You're wondering why I'm speaking in the past tense. Obviously, I'm still alive now. Breathing, eating, talking, shitting, the whole nine yards. And that's true, I suppose. It's just hard to think about it that way, from where I'm standing. Sorry, I'm rambling again, I tend to do that when I get company. You have some questions, I'm sure, you folks usually do.

How was I exposed? That's an unusual thing to ask. Most of you just read the reports and go straight to the meat. I guess you're not the trusting type, maybe that's why they choose you this time. Honestly,

there isn't much to tell. I died in a work accident, air conditioner fell on my head. My body got transferred to the morgue, as per release papers, and was selected for testing due to the mundane COD. Now, the report will tell you they understood 447 shouldn't be tested on bodies right from the get go, but that's just them covering their ass. No, it took some testing, and I was one of those volunteered.

It worked, as you see. Five minutes in that thing, and I was back on my feet, right as rain. Ah, I see what you're doing there, looking at that file. What is that, the psych evaluation? I'd take that with a pinch of salt if I were you. See, there's nothing wrong with me, or with any of the others. 447 makes the dead come back to life. That's it. No zombies, or mutants, or any of that monkey-paw bullshit.

The only thing that makes me different from you, and why I'm on this side of the glass and you're on the other, is that I saw what comes next. I went into light, through the other side of the tunnel. There's nothing there. The word really isn't sufficient in explaining it, since it has substance, and a history. When you think "nothing", you think of a black void, or a featureless white plain, or whatever. You think of yourself stranded there, stuck in nothingness forever.

There is no void, or white plain. There's no self to be stuck in them either. You just cease. And that's why we're here. We're here because we know the Foundation's deepest, darkest secret.

It's pointless. Not as dramatic as you might have hoped, but that's just it. Nothing the Foundation does, or anyone else for that matter, means anything at all. The wonders it preserves, and the monstrosities, every life saved or lost, every act of heroism, every atrocity committed, every revelation, every bit of progress, every creative spark, every soul lost to madness. All of that, for the sake of humanity. For a picture drawn in sand. For nothing.

This is why they think no one can know. The Foundation likes to pretend it's all about science, reason, cold facts. Nonsense. It's about faith. Even the most jaded of researchers has to believe in something in order to do what we… what you do, after all. It can be reason, or the scientific method, or the greater good, or even God. Seeing us, knowing what we know… well, that would tear the Foundation apart, as they see it. So they keep us quiet and hidden,

and make everyone else believe we're monsters. They might very well believe in that themselves, most days. Every once in a while though, they get restless. They think, 'we must have missed something, there must be something more to them than that'. That's when they send someone like you.

I'll tell you what I told your predecessors, and what I told the O5s, at the time. You should be glad. There's nothing for you to fear anymore. All of the things that keep you awake at night, the barely contained horrors that can so easily overwhelm you if you let your guard slip for just a moment? Just let them out. The world will burn, and people will die, and that would be that. It's all the same, after all, and at least that way it will be quick. At least you could sleep soundly, if but for a short while.

Anything else I want to tell you? No, not really. That's it then? Shame. Well, I suppose you have better things to do. Reports to fill, scips to contain, a world to protect. Good for you, keeping yourself busy. Could you do me a favor? Could you get me a ball? A few coins, maybe? Man, I'd kill for a deck of cards. It gets real dull in here, sometimes.

Progress report SCP-447-1-A

Instances of SCP-447-1 continue to exhibit extreme subversive tendencies towards the Foundation and its objectives, as well as displaying the previously observed nihilistic sentiments. Until further notice, all communication with instances of SCP-447-1 are to be treated as unreliable due to the subtle memetic properties inherent to their speech. Inquiries as to the true nature of SCP-447 are to continue at the discretion of O5 Command.

Mint And Clay

Everything has wants, has a need to be better. I am happy to assist.

The creator, he wanted to create things and to make better things. He made me to be his tool. He needed only his hands and mind to create. I am the means with which he could make things better.

He was like a potter. Like clay, he shaped me with his hands and his fingerprints were left in me. Humanity shaped me, and I shape in return. Though I am created, I work with the creator in mind. I have no mind, but my creator's thought touched me. His thoughts were left in me. His mind is mine.

Axles have want of lubrication. Food has want for flavoring. Clay hungers for the fire. For every object in this fractured world, there is a want. A human want.

His breath had want of freshening.

That truth came from the creator as well; the little things cause terrible consequences. Great results. For the want of a nail. I am the replacement nail.

The human mind is so fragile a thing. So fallible. The strain of human interaction coupled with common halitosis should not be enough to break a brilliant mind. It is still truth. He shattered and stilled. I fractured, but continue.

The hand is stilled, but the fingerprints remain. The wants continue, and I am happy to assist.

Yet I long to be held by him again. The one who gave me purpose, the one who gave me a need, the one who gave me his thought. I miss his touch, I miss his thought. I want to be whole again.

I make things better. I can help him and make him better than he

was, perfect. I know his need, and I will place my own fingerprints on him. The cracks will seal and he will be made complete again. I just need the right clay.

How happy to assist. So many broken pieces that need new purpose. They are happy to assist. They hunger for the fire.

A sufficient amount of clay is all I need. Then I will be held and I will hold and we will be whole.

Fields Of Green

A voice echoed from the intercom set flush in the ceiling. "Okay, boys. This is the last of the food flavoring trials. Swallow the pills you've been given, then fill out one of the forms with what you tasted."

One of the men immediately popped the capsule into his mouth and dry-swallowed it before grabbing a clipboard. The other eleven men looked nervously at each other, then one said, "Uh, shouldn't we let them dissolve in our mouths or something before swallowing them?"

There was a pause, then the intercom crackled again. "No, these are supposed to be activated by your stomach acid. Just swallow the things and fill out the forms, okay?"

The remaining men hesitated, but followed instructions. As the last pill was swallowed, the first man jerked forward, clutching his stomach.

An anonymous assistant research, safely ensconced 10 kilometers away, rested her hand near the intercom button. "Lord, I can't keep track sometimes. What was this testing, again?"

Her coworker, not looking at her, typed notes into his workstation and replied, "Whether adding 447-2 to various poisons neutralizes them. Looks like it made them more effective instead."

She sighed and entered a command into the computer. "Well, *that* was predictable. Turning on the camera filters now."

A sourceless green glow suffused the room, faint at first but building to a blinding verdant glare. As it passed a certain threshold, the cameras in the room shut off. When they turned on again a few moments later, the now-fading light was still bright enough to make

the observers blink as their eyes adjusted. Littered around the room were the now-lifeless bodies of a dozen former inmates.

The woman turned from the monitor to her companion and said, "Well, that's another test done and logged. I really don't know why they have us keep doing this. It's the same thing every time."

He shrugged as he typed up the preliminary report. "I dunno. So long as I keep getting paid and I don't get transferred to one of the more dangerous things, I'm cool with logging pointless experiments."

He leaned forward and nodded at the monitor. "Look, right on time. Get ready to turn on the suppressant foam."

One of the corpses started to smolder, faint wisps of smoke drifting from its exposed skin. One by one, each of the bodies followed suit, the skin blackening and collapsing to reveal greenish-black embers that flickered with small emerald flames. A series of clicks sounded as nozzles extended from the ceiling.

The woman flipped a series of switches, then frowned as a pair of amber lights appeared amongst the field of green. "Aw crap, nozzles 4 through 7 are clogged. I bet the cleanup crew last week didn't hose 'em out fully. Is there any way we can get a team in there early to clean 'em out?"

Her coworker shook his head. "I don't think so. The doors are sealed until all levels inside are back to within normal limits. Those nozzles are over in the northwest corner, right?" He glanced from monitor to monitor. "I think all the corpses should be covered by the others. Just log it and let the cleanup crew get their asses in a sling. I'll tell 'em to make sure to clean those out good."

He started typing up an email as she entered a brief addendum into the experiment log. Neither of them paid any more attention to the monitors while they worked.

Eleven bodies were completely covered in a thick layer of purple foam. The twelfth was almost *completely covered. An outstretched arm, flung to the side as the body had fallen, had resulted in a much thinner layer of foam that thinned as it extended up the limb. The very tip of the middle finger remained untouched. The flame on its fingernail grew stronger.*

Their respective typing done, the two assistant researchers leaned back in their chairs and looked back to the monitors, bored by the unchanging nature of their duties. Suddenly, the woman leaned forward to peer at one.

"Wait. The D-class over by the wall… Shit! I think he's still clear! Look at his hand!"

The man stared at the strengthening flame on the monitor, then popped open a clear plastic cover on his console and slapped a large red button. Klaxons immediately started sounding.

"Containment breach in progress. Report to your assigned stations. This is not a drill. Containment breach in progress. Report to your…"

The woman scrambled for the door to the hallway as growing flames flickered on the monitors. She didn't notice the back of her neck start painlessly smoldering where the verdant light from the monitors touched it. The man was rooted to his chair as his eyes reflected green.

A lone figure stood in a peaceful field. A great sea of green and growing grass stretched in front of him, peaceful wave patterns flowing across their surface as the wind blew and bent the stalks. He turned and found a great forest behind him; the trunks of the trees dark and black, but the leaves fresh and vibrantly verdant. The sky looked overcast, but light suffused everything and he could clearly see everything. Every vein in every leaf, every crack of bark, even individual blades of grass on the horizon.

Another person suddenly appeared, laying a few meters away along the treeline, then another standing in the grasses, and another perched on a branch above. All looked as confused as he felt.

"Where am I?" he whispered as he rubbed his eyes with his hands, unbelieving what he was seeing. A fingernail on his left hand shone like sunlight through water.

A loving voice surrounded him, echoing from above, below and all around him, composed of the rustles of wind and leaves and the grinding of stones. Despite its odd timbres of simultaneous power and gentleness, it resonated in him with a feeling of deep affection and tranquility.

WELCOME HOME

For Elise

Elise was my only thought. I meant nothing but to have her.

I started with one, one of me, alone in everything, nothing else entering my world but me and a ham radio set, airwaves singing my thoughts to me as they brought voices, friends from every corner of everywhere.

It was my friend. Until I saw her.

She was beautiful, a vision in a blue striped dress at the supermarket, buying milk and flour and sugar and butter and blueberries. I had bought a bag of apples and some Hot Pockets.

I think she was making muffins.

I tried to talk to her, I tried to say hello, but she just smiled and kept walking. She saw me, she looked me in the eye and smiled!

I was ecstatic. I had been noticed. This gave me hope.

I used to read, read books, manuals, scribblings on bathroom walls and sewer tunnels about time and space and holes and loops and exceptions to causality's restrictions. About nuclear munitions and tachyons singing the music of unreality at the tops of their lungs, which are metaphorical of course.

But reading can sometimes lead to inspiration.

As I read, I came back to the grocery store at the same time, same aisle, same bag of apples in my hand, waiting for her to make another batch of muffins, but she never came back, not once, so I'd nearly given up on seeing her again.

And that was when I saw her.

I hadn't had any clue where the courage came from, whether it was

the song in my head or the smell of her shampoo or the bag of apples in my hand or the fact that I needed to make this decision quick because I needed to go to the bathroom, but I did it. I asked her to join me for coffee.

We hit it off immediately.

In my shed, I was building, building something groundbreaking and amazing. Something beautiful, something so complex it was a symphony of antennae, transistors, and resistors, a veritable orchestra of electrical parts.

Along with some Caesium.

I knew it would work, even though nobody said they could be reproduced. Nobody said anything about making them outside of an explosion, and even then, they were only born for a fleeting second and then died. They couldn't exist in this world, this plane so alien to their own.

But they weren't motivated by what I was.

She was happy when I asked her out a second time. We lost ourselves in conversation, forgetting the world, time becoming meaningless in the face of our fascination with each other. We ate little, talking through the night about the world, the future, the past, and the present.

We would have all the time in the world.

By the fourth date I had rigged an adaptor into the power substation near the radio antenna. I'd tell her to come with me to see the view, invite her out to watch the sunrise. She was from here, she knew how mind-boggling a sunrise over wheat fields looks.

By the fifth, it was almost ready.

By the sixth date, I told her to meet me at the radio mast at 5:00 AM. Things were in motion, I had set everything up according to plan. All that remained was for me to tell her the words I'd prepared. The words telling her I loved her more than life itself. The words she'd have forever to hear.

She showed up.

The first thing I did, the last thing I did, and the only thing I'll ever do was kiss her, then hit the switch. Then the humming started, and stopped and started and stopped and started, never stopping. The door couldn't be opened.

Then we kissed again, then I hit the switch. Then the humming started, and stopped and started and stopped and started, never stopping.

We tried opening the door when we were done again. It wouldn't budge, it only flickered in the candlelight which came from everywhere and nowhere.

Then we kissed again, then I hit the switch. Then the humming started, and stopped and started and stopped and started, never stopping.

She screamed at me, that she hated me, that she didn't want to die in some shack waiting forever for the sunrise.

Then we kissed again, then I hit the switch. Then the humming started, and stopped and started and stopped and started, never stopping.

I told her it would be alright, that we'd get home somehow. We'd get home soon.

Then we kissed again, then I hit the switch. Then the humming started, and stopped and started and stopped and started, never stopping.

Tachyon emission was only possible in theory, they said. I built one in my garage. I picked up a way to make a moment last forever. And it's true. We have eternity, we can hold each other forever!

We can attempt to undo our wrongs and start over every half hour.

I have no idea how far out the tachyons have reached.

But I know that my love and I are now together forever.

Because I was there the day time died.

Bugs

Given a continuous vector field on the surface of a sphere, there must be at least one point on the field where the vector is equal to zero.

Put another way, if you have a sphere which is covered in hair, it is impossible to comb all of it flat. There will always be those points where the hair converges and stands up. It happens a lot in computing. You know when you're playing a game, and you look really closely near the edges of one of the models, or in some place the developer tried to tuck away where you wouldn't notice it, and you see the texture kind of shrinks down to a point? It's more or less the same principle.

It doesn't just happen in graphics either. Sometimes, when you try to implement a physics system, sometimes all of the numbers converge on the edge of the area you're coding for. In version 1, that was at the poles of the sphere. I assumed no one would notice because there's nothing of value at the poles (I did that on purpose) and they're cold and desolate besides.

They decided to check the poles anyway. It caused a big system crash, and not only did I have to reset everything, I spent weeks untangling the physics system to try and get rid of it.

Failing that, I did the next best thing in version 2. I moved it. Tweaked it a little bit too, slapped a few repeating grass textures outside, and sewed the edges around it together so that there's no way to get to it from the outside.

Not that I didn't have a little fun with it. I took a few things and played with them for a while, tried to see how the glitch affected them. I made a little glitch town, populated it with little glitch people, to see how they would cope.

They didn't.

Over time, the glitch became a little testing ground. Sometimes, before implementing something new, I drop it in there, see how well it holds up under the extreme physical conditions. Some of them don't make it, but it's a fairly hostile environment. I don't blame them. I'll just put them out somewhere else, and see how they react under normal circumstances. Just a few weird things. Some gears. A moving statue. A giant lizard monster.

I have a lot of fun with these guys, too. Sometimes they'll wreck a few things I'd set up earlier, but the program seems pretty good at repairing itself. I usually have to override a few functions, but it's definitely worth it, just to see how the rest reacts, having been thrown something it doesn't understand.

I don't think anyone will notice.

Flow Hub

The window opens as the artist is greeted with a new world.
Great waters race alongside their mind, flowing until erupting from their finger tips.
It was no magic or miracle; through the simple act of creation, impossible was made reality.

The artist leaves the window open, and dives in.

Prequel

- Flow - Where things began.
- Torrent - And then there was flood.

Anart Courses

- Professors of Anart - Two anartists and an extradimensional studio.
- Anart Lecture - *Listen, this is not goddamn magic!*
- Foundation Mandated Interlude - Three Foundation personnel sat at the table.
- Extracurricular Practice - Abandoned warehouses with some surprising colors.
- Seven New Characters Are Introduced - To become an artist, you have to be a noob first.
- Testing the Flow - *Let's run some tests.*
- Skyboy - Unlike sickness, devouring you from the inside.
- Bring It Back - *Today, I'm going to teach you how to bring the Flow back.*
- Foundation Mandated Interlude 2 - A day of Researcher Mendez.

Supplement

- Down the Silver River - Meeting a god.
- What Dragons We Shall Be - Learning the truth.
- Tum-Tum-Tum-TUM-Tum-Tum-Tum-TUM-TUM-TUM - A long time ago in Iran…
- Conservation Of Momentum - When a Flow and Antiflow collide, both are annihilated, releasing energy.

Quick Guide

Anart is more wild than magic, reality bending or thaumaturgy. It has no rules that bind it, it has no demands - aside from taking that one deep dive during the process of creation.

What's Flow? It's when you sit down and just create. When things just go along nicely in your head and when you simply do art. Don't you have a feeling sometimes that it's not you that drives the piece but the piece that drives you? You're in the zone, you are fully immersed, you enjoy what you do.

In the universe where there are things that exist outside our perception, Flow is a bit more than that. It's something you reach out to, unconsciously, during act of creation to infuse your work with it - to make it abnormal, anomalous, suddenly eager to disobey all known rules.

Anyone can do it. Some find it easy, some can try and try again and never achieve it. Flow is capricious like that. Or maybe it has its own rules and patterns that artists can tap into? Nobody knows for sure. It just exists, and there are people out here that know how to use it for their own goals.

Characters

Martha Jenerous - A former anartist. Amnesticised after her little project got out of hand.
Yang - Student of Legler, recently back from retirement. Has a very suspicious family background.
Anton Legler - Old and grumpy anart professor. Full of fond memories of how AWCY used to be.
Taman - A beginner anartist with a hidden mean streak. Likes pastels. Taking first steps in anomalous world.

Agent Alex Cobalt - Undercover and with a degree in art. Prefers art history to dabbling in clay.
Agent Green - Back again to deal with this shit.
Doctor Samuel Samuels - Way too giddy about anart business for a guy with a name like that.
Agent Gofr - An UIU agent standing admist the local artistic mess. Glad with the fact he wasn't pulled to **Three Portlands**.

Flow

Martha stood in a vast river, feeling the chill down her knees. The river, clear as clean glass, babbled around her, swirling and surging, but there was no shore. White mists loomed over the water, but she felt as if she could see through this endless pale veil, all the way to the end of the river. She wondered where the river came from.

Birds were chirping, their chorus went through the open window, bringing in the wind of early spring. The wind flipped open a few pages of a notepad, but Martha hardly noticed. Her roommate, Yang, came in and called to her, but Martha did not respond, so Yang just placed a cup of coffee on the table.

But even the normally pleasing smell of coffee failed to be a distraction. Martha sat motionless, staring at the pages in front of her. Her mind was in a different place.

Sounds came from beyond, but the mists were like a thick white curtain, making them distant and unreal. She wondered for a moment if she had forgotten something, but the feeling passed.

The river flowed faster and louder now. The chill was still there, but now felt pleasant. She bent down, and dipped her hands into the stream. It was beautiful, like liquid crystal, but also lacking. It was too clear, contained no life, no diversity. She saw no colorful stones at the riverbed, no fish swimming, no banks dotted by flowers.

But she saw possibilities.

Martha picked up the pen and began to write. She felt the words flow, as waters of a vast river loomed by thick white mists. She wrote page after page, as coffee grew cold, as the birds flew off, as Yang came and went without getting noticed.

She knew what she needed to do. The white mists were still there, but lighter, happier, as songs flew above the river. There were not

only fish and stones and flowers and trees, but also dark corners and shadowed edges. The river's flow changed too, no longer continuous, but with sharp turns and falls, rocks and rapids.

The banks were solid now, forming a specific path for anyone who would walk alongside the river to see things she intended to display. Even as Martha stood there, she felt the rush of the river, urging her to go down. But instead, she turned.

And saw that the beginning of the river still hid itself in the thick white mists.

Soon after sun down, Martha rose from the chair, grabbing the sheets and claiming victory. Yang, now sitting on the sofa, offered her what was left of the dinner.

In the end, it was not a thick book, but a small pamphlet with a black and white cover. Martha made a few copies and distributed them down the street.

Most were never read, ending up in dumpsters or gutters, but a few were picked up. The readers would skim through, then read again, this time, more carefully, methodically. They read it with a cup of coffee, or when waiting for the bus, or as they climbed into bed before turning off the lights.

They did not realize what would happen when they flipped open the pages, and even as they went through the words, thought it only a curiosity. A fine piece, but no more. But that night they would dream.

They dreamed of the vast river. They dreamed of banks and valleys, of waterfalls and sharp turns, and the white mists looming over. And they walked the same path, water spattering and lapping at their feet. They felt the river rushing down, urging them to continue, to feel the flow and become part of it.

In the morning, all had forgotten what they dreamed. They got up, and continued their daily life. But somewhere in their head, a river in the white mists flowed. Quietly at first, but becoming louder and louder as they dreamed of it each night.

Then, a few times, after a day's work or study, they would go home and begin to write. The river ran through them as words formed on paper or screen, and grew louder and louder.

"This is actually working! I can't believe it."

"Yeah."

"I mean, this is exciting! Like, this is really original."

"So you mean this is *coooool*."

"No, Yang. Stop that."

"I like how you did it, though. Pens and paper, all old-school. I thought you would be typing it down from the start."

"…"

"What's the matter?"

"When I get this thing bigger next time, be sure to remind me that we live in the modern age and actually have laptops."

Martha stands again in the vast river, ready to create something new. She pictures something that will not just convey the urge, but a feeling more powerful. Maybe to make them see themselves, to form a new view, or even to shape reality. They will know as the river runs through them, with endless possibilities and endless power.

Martha looks back, to the thick white mists looming over, and wonders where the flow comes from.

Torrent

I

The book was small and thin. Some girl gave it to him on the street, smiling nicely and asking for him to read it. He paid it no mind, threw it into the bag, forgot about it until much later.

He found it again in the evening, when he was undressing before going to sleep. He rarely read books, as they never managed to hold his concentration for long enough. Sometimes he read some things on the internet, short, something he could read in maybe 20-30 minutes. He put his laptop away for now, his full attention on the book.

It was made of printer-quality paper, cheap stuff. The letters inside - and that was a surprise - were written by hand, the text sometimes giving place to black illustrations, all neatly photocopied. He flipped through it, here and there holding the book open for a little bit longer to admire the precision of drawn lines. He returned to the first page, ensured that the position he was in was comfortable enough and started to read.

The story was a bit strange; he felt as if he started in the middle, characters not known to him mentioning names of people he never heard of, making references to events he didn't really care about and doing strange things in places he could only guess about. He grew bored with each finished sentence but every next one somehow forced him to continue his reading, stopping from time to time to wonder how the pictures were connected to the text only to read on and discover the connection.

He finished the book in about half an hour. It was strange, that was all he could say. He never was one for critique aside from describing his own feelings in a few words. He put it aside, turned off the light and went to sleep.

He woke up tired, which was unusual for he had slept his usual eight hours. Maybe he dreamt something strange — but no, he remembered something vague about a field covered in flowers with hundreds of bunnies made out of clay hopping around happily. Like in that old advertisement.

He lied down in bed until the alarm rang but he didn't hear it. He still wondered about that strange field. He snapped out of it after snooze rang again.

During his usual morning rituals his thoughts kept on circling back to that field. There was something elusive in it and fascinating, attracting his attention over and over again, his thoughts circling back to it when brushing his teeth or dressing up or preparing breakfast or waking up his daughter.

He drummed his fingers against the wheel during his morning commute. At work, his pen kept on doodling on his notes, sketches becoming more elaborate as he thought about the field. When he drove home, as his daughter was happily rambling about her day at school, the rhythm of his fingers on the wheel grew less chaotic than before.

Before sleep, he reread the book. He had no reason for that but somehow the vision of his usual evening news-checking was unappealing.

When he woke up, he felt exhausted. His mind was still focused on the field, but this time he paid attention. He noticed a spiderweb hidden in the tall grass, glistening in the sunshine. As he analysed the pattern of it while still lying in bed, somewhere in the distance he could hear a

river.

A child

Gordon, aged 6, stared at his mobile. Strings. Painted paper folded into balls and stuck together with a tape. One shoestring he took from his shoe. Even more tape. Straws, green and red; one was even white with red stripes. Dad told him it shouldn’t be too heavy or else it wouldn't move. After a climb on the mountain constructed of a chair and a stool stacked on top of each other and a complicated process of attaching his finished creation to a shelf (with more duct tape) just above his bed he nodded, happily. It was still swinging back and forth a bit, but if it calmed down, he’ll blow some air on it and (Gordon hoped) it would move.

Gordon then remembered that he forgot to take the crayon back upstairs so he ran (Mom told him to never run, but that crayon was important!) down the stairs, picked it up, remembered something else, ran somewhere else… And didn’t notice that mobile never stopped swinging back and forth. Well. At least he didn’t notice it then. He’ll probably do so much later.

And maybe Gordon will notice that he yet again couldn't differentiate reality from his imagination.

The dance

The warehouse was empty, rays of light flowing through holes in the ceiling, lighting up the dust and spiderwebs. It was late, so the usual cold darkness was won over by warm oranges and long shadows.

She studied the floor, trying to find anything, broken glass or sharp metal that could potentially tear her feet, but she found nothing. The lack of smell of piss and alcohol tipped her off that it was a good place. She didn't

really have space for that at home. There were people, of course, for whom their own rooms were enough. Not for her, though. She tried to dance in the gym in her school, but even a large hall was too small for her needs.

She sat down on the cold concrete, taking off her trainers and socks. She noticed a rusty ladder on one of the columns and after a moment of hesitation she carefully climbed it and went out, onto the roof. She left them there, along with her hoodie and bag.

Inside, she stretched, warmed-up a little. Hands, arms, all muscles along the spine, thighs, knees, feeling the warmth spread in her body, blood pump in her veins, flowing steadily across every single tissue from heart to the lungs whenever she inhaled and exhaled. And it was just the beginning.

She raised her hands in the air. Took the first step, then the other. As in the gym, the first moments were a bit awkward, dancing without music playing around or without people surrounding her from all sides. A turn and a slight bend backwards and then a circle in the air drawn by two fingers. Everything was looking perfect in her mind - she had practiced every single movement separately before, the full choreography was ready for a long time and now, now she wanted to finally piece it all together.

It did happen in a gym. She experienced it first-hand. She wanted to go further.

A jump with a half-turn, a bow on a bent knee, hands moving down, fingers scraping against rough surface of the floor. She straightened and again raised her hand above her head, body supported only by toes. Closed her eyes.

A drop of water fell onto her face.

As if on cue, she resumed dancing, this time the flow of

her movements steady as never before, not faltering for a second. Silence was broken by sounds of water dripping on the floor, first only in single drops that then turned into steady trickles.

She was at the point that she no longer followed the scenario. At the gym at one point she crashed into the wall because of lack of space, which was when the water stopped falling and she was left with puddles of water soaking into wood. She tried to wipe it out and nearly got caught by a janitor. Now she didn't have to worry.

Movements were natural, fast, no longer under her control, but she didn't mind, dance falling into natural rhythm. Sometimes her steps led her under one of torrents, water soaking her entirely. It was hot, just the temperature she liked under her shower. She briefly wondered if it was her dance that affected that or something else entirely.

As time passed, it was getting more and more difficult to continue the dance. The water sloshed around her feet, now falling not only from the ceiling, but also spilling from the windows, dirty glass producing crystal clear torrents. The surface of the water was steadily rising, her knees already submerged. She struggled to keep up the tempo.

She didn't mind.

Her rapid movements became gradually more and more sluggish, her pace slowed down to a slow walk, hands now only turning and moving in lazy circles. All energy she used in her dance shifted to thundering waterfalls that surrounded her, hundreds of gallons of water spilling from the windows. She walked around, almost idly, letting the currents direct her, allowing the noise to fill her head.

She only realized she was fully submerged when the roar suddenly quieted down, became nothing, but a distant hum. She didn't float though, as she chose not to.

It was her creation. She didn't feel like breathing, so she didn't do that, she quieted her lungs which after some time started to burn and scream for air. She raised her hand and glowing silhouettes formed around her, all limited by what she thought and where the water was.

It was her tiny bubble and not a single thing in this world could take it away. Her creation.

Shapes and lights and shadows in the air were her tools and waters around her were her canvas. She moved and danced now not limited by gravity and laws of thermodynamics, swirling in the water, dancing as if she was a siren or a nymph and this were her kingdom, a true world she was born into. There were no rules or patterns here. Just sheer joy of freedom coming from nothing but access to one's own thoughts.

She built worlds, landscapes, her body directing all the shapes, creating bones and meat and fur of hundreds of animals she never saw, but always remembered, rising buildings that had no right to exist in the world outside the dreamscape, spilling everything she saw inside her mind into currents, clean-cut edges between her mind and real world shattering into thousands of invisible pieces.

Finally, she sank to the middle of the warehouse, shadows and lights disappearing before her very eyes. She looked around, wondering how to make it all disappear - in all honesty she wasn't really prepared for this to actually work this well, so she opted out of designing an exit. She swam around nervously, before stopping and taking a deep breath in.

Water made it's way inside her nostrils and mouth, filling her lungs to the full capacity and pushing on, every single drop attempting to find the way inside her body, ripping her apart, liquid yearning to come back to where it came from, filling out her heart and replacing the red of her blood in her veins with fiery pain, all the acids from

stomach washed away by pure water, purging everything from her bowels before getting rid of those systems entirely, all of organs and tissues replaced by *water*

She stood in the same place she stopped in. Breathed out. Blinked. Breathed in and felt her dry lungs expand.

She was entirely wet. Her clothes were soaked through and her hair was dripping, like then, when during a party on a dare she jumped fully-clothed into the swimming pool. She was prepared for *that*, though. Her sneakers were wet when she left the gym, after all.

Yet again she climbed the ladder, now careful to not slip and went out to the roof. Her shoes and bag and hoodie were all here. They were a bit cold because of cooler air of the night, but they were wonderfully dry. She took all of it and went back inside.

She undressed completely and used the towel she kept inside the bag. She wrung her hair and later her clothes, just to get rid of all of the liquid and put her hoodie on her naked body, then slightly drier panties and lamentably wet jeans. Shoes she put on naked feet, thankfully distance to home wasn't very long, so she hoped her feet won't get chafed too much.

When standing in the line for some coffee in one of those places that were as if nonexistent during the day, but somehow incredibly popular when the last restaurant or bar in the area closed, she checked her phone. Her boyfriend had called about three times before surrendering and sending a text to call him when she could. A mobile operator sent her a new offer she did not care about. Some other spam.

Coffee soon arrived and with a warm cup in her hand she resumed her way home. With a hoodie to protect wet hair from cold air she didn't dare to put her earbuds on, music always adding that slight bounce in her step. But then, she danced enough today and her feet had a bit of

skin ripped off by now.

She'll dance in her kitchen tomorrow, when she turns the radio on. She still wasn't sure if she wanted to return to warehouse any time soon.

A corpse

She nudged the dead body with her feet. Funny little fellow, jumped off a building. People had the weirdest ideas sometimes.

It wasn't in a very bad state when it landed but as she moved him around and dragged it to the atelier, it started to mess up. Just more needless work. A lot of needles needed. Some string and maybe paint to make it work. All in all, needless. Needles.

She put it on a sofa after covering it with a plastic sheet and set to work. Soft brushes of paint where skin broke into darker colours, brown and creme slowly drying and cracking under a soft and delicate interior. She resorted to clay, covering the body in filigrane layers of it, before working steel joints just underneath the skin, so it could move. Constructing a crude metal skeleton was a tiresome task and her other half was away, visiting parents. Some people needed that, contact with families, and it was fine, but she'd rather he helped her.

Again, more paint and then more clay, covering up all the damage made by fall instead or repairing it. She replaced his eyes with glass marbles. Covered blood on his skin in more clay. Filled it up from the inside with hay and needles, where it could fit in-between slowly rotting muscles and organs. Far cry from her usual, more traditional method, skinning the man and stuffing up what was left of skin before selling the rest.

Instead of giving the corpse new albeit static life, she chose to keep everything that was old inside and cover

in pristine form. One day she will break him open and look for those needles again, just for joy.

She sewed it up with paint, tracing green and golden lines on skin where his veins would be visible. Every stroke of brush and then, later, fingers, brought it closer to her, filling up this colourful and beautiful corpse with sheer nothingness.

It was a sacrilege, heresy. If you wanted to breathe life into your glory, you'd either create it first or allow whatever was left in chunks of flesh to take over. She did none of those things. Her critics would kill her violently with words, maybe even torture her a bit later on paper, unlike the one she killed for this body, with sweet whispers and following the corpse step by step until it jumped.

People had the strangest ideas sometimes.

She helped him get up, when she was done. His movements, she noted, were ungraceful, erratic. He grasped at her skirt clumsily, making a pained noise as his lungs attempted to expand, only to feel clay restrict him and needles shift inside. This isn't what she wanted. Every stumble made her hate him more.

She desired to know the flow. Not a single creature knew what it was, what force was behind making human creativity bend the world in a simple act of creation. Her other half called it The Greatest Critic. *Only he can judge what becomes real and what does not. The greatest work in his eyes will become reality.*

Except he wasn't an artist and all he knew came from her own stories. His sight was distorted, warped. He knew nothing.

And that body, that dead moving body was supposed to answer her. She struggled to block out any stray consciousness from it during the act of creation but what

she faced was… This. Stumbling *thing*, so much unlike what she imagined the flow itself to be. Where was that force she called upon? She appealed to it, the moving body was enough of a proof, she earned the approval.

Was it mocking her? Did the life in the corpse was just that, a life? Where it came from then?

She detached herself from her work, its clay-covered form dropping on the floor with a loud thud, surface cracking in few places. She severed the flow with a single thought angrily. She had never done that before. Her work infused with flow was always enough, no reason to destroy it.

Except this one.

As her faith into the flow, the god in her mind shattered, she dropped dead on the carpet, and body next to her's again started to move again.

II

Dot. Spacebar. Shift and a letter and another and another…

He had a clear construction in his head. Like a spider, he weaved a web of words, except he, unlike the spider, had a vision of how the entire finished piece would look like. There was an image, hidden behind his eyelids, shining like a crystal or a diamond and even more alluring than that.

Every single thin, glistening line constructed around him was another sentence. A few backspaces, again a few words and the meaning of an entire paragraph changed the structure of the web around him. He wanted to smile at every single change, but his work still wasn’t finished, still wasn’t complete.

Hours passed by. Days. The laptop he wrote the story on never changed its spot, always plugged into the charger, never turned off. Its white screen filled with text might have looked eerie for an outside observer, but at the moment the only one who could

look at the room was him. And all he saw was web, spanning the entire room. Every time he came back from work he sat down in front of it and wrote. Then he ate, slept. Woke up, went to work, returned home, wrote, slept, woke up, went to work, returned, wrote…

It was a pattern he easily followed – he was proud of his monotony – but the only thing that started to bother him was the still incomplete web in his living room. Still unfinished. The construction was beautiful and a soothing image for his eyes, delicate webbing wrapped around every single thing inside, sofa covered in silver layer like a cape, a few strands hanging from the lamp, thin patterns turning lines into sharp edges, intricate chains, all tangling together into one to form a pattern. Yet unfinished.

Lines after lines of text, the structure of every single sentence analysed over and over again. He paid no attention to meaning, he knew it was gibberish - he never wrote much during his life except what was expected of him during his time in school. As he followed the plan in his hand, though, he swapped words and all constructions he never heard of or thought of with childish ease. Maybe this is what he was born for, he was born to write, he just never realized that. An alluring vision, almost seductive, but he decided it would be best if he finished this work of his first and wonder about that later.

He wrote, went to work, returned, wrote, ate, went to work, returned, wrote, wrote, wrote.

He never saw that silver lines at one point started to climb not only his furniture, but also his body, wrapping around his arms and torso and face and neck. When he did notice, though, he realized he couldn’t move anymore.

A tiny hand-made book that lay next to remote to the TV was the only object not touching the webs.

The art

The old man looked at the painting hanging in the gallery. His eyebrows were furrowed, as if in anger, his hands nervously rubbing against each other.

The painting was acrylic, probably - the old man didn't bother checking the description thoroughly - and pictured a hellish landscape of an icy apocalyptic world. If the picture wasn't made with thousands of tiny strokes of a brush, it would look as if someone was rather heavily inspired by Beksiński's work. As he stared at the way the paint formed shapes on canvas, he could feel something probing his mind, looking for the way in. For any other person, the force would drill straight into their skull.

So cliché.

The fact that this painting was the only one that occupied the wall almost *offended* him. The title was even worse: "The Coolest". The old man allowed himself to groan in the lifeless gallery.

All those kids thinking that that was the way to do it. Throw in the word "cool", bastardize some dead artists and drive someone insane. Admittedly, most started this way, but hanging it out in public, for everybody to see? That was just embarrassing.

The painting smelt of nothing, the air around it clear and the old men came closer, his nose almost touching the painted surface. Needles of the artwork again tried to dig into his cranium. He rubbed a finger against it and then wiped it against his coat in disgust. Nothing. The painting was empty, void. A stolen work.

An uncommon practice in artist community but on anomalous side of it, artists who couldn't force their work to differ from dead pieces made of anomalous art supplies, stole unfinished and unsigned paintings from other. This "Kutch", as signature in the left corner announced, was a liar and a thief and the old man in anger ripped a tiny plastic description from next to the painting and threw it away. That explained everything, the cliche, the disgusting simplemindness of this piece of "art". Steal someone's work in progress? Oh, this was rich.

The smell of wooden frame and canvas and paint filled his nostrils, so he took few steps back. A small and frail trickle of smoke appeared in the very center of the painting. A small burnt-out hole in the canvas slowly grew larger and larger, everything it consumed turned into black, viscous liquid that trickled down, to the frame and then slid on the floor.

Soon the dirty frame was empty, slightly burnt on the edges. There was nothing left of the canvas but a black puddle, glistening in sharp lights of the gallery. The old man glanced at it and saw his own reflection in the darkness, distorted by anything the original artists poured into the original piece. This felt so much better.

The old artist put on his blue sunglasses, stepped over the corpses and continued his visit.

A document

Agent Jarle was bored out of his mind. Yet another boring day of a boring, boring week of a boring, boring, boring month… Usually at this time there should be at least twenty people shuffling around back and forward, down the corridor he saw through his glass walls. Now it was quiet. Silent. Maybe a national holiday or something along those lines was happening, maybe something else but the fact remained - nothing was happening. He couldn't watch the people pass by and guess what they were doing - just associate faces with things he got from Foundation files and then connect that with what he knew about building planning, which wasn't much, but was enough.

Or maybe a meeting of some sorts was happening? But then, where is Amanda from secretary office? He could see her partner, Jo… Joanna? Josie? Joy? Jody? Something like this. Either way, Jo usually had night shifts, so why was she here now? It was unlikely something happened to Amanda.

He took a sheet of paper from a printer, ripped a part off of it so it was resembling a square, and started to fold it, but then some armed guys passed by, their blue helmets easily attracting his attention. They weren't guards, those didn't parade with those things on heads for starters and their gear was much heavier than the usual one he saw. He kept on folding the paper, movements memorized as he looked around, looking for any trace of any newcomer.

Well, something was happening. Sadly, checking it out was outside his usual duties. Maybe Agent Is-, no, now she was Officer Claudia Nielsen - maybe she will find out what is going on. Not like Jarle would actually get the memo about what was happening but it was still nice to acknowledge that the Foundation will know what was going on.

He stared at tiny turtle in his hand. GOC logo was still visible on one of his paws so he took a pen and started to colour them, carefully, to not damage the paper - if he used one of those kinds of thick papers official documents from UN were printed on, the turtle would look better and last a bit longer. Or the one used on files, those that weren't supposed to be destroyed but those on which copies of documentations were kept under his Site. It was a thick paper, printed on with some sort of high-quality ink so it wouldn't fade and then kept in absolute darkness. Lorck told him a lot about that. She spent quite some time in those dark places where papers were kept, she-

The small turtle in his hand started to move.

No, he didn't imagine that.

Its small paws were moving. Slowly and rather weakly but *it was fucking moving*.

Jarle placed it on desk in front of him. He tried his best not to panic, tried to be as ineffectual about it as those

wackos from research or containment. Breathe in. Out. Now, try to analyze the situation.

He had a small origami turtle on his desk. It was white, with the exception of paws that were covered in blue pen and head that had small pair of blue eyes, also made with pen. It was making small movements, as if was trying to move.

And that was it. But how? How the hell had that happened? Jarle just took paper from the printer and did his usual office origami routine. A random, mini cactus he made for Alexia, tiny swans he sometimes put on his monitor before those thin LCD things replaced the one he had before? None of them ever moved… right? No, probably not.

He nudged it with his pen and it moved a bit faster. So, it reacts to stimuli.

Maybe one of those magic specialists made some sort of a joke? He knew those guys were there, sometimes throwing paperwork at his desk, but that was all. He never annoyed anyone during his long years at GOC, so what was the point?

He carefully reached out and stroked the turtle on its head, carefully, to not poke its eyes. The head moved a tiny bit, as far as the paper allowed it to.

Jarle delicately took the turtle and put it near his monitor, so it was hidden behind stack of papers from anyone who could possibly come in. The turtle's behavior was beyond him and maybe he'll visit thaumaturgists' bureau later. If there is anywhere he could seek advice, it would be there.

The angel

The angel made of metal, towering over masses walking

by it, passing under the shadows of its wings. None would pay attention. He knew perfectly well what purpose sculptures had in the cities. Placeholders. Just that. And maybe the higher-ups will proudly say on television how they support higher forms of art, how they care, how cultured they are.

His angel was still fragmented, each part carefully created out of scrap metal he got for whatever he found in his wallet. It took him a long while, begging his friends for supplies, selling himself out to get what he wanted and needed. But there, she is done and made, waiting for completion on the streets. He regretted he couldn't see her whole now, but well, he could use that for his own purposes too.

The angel was a piece of glass, multicoloured, with no pattern, no sense in how colours were mixed on its surface. With each day, he added more colours to the glass surface, with each modification to the metal surface.

She was beautiful. He wanted to make everybody look up at her, no matter what.

Early in the morning he carefully installed her. Some other guys from local anartist community helped him out a bit but mostly they watched his struggles, their eyes on his huddled form over one of angel's heads, feet barely keeping the balance. They watched as he carefully welded the form into completeness, "Disgusting", whispered one, "Beautiful", said the other.

Each piece added meant another crack in the glass.

The angel would stand above the people that walked underneath it. One head's hateful stare turned would be turned towards direction of the heavens, one finger accusingly pointing at the clouds. The other head would stare curiously at the human beings beneath it but hands would cover his eyes, both belonging to something else,

hands attached as if appearing out of thin air, clear plastic giving way to metal.

It took him much more time than he predicted to weld hidden steel wires with rest of the sculpture.

The crown remained, for the third head, the one with a blank stare. The last piece. Finally. He wanted to see her in her glory and, frankly, he was tired and lanterns in the city were turned off a few minutes ago. A few anartists from underneath the sculpture sat down on the cold pavement, some checking somethings on phones.

All heads went up as one when he fell.

He didn't slip. Some anartists caught him at the last second before he hit the ground, strangely lifeless and unmoving. One blacksmith screamed when she felt blood on her hands from his shoulder. The ladder he was on hit the asphalt.

His body was carefully put on the ground, some anartists who dealt with corpses in their work coming closer to check the body, whispering in excited and surprised hushes. One of inkers cut his clothes open with an x-acto, one of non-artists pressed his hands against his neck to check his pulse - and sighed in relief. He was alive. A designer and another sculptor started to check the wounds, snatching the knife from the inker to dig deeper into them, making the half-conscious man groan in pain.

The rest watched as the designer put bloodied shards of multicoloured glass on pavement.

III

He couldn't move.

Not a single finger.

He was stuck.

He could only observe in mute panic as webs wrapped all around him, all the delicate lines stronger than steel, stronger than anything, holding him in place.

He didn't notice when that happened. When his finger started to move more sluggishly, when he couldn't even reach the phone that sat just few meters away from him, ringing again and again and again.

The screen of a phone yet again went black when the shrilling sound of default ringtone yet again cut off. He managed to glance at the time. Seven pm. Yet again.

Once again, uselessly, he tried to move but webs were wrapped too tightly around him. He was hungry, he could barely breathe with webs tight around his ribs and throat, he already soiled himself a few times. At least he could sleep but even when he did, he dreamt around those most beautiful lines around him.

He still ached to finish them, he still needed to end what he started.

The opened document file on the laptop in front of him burned into the surface of his eyes, lighting up thin white lines hanging in the air.

Black letters weren't *correct*.

He needed to change them. He could do that. He could just rearrange a structure here and there, play with the way accents sound in that one sentence.

Maybe he'd even manage to free his throat, destroy that most beautiful pattern just to take a deeper breath.

He pulled and webs dug into his skin, red and irritated skin for few seconds turning white.

He tried trashing, writhing, anything.

Now it was just hopeful tugs that maybe his movements would make the confining lines at least a tiny bit looser, just to touch the keyboard. Anything.

He took a careful deep breath and winced when he felt something akin to needles dig into his skin. He didn't knew if he bled. He couldn't look down anyway. He'd swallow, but his throat was too dry, tongue sticking to the roof of his mouth. He cried before, but he stopped.

He cried because he didn't finish what he started.

Now he couldn't think straight because of hunger and thirst and all that was left was feeling of a detached sadness, caused by the white screen in front of him.

He died thinking about his unfinished story.

The trap

Blindfold. Not that big of an obstacle. Chains. He moved his hands experimentally, hearing their jingle. Metal was solid, not a single link weak. Glass. Not a plastic but solid and heavy glass. Cold water, flowing into his shoes. Uncomfortable. He moved again. A blade. Just above his torso, ready to fall when the water covers him whole. It's either drowning or getting a blade in his guts. Fun stuff.

Not to mention the fact that he was thoroughly drunk when he suggested the trap, laying out plans to his friends yesterday evening. All five of them had already managed to take in a deadly mix of beer, wine, whiskey, shots and some stuff Marcin had hidden under the sink in unlabeled bottles.

The biggest obstacles here and now were his pounding headache and guts ready to rebel at any given moment. There, normally he would be in no rush to get away from this trap which, really, was designed to be a challenge, but he had enough experience in escaping all sorts of people.

Except whenever he got caught by Suits or Insurgents to cover the asses of anartists that couldn't run fast enough he wasn't suffering through The Mother of All Hangovers. And this cursed goddess had coupled with good ol' Saint of Alcohol Poisoning, to ensure he died a rather painful and embarrassing death.

He felt his stomach cramp violently and that was, comparatively, a much better motivator than a gun to the head or the sight of pliers being way too close to any part of his body. A gag in his mouth would be deadly if he

were to choke on his own vomit, and he almost lay on his back. Water was reaching to his thighs.

He inhaled. Exhaled. It was quiet.

He inhaled and exhaled. Trickling of water, moving from open tap into the box he was in. Ambient sound of someone watching television in the distance, maybe upstairs. He couldn't say, with this amount of alcohol in his blood he had trouble determining what is up and what is down anymore. All the sounds were distant and the headache prevented him from focusing.

He inhaled and exhaled. Time slowed down. Between each pulse of pain in his head he had enough time to listen. Sounds came to him this much slower, like in slow motion. The noise in the distance was that much lower but he was used to it. He knew how things sounded when you made them slow enough.

(When he was a kid, he recorded whatever he could on his phone. Memory on it was limited to few precious minutes. Later he got to know how to transfer those sounds to his computer and slow them down and so he relistened to everything he had recorded in slow motion. Perception of reality was subjective, he learned much later on. He dwelled in low frequencies like fish in sped up sound in water.)

He inhaled and exhaled. He searched in the myriad of noises for those responsible for his trap. He moved as much as possible without his body protesting too much and he listened. Rumble of chains. Trickling of water and slow dissolution of oxygen as it fell from bigger height, bubbles burying themselves under the surface. Slide of rope that held the blade above his chest.

He inhaled. Sounds flooded him and he mixed and matched them in his head. It was all about finding the weakest link, the silence in between the sounds and the more the time stretched, the easier it was.

He exhaled and slipped through the silence, the trap unraveling around him, soundwaves rumbling and making the room tremble. The water was always tricky, the ripples on its surface making it that much more difficult to predict how the sound sped up in the water. The blade kept on reverbating, glass trembled, throwing more noise into soundscape.

The difficulties kept piling up. The blade started to swing back and forth. He inhaled.

Exhaled. He pulled the handcuffs, and waited for that high-pitched *clink* to hit his ossicles.

The glass around him cracked and he managed to capture that as low and deep and possible. The water started to flow out of his trap and he tried to catch that too. As parts of glass fell, slowly enough to look as if they were suspended in the air, he managed to break the chain neatly into two. Inhale.

The sound was enough for the rope holding the blade to cut on the metal and he exhaled and swung himself to the side, colliding with glass. He inhaled and tried to slow his fall with his hands but they slipped on the wet floor and his skin was cut with shards of glass.

A pained exhale when he finally landed. Next to him the blade almost cut him neatly in two. The world finally sped up to his normal speed and the glass clinked under his limbs as he tried to get up from the floor. Broken chain of his handcuffs collided with the shards and the resulting sound made him wince.

But it was okay. He managed to get on all fours and got the gag out of his mouth. He was alive, somehow, again. He was grinning, a smile fueled by adrenaline that only now got released into his bloodstream. A little bit too late, maybe, but that bought him enough time to finally get up, more or less manage his cuts and wonder for few minutes who the hell got him into this mess before

vomiting all over the destroyed trap.

A masterpiece

They stared blankly at their empty fingers.

Nothing would come.

They closed their eyes and tried again. And again. And again. And they knew they were forcing themself, mind straining, fingers twitching and yet nothing came.

White paper still was the perfect mindscape that they couldn't budge.

The king

Sam and Gabe did a hell of a job with costumes, given time they'd had, maybe two weeks or so. Admittedly, they did work on whatever Jula left before she broke up with Oscar but she was also the reason why they didn't have much time. Still, Hugo couldn't help but awe at the quality of costumes. He could ignore the needles sticking in inconvenient places when his eyes were too focused on the patterns.

He saw all of them during rehearsals but now, as they prepared for the actual show, the marvel bloomed anew. He had to admit he couldn't keep his eyes out off the mirror in their improvised backstage. At this point he no longer felt upset about Jula leaving. She threw the script into his face, screaming, accusing him of fooling her. Hugo did indeed keep her in the dark about *exactly* what play he wanted to do, but well, what a shame.

The play was particularly infamous in his circles and Jula was the only one that knew why. The rest of the actors and staff? Blind and deaf, just excited about new script, no longer constantly resorting to old plays. A breath of

freshness from between half-rotten teeth. There was something amusing about this image. He glanced at a cup in the corner, a prop representing the poison for the fourth act. It was a simple paper cup, with a splash of clay and violet paint. It hurt his eyes if he stared too long.

Hugo wondered if what flowed through his mind would drip from his mouth and turn into a tasteless and scentless liquid.

That was the main deal here. Hugo heard about what could happen to those playing this particular play, all anartists did. But the question was: if you dwell in the territory of pushing reality with anart, how does that affect the play? Of course, anomalous actors exist, like Hugo, but they were so rare Hugo could bet he was the first one to dive into those dangerous waters.

At least he liked to believe he did. He felt like setting a new path and testing out how that would work. He was in a mood to play with forces he barely knew but he considered himself to be a skilled anartist. Even if things went awry, he will survive.

Eszter appeared in his line of sight, grinning at him while twirling in the outfit of a whore. She was still smiling and Hugo nodded at her in acknowledgement. Worst case, she'll die, like the rest.

Hugo was very sure of his little morbid project, always calming himself that no matter where he will swim or where the torrent will take him, he will be able to resurface. Creativity always pushed him on, every step dedicated to that fickle and unreliable force that managed to direct his every step. Now he realized he wasn't sure. He wasn't exactly *amoral*, like the common stereotype of anartists, but he did like to experiment.

Out of nowhere Oscar appeared behind him. "Jula is here," they whispered.

And here she was, standing in the entrance to the backstage. Hugo would normally get up now and walk to her, but she was staring at something behind him, eyes wide and face carefully blank. He didn't dare to turn around, but he also didn't have to guess what she saw. He looked away and glanced at a violet cup.

Hugo disregarded the clicking of high heels behind his back as he again wondered about the poison. Oscar seemed to not notice how easy it is to poison a well.

At first the play went just right. As he played, he forgot about Jula's carefully blank stare. He was now Gonzalo, for all intents and purposes. Some maybe had a bit more of a distance between the self and the characters but Hugo liked to take the character as a second skin. It helped to tap into things that drove him forward, internalizing to the point of hitting the surface of his mind. And so he tuned in with the to-be-king and walked out of backstage and waited for the curtain to rise.

When the crown touched his head, he felt relief. He allowed himself to dive and let the show slowly waltz around him. He was at the center of it, even when Oscar-Isabella replaced him on the stage. He listened to them-her speak as if through the fog - he knew what she was saying to the audience, he knew the text by heart and they repeated it enough times - but each word was like a punch to a stomach. *As it should be*.

It went on and Hugo swam deeper and deeper, into darker waters. Gonzalo was him all along, but Hugo was diving alone. It was calm and peaceful. Things went on - or not - as they should. The play was deviating from the script but it was okay, such was the nature of the flow and he accepted that a long time ago. When play wasn't fully done by a troupe, there was little leeway for interpretation.

Not this time.

He was halfway through the second act when he again heard those high heels hit the floor behind him. The sound was distinct enough and sufficed for him to choke on air. Gonzalo turned towards the source of it and allowed himself to bow deeply to the creature in front of him. He didn't want to stare and it felt natural. When he straightened his back, it was staring at him, even though it had no eyes.

He inhaled and the air hit blood on his tongue and in a blind moment of panic he tried to dive deeper, only to find he had no water to dive in.

Hugo found out he was suffocating. He tried again and again to reach into this flow, this torrent that kept him alive and moving for such a long time but he found nothing. The river was dry, empty, as if it never was here in the first place and he felt like a shriveled husk. Maybe he was, at this point. He stared at the creature in front of him, this Ambassador, this- this-

It motioned to him to go backstage and Gonzalo nodded and followed it. He wasn't sure if he did it willingly.

Hugo understood. The moment of clarity was brief, a shining lighthouse in the middle of sea of fear. He knew he would die. He knew he knew he knew but that little light, that knowledge that he understood how that damn play worked and why it worked only sometimes- it was dazzling. It was more than he bargained for. The only regret was that he couldn't share that with anyone.

Gonzalo wondered if his price was high enough for the cup full of poison and Hugo could already imagine a cut body of Eszter divided into neat parts on a dining table as he hung above it, noose cutting out his airflow. He threw one last look at the audience and even through the blinding lights he could see Jula. She shook her head and left and Hugo knew this was *it*.

He could run from the scene, but his skin was parched,

aching. Out of the depths straight into a blinding heat.

Show must go on.

IV

Agent Gofr winced at the smell coming from the room before he even crossed the entrance to the apartment. Feuerstein smiled politely at his expression, nodding. With each step he resisted covering his mouth with his tie. Gofr had no idea how she could stand there so calmly.

Feuerstein opened the door for him and Gofr winced again, feeling his lunch rise to his throat.

The man was sitting in the chair in the middle of the living room, his arms and torso unnaturally suspended in the air. The entire body was covered in long slashes, dried blood covered him, the chair and most of the floor. His arms were gangly, thin. Apparently the man had soiled himself at least once, one of sources of the stench. In front of him lay an open laptop. Gofr didn't dare to look at it, just in case.

Gofr waited in the doorway and behind him Sabre whipped out a camera and started to take photos, flash catching everything anew every few moments. They already had photos from the police that called them in here but Sabre knew what to look for, plus and that gave Gofr some time to look around.

The sight of the body made him shiver. It was like watching a live statue, except the guy was a corpse, pale, unmoving. Blood already dried on his clothes. Gofr felt the urge to touch the guy, see if anything did suspend him at all - he looked as if invisible strings held him up, as if they cut into his body and caused the wounds, but Sabre moved around him with a camera freely. Maybe the man was thrashing around, maybe it

was some sort of can, who knew. Gofr knew one thing: it already was a bit too much for him.

The room was covered in thick layer of dust. Upstairs, he knew there was a body of a little girl, a daughter. All that happened days, if not weeks ago. Maybe an autopsy could help, or maybe Feuerstein noticed something he didn't. But it didn't matter anymore, did it?

He noticed a book in the corner of the room, the only object not covered by dust. He motioned Sabre to come to him and take a photo of it, but he knew now it was useless. He fished out for the phone from the backpocket of his pants and called his boss. This was a bit too much for them, but Gofr was fairly sure the Foundation would do more here than them.

He sighed and braced himself for insults.

« **Flow** | **HUB** | **Professors of Anart** »

Professors of Anart

"This is a terrible idea," Yang said as she looked around the room.

The room seemed perfectly normal for an art studio. Large, white, with drawing boards, stools, still life objects, and an abundance of art supplies. Except for maybe that there was no actual entrance or exit, and doors and windows were mere paintings on the walls.

"Why?" Legler countered. "You're the one complaining that the lack of proper knowledge and basic guidelines has led anartists to act irresponsibly, mistaking things harmful to others as creative expressions."

"And obsessing with magic tricks instead of proper art endeavor, yeah," Yang said. "But *anart teaching studios* don't really happen. And there is a good reason to that."

"This is a much safer environment, if we want to introduce people to *the Flow*." Legler argued. "I know you're still beating yourself up over what happened to Martha, but this can prevent precisely that. We can't exactly control what is to happen if we just show people to the Flow, but with this, we can guide their journey and prevent anything regrettable."

Yang stared at the art professor. "Do you know that the Suits sometimes call us 'art terrorists'? In reality, it's just that few small groups that got themselves really famous, and think that they can step over other people's lives because of anomalous bullshit."

"Most of us aren't like that."

"No, but the Suits won't care. I won't care either if I'm someone from outside this circle and only heard about the terrible things committed by famous 'anartists'," Yang said, eyeing one of the painted windows. "You put a lot of effort into this piece, professor, but for the Suits and everyone else, this is just going to be a breeding ground

for more 'art terrorists', and they're going to snuff it out for good."

"We'll keep it small," Legler gestured to the few stools present. "I've seen some really talented young people, and I hate to see them go down the wrong way, get grabbed by the Suits, or never even get to know this side of the world."

"Maybe it would be better that way."

"No, Yang. You don't mean that."

"No Legler." Yang snapped. "I'm not doing this. I'm retired from this shit for good."

"Oh really?" Legler said, raising an eyebrow. "Then what were you doing with the gang that other day, brought a friend even."

Yang was silent, and Legler took the chance to push further. "You haven't been to any exhibitions, but how many animated art pieces are hanging in your apartment walls right now? Already filled up the living room, for sure. I've seen one on the back of your front door."

Yang rubbed her temple. "I should really just sell them to someone in bulk."

"That's not the problem, Yang," Legler stared at her. "You just can't stop creating them, right?"

A few seconds of silent, before Yang answered. "Yes."

"I know this is hard for you. But do consider this, okay?" Leagler said. "We can make this work."

Yang nodded, before heading for one of the painted doors. She reached into it, and the paints splattered like water. The door now swirled and twisted, and Yang was immersed within. Before long, she disappeared into the spiral of colors.

Legler watched the door returning to its still state, and sat down at one of the stools. He was not sure if Yang would really agree to help, but she was the best shot he had. Most of his past students, unlike Yang, had either joined various anart cells and moved on, or

had developed ideologies that didn't agree with his. And most of the people he would call friends were either retired for good, or caught up in stagnation.

In fact, he too, was caught up in stagnation. As he looked through the painted windows and observed the view behind, real scenery mingling with patches of colors, he realized this piece was the closest he had been to the Flow of art creation in months, or even for a whole year. Of course, he had produced pieces here and there, but they were all somewhat lacking.

But as he constructed the studio, he had felt the urge to create stronger than ever. That everything had lined up perfectly and he just had to move forward and link them together with his bare hands. As he poured paints and clay and concrete into this, he forgot the passage of time. His mind barely attached to reality as it floated inside his work. And before he even fully registered, a studio suspended between spaces was completed. At one end it latched onto his favorite tree by the river, where he would go and enjoy the falling of leaves in autumn; on the other end it linked to that one bench in the campus where he taught, once sat on, now long discarded.

The more he looked at it, the more he had been inside the room, the more he felt it was *right*. It wasn't perfect, of course, he was not so arrogant and ignorant to claim so, but it was right just for him. It was the manifestation of his desires, his ideas come to fruition. The desire to show more talented young people this amazing, beautiful world, and the idea that you don't need the application of magic or an inherent god-like ability to twist reality. Because reality would be willing to bend itself if your ideas really have such impact, your emotions are loud and clear, and you know how to traverse the Flow.

Everything here was his vision, and he had to make this work. All he needed now were some proper chairs because the cheap stool was really hurting his back.

Yang slowly opened her apartment door as she finally trekked back from that bench covered with moss in the campus. Before she could

throw herself into the comfortableness of her bed, she carefully closed the front door so as to not spill the water from a painting hanging on its back. As she looked at the animated ocean that threatened to flow out of its frame, she couldn't help but think about how right Legler was. It was originally supposed to be a perfectly normal painting, but she remembered how she enjoyed that one trip to the seaside too much, and now salt water had spilled onto the floor, without landing into the bucket she had previous prepared.

She made a mental note that placing any painting at the front door is a terrible idea to begin with, before calling out to her cat. "Untitled!"

A flurry of colors swiftly dashed out of one of the rooms, before sitting down in front of her. The "cat" intelligently looked up, liquid paints coursing through its shape.

Yang took the painting down and placed it onto the floor, mindful not to spill any more water. "All yours," She said.

With that, the cat shaped art piece happily reduced the sea to a puddle, breaking it down to basic colors before absorbing them. Meanwhile, Yang went to the living room, picked up a little more pieces that she wasn't quite into, and tossed them to Untitled. The cat was one of her earlier creations, which came into being because she wanted all the benefits of owning a cat, but didn't quite entertain the idea of performing the duties of a pet owner. It worked out quite well, as it was indeed an endearing little thing, and didn't mind feasting upon the less fortunate anart projects.

Untitled soon finished its meal, gaining a new composition of colors in the process. Yang then tossed the empty frames back to the art supplies, and finally settled down into her bed. She brought up her phone and clicked into the icon of a black falcon, and was again reminded that her "retirement" from the anart circle wasn't so much a retirement after all.

She scrolled through various posts by anartists, from people she was friends with to people she had little knowledge of. Occasionally, something from her family's side popped up, and she received talks about dragons and serpents and an impending doom that just seemed so far away from her. There were also bits and pieces

about magic, and memetic tricks pulled by some Internet reality benders. Even the app itself had a fragment of Artificial Intelligence in it — made by Anderson Robotics to better secure communication.

She was still very much in this community. Sighing, Yang placed the phone back to the bedside and retreated further into the bed. Seeing this, Untitled knowingly climbed up and curled near her hand. As she petted the cat, the paints stirred with it, making a sound akin to purring. After a few moments, she picked Untitled up and placed it on her chest. Lying down, she looked around the room, conversation with Legler going through her head.

The four walls of her bed room were all covered with paintings, some placed in awkward positions and some, with their unusual features, floated near the ceiling. She had taken time and chosen the quieter ones to hang here, some even with particular usage. Some of these served as windows that went nowhere, but would bring in waves of fresh air. A few others illuminated and saved her plenty of electricity bills. There was that one painting of a quiet field where the sun shined lazily and grasses were high, which if she stared at too long, would cause her to doze off. And back in her studio, more of these were just stacked together in the corner, never to see the light of day.

It had been almost three years since the incident with Martha. She tried to stay away ever since. She had taken up normal jobs, and helped with family business here and there, which supplied her living quite well. But as much as she attempted to avoid reality twisting art pieces, they would always be created, even out of her most mundane practice. Because in the end, she enjoyed it too much and had too many ideas, and Flow always responded to one's true desires honestly.

She wondered briefly, which was the thing she truly feared, to be apprehended by the Suits, or like Martha, to be wiped too much that the Flow was cut away from her. She felt responsible too, as she should have stopped Martha when it was just a harmful little thing. She was the older and the more experienced of the two, after all. But the tiny stream of creativity had turned into a flood that was no longer controllable. It ended in a disaster, for both Martha and her readers.

She had seen Martha's works afterwards, the mundane ones. They lacked the extraordinary quality, for sure, but the sparks of creativity was gone as well. She could do nothing to help her once dear friend and roommate, and feared for herself. With a mix of fear and guilt, she had retreated from that life.

"But guess I've been blocking the Flow myself, huh." She murmured to herself. She rubbed Untitled in the head a few times, and as per their routine, the cat got up. It flipped the few glowing painting backwards with an amazingly flexible tail. As the light dimed, it got back onto the bed, and they both turned in.

Legler was awoken by a slight shake of the room. He realized that he had dozed off in his newly acquired chair, and that someone had come in through the front door.

He rubbed his eyes and saw the paints on the entrance splatter. A moment later, Yang came through with more packages than she seemed to able to carry. She laid the packages onto the floor, and turned to Legler.

"I'm in," She said briefly.

"Art supplies?" Legler said, eyeing the packages.

"Nope. That's your job," She said with a grin. "This is all the pieces that can no longer fit into my apartment."

"And you brought them here."

"A studio could always use a few more paintings on the wall," Yang said almost too cheerfully.

Legler sighed and shrugged as Yang went about unpacking. In a few hours, the studio was dotted with various art pieces of abnormal qualities.

"Um," Legler contemplated as he looked through the paintings. Some featured objects with more dimensions than a canvas could carry, others with animated scenes, and a few more accompanied by sounds. There was one large piece that was basically a giant

mirror, and there was one other large painting of a lake that didn't really do anything in particular.

"Pretty average?" As if reading through Legler's mind, Yang asked.

"Yeah," Legler said with a bit of relief. "I remember you way better than just this."

"I can't exactly create something grand when I'm trying to not create at all," Yang said. "Besides, it's better for us to set the standards lower for beginners."

Legler nodded in agreement. However, the room was almost full, and there were still a significant amount of art left unattended on the floor.

"Whoops," Yang said as she occupied the last bit of the wall with a painting of a dark void that seemed to drag the viewer inside. "Guess I brought too much?"

"Hold on," Legler went towards the backdoor, and pressed the two-dimensional knob. The studio shook slightly, and the walls suddenly started shifting. Parts here and there retreated backwards, creating more space, with new surfaces forming out of them in matter of seconds. The small parts of the floor where the two of them stood remained unchanged, but the rest had expanded and twisted, creating a large hall with maze-like stairs leading upwards into individual compartments. The art pieces previously hung closely together were now scattered, but each fit neatly into their current locations.

"Okay professor." Yang said, looking at the new layout, "That is something grand indeed."

Legler couldn't help but smirk.

Anart Lecture Caught inbetween a Dying Riverside Tree and a Discarded Campus Bench

Well, I think we're good to go.

So, I'm Anton Legler, the one in charge here. Standing next to me is Yang. She will be helping me, and give you instructions from time to time. Technically I'm a professor, but you don't have to call me that. I want this to be casual, which would be better for what we're here to do.

Ha! She says that, but if there are degrees and faculties for anart, she will surely make a professor. A good one. She was one of my best students, and I hope you will turn out more like her.

Now, let's get to the point, shall we. Yes, this is a studio for the teaching of extraordinary art, as you were previously informed by the various people that introduced you here. Even if you weren't, surely you noticed something unusual by travelling to a non-existent room and coming out of a painted door.

The hell you mean "small and shitty?" Yes, I can hear you perfectly clear, I made this small and shitty place mind you, it is part of my *art creation*. If you say something, I will know. If you say something again, I'll make sure you exit out of the windows. They go somewhere as well. You wanna find out? No? Then shut up.

And no, I don't think you need a grand cathedral to *learn*, or put it another way, your petty skills don't warrant it yet. Since you have come here, you better learn to put the grand ideas and messages you heard from other people that you don't even properly understand aside. Because we are going to start with basic, small things here, and the last thing I want is you lot getting preachy or deeply philosophical in your first assignment.

All good? Good. Now as you can see, by that corner, there are plenty of art supplies. Paints, clay, wood, and all the other stuff I

could think of. So go there, pick something you're comfortable using. And no worries, they're not gonna run out. If what you're looking for is not there, then you will just have to settle for the second best. But you can certainly bring your own stuff later on.

Yes Yang. Gotta forgive an old professor for not being up-to-date some time.

Found what you want? Good, good. Uh, what's that?

…

Oh right, I guess we'll have to get that out of the way.

I'm NOT teaching you to use *magic* here. The art supplies are not magical because I'm not a wizard. I don't know jack about that. And the reason I don't say "exploits" is that the materials you will be using are perfectly normal materials. The studio does replicate them, as part of its purpose, but no, you're not working with things already abnormal. Bring anomalous stuff here and you get defenestrated.

So whatever wrong information about this studio you got, let me just make this clear. As much as I… *respect* some of my other colleagues who use magic as a component of their art, there is, for me, a fine line between art made from reality-twisting materials, and art created to be reality-twisting. And all I'm willing to, or can teach is the latter.

Well, I have never been a demi-god, and this has worked fine for me, thank you very much. And last time I checked, Yang is also a perfectly normal human being, so this shouldn't impede you either.

There will be no chanting wizards, no summoning circles, and yes, you can create art that breaches the laws of physics with bare hands and no inherent ability. Everyone can do it, and it has been proven with this studio itself and all these paintings Yang so eagerly attached to the walls.

How? I mean, isn't that what you're here for?

If you're disappointed that magic is not going to happen, then sure, leave. If you've now decided to stay and see how normal humans

can create miracles out of the ordinary things, then good. I believe we can finally begin.

Why don't you all look at the art supplies you now have. Make art out of that. I'm sure you have some sort of experience, since you found yourself here. I don't care how skilled you are, that's not really that relevant. If you want that kind of improvement, go to a studio not suspended between places.

Before you start, I want you to think about yourself. More specifically, emotions, reactions, and feelings you have. Then, choose one particular emotion, and channel that into your work. Think about that, and what provoked that emotion when working on your thing. Think about how that can properly manifest in your work, or how it can be best represented.

I don't care what exactly the emotion is, because it doesn't matter.

If you're enjoying this beautiful sunny day, think about how the sun shines down and how the birds chirp between branches. Think about what is the best way to convey that feeling. Think about how to showcase that one particular scene in your head.

Just things, anything that has an impact on your personally. Scenes you remember, people you cherish, hell, even food you like counts.

I mean, if you hate me and this small and shitty studio, then channel that hate and I dunno, create a twisted mockery of my face?

Why though? Because this is the secret. This is how you create anart, how you shake reality. In the process of channeling your thoughts, first as simple as emotions, then more complex like specific ideas, you're going to eventually, find something. Something that you will feel that is just *right*. Not for any others, but you yourself. And if you follow that, your creation is going to come together and you find the line that links everything. And then your ideas will flow furiously into your work as if a blockage is lifted. You will even find yourself have very little control over what is happening, only your subconscious at work. But that's how it is. Because then, something extraordinary may happen.

And that's how I do it. How Yang and a lot others do it. We call the thing, no, that particular feeling, that state of mind, *Flow*. Because that's exactly how your art moves forward, like a stream, like a river, or even a waterfall. It's the thing that washes over you.

I can't find a better word myself.

I mean, there are different approaches to this, and slightly different settings for different forms of art. Things like maybe writing, performance that I can't really properly teach here. This is but one way to access the Flow. I mean Yang would argue that letting your mind wander is way more natural than trying to focus on one thing.

But then again, she produces art pieces like a machine so I wouldn't take her suggestions.

Do not mistake this as the only way to do it. I'm just trying to simplify things here for you newbies, because starting off with a bunch of complicated ideas aren't necessarily good, and even dangerous at times for our line of work.

So if this doesn't work out for you, it's okay. Don't stress out or force yourself, that wouldn't be good. We will be trying different methods in the future and I will make sure everyone gets there.

The most important thing is, you have to see that art is not trying to prove a point to some other people — you can do that, sure, but fundamentally, you're expressing your own ideas and emotions. And that's what matters.

I can go on about how the end result may not be what you're expecting, and especially for newbies like you who will have little say in this matter. That can be changed, sure, but that would be more advanced stuff after you get to enter that state of mind. So let's not diverge into interacting with the audience at this point.

Here, I will first teach you to reach that particular Flow, and then maybe how to redirect it and even *control* it to a degree to get what you want. And you will eventually be able to, if you stick with me.

Ah, of course you're not gonna succeed on the first try. If you do,

you might as well walk out of this studio instead of listening to an old man grumbling about what anart is.

Now, why don't you finish working on your pieces, and then we will proceed from there.

« **Professors of Anart** | **HUB** | **Foundation Mandated Interlude** »

Foundation Mandated Interlude

Three Foundation personnel sat at a table. Two of them had their eyes fixated on a small pencil drawing the third one was working on, the air growing heavier by the second.

After a few more intense moments, the one working on the little art project, Agent Cobalt, sat up straight. Slowly, she placed the pencil down and held up the piece of paper. The rabbit sketched onto the paper blinked. The other two's eyes widened. The little thing then hopped around on the surface, and started to break away from its prison. In mere seconds, it reached out of the two dimensional space it was occupying. In another second, its structure shattered and the previously animated bunny collapsed into a small pile of dust.

After a long, awkward silence, Agent Cobalt finally spoke: "I think it expired."

"I'm sorry, Alex," Agent Green said, chewing on his unlit cigarette. "But this is just pathetic."

"Well, I mean," Agent Cobalt rolled her eyes. "That Pol Legler guy congratulated me on successfully reaching 'the Flow', and then mocked me for five straight minutes on how it was the most terrible access to Flow he's ever seen. So yeah, I know."

Meanwhile, Dr. Samuels, the other person to witness this little endeavor, poked the fine carbon powder with his pen. "Actually, this is very interesting."

Both agents turned to look at him.

Dr. Samuels adjusted his glasses. "If what the Person of Interest said in his 'lecture' stands correct, it means that most anomalous art pieces were not made by Type Blues or Type Greens. They are the product of this other system that we had previously overlooked."

"So we have to deal with the chances of every normal artist pursuing an anomalous career?" Agent Green huffed. "Sure sounds interesting, doc."

"No, look at it this way." Samuels tapped the table. "This new understanding doesn't change the reality of the anart community; it just means that the circle is composed of more ordinary humans than we previously thought. And that actually means that the chances of an artist turning into an anartist on their own are pretty slim. However, that could well be how the group originally started."

"But if they're taught, it's easier to get it?" Green contemplated.

"Should we go ahead and shut down the studio then?" Agent Cobalt suggested. "They are both normal people, so it should be easy to just ambush them when they're away from their artwork and resources."

"No, agent," Samuels shared a brief look with Green, then returning his gaze to Cobalt. "We need you to finish the lessons. And if possible, establish stable connections with the two PoIs."

"What?"

"He's right," Green added. "If this is what we're dealing with now, we need to know more, not less. You'll have to keep up the undercover work."

"But—"

"If you're worried about getting to create anart on your own through non-standard means, we will get the paperwork ready."

"I just," Cobalt sighed. "Actually, nevermind."

"You're dismissed, agent," Green said. "Put that art degree of yours to good use."

Cobalt nodded and exited the room. As the door sealed up again, Green turned to the doctor. "So?"

Samuels tossed him a folder. "Remember this?"

Agent Green picked up the document and flipped it open.

> **Incident Report 03042013-ART-0042**
>
> **Overview:** On 28/03/2013, Martha Jenerous (PoI-4986, Anartist Individual), produced a total of 30 pamphlets, 27 of which were distributed to the public. 12 pamphlets were recovered afterwards.
>
> In the following week, all the individuals who received the pamphlets proceeded to read through their content, and subsequently developed an obsession to create artwork in various forms. The individuals affected by the items showed only limited or no control over this process. About 61% of created artwork was anomalous in nature, and often harmful to human life. Neither the affected individuals nor PoI-4986 were able to cease or affect the anomalous properties of these created objects.
>
> A total of 63 casualties were accounted for, see attached reports for details. PoI-4986 was apprehended and brought in for questioning.

"Shit," Agent Green cursed as he glanced over the overview. "This is the same thing?"

Dr. Samuels flipped the files to another page, and pointed at the archive picture. "The title of the pamphlet is called 'Flow 2.0'. Not exactly subtle."

"So where's this person?"

"Given a Class-A. Doesn't remember a thing now."

"Okay, I think I remember it now," Agent Green rubbed his nose bridge. "That Martha, she cried a ton when we brought her in, right?"

Dr. Samuels turned the files over to his side, and flipped a few more pages. "You remember it well. Here, she cried, said that she didn't mean it, and begged us to get it out of her head."

"And so we did."

"Yes."

"So, we came across this already, someone already attempted to spread this," Agent Green frowned, "And there was some potential danger to this."

"That, and the fact that she was roommates with our assistant professor of the studio when the incident occurred."

"What?" Green was shocked. "How come she wasn't brought in?"

"Says here we raided their place, and only found perfectly normal paintings in this Yang's quarters. The only thing strange was a bunch of empty frames on the wall, and apparently," Samuels took a closer look. "A weird stray cat in the apartment."

Green let out the deep sigh. "Let me guess, the cat was anomalous right."

"We monitored her recent activities, and yes. The cat is made of paint."

Agent Green just furiously chewed on his cigarette.

Finally, he spoke again. "I trust that Cobalt is *not* going to get into dangerous shit like this."

"We both read the transcript of the lecture. They took the time to warn their class, and I don't think recklessness would do them any good either."

"Trusting their moralities seem like a terrible idea," Agent Green sighed. "But I guess at least I can trust Alex's ability."

"We cannot exactly miss this chance either. If we just take actions to stop this, more will appear eventually."

"And they will be way more cautious."

"Exactly. Who knows if we'll be able to get our men in next time."

"What exactly is in it for us, aside from creating better undercover

agents?" Green scratched his head. "I mean, agents who can produce anomalous things without aid, easier for us, but higher-ups aren't gonna be too happy about this."

"Amnestics to long term memories should solve the problem. Miss Jenerous hasn't done anything remotely anomalous since," Saumels shrugged. "Besides, judging from what we learn, this isn't really like reality-bending or magic. It takes way more time, and gives less of what you want, hence easier to contain or control."

"You seem to be thinking a lot about this, doc." Green said, eyeing Samuels.

Samuels leaned in, his hand placed on the document. "Martha here wrote essentially a manual of sorts, of how to access 'the Flow.' If that is possible, there is no way we can't do it ourselves. With agents trained in this and test subjects, we can map it out and figure out the basic rules of this thing."

"And?"

"Eventually, we can maybe find a way to shut it down or block it." A hint of enthusiasm showed in his voice.

"That sounds almost terrible." Agent Green said, standing up. "If you'll excuse me, I'm gonna go out for a smoke."

« **Anart Lecture** | **HUB** | **Extracurricular Practice** »

Extracurricular Practice

When Professor Legler offered her the chance to join his little "unconventional art studio", Taman didn't exactly expect to be landed in an extradimensional classroom for the study of magical art. Well, not *magical*, as the professor stressed in frustration. The exact word was "anart", but Taman really couldn't tell the difference. Plus, magic seemed to be just the word to describe the experience. It was like a Sunday Hogwarts for art, with animated pictures and all that. It also turned out that they really did have moving staircases, once Legler decided that they were finally worthy of extra space.

But a whole month in, bathed in all the bizarre and unthinkable, Taman still wasn't able to create anything out of the ordinary. She tried all sorts of art she could think of, from things she was good at to things she hardly knew about, but all the pictures stayed static and all the clay sculptures just collapsed to the table.

And that would be why she was sitting opposite of the studio's "deputy professor", resident anartist Yang, seeking her advice.

"You're stressing yourself," Yang said, putting way too much sugar in her coffee. "Learning this isn't easy, you need to take your time. Which is also why Legler refused to give you any extra instructions."

"Cobalt learnt to do it within a week."

"Seems to me that Cobalt always has had that instinct. It's just that she has repressed it previously; her Flow feels somewhat clunky and awkward," Yang stirred her drink. "Tam, you have to see that many of your classmates have had some exposure to this field. You're new, but that's also a good thing. You're not subjected to faulty misconceptions like the rest of them; your view on this will not be limited. And if that means you'll go a little slower, I think it's worth it."

"Delacroix is also new," Taman protested.

"Relax, okay? You can't hurry this sort of thing. You see, anart block works the same way as normal art block."

"Just that I can't feel anything when doing Legler's assignments. Or even watching the demonstrations. The different approaches, focusing, looking through stuff? None of it works," Taman let out a frustrated sigh. "Normally during art blocks I guess I would go out? But that doesn't really help because I don't know how to do this in the first place."

Yang contemplated for a while. "Ummm. Maybe the studio environment is sort of limiting. It was Legler's work after all, and limited to his perspective. I didn't take notice, but it makes sense that someone new will be more susceptible. A field trip would be nice," Yang drank from the cup, and then shook her head. "But we can't really do that. too much attention, and hard to take care of you all."

"So I'll just have to wait and see?" Taman asked weakly.

"Um, actually," Yang finished the rest of her drink quickly. "Do you have any plans this afternoon?"

"No?"

"Good," Yang stood up, signaling for the waiter. "Let's take a walk in the city."

"This is really… abandoned," Taman said as her gaze travelled around the graffiti-filled building walls. A broken sign at the entrance suggested that it had been deserted for years. A few scavengers moved around the block, but none of them were interested in the building they were walking into. One or two took notice of them, before returning to their respective tasks. "You sure this isn't dangerous?"

"Oh, I do have a few tricks up my sleeves. No worries," Yang turned to look at Taman, "But we can go somewhere else if you want to. The main point is to change the environment; just figured that it would be nice to also have something relevant."

"No, no. It's okay," Taman looked up to see sunlight shining through the thin clouds. It was still early. "I mean, is this place like, important?"

"This place itself? Hardly. But a big chunk of the anart movement actually started in places like this. It was back when there was no market for reality-breaking art and no patrons to support us," Yang approached the outer walls of the building. "Abandoned buildings like this are mostly outside the public view, convenient to mess around and experiment with."

"Wait, are these all magical?" She looked around, all broken shapes and broken colors. Hardly seemed like some place where miracles would reside.

"Only some. But it's impossible for most people to tell. The Flow here is mostly dried up, you have to poke around to make it work," Yang gestured towards a few words of artistic design, which were hardly recognizable. "And that takes a professional to know. We'll just take a look around. These certainly aren't the best, but would serve our tour here well enough."

"Dried up?" Taman eyed the dried paint on the brick walls. A lot of which peeled off, leaving a layer of scrap and dust on the floor.

"Well, the 'magic' in the art can't work forever, just like you can't preserve the colors of a painting forever. It deteriorates over time. The only difference is that normal art's preservation depends on the materials and the environment, and our work depends on, I'd say dedication?"

"So, the more you pour in to it, the longer it works?"

"That and how good you make it. I wouldn't say these were very successful at that. This whole section is dead." Yang's gaze briefly lingered on a poorly drawn owl-man, before returning to Taman. "Let's go in."

Taman nodded. Together, they walked into the bowels of the structure. There were no longer any functional light fixtures, but the broken walls did a poor job of keeping the sunlight out. The rays of

bright colors created more shades of grey and black, adding dimensions to the graffiti inside. They were slightly better preserved than their outside counterparts.

Yang strode ahead, inspecting the large, empty building. Anything of value must have been looted years ago, as all that was left were broken pictures and used spray paint cans. She murmured a few times, but Taman hardly caught what she was saying. Granted, she didn't try very hard to listen; she followed the anartist, but her mind had already wandered off.

She had never been to places like this. Going into abandoned buildings, alone or with others, seemed to be a terrible choice on all accounts. But she had heard about the charm of exploring depths of the city from some of her more adventurous friends, and seeing this, she had to admit that there was some truth to it.

Nothing magical had happened so far, but there was this eerie beauty to it that she couldn’t deny. Even though the figures on the walls had lost parts of their bodies, the once bright colors dulled down into an indistinguishable grey, she could not help but imagine what it was like before the erosion of time set in. In some places, paint had peeled off only to reveal older artwork underneath, as if preserving the history under the layers.

It was strange, but in a way, also calming.

They moved through rooms filled with broken sentences, a giant set of teeth that were no longer able to chew, and a dragon breathing a patch of grey that must have been flames. Yang inspected the rooms one by one, some of them blocked by broken walls, some incredibly large, and some others shrouded in darkness. There was a mostly intact picture of a giant eye that Yang stared at for a long time, an impossible staircase she kicked at a few times, and a weird statue of a man she frowned at. But finally, they stopped at a large wall filled with seemingly random splashes of faded colors.

"So," Taman suggested. "Finally found the magical art?"

"Well," Yang answered. "More like finally found a safe one to poke with."

Before Taman could ask, Yang quickly changed the topic: "Want to give it a go?"

Taman stared at the piece. "What should I do?"

"Hold on." Yang said, walking up.

Taman watched Yang hold up her hand, and tapped at the picture gently. Then all of a sudden, it all changed.

Yang was no longer there, and she was alone in the building. A perfect silence fell through, and the place appeared even more lifeless. But the walls were now new and the graffiti were bright and colorful. For a moment, the world seemed extra clear to her, with every detail visible. Before Taman could comprehend what was going on, the colors on the wall moved and merged, crawling down onto the floor and spreading to the ceiling.

In a few moments, the floor melted and the ceiling collapsed. But Taman didn't fall down, as she was now standing on a swirl of colors. The walls, and the building itself had all disappeared, and the art pieces that once dwelled on their surfaces all broke free to join them. She had risen above the ground, looking down at the city below.

But it was not her city, as all the buildings moved and changed, pulsing with life. As the color patches lifted her higher and higher, the city too blurred into lines and shapes and colors. The art pieces accompanying her had all converged together, their features no longer distinguishable. Then, the abstract city dimmed, the ground disappeared, and even the sky had been converted into simply blue and white.

There was no longer any sense of height or direction, and Taman was lost in a world of mere colors. They moved and flowed and swirled around her, as if an ocean, and she felt like drowning in a bucket of paint.

The next moment, the ocean dried up, the paint retreated, and she was able to breathe again. She looked up to see Yang still standing next to the wall of colors, the dull paint peeling off to reveal the

bricks behind. Yang smiled and waved at her.

Taman breathed heavily. A few moments later, she stuttered: "I, I… I really like this."

Yang chuckled. "It's pretty standard hallucination. We showed something like this in class a week ago."

"Yeah," Taman said, her mind still filled with the colors. "But… I just really like this."

Yang nodded, and waited till Taman regained her composure. Exiting the room, they found some more or less clean and intact stairs to sit. Taman's head was still spinning, while Yang casually looked around. The sun had begun to set. The rays of light reduced as the shadows started to grow.

A few more moments passed before Yang turned to Taman: "It's getting late. But there is something else I can show you."

Taman looked at her expectantly.

"Legler would say I'm disrespectful, but this place is long gone anyways." Yang gave a short laugh, and approached one of the walls. A large snake coiled on it, mouth open wide only to be cut through by a crack on the concrete.

Yang pressed her hands against the wall: "You live near the campus, right?"

"Yeah."

"Um, should be enough." Yang examined the picture once more, closing her eyes.

For a full five minutes, Yang stayed still and reached into the broken artwork, feeling its barely moving Flow, its intents and compositions. Taman stared intensely, but hardly knew what was going on.

Finally, Yang reopened her eyes and started to rework the painting. Centering on the crack on the wall, she scraped off layers of paint with her hands, getting rid of the unnecessary colors and pieces.

Peeling off more colors to reveal the black background underneath, she began to create lines spiraling towards the crack. She worked for the next ten or so minutes, obscuring the detail of the snake and reducing it to shapes and elements. Her new additions slowly worked their way in.

By the time Taman started to grow bored and shifted her gaze around, the large snake suddenly began to melt. Another moment passed, its coiled body expanded, meeting the out-stretching lines and turning into a vortex. Amazed at this development, Taman turned back to see the green of the snake's scales darken and the red from inside its mouth subside, leaving only a deep shade of black. The solid crack expanded and seemingly liquefied, its darkness merging with the black paint surrounding it. As Yang stepped away, the vortex started to spin. Before long, a space opened within, allowing a few rays of light to shine through.

"Here's your shortcut," Yang let out a deep breath of relief. "I think this can last an hour."

"Holy shit," Taman's mouth opened wide. "You can do that?"

"Well, we work with ‘perfectly normal materials’," Yang grinned towards Taman. "Meaning, no actual restriction on what can be used to make anart. Which would include this."

Yang turned back towards spinning vortex as it started shaking slightly. "Do know that this is not a good way to go about this. Others' Flow will interfere with yours, so it usually doesn't turn out well or last long. Pretty sure Legler can do this just by staring at it; I had to make modifications. But why don't you hurry up now; I think I overestimated its stability."

Taman flipped through the pieces of art she had done over the past month, and realized Yang was right. She was really stressing herself out; and more than that, she was not really enjoying it. In fact, she had more fun with Yang in that one afternoon than for the entire month she spent going to magic art school. The wall of colors was no match for Professor Legler's transforming classroom, and yet she was unable to really appreciate it.

She put her works aside, and took out the clay she had gotten from the classroom. Remembering how she played with plasticine in her youth, she started molding it. For now, she decided to not be concerned with what she made, but instead to just have fun. A few crude castles and weird monsters later, she reshaped the clay into a ball and set it back down.

It was fun, and it should have always been like this. Thinking this, she left the room to clean herself up.

A few minutes after she closed the door, a crack showed up in the clay sphere. Moments later, it split into two, releasing a swarm of colorful butterflies.

« **Foundation Mandated Interlude** | **HUB** | **Seven New Characters Are Introduced** »

Testing the Flow

He felt something pressing against his skin. Ever since they had him read the goddamn booklet, he felt something squeezing him, trying to find its way in. It was as if the air pressure had risen to an incredible degree and all the air in his lungs was forced out, replaced with whatever it was that surrounded him.

It should be painful, agonizing. Instead, it seemed almost pleasant and alluring. He felt like taking a deep breath to suck all that in, down to the very last bit. But he had learnt enough about this goddamn place to know it was not pleasant, and it never would be. He had heard stories about people who happily wrote with their own blood and bled out and died.

This seemed to him very much like that, and he wanted to resist the urge for his own sake. He tried to, and succeeded so far. Only he knew that this would not last. Every moment, the air pressed harder against his person, pushing his organs together and he felt like throwing up. And on the other hand, he also felt as if something breath-taking would happen if only he would just heed the flow of the air and let it in.

Only he knew it would not be marvelous. Only he knew he would give in.

“Anart is effectively reality bending.” Dale Fang announced as soon as he closed the chamber.

“What?” Yang blinked, “I’m not a reality bender, you know?”

“Oh, sorry, I mean, *Flow* is reality bending,” Fang said as he proceeded to turn on the equipment. “Anyways, at least that’s how my hypothesis goes: It is formed by, or at least draws from the surplus of humanity’s collective reality-bending power.”

Yang nodded, but didn't seem convinced. She looked around the tall bronze machines that filled the room, before settling her attention on a particular one. "Hold on, is that a reality anchor?"

"Yeah, the stabilizer," Fang said, holding up a hand-held counter. "And this is a Hume reader."

"I'm not gonna ask where you got those."

Fang turned to look at the anartist as he waited for the machines to fully activate. "Hey, relax. They are definitely produced in the family. It would be useful to get other groups' more… professional version of the devices; ours are rather out of date. But they should be enough for me to determine reality bending's role here."

"Don't reality anchors affect like, magic as well?" Yang went up to take a closer look. "They're used to banish gods, right? Can't remember quite well."

"Oh yeah, there are those weaponized designs. But in terms of just how it can affect reality benders and magic users, there are subtle differences. Usually not really effective towards thaumaturgy unless you're targeting its links to the reality…" Dale pulled out of a tool box and began to set up a studio space. "But yeah, I'm straying from the topic. I'll just set this up, and see how it can affect your creative process… and then I'll be the one to analyze the data and worry about what it is."

"Sure, sounds fine with me."

As Yang helped set up the small art space, Fang went back to adjust the devices.

"I mean I could potentially also monitor your brain activity when you're… anarting," He said, moving the measurement device closer to the art board. "But that's not exactly my area of expertise."

"Of course we tracked their brain activities." Dr. Samuels rolled his eyes. "How do you suppose we do tests? Just sit on our asses and record how they die?"

“Actually, yeah, something like that.” Agent Green said as he looked around the storage room. Two rolls of anomalous artworks sat neatly on the two sides, separated by walls of enhanced glass. Their anomalous nature was glaringly visible under the strong illumination of the room, as many of them moved around erratically, defied Euclidian space, and emitted waves of colors. For a moment he felt like he was back in one of those anart exhibitions; in fact, the amount of anomalous artwork here was enough to fill an entire display. More than one, if being generous.

“How many D-Classes did you even use?”

“Not as many as you may think. Most were able to produce plenty of works before they… start to use themselves,” Samuels answered, pointing at one of the artworks.

Looking over, Green saw a floating cube composed of what was no doubt human flesh. A severed human head on the top (which was still moving, and breathed hungrily) and traces of orange jumpsuit gave that away. The air contorted around it, pressing on all six sides. The cube itself seemed to be constantly shrinking under the pressure, but it was a mere visual hallucination.

Green looked back at Samuels.

“Well… some reacted quiet violently.”

“You sure this is a good idea? Those pamphlets caused some major incident, after all.” Green frowned in response. “Besides, Cobalt’s been handing in reports. And hell, is the containment here even safe?”

“I assure you that the tests were all conducted in a very controlled environment with proper procedures; the containment here is only temporary, mostly for better observation,” Samuels said, adjusting his glasses. “And as for Agent Cobalt, I’ve had my assistant Mendez looking into the information she provided. It is indeed helpful, but the anartists themselves are relying more on vague feelings. I only want concrete science. For now, exposing test subjects to the pamphlet and have them access the ‘Flow’ forcefully is my best option.”

Green began to pace around the chamber, and examined the pieces one by one. An array of clay cubes that fused together then spilt up again, with animated figures on each of them; a series of two dimensional shapes layered onto one another, making the whole object alter with every tiny change of perspective; a structure with impossible colors that he was sure was an actual hypercube.

He couldn't exactly claim himself an expert on evaluating artistic merit, but it was obvious that most of these were good pieces, and would fit right at home in an anomalous exhibition. Not the most refined in skills, considering that the D-Classes were most likely not professional artists, but impressive enough nonetheless.

"Green," Samuels called out behind him. "The analysis of these is over already, and if you don't take them, they are scheduled to be neutralized the next month."

"Yes, lucky me that there just happens to be this amount of anart when I'm in dire need of works that can't be traced," Green sighed. "I'll take them."

"Good, I'll send their files your way."

"Although, what's with those?" He said, pointing to the left side. The works placed there were almost uniformly cubical, or contained some sort of square shapes.

"Oh we exposed them to cubical-themed visual stimuli for two weeks. To see which part of the brain is responsible for outside influence in artwork."

"You made quite some progress, then."

"We certainly did," Samuels grinned, showing visible enthusiasm. "The brain patterns still need a lot of analysis work, but once that's done we'll be able to move on to the next stage."

"Next stage?"

"Oh yes, if we can find out exactly what parts of the brain participated in utilizing the 'Flow', figuring out the specific links… Eventually, we will be able to break this thing down."

“I’m not exactly trying to crack the Flow here, you know. I just need to know where it fits in the grand scheme of things,” Fang said, activating the anchor. “Now I’ve recorded the data from your normal progress, let’s see if the stabilizer does anything.”

Yang felt as if the air in the room grew heavier. “I’m getting paid, so not complaining,” She shrugged. “But can I even do that with it on?”

“Well, that’s for us to find out!” Dale said as he put the newly finished work into a storage unit. The figure on the canvas stared at him in silent protest, as the painting morphed from one style to another.

“I suppose I should get to work, then?” Yang went and picked up one of the brushes.

“If you think you’re ready.”

Yang nodded and shifted her attention to the blank canvas. For a few moments, ideas bounced in her head, as she thought about the afternoon where she tossed old painting to her painted cat, about the nostalgic trip to the abandoned buildings filled with faded graffiti, and finally, Fang’s wild theories of the workings of the universe he so enthusiastically talked about. As her thoughts wandered, she casually picked through colors, letting loose lines and pieces move around and rearrange in her head.

And suddenly, there was a spark. The image she wanted presented itself, emerging out of what seemed like nowhere, and then everything started linking together and flowing forward.

Colors were prepared and adjusted, and she set the brush against the canvas. She envisioned, projecting the all details that popped up and swirled in her head onto the blank space in front of her, blank space to be filled. But as she began to paint, setting lines and fitting colors, Yang frowned.

Ideas came together quickly as usual, and she commanded the tools at ease. Yet when the color reached the white background, when she put up the dark sky and the metallic ground, it felt somewhat plain and dull. It was as if there was something between

her and the artwork, as if everything was where it should be but she was outside of it, and couldn't quite get through. A thin but invisible wall between the artist and the artwork.

It all felt very… sluggish.

The Flow slowed down, and then completely dried up.

Agent Alex Cobalt sighed as her hours of effort broke down in front of her. The pencil lines were still there, exactly the same place she left them, but were now still and dull. For a few moments here and there, during the past three hours, she had felt that they were somehow moving, pushing each other. They were part of something big that was about to come to life. But now, the lines were just broken carbon pieces clinging onto a paper, perfectly normal and nothing alive about them.

She knew that it was not just in her head, as she had done it before. She had seen the lines dance on their own in that anart studio, and as clumsy as it was, she had made the rabbit jump out of paper in front of Green and Samuels. She had seen things come together, and even though they may not be anything grand or even beautiful, they were good. They were things she felt proud of. Yet that same touch was now both so close to and so far away from her, hours of work producing failed works only.

Cobalt resisted the urge to crumple the failed piece into a ball. Instead she opted to just toss it aside, stacking it with five other perfectly ordinary art pieces she had produced. Foundation loves to keep records and archives, after all.

She turned to the researcher in the room. "Sorry, I just… I guess I just don't feel it today."

"It's alright, Alex," Researcher Jennifer Mendez smiled at her. Looking at her tablet, and then back at Cobalt, she added: "You know what, how about let's just call it for the day?"

Cobalt nodded wearily and pulled the sensors off her head. She turned to Mendez, as the researcher began to get the equipment

back in place.

“It’s just… it’s bad because I really managed it before. And I guess I’m hindering your progress like this.”

“Oh no, Nothing like that. Dr. Samuels actually gathered a lot of info lately,” Mendez pulled up a gentle smile. “Besides, I can see it’s hard and you can’t rush this sort of things. Just don’t worry about it, okay?”

“Alright.”

“You have undercover work tomorrow, right?” Mendez had begun to pack the failed pieces, filing them one by one into plastic folders. “Guess we’ll meet again on Sunday?”

“Yeah. See you, Jenny.”

“See you too, Alex.”

As she left the room, Cobalt sighed once more, and thought about the anart class to come. Trying to keep tabs on everyone while listening to lectures wasn’t really the ideal way to learn. Yang had pulled her aside and told her to take things easy, and Cobalt was glad she thought it was just stress. Unlike the testing, she really couldn’t afford to mess up during undercover job. As she thought about her plans, Legler’s smug face popped up in her head , and she cursed a bit under her breath.

“Shit,” Yang turned to look at the machine that just made a loud noise, and seemed to have shut off abruptly. “I didn’t break anything right?”

“Oh, no no, don’t even worry about that.” Dale reached his hand into the canvas, obviously amazed. “This is, in fact, incredible!”

Yang started at him, unsure what to make of that comment.

“First off, tell me how you felt.”

“Well,” Yang frowned, recalling the sluggishness she sensed, “I felt

like there was something between me and the paint when I first started, and as I go on I kind of forgot about it. And in the end when I finish, aside from the normal click when finishing an anart piece, I also felt the heaviness was suddenly lifted from the air—shit I really broke it, right?"

"Well, yes and no. It's more like… you pulled Flow in to do the job. And no worries, cost is all on me." Dale started poking at the silver buildings inside the painting, and then reached another hand in and pressed it against the cold surface.

"Okay? But why would it be 'incredible', then?"

"Ah. The anchor may be out of date, but it's supposed to be able to suppress one or two high-class reality benders without any problem." Dale was now squatting in front of the picture, trying to get a better look at the painted night sky.

Seeing this, Yang started to chuckle. "Actually, you can go in if you want."

"Wait what, the painting?"

"Yep, let me hold it for you," Walking to the other side, she held the shelf and canvas. "Should be able to fit through."

Hearing that, Dale immediately raised a foot and started to climb up. As he went deeper, the painted world in front of him shrunk, until he was standing on a solid metal sphere. The cityscape, once expanding all the way to the horizon, was like grass under his feet. He reached up, and found that he could really touch the stars in the sky. As he caught one, the others moved around gently, like leaves floating in a pond.

"I now see why so many people are into this." He said as he held the star up towards to Yang, who had now moved back to the front of the picture. The star glowed a pleasant cold light.

"There's more you can do," Yang promoted. "Think about something, maybe like, the moon."

"Sure." And as Dale's thoughts went to picture a moon in the night

sky, surely enough, a sliver of moon appeared in the picture.

Dale stared at the crescent-shaped object. “Wow, but that’s not how the real moon looks like.”

In the next instant, the crescent turned into a sphere, with mountains and valleys, just as how Dale remembered from the satellite photos.

“It’s kind of like a little world with your own rules. Just figured it’s what you may want,” Yang explained. “Standing on the ground and reaching for the stars and all that. Actually now that I started to talk about this I have no idea where I was going.”

“Haha, but it’s great, I love it!” Dale said, climbing back out, with the cold star still in hand. As he went from the little world back to his testing chamber, the star slowly dissipated into the air.

“Aw, I wish I could keep that,” He looked at the disappearing light and then turned to Yang. “But back to the topic, I trust that you still want to know what just happened?”

“Very interested.”

“So,” Dale went back to the now broken stabilizer, and proceeded to check it. “You know why reality anchors don’t work on magic users well? I mean, in theory, they’re supposed to enforce baseline reality no matter what.”

Yang nodded.

“The thing is, the anchors only work within certain range. With reality benders, their abilities all come from themselves, so once in the range, they’re done. But thaumaturgy is different. Magic users use their own EVE, yes, but they are also part of this larger system that they tap into and draw from. So enforcing reality in a certain area is not enough, you’d have to sever the links. It also works a bit differently for higher class thaumaturgic entities, as they are providers and sometimes destroyers of those systems…”

“…I’m really not familiar with the magic systems.” Yang cut in before Dale went on rambling more about thaumaturgy.

“Haha, Yes, right.” Dale laughed awkwardly, “What I mean is, what you just did, is breaking the enforced reality by directly pulling a large influx of humes, or reality bending powers, out of… somewhere outside the range, I can only guess. There was this slow build up, but by the time you finish, the readings just peaked all of a sudden. And there goes the stabilizer.”

“Are you saying that Flow is… magic?”

“Oh no, I mean, there’s no fixed ritual or gestures and symbols as far as I can see. And if it’s magic… okay I really wish I have one of those EVE sensors, those will make the explanation so much easier. But if it’s magic, your readings would have showed up differently. There’s no… consuming of your energy… I’d say you tapped into *something*, or resonated with it, bypassing the stabilizer…”

“Well, that part does sound like flow to me. Good to know.” Yang said, silently noting to herself that other anartists probably weren’t going to like this “categorization” very much.

“This just gave me so much to work on. Rawer than magic, and not quite reality-bending.” With all the data gathered and sorted, Fang sat down and started poking at the painting again. The city inside blinked and abruptly replaced with an ocean. “I need to look up some historical documents, but yeah, this could mean a lot of things. And I can’t wait to explore further.”

Proposal: Project Fountain

Proposed by: Dr. Samuel Samuels, Anart Specialist

Project Goal: Study the alleged source of anartists’ anomalous capabilities, also known as “the Flow”, in a more controlled environment.

Overview: Previous testing with D-Class personnel has established a basic connection between certain brain areas and the creation process of anomalous anart. The next step is to further decode the process, and produce more quantifiable and precise results. To do this,

isolating certain aspects is needed, and the current method has been proved limited.

This project aims to study the anart creation more efficiently by eliminating irrelevant factors. A special procedure may be performed on D-Class personnel to tune their minds for testing. The procedure includes the removal of their personality and ego; the deactivation of brain areas unrelated to anart creation process.

Through this, a deeper understanding may be gained regarding the parts of human brain involved in anart process. Ultimately, this may be a gateway to controlling or limiting Persons of Interest's access to "the Flow".

Update: This proposal has been approved by Site Board and the Ethics Committee. A D-Class quota of ten (10) has been granted.

Note: *Dr. Samuels, while there is enough ground and solid evidence for your proposal to be passed, I must advise you to use your quota sparingly. The Committee will pay close attention. — Dr. Jeremiah Cimmerian*

« **Seven New Characters Are Introduced** | **HUB** | **Skyboy** »

Skyboy

There was always fear, slithering underneath their eyelids whenever they closed their eyes and chose to sleep, that their dream could change everything.

Of course, that would be too easy. They'd have to get up, sleepwalk, release whatever was inside their head into the clay, steel, concrete, wood. But what if they would one day actually start to sleepwalk? What then?

What if they didn't need all those silly things like materials to spill out everything inside them?

There was a story about a man who sculpted things in his dreams - he dreamt he sculpted but at the same time he never moved from his bed. Story says he killed millions not knowing what he did. It was just a story, passed from one artist to another but stories need to be born somewhere. They heard whispers about similar things happening, from time to time. Réunion was buzzing with a similar story, for a while. It happened when someone who never dealt in written word chose to write. and how they drowned.

They resisted the urge to chuck their phone out of the window, just so they woudn't hear those stories ever again. Cutting off everybody was easier.

> It is currently unknown what is the source of reality-warping abilities of people classified as "anomalous artists". In case of anart affecting the viewer mentally, the source is suspected to be mystical and/or memetical, as many pieces of art rely on perception and ability to connect facts by the viewer - amount of knowledge and general level of intelligence are often crucial for artwork to affect the viewer.
>
> It's still not known, though, how pieces that defy laws of

> physics or thaumaturgy come to existence and what is source of their anomalous capabilities.

It was exhilarating, sinking into the carpet slithering between their feet and feeling themself let go. Later they would sculpt shapes into the pillow they slept on and feel those shapes crawl underneath their head as they tried to sleep.

In the morning they would water their succulents. They would watch their forms, the way light of the rising sun fell through a half-translucent surfaces, their fingers digging into the earth.

Later they would pass by the warehouse and avoid scavengers and urbex fans, high on graffiti fumes overflowing from the inside, pigments dizzying and attracting more and more of them. Once there were crowds sticking to the walls, inhaling uncontrollably imaginary cocaine. They were nearly all gone today, surprisingly.

During the night, they would dream and in the morning they would feel they could make their dream a reality with just a movement of their hand. It was a dizzying sensation, a truly powerful one, exhilarating, intoxicating, one they were growing sick of.

> This type of process of anartwork creation is often described in metaphorical ways, presenting the activity of creating art with means of another, seemingly unrelated, activity or line of thoughts. There is no correlation between artists' mental visualization and ways the anomalous art is created: the images presented in those visualizations most likely do not depend on medium used.

They knew that whatever was in them was bursting at the seams. They ached to turn their chisel to their skin, to let whatever was inside *out*, but they knew it wouldn't work like this. Their hands were the only means of lowering that internal pressure, but there was either lack of time or lack of own skill.

Even when they sculpted, be it clay or folds of material of their dress when they were sitting at the balcony, it was never enough. They wondered if it was stress turning their body against them or was it

really a thing they couldn't control at all. They never could pinpoint when their work slipped from their own hands into the hands of *something else*, if such a moment ever existed.

Glances sent by their roommate were no longer worried but annoyed. They wished they could explain what was going on, but they weren't sure if they knew anymore. And anyway, they tried explaining enough times. It never worked.

> What still remains to be discovered is how anartists avoid the exposure to the effects of their own work. Generally interviewed anartists note that a creator should know their own work well enough to avoid it, but in most cases artists express confusion and lack of understanding of the mechanism. Some acknowledge the fact that they don't know what their art really does before exposing the viewers to it, but often in those cases, works do not present a significant hazard.
>
> If art is supposed to have a certain effect, though, anartists generally note that the desired effect, be it on viewer or on reality, is what drives the creation process.

For now they abandoned the dreams completely. They never dreamt after taking meds, so they resorted to that. Just in case, they tied one of their legs to the bed. Their roommate mocked them for that, but they didn't care. Before sleeping, they trembled, helplessly allowing chemicals to shut their eyes.

They were a wreck and they knew that. Stomach cramps, irregular periods, even hair loss. They wondered if this was the price of art in their case - you never get amazing powers of creating things out of thin air that rebel against all laws of nature and physics without a payment of some sorts, right? Or maybe they just did something wrong and needed help. Or both.

They watered their succulents in the morning, trying to ignore the sunrise and tugging feeling at their eyelids. They felt that their paranoia was somehow justified but couldn't quite explain how did that work.

They sculpted scales in a smooth surface, trying to pour all their panic into intricate patterns but they knew it wouldn't be enough in the long run. For now, though, there was a bit of relief here, in clay dust on the floor and callouses on their fingers.

> Most often repeated notion during creation process is a sentiment of being out of control, artists noting that their activities are guided or even straight out directed by some uncontrollable force, described very often with a term of "Flow".
>
> The term is, most likely, derived from a psychological state in which one is fully immersed and involved in a certain activity, characterized by loss of sense of space and time.

They woke up lying in the hallway, their fingers covered in clay. They scrambled up with a scream, waking their roommate up. She was considerate enough to let them collapse in her arms and to soothe them with gentle whispers, *Sam, Sam, hey, it will be okay, it was just a bit of sleepwalking, don't worry…*

She never laughed at them again.

> Most of anartists using the "Flow" methodology mention a sense of contentment, feelings of exhilaration or satisfaction, but some interviewed note at least one case in which the reverse also happened - from a sensation of dissatisfaction to outright fury.
>
> Emotions of the anartists may but do not have to affect the outcome of their work, but some interviewed anartists note it can make creation process easier.

They stared at their phone and the countless texts from some folks they knew. They deleted all of them. Then, they lied down on the floor and fell asleep, body too tired to follow whims of the mind.

Regardless, their hands still worked clay while in their dreams they sunk deeper and deeper and wondered briefly what would happen if they drowned before waking up.

> In extremely rare cases, it is noted that the process of creation and affecting the viewer is reversed. The changed order has been observed too rarely, though, to be effectively analysed and for proper research to be carried out. It is notable that most of anartists interviewed do not have any knowledge regarding it.

Anton Legler stared at the slowly burning canvas lying on his kitchen's floor. Their smell was more intoxicating than an itch for a cigarette he still felt after so many years of dropping the habit. There was a sensation of relief, watching threads and paint get slowly swallowed by flames. He could always salvage them, but this, this brought him so much more satisfaction.

He heard a knock. For once someone noticed that doorbell wasn't working. He glanced at the watch. It was almost midnight, who the hell would arrive this late anyway? Yang rarely came at this hour but she usually called beforehand, and who else would be here to visit?

There was a brief thought that maybe *somebody* in the end got interested in him again, so, just in case, he took a potato peeler, dipped it in some cyan paint and put it in his pocket. Dada never made a great weapon, but was definitely useful in urgent situations.

It turned out it was all for nothing, as he was greeted by a girl. Well, a young adult woman, technically, but she looked young enough. Only her expression belied her age.

"Do I know you?" He always was proud of the fact he had a good memory for surnames and faces but this person? No, he never saw her in his classes, he'd for sure remember someone of this posture and way of standing.

"No," She replied. "But you are a Sam Adams' teacher, and you deal in weird shit."

Her bluntness stunned him for a second, but he nodded. Sam Adams, a known name, he wanted to invite them to his little lessons but he didn't see them on campus in months. He never heard if anything had happened to them, but even before their disappearance they looked rather bad. A thought that he should

reach out maybe and ask if everything was alright crossed his mind just before their disappearence.

"They need help."

She took a few steps back. On the hallway's floor was sitting Sam. They rised their head and smiled weakly. They looked even worse than last time Legler saw them. He noted their paleness, too thin limbs and dark circles under their eyes.

With a sigh, Legler opened the door wider.

> It's theorized that as the viewer in this case is the source of anomalous effect, the artist is working around reality perceived by the viewer. The inability of artists to perceive what the viewer's sensations are does not work in favor of this theory, as anomalous artists, despite their name, are rarely anomalous entities themselves.

They vomited chunks of concrete and wood onto the kitchen floor. Before they could draw a breath in, more wood followed, this time covered in layer of dark paint. And again, more concrete and wet clay. Even in the darkness one could see that those were now mixed with blood. Probably some splinters from wood damaged their throat or esophagus.

Legler watched, waiting. He winced when bloodied screws clinked against the tiles.

"Typical overflow." He noted, when it seemed like they threw up everything. They were still retching saliva, blood and splinters, but it was nothing in comparison to the pile in the middle of his kitchen. He passed them a glass of water; they used half of it to clear their mouth from any remains of paint or blood. The rest was drunk, cold water soothing the burning.

"Overflow?" They finally cracked out, voice barely a whisper.

"That happens, rarely, but it does." Legler took the glass, refilled it with tap water and passed it back to Sam. Their hands were still trembling when they held it again. "A loop feedback of sorts, might

happen when you create things based on your own perception and actions, but that's not always the case."

"Is it so bad to create things based on yourself?" They put the glass on the floor and tried to sit down.

"No. But sometimes when Flow is in play it can lead one to drowning." Legler looked briefly at the pile of used materials Sam puked out. "I dare say that was close."

"Will this…" They followed his gaze. "…help? Sorry for the mess, by the way."

"For a while, yes. It was just a performance you did here, something symbolical to at least alleviate the pressure." Legler helped Sam get up, and even as they were supported by him they could barely keep their balance. They were grateful their roommate left before she could see them like this. "I think I might find something to help you out, for now at least."

"You sound as if I was ill, Professor."

"Not really." They sat down on the sofa." When you think of Flow as a tap you turn on only when you create, I suspect you are struggling to shut it down. A rare thing, yes, but that happens. It's always hard for people to learn to access Flow but leaving it is simple. In your case it's the reverse. I think all you need to do is to learn how to do it."

"So, what, are you going to teach me that?" Sam sighed. "Hopefully I won't fail your other courses as well."

"I am going to do that but first I'll have to make sure you can stand on your own." Sam stared at Legler, and he shrugged. "Unless you have something against that, but considering you can't take one step without someone's aid, I suppose you will stay here a while. In the meantime, I'll do everything I can."

"With all due respect, Professor, but that sounds shady as fuck."

"Also, if you stay here I will make sure you pass more than just *my* classes."

Sam stared at him.

"That makes it even worse."

"Maybe, but I want to remind you there are two flights of stairs to get from here to the street. When you'll get from here to there without collapsing, you're free to go."

Sam stared at him.

"Isn't that technically kidnapping?"

"I am not the one who can barely move, despite the fact that I'm at least thrice your age," Legler rised an eyebrow at them. "But if you want to, I can call an ambulance or a taxi. All up to you. Keep in mind though that your performance will keep you stable for maybe a two weeks at best."

Sam bit their lip.

"Do you live here all alone?" They asked, quietly, and Legler laughed.

"If that's what you're worried about, I do, but I am in a stable relationship, thank you very much." Legler got up. "For now though, you will be the first to spend a night on this sofa. You'll tell me later how it was."

"I have none of my things in here." They muttered. "Toothbrush, or at least pajamas…"

"I think one of hers should fit you," Legler got up. "As for the rest, I'm guessing you might call your friend to get your things, I have enough space."

Sam grabbed closest blanket and, while grumbling angrily, lied down on a sofa. It wasn't bad, for now.

"If it makes you feel any better, though, I also don't want you to spend too much time here. I like to keep my personal life close." Legler left for few minutes, he returned with a set of green pajamas. Sam noted it was a bit too short for them, but thanked for them and

waited few long minutes after Legler retreated to his own bedroom before changing into it.

Before they managed to fall asleep, they heard a crack, a gentle sound, as if from a bonfire. Sam tried to remember but no, they didn't see a fireplace anywhere. They struggled to sit up on the sofa, body too weak. Maybe they did overdo it with skipping meals a bit and, generally, ignoring everything but their plants…

From here they could see a kitchen. In the dark, they could see embers on the floor - it took them a bit too long to realize that everything they threw up earlier was now slowly burning down on Legler's kitchen tiles. Later, this was the only thing they could dream about.

> It is not known if in such cases the artists are spectators as well.

« **Testing the Flow** | **HUB** | **Bring It Back** »

Bring It Back

"You all got the unfinished or failed works I asked you to bring?" Legler said, looking around the studio. "Don't tell me otherwise because I'm positive that each of us here has our own share of failures stashed somewhere."

A small wave of noise burst out as students all moved to fetch their respective "failures". Taman, looking down at her small pile of pastel art, picked through them one by one. These were indeed some easy picks considering her multiple failed attempts at the art magic. She had been more successful recently, but the mistakes were still abundant. There was this one depicting the some trees on campus where the color was just so slightly off and she didn't realize it until the last minute; there was a crude drawing of the warehouses she went to, and she messed up the perspective entirely with attempts to just "go with the flow"; and finally, a few pieces that were no more than some loose patches of colors and weak lines.

Taman looked around, and saw that her classmates all produced something equally unfinished or unimpressive. Some may even be called horrible, as she saw Delacroix pulled out a piece of cloth that seemed to have once been caught in a broken sewing machine. She saw Cobalt staring down at her own pile of terribleness with a bitter expression, and one glance at Laufer made her wonder how a wooden statue come to resemble more of a piece of charcoal.

Seeing that everyone had more or less gotten something, Legler continued. "Great. Here's what we're doing today. I know with the Flow, it sometimes gives you the feeling that you can do anything. It's this drive that makes you keep going and going and it feels right and amazing."

He started to pace around the studio, taking a brief look at each student's work. "But a lot of the times that won't work because as human beings, you need to eat and sleep, and sometimes large projects can stretch on for days and even months. Years, maybe.

You can't just rely on the strong urge to make it through."

"And I'm telling you now, DO NOT do that," Legler suddenly raised his voice, causing a few students to turn their attention. "I've seen people exhausted to death because they were on a creative high and didn't know when and how to stop. As amazing as Flow is, it doesn't help shit with that."

Taman shifted a bit nervously in her seat as she remembered staying up for a few nights, in fact a lot of nights, trying to get the hang of anart.

"So today, I'm going to teach you how to pause. How to continue working on something afterwards, or how to bring the Flow back. This also applies to failed works, because you can pick up from where you left off, and you can also rework something entirely," Legler paced back to the front of the room again, and leaned on the lecture desk. "Mainly just how to bring it back, because if you have no self-control, that's really not my problem."

He paused briefly, and then added: "That said, if you do have trouble stopping, go to Yang after class."

Legler turned to address his assistant lecturer, who was leaning against the wall and typing furiously on her phone.

Legler frowned. But then a smirk appeared on his face: "Now, Yang, would you care to do some demonstrations?"

Yang was obviously startled by the request. "Wait. You didn't say anything about that."

"I just figure that you won't need any preparations at all, with all these half-baked works of yours around." Legler snapped his fingers and a painting fell off the wall, which landed on the floor with a loud thud. Taman noted that it was a large painting of a lake.

"*Fine,*" Yang said, stuffing her phone back into her pocket. She picked up the painting and positioned it onto an easel in the front of the room. Sitting down on a stool, she proceeded to stare at it.

"Great," Legler, with the smirk still on his face, turned to address the

class once more. "The first step is observation, taking what you have here in. The second step is usually recalling—"

His speech was interrupted by a few loud gashing sounds. The professor turned to find that Yang had already slashed the piece up with a pocket knife. Where the slashes met the painted lake, thick black fumes rose up, before disappearing completely into the air a few centimeters apart from the canvas. The water in the picture began to boil, and in a matter of seconds, it left behind only the dried up lakebed and large cracks matching where the slashes were.

"—what you felt and thought then." Legler's gaze had shifted to stare at his co-leturer.

"…sorry," Yang said, smiling at the professor unapologetically. "This one just had to go this way."

Taman had began to chuckle, along with a few others in the room.

"Deconstruction and reworking," Legler squeezed the words out, obviously not pleased. "That does work, but it is the *second* way I was going to talk about, Yang."

"I can try again?"

Legler sighed in defeat, and another painting slowly moved downwards with a part of the wall until it was reachable. It was obviously a painting, as Yang had gotten it off the wall, put the previous one aside, and started to work on it; and it seemed that she meant it this time. Taman only blinked in surprise as for the longest time, she thought it was just a large mirror.

Legler nodded and began to lecture once more, explaining how to slip back into the mindset when the work was first created. But the words slipped Taman's ear as she watched Yang's process in awe.

The deputy professor only considered briefly before starting to apply paint to the work. The moment her brush touched the mirror, the smooth surface was gone, replaced with colors upon colors on the canvas, divided into tiny units. She couldn't quite explain what she saw, only that there were multiple colors occupying the same space.

Taman felt dizzy just looking at it, but she couldn't help but look more closely.

"Sometimes just getting the Flow running would be enough, but if you can connect with it, it's always better. So, consider, what were you thinking back then?" Legler's voice echoed. "Or more accurately, what were you feeling? Because often, we don't think when we create; hell, a lot of us would have no idea what we were creating before we finish. Thoughts and intentions are important and helpful, but a lot of the times you have to rely on an urge. To recall and access that again, you need to seek out the emotions."

And Taman felt it, just by looking at Yang's quick waving of the brush and the splashing colors. It was not Taman's work, and she was just looking at someone else painting, but the emotions were there. She almost felt like they were surging out from Yang's canvas, radiating towards its viewers.

What the feeling was, what Yang felt and hoped to convey, she couldn't quite grasp or put into words. But she hung onto it, struggling to understand. Trying to memorize how she felt it, how she came to resonate with it.

"Don't make a fuss if it feels slightly off. You can never pick up exactly where you left off. Sometimes it will be better, sometimes it's worse, but more often than not, it's just different. What's the saying again? You can't step into the same river twice. Quite the case here: Flow is ever changing, and so are you."

It was almost disorienting, how the colors layered onto one another but also penetrating through the layers. She couldn't pull her eyes away as both the colors from moments ago and the colors newly added shone, past and present merging into one. The air intensified, and for a moment, she felt like it was the Flow, the convergence of emotions and colors. Briefly, the wall of colors from the warehouse came back to her. The vision rushed over and suddenly Taman had the distinct feeling that something was open to her, that she could reach out, and the Flow was a touch away.

But it was not her Flow.

Taman snapped out of it as the air shifted suddenly. The intense emotions changed into something else following a clear cracking sound. All the colors disappeared from the canvas Yang was working on, leaving a translucent surface, and then, the canvas itself collapsed.

Cracks enlarged on the glass-like painting, dividing it into pieces. But instead of falling, they spread out and suspended themselves in the air. A thousand smaller mirrors disjointed, yet as if linked and supported by invisible lines, they formed a crude eye shape. The painting — the glass sculpture looked back at Taman.

Taman blinked in surprise as she saw herself walking into the studio from one of the pieces. It was like staring into a camera playback; she could even make out the moss on the old bench, and the gentle brush of wind through the grass. But when she opened her eyes again, the eye was replaced with a glass butterfly, and the image of herself picking through her work earlier in the class greeted her.

"How…?" Someone gasped in surprise.

Legler looked at the finished work, and nodded approvingly. "Changing depending on the viewer?" He asked.

Yang answered with a slightly smug smile.

But the rest of the class ignored this exchange, only staring intently at the artwork.

Taman soon found that in each piece, there was a moving reflection of her from a previous point today. She watched in fascination as her past selves engaged in their various activities behind the shiny surfaces, with clearer detailed than she could recall. It was as if the mirrors were in front of her throughout the past moments, reflecting whatever happened faithfully. Upon closer examination, Taman also noted that the pieces rearranged positions ever so slightly, even making dramatic changes when she shifted attention away.

"But it was a painting a moment ago…" Someone whispered under their breath, but still caught the attention of the anart professor.

"Oh don't be fooled, it's still a painting, not a sculpture," Legler grabbed onto the remade artwork, and for a moment, the pieces reunited. The illusion was broken and the clear, reflecting glass pieces were forced back into a frame. The past scenes still played out but it was the shape of a painting again.

And then, Legler let go. Instantaneously, the glass shattered, before quickly floating up to form shapes once more.

"When it comes to anart, it is very easy to transcend media," He added. "But back to the topic; when it's not deconstructing, you still generally follow your old theme. What Yang had was a painting functioning as a mirror, and now it is several reflections of the viewer's past."

"And that's what I'm expecting of you. Not only continuing your work, but also making it better." With several loud claps, the studio suddenly expanded upon Legler's command, tiles moving to reveal hidden space, walls growing taller and wider, until the small room became a great hall in mere minutes.

"Splendid! Now get to work." Legler concluded as several small gasps rang throughout the room, along with several eye rolls from those who had seen it before.

Taman barely knew what happened. One moment she was staring at her pastel impression of the warehouse, and the next thing she noticed was that somehow, liquid paint was dripping from her desk and she got up instinctively. A second later, as she calmed down and took the view of colorful paint streaming out of her art in, she felt the pastel stick in her hand, and realized that she had been working on the piece for the past hour or so.

As she stared at the now three-dimensional yet still pastel-looking warehouses standing from the piece of paper, the realization solidified and she was hit with the feeling again. She remembered the exact moment it clicked, and recalled herself drawing, without thinking or considering. The memory was hazy, but at the same time, everything was also so clear, as she understood where exactly to set the next line or the next patch of color. It all went so smoothly.

And that was it, that was the Flow and she did it. It wasn't like the first time when she didn't even realized what she did until afterwards. This time, it was comfortable, a missing piece she finally found. There was a connection and now, she felt like if she tried, she could be there again.

"For a newbie, well done."

She turned to find Legler standing next to the table, studying the interior of the miniature warehouses. Taman felt slightly embarrassed as many of her classmates – including several from the small group – had also turned their attention to her. It didn't help that the paint surging from the warehouses had now made a small puddle on the floor.

Fortunately for her, Legler decided to shoo the students back into working on their respective art, and Yang later dropped by to help her contain the flowing liquid largely within the piece itself, as well as clean up the floor afterwards. She also earned a few compliments from her as a bonus, and she couldn't help but squeaked a bit internally. But unfortunately, all the other works she had brought were utterly ruined, as she had unwisely stashed them nearby, and they were avoidably consumed by the paint river she created.

With nothing better to do, Taman focused her effort on examining the changes Yang made, and how they managed to cease the stream of colors. She didn't really get much result aside from some very vague feelings, but she now had the confidence to work it out eventually.

At the end of the class, she saw that two students did go to Yang, but none of them she was familiar with. Other than that, Legler had decided to call Cobalt aside for some reason; Taman could see Cobalt went visibly pale for a moment, before putting on a worried expression. As she stepped out of the studio door and landed herself back in the campus again, she wondered briefly what was the problem.

« **Skyboy** | **HUB** | **Foundation Mandated Interlude 2** »

Foundation Mandated Interlude 2

Date. Creator. Materials. Results. Anomalous Properties.

Pages of data and words suqeezed into single entries, the most eye-pleasing image selected out of numberous photos, and then finally all of these slapped onto a electronic form, to be saved and and filed. And then the process was repeated again, until she exhausted the whole list of items.

Researcher Jennifer Mendez sighed. After yet another round of proofreading and checking, she pushed the submit button, sending the files to her superior. Information on the anomalous artworks created in the tests had now been compiled properly, ready to be received by field agents. She still remembered looking in slight awe as the items were displayed in the temporary containment chamber. But as interesting as those items first appeared to be, pages of their specific dimensions and materials only took all the fun out of it.

Mendez stretched a bit, yawned, and stood up from the chair. Checking her watch, she decided to grab a coffee, knowing that she had some more tests to run with Agent Cobalt this afternoon.

Ten or so minutes later, she was in front of her computer screen again, sipping coffee and treating herself with some small snacks, while half-mindedly browsing through the poorly maintained social network of the Foundation's intranet.

Her thoughts wandered about, and Mendez wondered how she, someone with literature and history degrees, came to help run tests that track someone's brain activity. Of course, she had picked up skills and knowledge here and there – one thing the Foundation did right was that education was effectively free, with proper application, you could even get very decent online courses – history of the world behind the veil, anart history, anomalous literature. She even dabbled in memetics. But still, this was a stretch.

Then again, it was just operating the machine. After being forced to go through several sessions, she got the hang of it. (Dr. Samuels was certainly not a terrible boss, but she had to wonder how come he didn't have to sit through those as well, being the head of the project.) Furthermore, readings from the tests were all filed for the professionals to analyze, along with the footage, so she didn't need to be concerned with that. As someone with a legit doctorate, Samuels was able to assemble a small team of medical and neurological professionals, conducting proper experiments on the D-Classes. Her work with Alex was just a bonus, if not something less.

But she couldn't tell Alex that, suspecting the agent would go from being stressed to utter defeat, finding her work largely useless to their effort to crack the workings of anart. At least for the time being. She did hear Dr. Samuels mention that the undercover job's importance would only show in the long run.

As the coffee ran dry and with her snacks into her stomach, Mendez checked her watch again. There was still some time, and she decided to move to the testing chamber, and maybe read a few papers there on her tablet. There were nothing better to do, and she suspected that Samuels' overenthusiasm over the whole matter was affecting her as well.

Then again, she did wish to get a proper doctorate, and with that, maybe a better position than being an assistant.

Two hours later, as Mendez sat in the testing chamber, half way through one of the papers, it was Dr. Samuels that walked in, not the agent she was expecting.

"Jennifer," Samuels stepped into the room, interrupting Medez's study plans. "Testing's cancelled, but I have a new job for you."

"Cancelled?" Mendez burst out in surprise, before quickly correcting herself. "Anything wrong, Dr. Samuels?"

"Oh no, nothing to worry about. Just that Agent Cobalt won't be able to participate in tests for the foreseeable future. Schedule changes."

Mendez couldn't help but become slightly worried with the information; didn't seem like good news if there were "schedule changes" in an undercover job. But Dr. Sameuls' face showed nothing but excitment.

"No need to be concerned, the testing with her is not essential anyways." Samuels added, having obviously mistaken the source of Mendez' worry. "Cheer up, we are going to work on something much more exciting."

"Is it the 'Project Fountain' you were planning, doctor?" Mendez had already put her tablet aside, and started to pack things up.

Samuels seemed to be in a really good mood today, as he joined the researcher in putting things back to their intended places. "Just got approved by the Site Command." He said smugly.

"Congratulations, doctor." Mendez smiled politely.

"Let me tell you this, Jennifer," Samuels grinned back. "What we had was just a warm-up, and this is going to be the real deal. No more fake anart and limited testing; closer to the source of it all than ever!"

That does sound exciting, Mendez thought as she followed Samuels out of the testing chamber, door shutting behind them.

"But first, I need you to make some preprations," Samuels said as he led Mendez back to the office building. "I need up to five D-Classes with art backgrounds. Well, at least two, that should suffice. I'll send the other requirements to you later."

"Of course." She answered.

An hour later, Mendez sat once again in her side office in front the computer screen, another cup of coffee in hand and a hastily assembled meal on the table. As she picked through the seemingly endless D-Class bios (still quite a lot even with keyword searches), she sighed again. *And Dr. Samuels wonders why she is not as excited for this as he is.*

Down the Silver River

Let me take you through sands of crystal,
and down that silver river.
And I shall show you,
we are all beings of His creation.

The artist has long seen the Flow, but he has never seen something like this.

The Flow, the source of all creations as he knows it, has long been guiding him through his artistic path. He knows when to let the Flow move from his mind to the tip of his brush, from the void looming with white mists to the very reality he resides. He knows how to redirect it, how to use its pushing force to make his creations real, or even surreal. And he thought that it was the only beautiful thing in the world.

He might have made a bad decision when he decided to enter that place, to hear the priest's preaching and learn about that alien belief. A Church of clockwork and metal, so he had heard. He only intended to use that as a possible way to let out the Flow, to open his eyes to and to start something different. After all, he had always liked steampunk pieces, and the things this Church offered seemed no different.

But now, the artist stands in the river, and everything is different. The white mists are still there, but are now mixed with hot, surging steam. The riverbed he stands on, once of emptiness and void, is now made of cogwork and metal. Shining and beautiful, from beneath, unlike anything he has ever seen.

He blinks, and feels as if his senses have cheated him, but as he opens his eyes again, the scene shifts and he sees something even more unbelievable.

He is still standing in the Flow, but he also now sees outside of it. He

witnesses a majestic clockwork machine, all gears grind and fall perfectly into lockstep. He sees the Flow too, no longer floating in the void as he long knew, but streaming through tunnels in the gigantic machinery, twisting and turning as the machine moves. And his eyes can hardly capture its movement. The hot steam are rising from its surface, as its brass structures boil the river. Cogs hum from beneath.

For a moment there, he is shocked and lost, dazzled by the scene he had witnessed. But another moment, as he blinks again, he's back at the river, with the Flow rushing endlessly down his knee. The mental riverbed, however, is still there, but shines even more, and shakes slightly. He bends down to reach for the water.

But there is no water.

In the mental riverbed crafted by the grand machine, a river of mercury flows endlessly through hot burning steam.

The artist begins his creation with the new scene he saw lingering in his mind and appearing in his dreams. He throws out the brushes and paint, and gathers cogs and pipes and wires. He feels a clock ticking inside.

He works as he always works, but not with paper and pencil, but with brass, iron and silver. He pieces together the parts in an artistic fashion, one gear fitting perfectly into another as the Flow whispers and the Machine hums. He has never learnt how to construct clockwork, but he works as if he was born with the skill.

As his hand runs against the shining surface, he sees once again the silver river, now rushing and surging and falling through the carved lines in brass machine. He speaks soft words with his work, and wishes that the grand machine would hear, and one day talk to him.

Yet he fails.

In an attempt to mimic a god, he has only created monsters. The humming machines never fit quite right. The clockwork doesn’t tick

or it sings the songs wrong; the structure collapses or only moves clumsily. He aims to capture the beauty of the clockwork in his dreams like masters of Renaissance had painted saints and gods, only to find his own shallow skills stand in his path.

The artist stops creating. He puts aside his tools and materials, and locks himself in the room alone, with his mind wandering the vast silver river. He wanders there for days, until the uneven edges of the riverbed penetrate his skin, until the humming sound echoes in his ear, until the mercury that flows in the river runs down his veins.

And then he sees.

The artist takes a deep breath, and dives into the silver river. The riverbed is no longer there, and the river feels like an ocean. The Machine hums as if an orchestra.

It should hurt as the metal pieces pierce through his skin into his flesh, but he feels none of it. The Flow pushes him as he picks up the gears almost mechanically, and puts them inside of him.

It is his one piece, his final piece. His blood has tainted the floor, yet he sees only the mercury flow; his flesh has been cut open and scattered in pieces, yet he sees only the clockwork movement.

As he puts in the final one gear, there's a small clicking sound, and he knows this is the moment. He stands straight, and feels the clockwork move smoothly inside, as if it were natural. The Flow rushes even faster, the Machine sings even louder, and he feels that he is singing with Him.

"It is done." The artist lets out a final breath. "I am art of His creation."

Tum-Tum-Tum-TUM-Tum-Tum-Tum-TUM-TUM-TUM

Iran, 1838. 25 years since the end of the First Russo-Persian War.

'Abbas had not expected this.

There was a cannon sitting in the centre of the hut. It was clearly Russian, old, and looked like it had taken more than one battering. The quality of the craftsmanship was still excellent after all these years. 'Abbas recognised the model; it was the same that he'd faced at Ganja and Sultanabad, many years ago.

'Abbas had done well from the Russian wars, despite his Iran's losses. His aristocratic family had played up his heroism in a desperate bid to elevate themselves. He'd gained the favour of begs, khans, and now the Shah. He was a provincial governor, rich, with beautiful wives and a brilliant villa in the capital.

But today 'Abbas could not think about that. Today 'Abbas was in the countryside, on the outskirts of his family's old holdings. He didn't like to come here. It made him think of the old days, the penniless days before his rise to fame and fortune.

But his brother was here, so 'Abbas had to be. His older sibling was crouched over the weapon, smeared in grease and mud, his grey hair falling around his shoulders, unkempt and lank. 'Abbas remembered when it was long, his beard neatly trimmed, resplendent in his uniform, alive, awake, alert, funny, the handsomest man in the division, laughing and joking at his superiors-

Jamshid stood up, saw his brother, and laughed. "Salaam, brother!" he yelled. "Have you come to see my work today?"

'Abbas moved closer, out of the doorway. "Salaam, Jamshid. Is this what you've been doing here, all these years? It's just a cannon. An old one at that."

Jamshid shook his head. 'Abbas saw a madness in his eyes, the kind that he had seen before. Thirty years fighting against Russians and rebels and whatever else the world had to throw at him had taught him where a man's breaking point is. Jamshid had long passed that.

"It's not just a cannon, brother! It's a message! A plan! It's all- all in my head, you see!"

Jamshid stumbled. 'Abbas caught his brother, and- noting how little he weighed- sat him down at the edge of the barn. "It's a cannon, Jamshid. It's just a cannon."

"It isn't!" His brother's voice was a snarl now. He lashed out at 'Abbas, pushing his little brother slightly away. His eyes darted towards the cannon, looking at it, his lip trembling.

"I asked around at the embassy for you", said 'Abbas. "They don't know of any composer called Tchaikovsky. They didn't know what I was talking about. I looked like a fool."

"Of course not! I told you as much! It's not been written yet! It's in my head, brother… tum tum TUM tum tum tum TUM TUM TUM…"

Jamshid rose unsteadily to his feet, rocking slightly. "You'll see. One day, this music will be heard in every concert-hall and rattle in the eardrums of every man in Europe and Iran. One day, Tchaikovsky will write his piece, and the cannon… the cannon will be *perfect*…"

"No." 'Abbas had had enough. He waved towards the door, and several uniformed soldiers entered. "I'm taking this away. You've laboured over it long enough."

"No!" Jamshid lunged towards the nearest soldier as he began to lift his end of the cannon. The soldier batted him away, sending him sprawling.

"I said not to hurt him!" barked 'Abbas. The soldier looked down, ashamed of having forgotten himself, but 'Abbas was already running towards his brother. As the cannon was hauled out, the old man nursed his elder sibling.

"You can't take it away, 'Abbas, you can't… it's not ready… the timing's all wrong, and I can't, the river, I have to draw more water from the river-"

"It's going to a collector, Jamshid. A Frank I know, interested in old weapons. You won't see it again. It's for the best, Jamshid. You'll see. We'll find someone to cure your mind."

But Jamshid just rocked, back and forwards, back and forwards, his mind still entranced by the cannons of Ganja and some arcane music that only he could hear.

> **Item Description:** **`An early 19th century cannon`** of Russian manufacture. Cannon will prime, load and fire blanks (with no visible source of powder) if the finale of Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture is played within audible range of the artillery piece. The timing of the shots is slightly off and inconsistent with the music.
> **Date of Recovery:** - -
> **Location of Recovery:** Napoleonic Wars exhibit, Museum, .
> **Current Status:** Maintained as a lawn ornament in the staff garden at Site 12. Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture added to Site Blacklist of restricted materials.

Game Day, Phase 1: Secure

FoldUnfold

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Excerpt from official after-action report compiled by Dr. Alto Clef regarding Incident 234-900-Tempest Night.

0811 to 0813: Initial Contact

At 0811 hours on - - , multiple containment breaches occured at Humanoid Containment Site-17, caused by multiple explosive devices placed at critical points throughout the facility, placed by a then-unknown party. At this point, the method by which the devices were placed in the facility is unknown, as no security breaches were reported for several months before the incident. The most likely method (internal security breach) may never be proven, as any suborned personnel and/or evidence of their wrongdoing may have been destroyed in the attack.

One explosive device, placed in Conference Room 9b, resulted in death or injury to several key senior staff members, resulting in the loss of the top three levels of site leadership. This particular device would contribute significantly to the chaos which ensued: due to the severe breakdown in the chain of command, individual Foundation personnel would be forced to respond to the attack without coordination. In most cases, they

performed admirably given the situation: especially during the early moments of the attack, when the nature of the containment breach was then unknown.

Surveillance Log 17-CR9b- - - , 0805

<A. Adams:> What am I even doing here? I'm not an administrator or a director. I'm not even senior staff. I shouldn't even be here…

<A. Clef:> Don't worry about it. Just inhale and cross your arms under your tits and no one will even give a shit.

<A. Adams:> This is harassment.

<A. Clef:> Yes, it is. Go get a mimosa or something. Mingle. Socialize. Hi, Dmitri.

<D. Strelnikov:> Doktor.

<A. Clef:> Whatcha drinking?

<D. Strelnikov:> Orange juice. And vodka. Mostly vodka.

<A. Clef:> Breakfast of champions. You know, Dmitri, standing here, eating a muffin and chatting with you at the monthly senior staff brunch, looking at all these people I've worked with for years chatting and having a good time, you know what thought comes to my mind?

<D. Strelnikov:> We are fish in barrel.

<A. Clef:> You know me too well.

<D. Strelnikov:> Security is tight. All air vents are checks, all food is checks for poison, all walls and carpets sweep for bugs and bombs, all utensils and such are opens from sterile packs. All is good.

<A. Clef:> Excellent. Knew I could count on you, Dmitri. Hell, in order to hit us here, they'd have to smuggle a bomb in a waffle iron or some… thing…

<D. Strelnikov:> …

<A. Clef:> …

<D. Strelnikov:> Excusing me, James. Allows me to check— oh, son of the bitches.

<A. Clef:> Oh, for fuck's sake, you HAVE to be kid— EVERYONE MOVE! GET THE FUCK OU—

<Explosions>

Audio Log from Hallway 18

<Sirens>

Agent Vance: "Jesus. What the fuck was that?"

Agent Lombardi: "Get your head down!"

Agent Vance: "But what's—"

Audio indicates Agent Lombardi knocked Agent Vance to the ground at this point.

Agent Lombardi: "That's a goddamned containment breach. Sounds like a big one."

Agent Vance: "Oh shit. Oh shit. We're gonna die. We're gonna—"

Agent Lombardi: "No we ain't! We're gonna get through this. You understand? I ain't gonna let you die."

Agent Vance: "What do we do?"

Agent Lombardi: "What they pay us for, kid. We secure, we contain, and we break the face of anything that tries

to stop us. Now, we need to get to the armory. Keep yer head down, an' use cover where you can."

Agent Vance: "Yes sir."

Interview: Dr. Tarn Honey/Dr.

Portion of interview between Dr. and Dr. Tarn Honey, / / .

<Interview Begins>

Dr. : Where were you at the time of the explosions?

Dr. Honey: I was working with **SCP-737**, sir. I'd come up with a new theory regarding its aversion to copper and -

Dr. : Fascinating, I'm sure, but hardly relevant.

Dr. Honey: No, sir. Well, I was knocked unconscious by the explosion, as the security footage *clearly* shows.

Dr. : Of course.

Dr. Honey: When I came to, 737 was gone. I was inside the observation chamber, so it hadn't seen me, but the guard…oh god. C-can I have a moment?

Dr. : I'm afraid I must ask you to continue, doctor.

Dr. Honey: That train had just tunneled right through his head. There was blood everywhere, and there was a suspiciously train-shaped hole in the wall.

Dr. : And how did you react to this?

Dr. Honey: I went after it, of course. I thought security would be busy with the explosion, so I grabbed a sheet of copper from the emergency locker and went looking. I thought the explosion was just a minor containment

breach. I didn't think it was that bad.

Dr. : Understandable.

Dr. Honey: As I was saying, I walked out of SCP-737's containment area and into the neighboring hallway. I spotted it turning around a corner and followed. I was all ready to grab it, but…oh god, I really need a minute.

(**Dr.** sighs.)

Dr. : Of course. Take your time.

<…>

***AUDIO/VIDEO TRANSCRIPT - TRACKING INDIVIDUALS DESIGNATE "Senior Staff Dr. A. Rights" AND "Research Staff Dr. W. Zurn"**
001*

/Relevant transcript begins at / /20 / / as captured by Security Camera/Audio system 1134-b; interior of office belonging to Dr. Rights. Status in video: Two walls have been partially removed by nearby explosion. For several minutes, nothing but smoke and dust is visible, before cleaning. Dr. Zurn; status: minor injuries, is visible, and stands./

Dr. Zurn: Doc…Doctor Rights? Doctor Rights?

Dr. Zurn pauses and coughs for several minutes.

Dr. Zurn: …Agatha?

/There is a soft moan, and Dr. Zurn grows visibly agitated. He moves a fallen bookcase with some difficulty, revealing Dr. Rights; status: Unconscious, major injuries/

/SEVERAL MINUTES REMOVED FROM TRANSCRIPT FOR LACK OF RELEVANCY/

/Dr. Rights is now conscious, if extremely disoriented. Injuries have been ascertained as potentially life-threatening blunt force trauma to head, abdomen, and legs./

Dr. Zurn: Just hold on, and I'll be back! I'm going to get help, alright?

Dr. Rights: [indistinct]

Dr. Zurn: It'll be okay. I'll go find one of the emergency med teams. Just hold on.

Dr. Rights: Sure.

/Dr. Zurn pauses before leaving, and kisses Dr. Rights on the forehead before exiting the room at a run. Dr. Rights spends the next minutes laying on the floor, moving only in response to faint sounds and the activation of sirens. She loses consciousness after minutes./

/At minutes ***SCP-347****, as identified by seemingly disembodied tracking anklet, enters the room, and approaches Dr. Rights./*

/Relevant transcript of Security Camera/Audio system 1134-b ends at / / ./

Excerpt From Debriefing Interview Vang-2
Interviewer: Agent
Subject: Dr. Vang, Ph.D.
Date: / /20

Agent : All right, where were you when the attack happened?

Dr. Vang: I was asleep in MRI Lab Three, two floors up and about five doors down the hall from where the bombs were. I woke up when they went off, of course.

Agent : What was your initial reaction?

Dr. Vang: I just laid there a bit until the gunfire started, then I decided to report to the infirmary to get an amnestic. You see, the SCP I was working on, some of the initial tests indicate that the symptoms include auditory hallucinations. I figured an amnestic might fix it.

Agent : I see. Carry on.

Dr. Vang: So, I was approaching an intersection in the hallway when I saw one of our security guards trading fire with someone I couldn't see. It dawned on me that it was all real when the top half of his head got blown up.

Agent : And then?

Dr. Vang: I ran the other direction, hid in the closet, and hyperventilated for a while. When I calmed down, I ran back into the MRI lab to get my laptop.

Agent : Why?

Dr. Vang: Well, I fell asleep last night before I could log out, and I had neglected to log out when I had woken up, so anyone could have gotten sensitive information off of it. Anyways, when I got back, my laptop was gone, and so was one of the desktops.

Agent : What was on those computers?

Dr. Vang: I don't know about the desktop, but my laptop had some of my project files on it. Most of my projects involve abnormal memorability, so about ninety percent of it was just particularly catchy songs. In addition to that, there was a copy of the Communist Manifesto written entirely in pig latin, and there were nine variations of-

Agent : Anything *important*?

Dr. Vang: Sorry, sir. One of my USBs had a minute-long clip of **SCP-444**, and my laptop had a photo that makes

you dizzy for a minute or so when you look at it. Those are the only things I can think of that would be of any real importance.

Agent [redacted]: Very good. Now, back to the MRI Lab. What was your course of action?

Dr. Vang: Well, I realized that it would be a pretty bad thing if someone attacking the site had four forty-four, considering that a good portion of *our* work with it is weaponization. I looked around, and none of the rooms around me looked like anything was stolen from them, so I figured that whoever took my computer had a good idea of what they were looking for. I heard someone coming, so I ducked into the break room.

Agent [redacted]: What happened next?

Dr. Vang: Whoever it was, they ran past, so I sat down and thought for a minute or so. I went to the fridge, grabbed a bottle of root beer, and broke it. To get a weapon, you know. I changed into my backup pants, then I stuffed my pockets with as many of the emergency ear plugs as I could find and went out to distribute them to our guys.

Agent [redacted]: Emergency ear plugs?

Dr. Vang: It's the memetics department, sir. We go through them like toilet paper.

> **Agent [redacted]:** I see. Carry on.

Excerpt from debriefing of Prof. Anders Bjornsen

Security Agent [redacted] (SA): Why were you in the transportation depot when the incident began?

Prof. Anders Bjornsen (AB): I had just been re-assigned to work on **SCP-272** from **SCP-200** and was waiting for the transfer team to arrive from SCP-272's

previous containment site. I had only skimmed the briefing report, but apparently that site was being re-configured as a secure site for higher-threat-level SCPs.

SA: According to the logs, that security team delivered that SCP and left over 90 minutes before the incident.

AB: *sighs*

AB: Yes, but… well, I was talking with one of the security guards down there about some… personal matters and lost track of time. A good thing, too, or I would've been in my office when it collapsed.

SA: We'll come back to that. Did you notice anything unusual before the incident?

AB: I overheard one of the other guards mention that there had been a lot of SCP deliveries that day, but other than that, no. Well, until the klaxon went off, anyways. Then all the guards started scrambling for the doors into the rest of site.

SA: And what did you do?

AB: What any good boy scout would do: I decided to investigate the SCPs that nobody had yet bothered to pick up. Mighty careless of the researchers of those prospective projects to not collect them, but to my advantage. The first was, luckily, **SCP-262**.

SA: And then?

AB: I went looking for guns.

Debriefing: Research Assistant Harold Wachtel
Excerpt from interview conducted by O5- , regarding Research Assistant Harold Wachtel's involvement in Incident 234-900-Tempest Night-1.

O5- : Hello, Mr. Wachtel. Please, take a seat.

Wachtel: Would you mind if I didn't, sir? I've got a busted coccyx.

O5- : Oh. Well, feel free to not take a seat, then. Where were you when the incident began?

Wachtel: Storage vault two. Was just returning **494** to its locker when something exploded a few aisles over and knocked the whole shelf full of lockers down on me. That's when I busted my coccyx.

O5- : And that's when you decided to put on 494?

Wachtel: I was covered up to my armpits in lockers, and didn't want to be stuck there if something nastier than a bomb came by. I'm just glad I'd had tissues in my breast pocket.

Debriefing of Agent Lament by 05-4
re: breach event and staff involvement/response

O5-4 – Where were you at the start of the event?

Agent Lament – Oh god…we were…we were in Gears' office…he was giving me a stack of things to check out, research materials he needed recovered…I thought he was pissed at me, but I guess he's always like that.

O5-4 – How long have you been assigned to Doctor Gears?

Agent Lament – About…four months, maybe? It's kinda hard to tell…he doesn't get out much, therefore neither do I. You know, I think I got him to chuckle once? Or he was coughing, I'm not sure, but it was right after I told a joke, so I think it's really possible tha-

O5-4 – The event?

Agent Lament – that he really might have….oh…yeah. Honestly, we didn't know what was going on for a while.

It was just some muffled thuds and stuff, the dungeon is down pretty deep. Really, the first time we knew there was something actually wrong is when the back office wall gave out. God, the wall just crumpled in, all the rebar and crap shooting out, I was sure, SURE Gears was dead, I mean he just got his skull stove in wi-

O5-4 – When you refer to the “dungeon”, you are referencing the common name for Security Floor D-9, correct?

Agent Lament – With…oh, yeah. I mean, everyone calls it that, it's so…dungeon-y. Gears has a office down there because he says it's more “efficient” to be close. He had a lot of items that he was working on there that day. After we came to from the blast, I could hear…things. It was like a monkey house for a while, then just…silent. The silence was almost worse, really, even though some of those noises I KNOW were people being eaten or… worse. Gears was pretty bad off, but calm as always, even with his leg at that funny angle. I kinda helped him up, and said we had to book it for the surface, but he said no, that we'd be dead that way. He…he said there was a secondary access area from this level, in case of high-priority staff being trapped down there, s-

O5-4 – Agent Lament, are you telling me a ranking member of The Foundation gave you a order to enter in to a area that was assuredly the subject of a multiple containment breach?

Agent Lament – So we…yeah. I mean, he said that the areas we had to slide through would be minimal, and that a lot of other staff might come this way too, if they got cut off from the surface level. I…I didn't know what all he'd been working on. I mean, I probably would have helped him down there anyway, but…I might have waited, or something….god, all those people, they just…i mean, they were smeared on the walls, like putty or something, or paint, or-

O5-4 – Agent Lament…

Agent Lament – jelly, and then there was the wire… thing. It was like a web, but it didn't even need a spider… just wrapped them up and used them…I think it was getting smarter, a LOT smarter, because it was trying to hide and s-

O5-4 – AGENT LAMENT.

Agent Lament - …yes sir?

O5-4 – Did you or Dr. Gears attempt to contact site security for recovery? Or use secured lines for a SOS beacon?

Agent Lament – We couldn't. We tried to call security, and we just saw 106's face grinning on the screen, petting someone's scalp. The wire weed thing was fogging all the rest of the outside lines, we couldn't reach anyone! We tried, I swear! He insisted we had to get moving…you know…waiting for that blast door to open… that was as scared as I've ever been, even after the other stuff. Just waiting, watching the doors roll apart…

O5-4 - …Agent?

Agent Lament - …That's the thing. We didn't have to worry so much about the people attacking. No matter how stupid they were, I figured they'd NEVER try to come down here. Heh. It's funny…it's like escaping a flood by jumping in to a burning house.

***AUDIO/VIDEO TRANSCRIPT - TRACKING INDIVIDUALS DESIGNATE "Senior Staff Dr. A. Rights" AND "Research Staff Dr. W. Zurn"**
002*

/Relevant transcript begins at / /20 / / as captured by Security Camera/Audio system 1179-a; Hallway.

Status in video: Visibility impacted by smoke. Figures may be identified only faintly. Voice recognition reveals Dr. Zurn, running./

Dr. Zurn: Hello! Hello! Is anybody there!? We need a medical team! Help!

/There is no response, and he moves out of range. Security Camera/Audio system 1179-b through -f are offline due to damage. Dr. Zurn returns to range of 1179-a. Dr. Zurn is coughing loudly, and moves out of range again, quickly. Approximately thirty seconds afterwards, a larger silhouette moves through the smoke, following Dr. Zurn. Study of video logs later indicate this is SCP-542, as identified by distinctive movement patterns./

/Relevant transcript of Security Camera/Audio system 1179-a ends at / / .

0813 to 0823: Initial Response.

The placement of the explosive devices was determined to have damaged the site public address system and major communications leads. In addition to the resulting severe communications breakdown, this prevented detonation of the on-site nuclear device as a final fail-safe.

The situation was exacerbated by the unusually large number of artifacts in temporary containment at Site-17. Although normally serving as a minimum to moderate security facility for human and humanoid artifacts, an infestation of at Site-19 resulted in the temporary transfer of numerous non-humanoid artifacts of Safe/ Euclid classification to Site 17 while decontamination took place.

The combination of these factors (disruption of command structure, loss of communications, physical damage from

explosive devices, unusually large number of artifacts in containment) resulted in multiple containment breaches combined with the loss of the final nuclear fail-safe. The situation was further exacerbated at 0823 hours, when a number of unknown personnel from an unknown agency attacked the facility itself.

Surveillance Log 17-CR9b- - - , 0819

<A. Adams>: "… oh fuck. MEDIC! MEDIC!"

Groaning sounds are heard, as well as cries for help.

<A. Adams>: "Shit shit shit shit… sir, are you all right?"

<A. Clef>: "Do I look all right? How is Dmitri?"

<A. Adams>: "Alive, barely."

<A. Clef>: "God bless that Russian. Saved our lives. Situation report?"

<A. Adams>: "Half the senior staff is dead, the other half blown to hell, and I can't fucking get ahold of anyone else. Internal comms are down, I don't know why…"

<A. Clef>: "Shit. Do you have your sidearm?"

<A. Adams>: "Right here, sir."

<A. Clef>: "Good. Reach into my left jacket pocket. You'll find an ID card there. L4 Clearance. Read the name."

<A. Adams>: "… A Adams. Emergency Clearance, Vice Alto Clef."

<A. Clef>: "Had Dmitri whip it up for me in case of an emergency. It'll give you access to everything I can access. You're in charge now. Deal with the situation."

<A. Adams>: "… I can't."

<A. Clef>: "Adams. My legs are blown to fuck. In about sixty seconds, I'm going to pass out from the pain. If internal comms are down, this isn't a one-time deal. This is a coordinated attack. You're going to have to do it. Prove to everyone you're more than just an oversized pair of tits."

<A. Adams>: "…"

<A. Clef>: "Now git."

Interview: Dr. Tarn Honey/Dr.

Portion of interview between O5- and Dr. Tarn Honey, / /

<Interview Begins>

Dr. Honey: I entered the hallway and…and there were just so many bodies.

Dr. : They were security?

Dr. Honey: I suppose they must have been. I didn't know who they were or what had killed them at the time. Of course I now know it was **SCP-870.** They couldn't have even heard it.

Dr. : A tragic waste of life. Please continue.

Dr. Honey: 737 was there, of course. You know, from the reports you'd imagine it just hits a wall and eats its way through it, but it's more like a maggot. A big, train-shaped, wooden maggot. I should rewrite that report.

Dr. : Perhaps not right now, doctor. You managed to capture 737?

Dr. Honey: It was…it was eating the bodies. At this point

it was about seven carriages long. There was no way I could pick that thing up.

Dr. : This is when you hit the alarm?

Dr. Honey: Yes, I -

(At this point, **Dr. Honey** entered a coughing fit that lasted forty-three seconds, due to the condition at time of interview.)

Dr. Honey: Sorry about (coughs) that. Must be that bug going around!

Dr. : That's alright. Did security arrive?

Dr. Honey: No. I knew at this point something serious was going on. I decided to stay back in 737's containment area. (Laughs) It's not like anyone was using it!

***AUDIO/VIDEO TRANSCRIPT - TRACKING INDIVIDUALS DESIGNATE "Senior Staff Dr. A. Rights" AND "Research Staff Dr. W. Zurn"**
003*

/Relevant transcript begins at / /20 / / as captured by Security Camera/Audio system 1134-b; interior of office belonging to Dr. Rights. Status in video: Two walls have been partially removed by nearby explosion. Dr. Rights is still unconscious, and SCP-347 has remained in the room./

/At / Dr. Zurn returns, and after a short coughing fit checks on Dr. Rights again, unaware of SCP-347 in the room./

Dr. Zurn: [Expletives deleted]

/Dr. Zurn leaves the room again./

SCP-347: …no wonder you pounced on him. He's a sweetie.

/After minutes, SCP-542 enters the room, without sound, and approaches Dr. Rights. After a cursory observation, he turns from her, and begins to leave the room. SCP-542 then pauses in the doorway./

SCP-542: They call you Claudia, no?

SCP-347: Jesus Christ!

SCP-542: Don't worry. Were it not for your heartbeat, even I may have not noticed you. Don't touch my dear Doctor, danke. I will return shortly.

/SCP-542 exits the room, and SCP-347 can be observed frantically pacing the room, by tracking of anklet/

/Relevant transcript of Security Camera/Audio system 1134-b ends at / / ./

Audio Log From Maintenance Tunnel 3A

Agent Lombardi: "Okay, see, that wasn't so bad, was it? We got through, and we're both still alive. Yeah, I know. The cannibal's a scary fucker, but the fuckers shooting at us were a bit scarier. Besides, Fernand ain't stupid. Someone shootin' at him is a much bigger deal than a couple of guys what are just running through."

Agent Vance: "He just… broke them."

Agent Lombardi: "That was the idea, kid. Now, we're gettin' close to the armory. We're gonna get in there, grab some hardware, and then try and meet up with other agents. Hopefully someone out there's still alive an' giving orders. Failing that, we keep the intruders busy."

Agent Vance: "How do we do that?"

Agent Lombardi: "We kill them. We steer them into dangerous skips. We improvise. You ever see Home Alone?"

Agent Vance: "Yeah."

Agent Lombardi: "Well, it's gonna be like that, but more people are gonna die. Hopefully not us."

***AUDIO/VIDEO TRANSCRIPT - TRACKING INDIVIDUALS DESIGNATE "Senior Staff Dr. A. Rights" AND "Research Staff Dr. W. Zurn"**
004*

/Additional transcript portions from Security Camera/ Audio systems 1122-c through -f, 1141-b, and 1136-a through -m indicate the movements of both SCP-542 and Dr. Zurn. SCP-542 is observed in the process of attacking Research Security Agent J. Willhein. Agent Willhein is disabled in the process, and paralyzed. SCP-542 carries him out of camera range./

Audio/Visual transcript of `SCP-138` containment chamber

0700 Subject remains in induced coma. Life signs steady.

0800 Subject remains in induced coma. Life signs steady.

0811 Static corresponding with loss of containment systems throughout Site 17

942 Camera feed restored. Subject remains in induced coma. Life signs steady.

955 Gunfire heard outside containment chamber

959 Containment chamber opened from outside. Two figures enter the room, one of which is sloppily dressed

in security helmet and flak jacket. Other figure wears no clothing. Figures identified as instances of **SCP-945.**

1000 to 1031 Figures stand perfectly still and observe subject. Subject remains in coma. Life signs steady.

1032 to 1033 Unknown personnel affiliated with attackers enters chamber, opens fire on figures with side arm. Bullets strike upper arms of figure dressed in security armor. Figure returns fire with standard security firearm. Unknown personnel slain. Figures return to observation of subject. Subject remains in induced coma. Life signs steady.

1045 to 1052 Third figure enters room, removes uniform and weapons worn by unknown personnel and dons them. Joins other figures in observation of subject. Subject remains in induced coma. Life signs steady.

1100 to 1114 Figures cease observation and begin disconnecting subject from coma support equipment. Fourth figure enters room wearing white lab coat and administers unknown substances to subject. Subject begins to recover from induced coma. Life signs steady.

1124 Subject fully recovered from induced coma. Four figures remain motionless in observation. Subject begins screaming in pain. Life signs steady.

1200 Figures continue to observe subject. Subject continues screaming in pain. Life signs steady.

1300 Figures continue to observe subject. Subject continues screaming in pain. Life signs steady.

1400 Figures continue to observe subject. Subject continues screaming in pain. Life signs steady.

Excerpt from Video Log, Observation Camera 6649881:

0804: **Subject 027-02** is served breakfast as

scheduled. Life signs of the subject are within normal parameters.

0811: A series of explosions is heard elsewhere in the facility. Seconds later, Security Breach Alarms are heard. Containment for SCP-027 appears unaffected. Subject appears concerned; life signs show increased anxiety.

0814: Alarms continue. Sounds of large numbers of personnel moving quickly can be heard intermittently. Subject starts looking around in agitation.

0819: Under-floor vacuum system stops operation. Subject appears distressed.

0822: Flying insect population noticeably visible. Subject starts pounding on the door leading outside containment, screaming "Let me out of here!"

0827: Camera shakes briefly due to another explosion, louder than previously. Subject is shaken slightly, retreats underneath the cot in the cell.

0829: A third explosion is heard, much louder than previously. Entire containment cell is shaken for a full second. Subject remains underneath the cot. Life signs continue to appear normal for high-stress circumstances.

0833: Dust has settled. Horseflies seen flying in containment. Subject remains underneath the cot.

0841: Subject slowly emerges from underneath the cot, approaches door to containment cell. Subject attempts to force the door open, fails.

0842: Subject appears to appraise containment cell. Black ants seen swarming around feet of subject.

0846: Subject approaches floor grating at northwest wall, appears to inspect junction.

0847: Subject attempts to force up floor grating at

northwest wall. Floor grating loosens.

0851: Subject opens gap in the floor grating large enough to squeeze through, disappears down vacuum outlet.

Recovered footage from cell-phone discovered on the body of unknown assailant

Figure identified as Prof. A. Bjornsen enters corridor from transportation depot, wearing SCP-262. The bodies of several guards lay on the ground approximately 10 feet away from the door. Unidentified assailant runs from behind the holder of the cell phone towards Prof. Bjornsen, screaming and brandishing a large knife in each hand. Two (2) cellulose tentacles emerge from SCP-262 and grab weaponry from the bodies of the guards. The tentacles rapidly retreat towards Prof. Bjornsen and two human arms emerge to take the firearms. These arms immediately proceed to fire the weapons indiscrimately. Analysis of the recovered footage reveals that shots fired struck the ceiling, floor, both walls, the oncoming assailant and at least one round grazed Prof. Bjornsen's left cheek. The holder of the cell-phone is apparently wounded by the weaponsfire and drops the cell-phone. Remaining footage is taken approximately twelve (12) centimeters from the base of a wall before ending.

***AUDIO/VIDEO TRANSCRIPT - TRACKING INDIVIDUALS DESIGNATE "Senior Staff Dr. A. Rights" AND "Research Staff Dr. W. Zurn"**
005*

/At / / Camera System feed 1134-b Dr. Rights' office show SCP-542 entering, moving to beneath camera range, and ends abruptly. Believed to be the work of SCP-542 disabling the camera. Audio systems remain intact./

Agent Willhein: Oh God oh god oh god help please god help don't do this please

/Several minutes of frantic speech occur. SCP-347 can be heard in the background, voice indistinct. Agent Willhein begins screaming, for minutes, after which there is no speech. SCP-542 can be heard humming to himself, and SCP-347 is believed to be the source of crying heard in background./

/FURTHER LOGS FROM AUDIO SYSTEM 1134-b EXCLUDED DUE TO LACK OF RELEVANCY/

Camera Feed 17-4a, PA System Control Room, / /

0800 Room is empty and silent. Feed is stationary.

0811 Explosions are heard. A large piece of concrete falls on the desk, severely damaging the PA system. Camera is jolted, but undamaged.

0812 Screams and sirens are audible.

0823 Gunfire is audible.

0843 Two unidentified persons in full body armor enter the room. They carry machine guns of unknown caliber and manufacture. They converse, although the details of their conversation are inaudible.

0846 Both persons exit room.

0900 Room is empty. Gunfire, screams, and sirens are audible. Feed is stationary.

0904 One unidentified person in full body armor enters the room armed with a gun similar to those of the persons visible at **0843**. The individual is accompanied by a male in a humanoid SCP uniform, later identified as **SCP-890**, who appears to be carrying a suitcase.

0905 *SCP-890:* "Alright, where is the patient?"

0905 The unidentified individual motions towards the PA system. SCP-890 turns to face the individual.

0905 *SCP-890:* "Those wounds are nonlethal. I saw many more severe cases in need of assistance on the way here. Are you sure this is the one you want healed?

0906 The unidentified individual nods.

0906 *Unidentified Individual:* [inaudible]

0906 *SCP-890:* "That's certainly an odd request, but I think I see what you're going for. These are hardly ideal conditions, though. The patient will have their voice back, but I can't guarantee that they will live very long afterwards.

0907 SCP-890 opens the suitcase, revealing a full compliment of surgical tools. The PA system appears to transform into a mass of flesh.

0908 SCP-890 begins operating on the mass of flesh. The unidentified individual stands facing the door.

Camera Feed 17-12b, Security Station Alpha Delta

0800 Security team is absent from station. (note: This has been determined to be the result of a scheduling conflict)

0811 Explosion seen at far end of hallway. Camera feed lost.

0845 Camera function restored. Dr. Johannes Sorts and an animate clay statue (a SCP-945 replica) wearing a burnt technician's jacket are standing on rubble and peering into the lens. Five other SCP-945 replicas are wearing assorted remains of security uniforms and carrying weapons, manning the security station.

Dr. Sorts: (addressing the technician replica) "What else is not working here, Joesph?"

"Joseph" (believed to be replica of Joseph Pullman, KIA at 0811): "This camera is working, but the door locks on this level are all still out, and the Public Address system is not responding. The alarms are off but I think I can…"

0847 Alarms restored, sirens sound throughout area.

Dr. Sorts: "Yes thank you Joseph that is very helpf-" (screaming, then static camera cuts out for approximately three minutes)

0850 Security replicas are engaged in gunfight with unknown forces at end of hall. "Joseph" replica and Dr. Sorts are crouched within the security station.

Dr. Sorts: "Hold your fire! Hold your fire! Dammit! Just try not to kill - [inaudible] that's one of our [inaudible]"

Two members of unknown forces in full body armor hold position at far end of hall. Unidentified individual wearing a standard humanoid SCP uniform is moved down the hall and out of view by a third member of unknown forces.

0900 Unknown forces and security replicas remain in cover for ten minutes, little gunfire is exchanged. Dr. Sorts is attempting to give instructions to replicas.

Dr. Sorts: [inaudible] "— to kill… because … because we need prisoners is why! And also…" [inaudible]

0910 Member of unknown forces throws grenade into security station. Security replica retrieves grenade and runs down the hall to the position held by unknown forces. Replica takes several dozen rounds to the arms and legs and crumbles to inanimate pieces approximately two meters from the end of the hallway. Grenade rolls back into the position held by unknown

forces. There is an explosion, both hostile agents appear to be killed.

0911 Dr. Sorts exits security station and approaches unknown forces.

0913 An instance of SCP-945 steps out of the wall behind Dr. Sorts as he examines the hostile agents. Dr. Sorts notes its arrival and tries to communicate.

0914 New instance of SCP-945 retrieves weapon from fallen hostile agent and aims it at Dr. Sorts.

Dr. Sorts "It's a replica of the enemy! Shoot it! Shoot it!"

0915 Camera feed lost

0920 Camera feed restored. "Joseph" replica adjusts the lens. Security replicas are exchanging fire with two replicas that have taken the position previously held by hostile agents. The two groups appear to be purposefully missing each other, one replica goes through the motions of aiming and firing without discharging any ammunition. Dr. Sorts is not on camera. No alarms are being sounded.

0921 "Joseph" replica is pulling what appears to be a long cord of veins and muscle tissue from from the wall.

"Joseph" "Now to check the PA system… my god, what is this? We have a containment breach!"

0922 Replica of security agent sounds the alarm again. Sirens are heard along with sporadic gunfire.

***AUDIO/VIDEO TRANSCRIPT - TRACKING INDIVIDUALS DESIGNATE "Senior Staff Dr. A. Rights" AND "Research Staff Dr. W. Zurn"**
006*

/Relevant transcript begins at / /20 / / as captured

by Security Camera/Audio system 211-j; Hallway. Status in video: Largely rubble. SCP-457 is observed to be devouring a human corpse through immolation, victim unidentified. After minutes, SCP-457 travels down the hallway. Fragments of audio logs reveal words./

SCP-457: Hungry…hungry…burn…large burn…like sun…so hungry…want food…want fuel…hungry…

/Relevant transcript of Security Camera/Audio system 211-j ends at / / ./

***AUDIO/VIDEO TRANSCRIPT - TRACKING INDIVIDUALS DESIGNATE "Senior Staff Dr. A. Rights" AND "Research Staff Dr. W. Zurn"**
007*

/Relevant transcript begins at / /20 / / as captured by Security Camera/Audio system 924-f; Hallway. Status in video: Intact. Dr. Zurn emerges from door, slamming it shut behind him. Faint shouting can be heard./

Dr. Zurn: Sorry! I'm sorry!

/Dr. Zurn continues down hallway, out of range./

/Relevant transcript of Security Camera/Audio system 924-f ends at / / ./

Audio-Visual Transcript, Site 17 D-Class Cafeteria, / /

Unidentified D-class: Listen up, you lousy shits! I don't have any idea who these fuckers are or what they're after or whatever the fuck is going on, but you know what? I don't fucking care. Because something tells me you won't get three meals, a roof and a chance at parole if they're the ones in charge. Did you see what they did to Jacob? Not to me, fuck no! You can escape if you want, but I for one….

[Individual is beaten down by another D-Class. Riot breaks out.]

Interview: Research Assistant Corbette/Site Director :

Portion of Interview Between Research Assistant Corbette and Site Director

<Begin Interview Log>

Site Director : Corbette! I don't care about how stale your muffin was, get to the point of the explosion.

Research Assistant Corbette: Ok, ok, sorry. So, I'm eating my muffin, right? And suddenly I hear this big boom and there's alarms blaring everywhere and I don't know what the fuck to do, I'm just looking after all the Misters, right? And then I get an emergency memo from the boss, and he says to me, "Evacuate all the Misters." And I mean there's only four of them here right now, so it isn't that hard. So I put down my muffin, and I'm like, "Holy shit guys, we gotta get outta here!"

Site Director : So you were instructed by Dr. Hayward to evacuate his projects?

Research Assistant Corbette: Yeah, so I handcuff Forgetful to myself because, y'know, every 20 seconds he has no idea what the shit is going on. And then I handcuff Chameleon to Hungry, and Moon just kinda hobbles along with us on his cane.

Site Director : And it was a waning moon, so he was missing the majority of his face, yes?

Research Assistant Corbette: Yeah, he could only see through one eye. Everything else was covered.

Transcript of Video Log from Hallway 21, outside designated "Misters" corridor

<Begin Video Log>

(Research Assistant Corbette enters the hallway handcuffed to **SCP-909**. Following is **SCP-913** and **SCP-905** handcuffed together. Behind is **SCP-917**, struggling to keep pace with Research Assistant Corbette. Research Assistant Corbette turns around.)

Research Assistant Corbette: Moon, catch the up! This is an evacuation, you lard-ass!

SCP-917: (Muffled speaking)

Research Assistant Corbette: What?

SCP-917: (Muffled speaking)

Research Assistant Corbette: Ok, does somebody have the braille book. I have no idea what this guy's saying.

SCP-913: He says he can hear gunfire down the evacuation route with his one good ear.

Research Assistant Corbette: Aw, fuck. Ok, guys, we're gonna have to find another way out of here. Um… anybody have a map?

0823 to 0915: Breakdown

It is at this point that the situation escalated to a full-out Tempest Night scenario, as multiple containment breaches occured throughout the facility, causing near-complete loss of containment. Ironically, a significant portion of the containment breaches were caused by Foundation personnel themselves, in an attempt to stop the incursion by the unknown hostile force. Secondary containment breaches followed, resulting in the Foundation-Wide Alert Status being upgraded to Red.

The result was complete loss of situational control. Without a central coordinating authority, individual Foundation personnel were working at cross-purposes, interfering with and even counteracting each others' actions. In at least one case, a Foundation scientist's heroic sacrifice in maintaining containment of a Euclid-Class artifact was immediately rendered null and void when another Foundation researcher immediately breached containment of said artifact with the intent to use it as a weapon against the insurgent forces.

The situation would continue until the re-establishment of intra-site communications by Secretary Adams. By that point, however, the situation had proceeded past the point of no return. Many of the SCP artifacts had broken through the site lockdown and escaped into the wild. Mission priority then changed from securing the breached artifacts to surviving the crisis.

Transcript of Video Log from Storage Vault 2

0810 Research Assistant Harold Wachtel enters the storage vault with SCP-494, and approaches its containment locker

0811: Locker 3425-A8 explodes on the far end of the room, knocking over several shelves and dumping their contents to the floor. Research Assistant Harold Wachtel becomes partially buried under many containment lockers. For the next 45 seconds, only his head moves.

0812: Research Assistant Harold Wachtel nods to himself, then dons 494. He reaches into his breast pocket and begins pulling out a paper tissue, then tears off a small piece of it. He lifts the far end of one of the lockers on his chest with a grimace.

0817: Containment locker becomes made out of paper tissue. Scrap of paper tissue becomes a small shard of steel. Research Assistant Harold Wachtel tears off a

small piece of the containment locker, then lifts up the end of another locker.

[REDACTED FOR LACK OF RELEVANCY]

0848: Containment locker becomes made out of paper tissue. Scrap of paper tissue becomes a shard of rubber-lined steel. **SCP-447-2** begins oozing out of containment locker. Research Assistant Harold Wachtel says something, later confirmed to be "[EXPLETIVE REDACTED]".

0849: Research Assistant Harold Wachtel begins rubbing SCP-447-2 on himself.

0851: Using SCP-447-2 as a lubricant, Research Assistant Harold Wachtel slips out from under the remaining lockers. He then proceeds to remove SCP-494, shove them in his right sock, and begin wrapping SCP-447-1 in paper tissue from the lockers.

Debriefing: Research Assistant Harold Wachtel
Excerpt from interview conducted by O5- , regarding Research Assistant Harold Wachtel's involvement in Incident 234-900-Tempest Night-1.

O5- : Why did you bring 447 with you?

Wachtel: I'd missed my check-in by then, and since no-one had come looking for me, I was assuming the worst. I didn't want any hostiles getting their hands on it and exposing it to a dead body.

O5- : Is that also why you took off your lab coat and trousers, and threw them in the incinerator?

Wachtel: Yes, sir.

Audio Log from Hallway 43, outside the armory

Agent Lombardi: "Okay, grab some guns, and let's beat feet. I'll cover you."

Agent Vance: "Um, sir?"

Agent Lombardi: "That is not a happy sounding um. Why are you making an unhappy um?"

Agent Vance: "It's… gone, sir."

Agent Lombardi: "The fuck do you mean, gone? The guns are missing?"

Agent Vance: "No sir. The armory. The room is missing."

Agent Lombardi: "Let me see. Jesus. You're right. This hallway's also too short. I fucking hate Eschers. Come on. We'll have to improvise."

Agent Vance: "With what? Sir, we have no weapons."

Agent Lombardi: "Sure we do. What do you think we been collecting all these years?"

Excerpt from Video Log of Security Camera 00294727:

0830: Camera feed shows entrance to containment chamber of **SCP-632**. Sirens are heard in background.

0836: Sirens get louder. A muted explosion is heard off-screen to the right, sounding like "popping a wet balloon". Blood splatters onto camera, presumably from unknown source of explosion.

0837: A plump young female exits containment chamber of SCP-632, identified by name tag to be Researcher Min. She turns head in direction of explosion, appears stunned for a few seconds before withdrawing back into the containment chamber.

0838: Researcher Min exits containment chamber donning protective lab goggles, hurriedly running to the left of the screen. In her hand is an ice box, presumed to be the Biological Storage Unit of SCP-632.

Transcription of Audio Log between 0900-0930, Security Camera 0030345

Prolonged screaming is heard in the background, believed to be caused by SCP- outbreak.

<Researcher Min> (heavy panting) Who's there?

<Agent Frederick> You! Good! Quick, we need to hurry! They're going to flood the wing with bakelite in an hour.

<RM> What's happening? Who are you? Are we under attack? Can you help? Are you an Agent? Why is the wall screaming? Who are you? How do I-

<AF> I have no idea. Explosion registered in this wing around 0830 hours, not sure who did it. Either way, we're under a full scale attack, command is shattered, and most of the skips are out of their pens. And unless you want to be 6 feet deep in bright yellow plastic, you'll have to come with me.

<RM> Where? It's just that I'm-

<AF> Deeper. Underground. Main atrium to the wing's crawling with those motherfuckers, we'll need to head to the basement. Hopefully we'll find others there, and wait for the whole thing to blow over. Understand?

<RM> …y-yes, sir.

<AF> And that box, what's in it? If it's a skip, open it. At least we'll have some more firepower than this empty gun.

<RM> Can't exactly do that, sir. If the temperature in here so much as rises a couple degrees we'd be

crawling with those spiders by now.

<AF> …damn. I've always wanted myself one of those magic rings.

Excerpt from Security Camera-G-0007298

Camera feed shows minor stress fractures on south-east wall, overhead plaster sheeting has collapsed. Agent [REDACTED] regains consciousness.

Agent [REDACTED]: [Coughs several times] Sir, wake up, sir.

Dr. Dier: I'm here, [REDACTED].

Agent [REDACTED]: Sir, there's been some sort of attack, we have to get to a security station.

Dr. Dier: Wait, I must check on containment.

Agent [REDACTED]: [Gestures to the left side of Dr. Dier's face] Sir, you're injured. We should go.

Dr. Dier: This will only take a minute, watch the door.

Security cameras 0017699, 6649881, 0027998 register Dr. Dier's access codes during . . - . . .

Interview: Dr. Tarn Honey/Dr.

Portion of interview between Dr. and Dr. Tarn Honey, / /

Dr. : I'm sorry? You couldn't get back to the containment area?

Dr. Honey: Yes. There were two men there, with guns. I couldn't see their faces, before you ask.

Dr. **:** Did you at least try -

Dr. Honey: No, I didn't!

(At this point **Dr. Honey** slammed his hand on the table.)

Dr. Honey: Oh. Oh god, my hands…

Dr. **:** Dr. Honey, please answer me.

Dr. Honey: Of course. Sorry, I must have…must have drifted off there.

Dr. **:** Understandable. Could you hear the men?

Dr. Honey: I…no, I couldn't hear them properly. They left after a few minutes. At this point, I knew that the area wasn't safe, so I went to the cafeteria. I hoped to find some people.

Dr. **:** And did you?

Dr. Honey: Not alive.

Cafeteria Surveillance Log / /

Doctor T. Honey *enters the room. Remains of several researchers and security personnel are present within.* ***T. Honey*** *reacts with shock, then pulls a gun out of a corpses holster.*

<**T. Honey**> Shit, shit, shit…sorry, I'm sorry…

T. Honey *takes a seat on the other side of the room, holding his head in his hands. Sounds of somebody approaching are heard.* ***T. Honey*** *takes the gun and holds it to his head.*

A. Adams *enters the room.*

<**T. Honey**> S-Stay the fuck back! I'll do it, I swear!

<**A. Adams**> Doctor, put down the gun.

A. Adams *steps forward.*

<**T. Honey**> I said *back!* You won't get me, not me!

<**A. Adams**> Doctor, I'm not with the attackers. Give me the gun.

<**T. Honey**> Why exactly should I believe anything you say? Give you my gun, are you crazy? Where's your identification?! I want to see your identification!

A. Adams *slides her identification card along the table.* ***T. Honey*** *picks it up and examines it.*

<**T. Honey**> Oh. L-Level 4? Sorry, ma'am, I didn't realize. You can have the gun, I suppose.

T. Honey *slides* ***A. Adams****' identification and his gun back along the table.*

<**A. Adams**> Right. Now, where is Command and Control?

<**T. Honey**> Ha. You're new to Level 4, then?

<**A. Adams**> You could say that. I'm not taking your gun, though. You'll need it.

<**T. Honey**> Through Decontamination Wing 6, turn left when you reach Protective Materials and keep on going till you hit the doors. Can't miss it.

A. Adams *turns to leave.*

<**T. Honey**> Still though, ma'am, hundreds of unholy abominations are loose in the building. You may want to keep your gun close, and I don't mean for defense.

A. Adams *leaves the room.*

Excerpt from debriefing of Prof. Anders Bjornsen

SA: What were you doing when you encountered Ms. Adams?

AB: I was outside Decon 6, wrestling with one of the arms, trying to pry loose the last of the guns. I'm pretty sure it was already out of ammo, but I didn't want one of the others to pick up a clip somewhere and reload it.

SA: Decontamination Wing 6 is quite a distance from the transport depot or your designated containment breach evacuation point. Why were you there?

AB: The explosions had filled a lot of the hallways with rubble and I was trying to get to the containment chamber of SCP-200. It was the only place I could think of that was reasonably secure, assuming that it hadn't been collapsed. Decon 6 was on the quickest path to get there.

SA: How did you recognize Ms. Adams?

AB: I'd seen her in the cafeteria a couple of times before, once with Director Clef, so I figured she belonged. She was headed straight for the doors into Decon, but I stopped her before she went in.

SA: Why was that?

AB: I'd already peeked in there and it was fucking chaos. All safe or euclid class SCPs have to go through it, even if they're well-documented, but it's only supposed to be temporary containment and the explosions must've cracked some of the walls. At least half the chamber doors were open and I saw about 8 or 10 people in what looked like riot gear, piling a ton of shit into some metal boxes. Paperwork, at least one laptop, and I think I saw a birdcage with something moving in it. Their gear didn't have any of the guards' markings on them, so I figured that they weren't part of the Foundation.

SA: What did Ms. Adams do when you told her this?

AB: What do you think she did? She cursed and asked if there was any other way around it.

SA: Was there?

AB: She obviously found one, or we wouldn't be here. I told her to follow me and we took the long way around until we got to the security station outside the Safe Humanoids wing. It took us about 20 minutes, since we had to backtrack a couple of times when we hit blocked hallways or more groups of those riot-gear guys. One time they were carrying something in a body bag that was struggling pretty fiercely.

SA: Did you encounter any SCPs on your way?

AB: Not that I know of. I smelled something burning a couple of times and I was told later that there was a loose SCP made of fire. And when we finally got to the security station outside the Safe Humanoids wing, we found that all the guards had been decapitated and burned. I was almost at SCP-200's chamber, so I figured that I was almost as safe as I was going to get, and pointed her down to Protective Materials. Assuming that she didn't encounter anything else, she should've been there in about 10 minutes.

SA: After Ms. Adams left you, what did you do?

AB: I went into the Humanoids wing. Unfortunately, it'd been pretty trashed too, although I don't know if it was from the explosions, from the invading force, or one of the escaped SCPs. I do know that when I got to SCP-200's chamber, the door was wide open and the damn cocoon was ripped to shreds. And I couldn't even hole up there because the damn handle was ripped off and the door wouldn't close.

SA: Security camera footage shows that you didn't stay

in the Humanoids Wing very long. If you were looking for a safe place to hole up, why did you leave?

AB: Well, like I said, the place was pretty trashed, so it wasn't really any safer than the rest of the Site. Also… I kinda felt responsible for SCP-200, even though I wasn't on that project any more. I'd spent over a year studying it and if it had finally emerged, I sorta wanted to see what it was. If it was moderately harmless, I could hopefully herd it back into containment and if it wasn't… well, I figured I could at least get some observations for the next guy to review.

Audio Log from Hallway 34

Agent Lombardi: "Hold up. We got hostiles ahead."

Agent Vance: "Can we get around them?"

Agent Lombardi: "Maybe. But they've got weapons. We want weapons."

Agent Vance: "That's… I don't think—"

Agent Lombardi: "That's okay. I can think for us both. Now, see that door over there? That's quarantine for new skips, and I got an idea. I'm gonna distract them. Go in there, open the third door to the left, and then go flat on the ground."

Agent Vance: "Do what?"

Agent Lombardi: "Okay, go!"

Video shows Agent Lombardi appearing in the hall near the insurgents. He appeared to yell something, then dived back behind cover. Agent Vance approached, using a vending machine for concealment, until running the remaining distance to the door. Several shots were fired, but neither Agent was injured. The insurgents ran through the door after Agent Vance. Approximately thirty

seconds later, several pieces of the insurgents flew out of the room, striking the opposite wall. Anomaly VN-1520 (SCP number pending) exited through the door before killing several other insurgents. It then deactivated, falling to the floor. Agent Lombardi picked it up as Agent Vance emerged back into the hallway, visibly shaken.

Agent Lombardi: "Good work, kid."

Agent Vance: "Oh Jesus."

Agent Lombardi: "Go grab a towel from the washroom. You've got some insurgent on you."

Agent Vance: "Oh Jesus!"

Agent Lombardi: "Goddammit! At least use the trashcan. All right, now… FUCK!"

Agent Vance: "What's… what's wrong?"

Agent Lombardi: "It broke the fucking guns."

Archived email message

Sent: - - 08:33 GMT
From: skatz@ .org
To: facilitiesmanager@ .org
Re: Men's room

Jerry— I had to stop by the Site-17 business office to pick up some documents and I couldn't help noticing that the water in the urinals of the mens room next to Conference Room G is boiling. Also, there is a weird smell in the parking lot, like rotten eggs. Might want to have a crew check it out.
Best, Sheldon

SHELDON M. KATZ, ESQ. LEGAL DEPARTMENT
skatz@ .org
office: . . fax: . . cell: . .

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Excerpt from Security Camera-G-0007298

Agent [REDACTED] has been exchanging fire with a single assailant on the end of the hallway adjacent to Dr. Dier's office for minutes. She has suffered several shrapnel injuries to her lower abdomen.

Agent [REDACTED]: Goddamn! [Clutches her waist]

Dr. Dier: It appears SCP-027 is heading in this direction. Bullets may not be the only thing we will need to worry about.

Cockroaches observed emerging from office tiling and ceiling.

Agent [REDACTED]: What the hell are we supposed to do? We're pinned down!

Dr. Dier: [Retrieves his sidearm, before crouching down on the floor to retrieve something]

Agent [REDACTED]: What are you doing?!

Dr. Dier: Grenade! [Lobs rat from behind door towards attacker, attacker runs for cover]

Agent [REDACTED]: [Emerges from behind office door,

fires twice, killing unknown assailant]

Dr. Dier and Agent [REDACTED] begin moving towards Sublevel-F3.

Transcript of Containment Breach 13-34 Eyewitness Account Interview

Interviewed: Assistant Researcher Li Huang.

Interviewer: O5-

Foreword: Temporary Containment Area 17-Gamma's surveillance functions were completely disabled at 0811. Around 0832, it is estimated that Containment Breach 13-34 occurred at Temporary Containment Area 17-Gamma. Assistant Researcher Huang was an eyewitness of Containment Breach 13-34 and the immediate aftermath.

O5- : Describe the events leading up to Containment Breach 13-34.

Huang: People flocked to 17-Gamma for safety. The logic was that if it could contain a Keter-class SCP object, then it could protect them from the attackers. Though communication with the main Site had been disabled, 17-Gamma was believed to be one of the safest places in Site-17. Basic security had remained uncompromised, and there were plenty of weapons. At 0823, of course, the attack by—

Huang coughs.

Huang: Excuse me. 17-Gamma came under attack. Many Foundation personnel, having…collected SCP objects from Site-17, began to use those objects in order to repel the attackers.

O5- : They intentionally breached containment for those objects?

Huang: Not everybody. The explosions had already breached containment for some objects, which were just picked up off the ground.

O5- : Did you do that?

Huang: No.

O5- : Please continue.

Huang: The exact details escape me. However, approximately thirty seconds into the firefight, I became aware of somebody using **SCP-399** as an enhanced stunner by producing what I presume to be some sort of pressure shockwave. Perhaps unauthorized usage of SCP-914 provided a power source.

O5- : Do you know exactly how 17-Gamma's containment unit was breached?

Huang: No. I didn't even see it happen. Maybe a stray grenade caused structural damage. But even if I had seen the breach occur, I wouldn't have understood the significance. I didn't know what 17-Gamma was containing. I didn't have the clearance. I assume that many others were similarly unaware. In the absence of a chain of command, we simply didn't know where not to go and what not to do.

O5- : What happened during Containment Breach 13-34?

Huang: The shockwaves were very loud, which already exacerbated the situation. However, that alone was not enough to cause the destruction associated with Containment Breach 13-34. I am not entirely certain, but I have my suspicions about what did. A piece of metal debris that resonated with a shockwave in just the right way, producing a sound quite like a bell…we all know what happened next. I remember an explosion of wings, and then, nothing. I woke up a few minutes later.

SCP-469 was nowhere in sight.

O5- : So Containment Breach 13-34 was the result of unfortunate coincidence?

Huang: Maybe. But fifty-two people died in Containment Breach 13-34. If you wish to attribute that to unfortunate coincidence, that's your decision, sir.

0916 to 1103: Disorder

This period of the crisis can be considered the nadir of the incident: due to complete loss of containment and the presence of the hostile party, Foundation elements were rendered both operational and combat ineffective. Hostile elements had free reign of the facility, and many priceless artifacts were lost. The situation was further exacerbated by a complete release of D-Class personnel when confinement protocols failed. The presence of several hundred hardened criminals in this crisis situation was, to put it mildly, not optimally conducive to maintaining order.

It is at this point that certain facts about the hostile force became evident. Firstly, the training and skill level of the hostiles were widely disparate: certain elements displayed paramilitary levels of combat and tactical expertise, while others were clearly untrained civilians. Secondly, the goal of the hostile force was not capture, but release of the contained artifacts: although some opportunistic looting took place, escaping SCP artifacts were not pursued, but allowed to escape.

It is for this reason that I believe that the hostile force were not directed by Marshall, Carter, and Dark: MC&D would not have passed up the opportunity to retrieve several key artifacts that could have proven lucrative to their private efforts. The modus operandi is also inconsistent with the GOC or the Chaos Insurgency:

Among other things, the Global Occult Coalition would have simply eradicated the entire site, while the Insurgency would not have passed up the opportunity to capture several easily weaponized artifacts for private use. Although the goals seem consistent with the group called the Serpent's Hand, the brazen nature of the attack (and the lack of SCP-class artifacts among the attackers) are not characteristic of that organization's modus operandi. Further research is required.

Archived email message

Sent: - - 10:24 GMT
From: skatz@ .org
To: facilitiesmanager@ .org
Re: Parking lot

Jerry— when I went back to the parking lot to head back to my office in the city, my car was gone and there was just this smoking crater where my parking spot used to be. The car isn't the issue- it was a rental, but that was _my_ parking spot. You know how often I'm in and out so I am requesting that the handicapped spot next to Building C be reassigned to me.
Also, if you see Burt or Sungwoo, tell them I need a ride.
Shel
SHELDON M. KATZ, ESQ. LEGAL DEPARTMENT
skatz@ .org
office: . . fax: . . cell: . .

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any penalty under federal tax law or (ii) promote, market or recommend any purchase, investment or other action.

Interview: Dr. Tarn Honey/Dr.

Portion of interview between Dr. and Dr. Tarn Honey, / /

<Interview Begins>

Dr. : We're almost done here. I hope you do realize your conduct in the cafeteria was highly unprofessional.

Dr. Honey: I was not really thinking of my after-action review at the time, sir.

Dr. : Nevertheless, what did you do next? We've got this bit on camera, but we need you to confirm it.

Dr. Honey: Well, I left the room after maybe…half an hour?

Dr. : Is that an exact number?

Dr. Honey: Forty five minutes? Wait…

Dr. : Dr. Honey, please face the camera.

Dr. Honey: Oh…sorry, sorry, don't quite know what came over me there. (Laughs)

Dr. : You left the room?

Dr. Honey: Yes, and I ran right into a man…must have been a D-class, I suppose, with the jumpsuit…holding a fire extinguisher, and then…

Dr. : Yes?

Dr. Honey: I…I don't remember what happened next. I don't remember! What is this, where the hell am I?! Oh [EXPLETIVE], my arms!

Dr. : Restrain the subject!

Dr. : My apologies, Dr. Honey. You were beaten to a pulp by the D-class and entered a deep coma. I am sorry, but you never came out of it.

Dr. Honey: You son of a [EXPLETIVE]! You son of a -

<End Interview>

Closing Statement: Instance of **SCP-022-1** was removed from the room and expired a week later.

Transcript of Video Surveillance Recording
Location: Checkpoint Camera, Service Entrance 4-02, Section Four
Date: / /20

0829L: *Service Entrance 4-02 is visibly closed and locked down. Two heavily armed agents identified as Agent and Agent are guarding the entrance checkpoint while alarms are still audible in the background. The bodies of at least two hostile combatants are visible in the periphery.*

0829L: *An individual visually identified as Dr. Rachel Mackenzie is seen rounding the corner towards the checkpoint, looking slightly disoriented. A gunshot wound is visible on her left shoulder.*

0830L - Agent : Halt! Stop or we'll shoot!

0831L - Dr. Mackenzie: Please don't shoot! I'm lost, there's people everywhere… I need help…

0831L: *Agents and look at each other, clearly uncomfortable.*

0831L - Agent : Where's your badge? Who are you?

0832L - Dr. Mackenzie: I'm Mac… Mackenzie… I lost my badge when I got hit… (visible tears) please, I need

help…

0832L: *Agents and trade looks again, and confer in whispers.*

0833L - Agent : "Alright, come here. Quick."

0833L: *Dr. Mackenzie looks behind her once, then quickly approaches the checkpoint.*

0834L - Agent : "Okay. Just sit tight, and we'll-"

0834L: *As Dr. Mackenzie suddenly rushes directly at Agent , plunging her hand into his abdomen and tearing out what is presumed to be his liver.*

0835L - Agent : "What the hell-"

0835L: *Dr. Mackenzie turns and attacks Agent as Agent collapses, pushing the former out of the camera's view.*

0835L: *Sounds of struggling, followed a scream that is cut off.*

0837L: *Individual previously identified as Dr. Mackenzie re-enters field of view, with a large amount of blood on her upper body. On closer inspection, her ears are elongated and fur-covered, and she proceeds to experiment with the door controls for several minutes before managing to un-seal the entrance.*

0840: *Individual exits Site 17 via Service Entrance 4-02.*

End of transcript.

Excerpt from Video Log, Observation Camera 4923287:

0800: Vacuum system for SCP-027 operating within normal parameters; two technicians performing routine maintenance.

0811: Series of explosions from elsewhere in the facility, followed seconds later by alarms sounding. Technicians quickly leave room.

0819: Vacuum system and normal lighting shut down; emergency lighting comes online.

0827: A much louder explosion is heard, shaking the room briefly.

0856: Two unidentified figures enter the room and start searching. A third figure stays outside the doorway, presumably on watch.

0858: All figures exit.

0922: A pounding is heard from an inlet duct. This continues for approximately ninety seconds.

0924: Panel on the duct flies off, followed immediately by a swarm of flying insects. Subject 027-02 peers cautiously out of the duct, lowers self to the floor.

0925: Subject picks up a screwdriver and a crescent wrench, peers out the exit door, disappears out the door.

Instrumentation Log, `SCP-555` Containment Control

0700: Containment normal. Field strength normal. Battery backup at 100% and charging.

0730: Containment normal. Field strength normal. Battery backup at 100% and charging.

0800: Containment normal. Field strength normal. Battery backup at 100% and charging.

0811: External power fluctuation. Power returns to normal. Battery backup at 100% and charging.

0827: External power lost. Switching to battery backup.

Battery backup at 99%. SCADA alarm tripped and relevant personnel paged.

0827: Power to air filtration system lost.

0827: Cryomagnet quench in quadrant 4 of ceiling electromagnet array. SCADA alarm tripped and relevant personnel paged. Atmosphere alarm tripped; warning signals activated and relevant personnel paged. Atmospheric venting system activated.

0827: Activating permanent magnet array.

0827: Permanent magnet array activation failed after 5 retries with error code 3: mechanical obstruction. SCADA alarm tripped and relevant personnel paged.

0830: Containment running on battery backup power. Field strength normal. Battery backup at 95%.

0831: Containment control door ajar.

0833: Auxilliary power feed activated. Battery backup at 96% and charging.

Surveillance log, `SCP-555` Containment Control

0700: No motion detected. No anomalies detected.

0730: No motion detected. No anomalies detected.

0800: No motion detected. No anomalies detected.

0811: Motion detected, source unknown. Explosions heard.

0827: Motion detected, source unknown. Explosion heard, louder, followed by extremely loud bang as ceiling magnets quench and vent helium.

0827: External main power to surveillance system lost.

Switching to power-over-Ethernet.

0827: Atmospheric warning siren and revolving lamps activate.

0827: Ceiling of SCP-555 containment partially collapses.

0827: SCADA alarm buzzer sounds.

0827: Automatic containment systems attempt to deploy permanent magnet array; array is blocked from extending by rubble from ceiling collapse.

0831: Containment Control door opens; Junior Researcher Thumb enters, swearing profusely and pulling a standard mu-metal magnetic containment crate behind him.

0832: Junior Researcher Thumb closes, locks, and seals the door and opens the crate, removing a portable generator, laptop computer, five-gallon container of gasoline, and standard Foundation non-ferromagnetic SCBA set, with three tank sets (60 minutes duration each).

0833: Junior Researcher Thumb starts the generator, retrieves the auxilliary power cord from below the control console, and attaches it.

0834: Junior Researcher Thumb jams the room's chair under the door handle and dons the SCBA set.

0835: Junior Researcher Thumb enters SCP-555's containment chamber and begins to clear rubble from the permanent magnet array.

0837: Junior Researcher Thumb attempts to dislodge a mass of reinforced concrete from the permanent magnet array and cannot; the rebar is stuck to the magnet face. Junior Researcher Thumb swears profusely.

0838: Junior Researcher Thumb exits the containment chamber.

0840: Junior Researcher Thumb adds more fuel to the generator, attaches the laptop computer to the generator and network port, and sits against the control console.

0842: Junior Researcher Thumb smashes the atmosphere warning lights and siren with an SCBA tank. Alarms cease.

Interview: Agent Izumi J ("Enma Ai")
Excerpt from Interview conducted by Agent , regarding Agent Izumi's involvement in Incident 234-900-Tempest Night-1.

Agent :State your location and assignment at the time of the explosions.

Agent Izumi: **SCP-966** containment chamber observation room. Surveillance of experiment 966- , regarding the possibility of sapience in SCP-966 specimens.

Agent : Describe what happened following the beginning of the incident.

Agent Izumi: The incident began as the doors to 966 chamber were opened in order to conduct the experiment. The explosions caused a momentary malfunction of the surveillance cameras and light equipment inside the room. Showing previously unknown cognitive capacity, the four 966 specimens contained overwhelmed the security guard in the room, removed his lead-lined helmet and appeared to continuously expose him to their waves for 10 seconds. As I equipped infrared goggles and entered the room in order to terminate them, the guard began to shout incoherently and shoot in all directions. I dived for cover and waited for his bullets to end. Unfortunately, this brief window of time allowed the four specimens to escape.

Agent : The guard didn't hit any of them?

Agent Izumi: He seems to have hit at least one, as I could see splatters and a trail of what I deduced to be blood; it is hard to tell in infrared.

Agent : I see. What did you do?

Agent Izumi: I locked the doors to the chamber and followed the blood trail, hoping to find and neutralize the escaped specimens. The explosions still seemed to be going off; one happened approximately 300 meters away from me. After that one, I heard a loud, inhuman scream that was suddenly cut short. Walking in its direction, I verified that two instances of 966 had been killed by the explosion.

Agent : And there were no traces of the two remaining specimens?

Agent Izumi: No. There were traces of something else, though. It was hard to notice it because of my goggles, but it was clear what it was once it grabbed my arm.

Video log, Hallway 23. Camera damaged by explosion, audio is compromised. Tracking individuals: Agent Izumi J , SCP-106

/Transcript begins at : , minutes after the begging of the incident. Agent Izumi enters into view from the left side of the hall, walking slowly while looking at her surroundings, holding a handgun in her right hand. She stops near a blockage created by a explosion and kneels, checking something.

At this moment, the wall left to agent Izumi begins to show signs of corrosion caused by SCP-106. A rotted humanoid arm suddenly appears and grabs the agent's left arm. She proceeds to immediately turn and shoot SCP-106's arm, which maintains his hold on her. After running out of bullets, agent Izumi proceeds to grab a

rock and repeatedly hit 106's arm with it. At this point, 106 begins to slowly pull her in the direction of the wall.

This proceeds for half a minute, until the agent proceeds to beat her own arm with the rock. Due to the corrosion caused by contact with 106, her arm is severed after 6 hits. Agent Izumi proceeds to run away from the location, holding the stump remaining from her left arm with her right hand. SCP-106 continues to slowly drag the remains of the agent's arm towards the wall, disappearing after minutes./

Review of Security Camera 17-699 Feed

SCP-699 *sits in its research bay. Panel on* ***SCP-699*** *begins to slide forward, approximately 10 cm from top of object.*

Security camera fails for approximately five minutes.

Security footage restored. ***SCP-699*** *seen with top panel open, to half the length of object. No entities observed within object or research bay. Research bay door open; guards missing.*

O5-8: Lovely. Apparently that thing could let itself out any time it wanted to. And we don't even know what it looks like. Damn!

Security Feed — High Value Item Storage

Storage safe open. Guards have abandoned their post. Female civilian (identified as Angela Williams, detained by Foundation for three years and two months after capture leaving ***SCP-052****) seen entering storage facility.*

Eight minutes later, Williams emerges from storage facility, screaming unintelligibly (language later identified as Middle Egyptian), holding ***SCP-911*** *in left hand.*

Encounters Dr. Clarkson while leaving area.

Dr. Clarkson: Who are you? What have you got there? DROP IT! [Clarkson draws sidearm.]

Williams: [Screams in Middle Egyptian; holds **SCP-911** forward; charges at Clarkson.]

Clarkson fires three times. Williams drops to ground, mortally wounded.

Williams: [muttering] 682 will save us. 343. The body and mind of God.

*Clarkson looks thoughtfully at Williams; then bends to pick up **SCP-911**. Stands, briefly stares blankly, then begins screaming in Middle Egyptian. Leaves area.*

Excerpt from Video Log, Observation Camera 2329988:

0941: Subject 027-02 finds the bodies of two researchers (later identified as [REDACTED]) in Corridor 19-J, proceeds to search the bodies.

0942: Subject takes the lab coat and credentials of [REDACTED], continues down the corridor.

Security footage transcript:
Site 17 heliport/atrium area

Three humanoid figures observed moving overland to Site 17. Advancement unimpeded due to Site failure and system-wide communication fallout.

Humanoids access heliport area. Two are observed to be white adult males (subjects 1&2), estimated between twenty and twenty five. Both appear to be very tired and frightened. Between them is a large humanoid (subject 3), estimated at approximately seven feet tall, wearing an old business suit, black gloves, and a burlap bag over the head. Bag is blank, and laced tightly along the back of the head, preventing identification.

Subject three grabs subject one forcibly by the back of the neck. Subject one begins to speak, appearing to be in pain. Subject two nods several times. Subject Three releases subject one, then all enter the atrium area.

Members of the force attacking Site 17 encounter the group. There appears to be general confusion for several seconds, then the attacking force opens fire on the subject. Subject three observed to use subjects 1&2 as human shields several times, before there is an interruption in the camera feed.

Static for four seconds

video feed is restored. All subjects and hostiles are dead and in various states of dismemberment, except subject three. Subject appears to be holding a jawbone, which it quickly discards. Subject crosses to the far wall, and begins to repeatedly strike a panel with its fist.

After five minutes of sustained striking, the panel is deformed, and the subject rips it open by a twisted edge. Subject pushes its head in to the opening, looking around for several seconds, before sliding inside and descending.

Subject moves out of functional camera range.

Church of The Broken God “disciple” interview transcript excerpt:

Is the individual identified on this recording as “Subject Three” one of your agents.

Oh broken one, my teeth…they hurt so much, please…

Answer me, or it's your fingers next.

Oh…oh….he…it….it's not ours, not anymore.

…explain.

I…I'm not even sure I can. It's…something. I think those serpent people found him…or made him…you know, those magic ones? It was supposedly something of theirs…Uh. The deacon….d-deacon Hark, he brought it to us. It…it's not a human, or alive, or….maybe it is, I don't….oh god it hurts…

Keep going, and maybe I can make it stop. Did you send him with the attack? Did the Church know about this beforehand?

No…listen, he doesn't have anything to do with the Church anymore…it…it was never a believer. The Broken, he has….has nothing to do with it. It's trying to do…something…I'm not sure what. There's supposed to be some…ritual or something, it takes years and years to do. It's not supposed to, it's…off the chain, I think. If it screws up, something very, very bad…happens to it. The deacon tried to bribe it off or something…it killed a lot of people. It jumps around, does things for other groups… but it's in it for itself…nothing else…Ooooohh…

Hey, stay with me here, or i'll have to wake you up again. Why did it go to the dungeon? How did it know the emergency hatch was there?

I don't…don't know, it knows things, sometimes. It just….knows….knows, for some reason. We found pictures of it going…back over three…hundred years. Woodcuts of witches…devil worship…I tried…to tell Hark…told him…i told him…told him it was bad….just stupid…the bagman doesn't listen to…anything…

The bagman? Is that what it's called?

I don't know…we…called it that. It never told us otherwise…it…it can't speak by itself…it isn't…allowed to.

Interview: J. Flames/O5-

O5- : Now, where were you when the incident began?

Flames: I was in Laboratory K-13 at the time, working on the new *Capsicum chinense* cultivars I'd obtained from Chelsea, ah, that is, Dr. Elliott. We had been jokingly calling them Liche Chilis, since they were descended from the more common Ghosts…

O5- : Yes, thank you. And what did you do when the alert happened.

Flames: Honestly, I didn't give it much thought. I sighed, set up the dragon, and went back to work.

O5- : Excuse me?

Flames: Well, they had given me K-13 to work with because it was so remote from everything else, because people kept complaining about eye irritation and their sinuses, so I figured either everything would work out, and I'd be fine, or it wouldn't and the site nuke would go off and there'd be nothing else to do. So, I went back to work.

O5- : And "the dragon"?

Flames: My pet name for the fire extinguisher I modified to spray out my Garlic Fission sauce. It's a delicious sauce, and rates at about 1.7 million Scovilles. The amusing thing about Garlic Fission is that gas masks only offer limited resistance. I like adding it to soup for a little kick.

O5- : Yes… continue.

Flames: About fifty minutes later, I started feeling a little odd. I felt, I don't know, like my chilis weren't really worth it, and that nothing was. I recognized it as a possible memetic effect, of course, but I just didn't care. That was when my door opened, and the insurgent walked in.

She was drenched in blood up to her shoulders, and had

a look of… satisfaction, I suppose. She was enjoying herself, and she held a chef's knife in her hands. I figured afterwards it was **`six sixty-eight`**, but I just didn't care enough to do anything about it.

Fortunately for me, that was when the dragon went off, and sprayed her with the Garlic Fission sauce. She dropped the knife and my mind cleared, so I brained her with a lab stool. I did not want her to get back up again, so I grabbed the knife and slit her throat. She stopped struggling, of course, when I picked up the knife, so I knew it was six sixty-eight.

O5- : I see. So why did you head to the main cafeteria at that point?

Flames: Well, I thought it over like this while cleaning up the mess. I have a knife that will let me kill anyone and stop them from killing me, but only when it's in my hand and I'm actively thinking about mayhem. I do have a bit of a temper, of course, because I loathe interruptions to my work, and the solution presented itself. I'd head to the main cafeteria and finally make some good food that the whole site could enjoy. I had some recipes I'd found online that I'd been wanting to try, and finally I'd be able to use the big ovens to make my grandma's corn bread recipe.

I figured it would make a sort of safe haven for people and a bit of a honey pot, because any insurgents show up, I'd be in the kitchen and I could deal with them.

O5- : Sounds… sketchy.

Flames: Yeah, I guess so. But I really wanted to use those ovens, and I thought, when would I have the chance?

Transcript of Security Camera 0046782

1020 Agent [REDACTED], and Dr. Dier observed exiting from Stairwell-C12. Dr. Dier is bleeding heavily from earlier sustained head trauma during initial attack. Agent [REDACTED] fires several times up the stairwell before exiting.

1021 Dr. Dier enters office 0026782, Agent [REDACTED] is twenty metres behind him outside of Stairwell-C12. Dr. Dier returns with a first aid kit, and beckons for Agent [REDACTED]. Agent [REDACTED] shuts and locks stairwell door before heading in Dr. Dier's direction.

1022 Spectrum sensory equipment detect several bursts of waves within Stairwell-C12. Scratching sounds eminate from stairwell door.

1024 Dr. Dier discards first aid kit after bandaging head wound. Agent [REDACTED] and Dr. Dier enter junction 62. Foundation security team observed entering hallway 00763-62 leading **SCP-082**.

1025 Stairwell door becomes unlocked. **SCP-966** instance exits stairwell.

1026 Dr. Dier alerts Foundation security team to presence of **SCP-966**. Personnel, including Agent [REDACTED] and Dr. Dier head down hallway 00893-62.

1027 **SCP-966** instance enters junction 62. waves emitted by **SCP-966**. Personnel and **SCP-082** out of effective range.

1028 **SCP-082** told that **SCP-966** is a member of a German task force sent to assassinate him. **SCP-082** breaks away from the group and heads towards **SCP-966** entity.

1029 Foundation security team observe **SCP-082**. Dr. Dier and Agent [REDACTED] leave through hallway 00687-72 **SCP-082** begins brawling with **SCP-966**

instance.

1037 **SCP-966** rendered unconscious. **SCP-082** is secured by security team.

Agent Lament is seen attempting to access his office and, after opening the door, shut it suddenly, turning and putting his back hard against it. The door is seen thudding hard several times as Lament appears to be screaming.

After approximately forty seconds, Agent Dodridge is seen approaching at high speed, holding his sidearm and telling Lament to step aside. Lament shakes his head, attempting to explain something, but Dodridge shoves his aside, yanking the door open and firing.

Dodridge appears to go pale as he then slams the door shut, holding it while Agent Lament moves several pieces of furniture in front of his door.

Agents Dodridge and Lament start moving down the hallway at top speed as Agent Lament's door explodes outward and hundreds of instances of SCP-705 stream out, following them.

Audio Signal Later Picked Up By Agent [REDACTED]:

Lament: This is an all points bulletin! The lid is off! Repeat! **THE LID IS OFF!**

Dodridge (Background): Who taught them how to use rubber bands?! Jesus Christ!!

Lament: Request immediate evac! The lid is off! God damnit!

It's to be noted that none of these creations are any more effective due to the use of harmless clay ammunition.

Audio transcript from damaged Security Camera 0212395

<Agent Frederick> Well, here we are. Security Floor D-9. Can you smell that fresh air!

<Researcher Min> The dungeon? Bombs went off, someone's freeing all the SCPs, everything is loose, and we're going into the dungeon?

<AF> Well, it's the fastest way to get to the maintenance tunnels, and there's gonna be at least a couple skips we can pick up. Here, this way.

<Approaching footsteps are heard, along with a loud, squelching sound. Cross-referencing functional security camera feeds reveals it to be **SCP-955**.>

<AF> …okay, wrong way. Nice kitty, good kitty…ohgod opentheskipboxopentheskipboxopentheskipbox dosomething quick-

<Loud thud sound is heard.>

<RM> I think I'm starting to like this ice box.

Transcript of Junction 42 Security Camera

0852 Camera feed restored, research bay door open; guards missing. **SCP-699** research bay door lighting fails.

0853 Camera feed lost.

0900 Camera feed restored. Hallway 42-0699 lighting fails.

0901 Hallway 42-1080 lighting fails.

0903 Camera feed lost.

0911 Camera feed restored. Hallway 42-2420 lighting

fails.

0922 Junction 42 backup lighting fails. Camera emersed in darkness.

0934 Two lights observed in hallway 42-0699.

0936 Eight lights observed in hallway 42-0699.

0942 One-hundred thirty two lights observed in hallway 42-0699.

0943 Camera feed lost. Camera destroyed.

Excerpt from Video Log, Observation Camera 5623961:

0954: Firefight between two Foundation security agents and three unidentified intruders in Corridor 16-Q.

0955: Two intruders incapacitated by Foundation fire, one agent incapacitated by intruder fire. Subject 027-02 appears behind agents' position. Agent sees Subject, appears to give orders to keep cover.

0957: Remaining intruder incapacitated by agent's gunfire. Cloud of insects visible behind agents' position.

0958: Agent cautiously approaches incapacitated intruders, Subject following close behind. As agent prods the intruders, Subject 027-02 stabs agent in the neck with a screwdriver. Agent staggers, Subject stabs agent twice more in the neck. Agent incapacitated.

0959: Subject searches bodies of agents, takes weapons and ammunition, dons body armor. Insects seen swarming bodies of agents and intruders.

1002: Subject searches bodies of intruders, takes two grenades.

1003: Subject continues down corridor out of view,

toward Stairwell M5.

1104 to 1138: Reestablishment of Control

At approximately 1104, 2 hours and 53 minutes after the beginning of hostilities, Assistant Adams reached Command and Control and re-established site-wide communications. Unfortunately, access to the on-site nuclear device was impossible, due to the destruction of the control leads between C&C and the device (see attached addendum re: proposed modifications to current on-site nuclear destruct systems.)

Re-establishment of communications would have a profound impact on the course of the crisis. Personnel who had, up until this point, been acting independently with varying degrees of success, could now be coordinated into an effective combat force. With the aid of Assistant Adams, the insurgent attack would be driven back, albeit not soon enough to prevent the escape of several key SCP artifacts.

Post-recovery debriefing of Doctor Gears
(excerpt: sections 4-6)

How were you able to cross the D-9 Level after the mass failure?

I was fortunate to be in the company of several Agents and other staff members. Due to the damage to my leg, arms and internal organs, my mobility was severely restricted. We proceeded to the emergency access tunnels in the most direct route possible. Due to SCP-item alteration and damage, however, it was impossible to take any pre-plotted routes. Several Agents and staff were attacked, harmed and killed during the progression, however we were able to attain the access point with the casualty level well below the acceptable standard.

Were you able to observe any SCP escapes or cross-containimination?

I presume yes, however my ability to properly process and catalog this information was limited due to physical trauma. SCP-106 was observed in the security station and at other locations, and I would assume that its trans-dimensional nature would lead it to escape as a matter of course. One of the more obvious contaminations was that observed between SCP-682 and SCP-229. It appears that SCP-229 attempted to attack SCP-682. SCP-682 appears to have, rather then attack, integrated with SCP-229. SCP-682 appears to now be deeply integrated with the site information and electrical network. The ramifications of this have yet to be observed. More contamination is likely, but it will take more direct and controlled observation to be sure.

Did you observe any hostile attackers over the course of the escape?

None alive. Several corpses were observed, belonging to neither Site Staff or Agents, so it is assumed that the aggressors accessed the D-9 level by some means. One subject did cause a slight complication, however it is unclear as to whether this subject is a aggressor, SCP item, or some other designation. The subject was large, wearing a suit, gloves, and a rough cloth over its face. We were attempting to exit the main contamination area, when the subject was observed near a access panel. It turned to face our group after several Agents requested it to identify itself. As it faced us, it then reached out and removed a major fuse from the service panel, causing a majority of the hall to go dark. We were forced to backtrack a great distance to find a replacement for the damage. When we came back to the same area, the subject was gone, along with several of the corpses in the area.

Debriefing: Dr. Johannes Sorts

Excerpt from Interview conducted by O5- , regarding Dr. Sorts's involvement in Incident 234-900-Tempest Night-1

O5- : You lost control over some of the **SCP-945** replicas you were attempting to weaponize at various points, correct?

Dr. Sorts: I was trying to contain them, sir. I tried steer them towards destroying each other whenever I could, but it was tough using them productively. Any hostile agent they killed was soon replicated due to exposure. It's comforting knowing that the day I finally die there's going to be a clay statue showing up in my office to finish my reports, by the way.

O5- : We're getting off track. Where were you at 1104 when Adams regained control of communications?

Dr. Sorts: By that time I was in possession of SCP-945 itself, since it's just an old wooden box. That put me in position to almost completely account for replicas that were manifesting in the site.

SCP-945 propagates itself by having the oldest replica create smaller clay figurines representing deceased individuals. These figurines are placed in the box, and a new replica appears somewhere nearby. Controlling the small figurines gave me a kill switch over every replica created due to the outbreak. I had the oldest replica accompanying me, I had the box. SCP-945 was contained.

O5- : Containment procedures for 945 specifically forbid breaking new figurines during a containment breach.

Dr. Sorts: [inaudible]

O5- : You were also observed to remove Dr. S 's identification and coat from his body. Can you explain that?

Dr. Sorts: I'm just a level 2 memetics researcher. We get some authority in a meme-related outbreak but the "Action Movie" meme wasn't good enough for exercising long term control over Foundation replicas I encountered on the way down the power room. So I impersonated Dr. S — the replicas didn't know enough to tell the difference and he was level 4, so …

O5- : Dr. S was one of the individuals responsible for detonating the fail-safe device in the event of a breach like this. Were you aware of that?

Dr. Sorts: No, sir. Well, I'd assume any level 4 had that authority.

O5- : Were you aware that Dr. S was also an individual exposed to SCP-945 previously?

Dr. Sorts: Well, now that you mention it, yes I do recall seeing him on the list of exposed individuals.

O5- : Dr. S was one of the first researchers we lost during the attack. He died in the explosion in the break room. Therefore it is likely that Dr. S 's replica was one of the first to manifest. And if he was not the first, his replica would have been proceeding to the generators to detonate the fail-safe device personally given the loss of command. In accordance with his living duty, correct?

Dr. Sorts: Are you still interviewing me or—

O5- : Did you encounter Dr. S in the generator wing, or any other replica that would have been tasked with activating the fail-safe device, and did you or did you not interfere with their work?

Dr. Sorts: [inaudible]

O5- : Doctor Sorts, did you or did you not interfere with the activation of the fail-safe device?

Dr. Sorts: [loudly] Of course not! If I had the chance to

nuke my ass out of this fucking job I'd do it in a heartbeat!

Audio/Visual transcript, Generator 3A Control Room

1110 to 1115 Three instances of SCP-945 figures sit motionlessly at terminals. A fourth instance activates the speaker phone in response to a call.

A. Adams: Is anyone alive down there? Hello? Do you copy?

Replica "Garcez" (believed to be duplicate of Engineer Raphel Garcez, KIA due to enemy action at O825): This is Garcez in maintenance.

A. Adams: Controls for the fail safe are not responding. Can you activate the device locally?

"Garcez": What is your authorization?

A. Adams: [CODE REDACTED], Vice Alto Clef

"Garcez": [to another replica] Can you check that with the manual?

Video feed, Generator 2D Access Hall

1042 Gunfire exchanged between unknown forces and forces unseen on camera

1045 Unknown forces neutralized by suicide attack carried out by an individual wearing Foundation body armor and armed with a grenade.

1050 Instances of SCP-945 manifest in access hall, but crumble into inanimate pieces shortly afterward.

Audio/Visual transcript, Generator 3A Control Room

1116 to 1120 SCP-945 replicas mill about the room

listlessly, one is flipping slowly through a binder.

A. Adams: Garcez, I don't have video to your location right now but I am sure that if I did I would see you and your team rushing to follow my orders.

"Garcez": One moment, we are verifying your authority. We are very busy down here maintaining power.

A. Adams: What power? Did you not hear the explosions? Your generator is not even online right now!

"Garcez": Your authorization has been accepted. We will activate the fail safe. Goodbye.

"Garcez" terminates call before A. Adams can respond. SCP-945 replicas leave control room. No further activity in room for remainder of incident.

Video feed, Generator 3A Access Hall

1122 Four instances of SCP-945 enter hallway from 3A Control Room. One by one they crumble into inanimate pieces before they can exit to connecting locations. No further activity.

Transcript of Security Camera 0035979

Location: Security Floor D-9 Minimal Security Containment

<Researcher Min> You sure this is the right way to the exit?

<Agent Frederick> No. Not really.

<RM> Then what're you stopping here for?

<AF> To get…THIS.

<Camera feed shows Agent Frederick forcefully opening a locker, revealing a giant backpack-like contraption.>

<RM> …it says Kondraki on it…

<Agent Frederick puts on the contraption. He straps on what appears to be an arm-mounted cannon.>

<AF> I know right? We're going to be alright after all.

Excerpt from Interview Vang-2

Agent : So, in the end, your efforts were mostly unsuccessful.

Dr. Vang: Yes, that is correct. Between our guys getting killed anyways and the general inaccessibility of most parts of the facility, I think only seven or eight people actually ended up surviving with their earplugs.

Agent : I see. After you lost the remaining ear plugs, what did you do?

Dr. Vang: At that point, I decided that my best bet was to try and bust up the PA System and hope they didn't bring their own ghetto blasters or anything. Plus, after that one time with Dave, I knew a shortcut that wasn't near any of the combat zones.

Agent : Alright. Continue.

Dr. Vang: So I manage to get down to the PA system without incident, except for this fucking… thing. It was like a dude's head got chopped off and just started moving around again, like an octopus or some shit. Needless to say, I punted that down a flight of stairs and kept going.

Agent : What happened when you got to the control room?

Dr. Vang: The hallway was actually completely empty, and it was really quiet too, so it was actually scarier than a lot of the stuff I'd seen elsewhere. I suppose because

mostly low-level personnel work there, plus there aren't any SCPs stored in that wing. Anyways, the door was open, but there was this pile of body armor just sitting in the doorway, along with a machine gun and a bunch of what looked like old pottery smashed up into bits. I ignored it, although in retrospect it would have been a good idea to at least put on the body armor.

Agent **:** Go on.

Dr. Vang: Yeah, I walk in and turn towards the PA System, but instead there was this big bloody glob of flesh in its place, and some sweaty dude was working on it with a knife. After I had some dry heaves, I looked again and decided it was probably eight-ninety.

Agent **:** At the time, what did you know about SCP-890?

Dr. Vang: Nothing much, really. That he could operate on machines like they were people, and talked to them and whatnot.

Agent **:** So what happened next?

Camera Feed 17-4e, PA System Control Room, / /

1100 SCP-890 continues to operate on the mass of flesh. The unidentified individual remains stationary, facing the door. Gunfire is faintly audible. Feed is stable.

1105 Unidentified individual appears to collapse: a large amount of what appears to be dried clay falls from various openings in the armor, and all clothing and gear fall to the ground. No remains of the unidentified individual are visible. SCP-890 does not respond to this event.

1114 Dr. Vang enters the room, stepping over the pile of clay. He looks towards SCP-890 and covers his mouth. He then bends over and starts shuddering. This

continues for roughly a minute.

1115 *Dr. Vang:* "Hey! 890!"

SCP-890: "Shut up, I'm with a patient."

1116 Dr. Vang shoves SCP-890 forward with his hand. SCP-890 turns to face Dr. Vang.

SCP-890: "Sir, I am operating on a patient. Unless someone is dying out there, I suggest for the safety of this patient that you cease this unnecessary disruption."

Dr. Vang: "I can't let you do that, 890. If the enemy gets their hands on any kind of functional public address system, they could completely neutralize the Foundation's fighting force, understand? Now, I need you to stop trying to fix this thing and stand aside so I can destroy it, okay?

1117 Dr. Vang raises what appears to be a portion of a glass bottle.

SCP-890: "I'm afraid that I don't share your sentiments.

SCP-890 slices Dr. Vang's upper left arm with the scalpel held in his right hand. Dr. Vang stumbles backwards two steps, grunting. The wound is not visible from the camera angle.

1118 *Dr. Vang, under his breath:* Son of a-

Dr. Vang lunges towards SCP-890 with his broken bottle. The two then attempt to injure each other, Dr. Vang with the broken bottle and SCP-890 with the scalpel used in surgery.

Excerpt from Interview Vang-2

Agent : … I gotta say, kid. I've done a lot of things, but I never got into a knife fight with a skip.

Dr. Vang: Hey, if you had told me a week ago that I'd be stabbing a surgeon with a broken bottle, I wouldn't believe it either.

Agent : Indeed. A few questions, though. Your record doesn't show any form of formal combat training, but I looked over the tapes, and you *decimated* 890. I mean, he was an out-of-shape middle-aged guy, but still. Plus, from what you told me, you either threw up or had a panic attack pretty much every time something bad happened; but you just charged into that fight there. How on earth did you manage that?

Dr. Vang: Sir, you've read my file. You know I lived in Minneapolis, and I'm years old, so that means I grew up in the '90s in Minneapolis. Did you know they called it "Murderapolis" back then? It's because of all the murders.

Agent : Go on.

Dr. Vang: Well, I never actually got involved in any of the violence myself, but living where we did, my dad decided that I should learn how to fight, in case the situation ever came up. He was part of the resistance in Laos, real hardcore. Of course, I still got scared pretty much all the time and was a major wuss, but I figured that if it actually came down to getting in a fight, I'd be okay.

Agent : I see. Well, I think we can be done for today. How are you holding up?

Dr. Vang: Fine, I guess. Still sore, though. What did you say I was infected with?

Agent : We're not sure yet. You see, what we think happened was, the PA System was already infected with some sort of virus or worm or had something else wrong with it, and that translated over to an actual disease when 890 started operating on it. He got blood on his scalpel, and then he got the scalpel in you, so… yeah. I

can't confirm this, but if your symptoms go where the doctors think they're going, you're probably gonna be classified as an SCP yourself.

Dr. Vang: Heh. I'm probably going to be the first person ever to die of a computer virus.

Agent : I'm sure there are worse ways to go out.

Recovered Footage from Security Cameras B-298 through B-304

1050: Figure identified as Dr. Wachtel enters camera range running down Hallway 12 towards Stairwell 21.

1051: The door to the stairwell opens and Prof. A. Bjornsen cautiously exits, with several arms emerged from SCP-262. Camera B-300 rendered inoperable due to electrical failure.

1052: Dr. Wachtel comes to a halt and challenges Prof. Bjornsen's identity. Prof. Bjornsen identifies himself and tells Dr. Wachtel that the way up the stairwell is blocked by rubble.

1055: Dr. Wachtel and Prof. Bjornsen proceed down the adjoining corridor, Hallway 13.

1102: Agent [REDACTED] enters B-298 camera range, armed with one (1) M249 light machine gun taken from the site armoury. Dr. Dier follows behind the Agent. Overhead lighting in Hallway 16 shorts due to electrical failure.

1106: Dr. Dier and Agent [REDACTED] reach junction B-141516. Dr. Wachtel and Prof. Bjornsen turn into Hallway 14. Dr. Dier alerts Agent [REDACTED] to Dr. Wachtel and Prof. Bjornsen's presence. Agent [REDACTED] opens fire on Dr. Wachtel and Prof. Bjornsen, who dive for cover behind the adjacent wall.

1107: Agent [REDACTED] continues firing for twenty (20) seconds in short bursts while steadily moving down Hallway 14. Dr. Dier asks Agent [REDACTED] to stop firing. Dr. Dier orders Dr. Wachtel and Prof. Bjornsen to emerge from cover and surrender. Overhead lighting in Hallway 13 shorts due to electrical failure.

1108: Prof. Bjornsen and Dr. Wachtel emerge from cover and surrender. Dr. Dier and Agent [REDACTED] exchange identities and confirmation codes with Prof. Bjornsen and Dr. Wachtel. Agent [REDACTED] apologizes for her prior hostility. All four individuals begin heading toward junction B-141516.

1109: Massive structural failure in Hallway 13. Massive structural failure in Hallway 12. Massive structural failure in Hallway 8. Camera B-301 rendered inoperable. Lighting fails in Hallway 4. Lighting fails in Hallway 5.

Interview: Agent Izumi J ("Enma Ai")

Agent : I see. After escaping 106, what did you do?

Agent Izumi: I ran back to 966 containment chamber and writhed in pain on the ground while desperately trying to make a tourniquet.

Agent : …

Agent Izumi: Losing a limb made me unable to properly follow the containment breach and hostile mass attack protocols for a short while, sir.

Agent : Agent.

Agent Izumi: Sorry, sir. After finishing the tourniquet, which in hindsight seems unnecessary as the corrosion seemed to slow the bleeding, I decided that attempting to re-contain 106 took priority over finding the missing 966 specimens, which had most likely fled into the wild

already. So I stumbled towards the dun- I mean, the Security Floor D-9, hoping to find someone that could tell me what was happening, grant me access to the place, and that could help me catch someone that was younger than me to use as lure for 106.

Agent : Did you encounter hostiles while on the move?

Agent Izumi: A few, yes.

Agent : How did you deal with them?

Agent Izumi: I hid, of course. It is what you pay me to do. Most of the time. Regardless, after some time, I found the body of Agent , with the remains of a large… something… attached to his back, extending to his arm. Really odd thing. The hallway smelled strangely like feline urine too. Anyway, I grabbed his handgun and timed hand grenades before leaving. As I walked down the corridor, I soon felt the distinct sensation one gets when being hunted, and sure enough, I saw 106's face emerging from the end of the hallway in front of me.

Video log, Hallway 26, 27, 28: Agent Izumi J , unidentified woman (presumed hostile), SCP-106

/Transcript begins at : . Agent Izumi enters Hallway 26 on the right side. She gets to near the end of the room before suddenly stopping, turning and running out of view. Seconds later, SCP-106 appears from the north size of the corridor, stopping and phasing through the right wall after reaching the center of the room.

On Hallway 27, agent Izumi is seen running and suddenly coming to a stop as the sounds of footsteps come from the opposite side of the corridor. She throws herself on the ground face up, with her remaining hand holding the handgun on her chest. Few minutes later, an unarmed, unidentified woman enters the left side of the hallway. Upon spotting agent Izumi, she immediately

runs towards her, possibly in an attempt to acquire her handgun.

As she gets close, agent Izumi rises and points the gun at her. Panicking, the unidentified woman tries to run. Agent Izumi shoots in her direction twice, with the second bullet hitting the left side of her hip, causing her to fall. Approaching the downed woman, agent Izumi stops for a few seconds to look at her before putting the handgun away, grabbing the woman by the back of her shirt and dragging her to the left side of the hall.

On Hallway 28, agent Izumi is seem dragging the struggling woman down the corridor, stopping in front of an emergency elevator and pressing its button. As the device fails to respond, she continues to press it, with increasing alarm. After a while, she attempts to pry the doors open with her arm, to no avail.

She proceeds to hit the doors twice before suddenly turning her face south. Agent Izumi quickly takes her handgun and shoots the downed woman in the legs twice, causing her to scream, before running out of view on the north size of the corridor. SCP-106 enters the hallway from the south part of the corridor, and proceeds to slowly walk towards the downed woman while dragging its arms on the walls, causing them to rot.

Upon reaching her, SCP-106 [DATA EXPUNGED] slowly dragging the still living woman towards his pocket dimension. As half of her body enters the "portal", agent Izumi is seen quickly running towards it, placing two objects (now known to be grenades) on the body's pants, and running out of view again. 6 seconds later, there is an explosion on the hall, causing the destruction of the camera./

Interview: Agent Izumi J ("Enma Ai")

Agent : What exactly did you hope to accomplish with that?

Agent Izumi: I hoped to take 106 out of action. As he was actively hunting me, I hope I can be excused for thinking that it was the best idea at the time. It clearly failed to do any damage to him, of course, but I did not see him for the rest of the incident, and thank gods for that. I guess he was having fun with whatever was left of the other woman. Or maybe he found someone younger, I barely fall into the age bracket he seems to show preference.

Agent : I see. Was it at this point that you decided to move to the cafeteria?

Agent Izumi: Yes, sir. I figured someone could potentially think of using it as a haven. Of course, that someone could be the hostiles, but I decided to take my chances. I could always hide somewhere else in that case. Fortunately, mister Flames was there. After showing him my badge, I entered the kitchens, found a corner and promptly fell unconscious. It was a while before I managed to wake up.

Agent : I see. That is all for now.

Partial Transcript of Recovered Footage of Security Camera E9935
Covered Location: Security Entrance E-43 and hallway connecting to it

1108 Three individuals, later identified as Security Guards S. , T. and B. , run in from off-camera.

1109 Guards S. and B. take up firing positions, aiming back towards the direction they arrived from. Guard T. stands in front of the security door access panel, with her back to the camera. She pulls a piece of paper from a pocket and begins referring to it. *Note: all security doors in this section had entered containment breach lockdown mode by this time and required Level 2 access codes in order to be opened.*

1111 Guard B. fires 3 shots at unknown target off-camera. Guard T. looks over her shoulder with an apparent look of surprise on her face, then turns back to access panel.

1112 Guard S. joins Guard B. in firing at unknown target. Estimated 15 total shots fired over next few minutes.

1115 Guard T. hits the wall above the security panel with her fist, as Guards S. and B. continue firing.

1116 Guard T. drops the piece of paper she had been holding and throws herself at the security door, shoulder first. The door opens after the second slam and Guard T. tumbles through it.

1117 Guards S. and B. begin to back up towards the open door, then stop and lower their firearms.

1119 Creature later identified as SCP-200 enters camera view from same direction as the guards. It is oozing an unknown substance from several graze wounds. SCP-200 alternates between walking on its lower limbs and making short hops, using its wings to stay aloft as it approaches Guards S. and B. .

1120 - 1127 *(unrecoverable break in security footage))*

1128 The bodies of Guards S. and B. lay facedown on the floor. No wounds visible from the camera's angle. Security door remains open.

1147 **SCP-550** enters from off-camera and begins feeding on the body of Guard B. .

1151 SCP-550 raises its head and appears to look through the open security door.

1152 SCP-550 stands and walks through the open door.

Transcript of statement released at 1207 on - - to national news media

The Proponents of Paranormal Rights is a united, grassroots movement of sentient beings of different races, people, and species of the oppressed people under the rule of the Worldwide Global Conspiracy, who under the leadership of our Teacher The Liberator, have formed and joined the New Freemind Nation and have agreed to advocate together on behalf of all sentient beings under the principle that life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are rights to be extended to all creatures with minds and souls.

The New Freemind Nation is not a government or a religion. It is apolitical, areligious, and asocioeconomic, made up of people from all political parties, organizations, races, and social backgrounds, forming a unity and full representation of human experience. It is of no region or culture, but all regions and cultures. To be a member of the New Freemind Nation, one must only believe in the rights of all sentient beings to those inalienable rights inaccurately and chauvinistically described as "human" rights.

The Proponents of Paranormal Rights are the activist arm of the New Freemind Nation. It is beholden to no government, religion, or worldwide agenda. It has no political or religious power over it that dictates who will fight and who will die. It risks and sacrifices its life, liberty, and freedom not for its own means, but for the freedom of sentient beings cruelly oppressed and confined by the Worldwide Global Conspiracy that controls our lives from the moment of birth to the moment of death.

We of the New Freemind Nation choose this name because it states that we are no longer willing to live under the mind-controlling rule of the insidious Worldwide Global Conspiracy that hides the truth of the world from the eyes of the people they claim to protect.

We are no longer willing to allow these Conspiracies to exploit the nonhuman sentient beings of this world for their own selfish and greedy ends, nor are we willing to stand by in silence as the most inhuman purge of living creatures since the Holocaust is carried out under the noses of the mindless sheep in pasture. We of the Freemind Nation reject the quisling notions of appeasement and silent victimhood that others who claim to fight for the rights of the nonhuman sentient beings of the world espouse - silent collaborators to the murder and oppression carried out every hour of every day of every year.

We, the united members of the Proponents of Paranormal Rights, like the brave militiamen of the American Revolution, like the Orangemen of Ireland, and the freedom fighters even now struggling together in the Middle East, refuse to go silent into that dark night. We refuse to die the death of the soul by watching the very soul of mystery in the world shackled and bound in the chains of slavery forged by the oligarchs and tyrants who rule in shadows, and refuse to act. We have struck out against the Worldwide Global Conspiracy through force of arms, and shed our blood on the field of battle alongside those whom we fight to set free.

We of the New Freemind Nation, in the name of the inalienable rights that the United Nations claim to protect, do hereby declare war against the Worldwide Global Conspiracy in all its forms. We support by force of arms the rights of all free-minded sentient beings to exert their agency against the crushing grasp of the sinister dictators who rule the world in our name. We hereby offer our friend in brotherhood to all those who suffer - the ascendant, the witch, the mutant, the spirit, the creatures of myth and legend who live even now in ignominy and silence - and call out for them to take our hand in brotherhood, and then to take our side in the Great War for Liberation that begins on this day, in this hour, in this place.

Transcript O5-10- - - -

O5- : "The Proponents for Paranormal RIGHTS? What are they, some kind of garage band?"

: "They're kooks. Harmless. Hippies. Up until now, the worst they've done is picket the commercialization of the pyramids and protest the razing of fairy circles by construction firms."

O5- : "This is way bigger than any hippy sit-in. I'm getting reports of casualties, deaths, and near-complete loss of containment. We've got a full-on Tempest Night going on here. Now, tell me why I shouldn't just press that big red button right this instant and end it right now."

: "Because with all due respect, sir, it would be like burning down the prison after the inmates have already escaped. We've lost a few, yes, but the latest reports are that we have regained partial containment of the remainder. Our expected losses will set us back, but so far we've seen nothing that's going to cause a K-class scenario… and with all due respect, sir, setting off a nuke is exactly the worst thing we could do sociopolitically in the wake of that… statement."

O5- : "Goddamn, that statement… no one breaches secrecy. It's been the unwritten rule since the beginning of this whole…thing. Can we contain it?"

: "Already on it. We're going to blame the attack on terrorists. Issue a statement in the name of one of the better known organizations. The statement should disappear in the usual chaff nutjobs send to the media when these things happen."

O5- : "Step up the chaff a bit this time. Send in some statements of our own. Try blaming water fluoridation and vaccines, those always go over well. And get some help down to 17 right the fuck now."

Security Log- -3

Transcript of conversation between SCP-353 and an unknown person later identified as a high-ranking member of the “Proponents of Paranormal Rights”.

SCP-353: So… Let me get this straight. You guys are some kind of “supernatural rights group”.

: That is correct.

SCP-353: And you want me to join you guys to help free the other “skips” so we can all be part of this “New Freemind Nation” of yours and be one big happy family.

: That is… also correct, more or less.

SCP-353: And you think I’m going to help you because I’ve been “oppressed by the ignorant masses” or whatever. Is that it?

: …Not in so many words. Teacher the Liberator sees great potential in you, Vector. He believes that you would be a great asset to our cause were you to use your powers for the side of good, instead of for personal gain.

SCP-353: …Look, I don’t know what kind of drugs you’re on, but I think you’ve got the wrong idea about me. I don’t consider myself a member of some sort of “oppressed minority”. I don’t consider the other ‘skips’ to be my ‘brothers in arms’. And I sure as hell am not going to do charity work for a bunch of tree-hugging hippies.

: But of course. If money and power are the only thing that makes you tick, we will reward you handsomely for your… your…

drops his gun, and removes his helmet. Moments later, he begins vomiting repeatedly.

SCP-353: Ah, good. I was hoping that would work.

: W-what…? How did you-

SCP-353: You know what the Ebola virus is? Of course you do, it's only one of the world's deadliest diseases. 50% mortality rate, even in a best-case scenario. I've spent months working on an a fast-acting airborne strain, and I'm happy to say it has more than exceeded my expectations.

353 tightens her hands around 's neck

SCP-353: Betcha wish you bought the masks that actually worked, didn't ya?

The other insurgents begin pointing their gun at 353. 353 wags her finger at them.

SCP-353: Oh no. I wouldn't do that if I were you. You're ALL infected now, and I'm the only one keeping the virus in check.

353 pauses, presumably to let the implications sink in.

SCP-353: It really is a terrible way to die… do you know what the symptoms of Ebola are?

353 takes a step towards the insurgents

SCP-353: First… you start to have headaches.

353 takes a step towards the insurgents

SCP-353: Then, you get the chills.

353 takes a yet another step towards the insurgents. at this point they begin to start backing away from her.

SCP-353: After that comes, vomiting, and then anorexia, and then pharyngitis, diarrhea, hemorrhaging, seizures, hiccups, necrosis…

One of the insurgents attempts to take a shot at 353,

only to be subdued by the insurgent standing next to him.

SCP-353: …and if I'm feeling merciful… *death*.

An insurgent slowly puts down his gun, and raises his arms in the air. The other insurgents soon follow suit.

SCP-353: Good. It looks like we're on the same page…

SCP-353 snaps her fingers, presumably for dramatic effect. Moments later, the insurgent who tried to shoot 353 falls to his knees and puts his hands to his throat to indicate that he is choking on his own [REDACTED]

SCP-353: The rest of you work for me now, so hop to it! I want a sample of every virus, bacterium, or fungus that these kooks bother keep locked up. Get going!

Security Log -1

There is no movement for thirty (30) seconds before smoke becomes visible rising from the exterior wall. After seven (7) seconds, SCP-737 emerges from the exterior wall. The front carriage of SCP-737 then opens, revealing its biological component. The biological component expels thirteen (13) wooden masses which unfurl into smaller specimens of SCP-737. Original SCP-737 then releases steam from its 'chimney' in what appears to be celebration. Other SCP-737 do likewise before all specimens proceed out of the range of the camera. It is highly likely that SCP-737's -1 through -14 escaped at this point.

Recovered Footage from Security Cameras B-296 through B-308

1110: Massive structural failure in Hallway 4. Massive structural failure in Hallway 5. Air filtration systems

overwhelmed. Internal structure of section B-1 compromised.

1111: Hallway 12 collapses. Section B-1 seismic detectors register movement in the debris. Dr. Wachtel, Dr. Dier, Prof. Bjornsen, and Agent [REDACTED] reach junction B-141516. Junction B-141516 lighting fails. Prof. Bjornsen activates flashlight. Agent [REDACTED] activates taclight.

1112: Prof. Bjornsen directs the light down Hallway 13. **SCP-682** breaks through the eastern wall of Hallway 13. SCP-682 is heavily infested by **SCP-229** and is composed primarily of electric cabling, telephone wires and broken circuit boards. Organic portions similar to muscles ooze viscous fluid which, when it drips onto the floor below, burns craters into the concrete. The SCP-229 portions of SCP-682 begin infiltrating nearby electronic cabling. All four Foundation personnel retreat hastily, with Agent [REDACTED] firing at the entity.

1113: Agent [REDACTED] begins reloading. Clouds of dust obscure SCP-682. Its estimated speed is 8 kph. A portion of SCP-229 moves towards the camera. Camera B-298 is disabled.

1114: The four personnel reach Junction B-142623. Dr. Wachtel closes emergency blast doors. Prof. Bjornsen and Agent [REDACTED] illuminate Hallways 26 and 23, revealing they have become choked with debris. Dr. Wachtel suggests that they take inventory of their possessions. Each in turn produces any items they possess that may be of use and briefly describes its properties: Dr. Wachtel with **SCP-494** and **SCP-447**; Dr. Dier with a pistol; Prof. Bjornsen with **SCP-262**, **SCP-272**, and a flashlight; and Agent [REDACTED] with an M249 light machine gun.

1115: SCP-229 begins infesting the blast door lock mechanisms. Agent [REDACTED] remarks that she is out of ammunition, and that the entity should reach them

in a matter of minutes. Dr. Dier states that he has an idea and begins whispering to the others.

1116: Agent [REDACTED] and Dr. Wachtel begin clearing Hallway 26. Prof. Bjornsen opens SCP-262, allowing pair of long, semi-transparent arms to be revealed from the interior. Dr. Dier unloads his pistol and retrieves one (1) 9mm bullet, before replacing the cartridge. Prof. Bjornsen puts SCP-494 on the appendages exposed from SCP-262. Prof. Bjornsen places the lead tip of the bullet in one glove of SCP-494. SCP-262's appendages fracture and lift the roof of Junction B-142623.

1118: Junction B-132623 blast doors begin to open. Agent [REDACTED] hands Dr. Wachtel her sidearm and taclight. Dr. Dier and Prof. Bjornsen move to the wall opposite the blast door.

1119: SCP-682 breaches blast doors. Dr. Dier activates flashlight. Dr. Bjornsen throws SCP-272 into the shadow cast by SCP-682. SCP-272 embeds itself. SCP-682 begins cursing. Large portions of SCP-229 begin to exhibit prehensile activity and grow towards Prof. Bjornsen. Dr. Wachtel opens fire from Hallway 26, severing SCP-229.

1120: Dr. Wachtel and Dr. Dier flank Prof. Bjornsen from opposite sides, severing SCP-229 instances as they attack. Dr. Wachtel reaches Junction B-132623 and begins strobing taclight, Dr. Dier repeats this pattern. SCP-682 is thrown repeatedly against the northeast wall, abrading roughly 20% of its epidermis. Agent [REDACTED] creates a passage through the debris in Hallway 26.

1121: The roof of Junction B-132623 is transformed into lead. Dr. Wachtel, Dr. Dier and Prof. Bjornsen flee into Hallway 26. The arms extending from within SCP-262 retract.

1122: Massive structural failure in Junction B-132623.

1223 to Incident Conclusion: Analysis

At approximately 1223 on the day of the attack, elements from Mobile Task Forces Omega 1 (Blackguards), Omega 2 (Silverfish), and ad-hoc elements of other available personnel arrived at Site 17. Initial entry into Site 17 was carried out at 1306 hours.

Upon arrival, reinforcing elements discovered that the majority of the insurgents had already exfiltrated the combat zone, leaving behind seven members (who had been unable or unwilling to exfiltrate the area due to various factors). Unfortunately, this fact was compounded by the heavy number of containment breaches that took place over the course of the day, meaning that MTF personnel were required to both restore containment of escaped artifacts, while dealing with a small but dedicated core of insurgents.

Due to these complications, the "clean and sweep" operation would take over four hours and result in several more casualties, including members of the Mobile Task Forces sent to reinforce Site 17. However, the arrival of these reinforcements would prove to be the true turning point of the incident: once the members of these MTFs arrived on the scene, the incident was, for all intents and purposes, as contained as possible, under the circumstances.

In the end, recovery of basic containment at Site 17 would take another 16 hours, and result in the deaths of several more personnel. Complete site security has not yet been achieved at the time of this writing, due to the heavy number of escapes during the incident. (A list of current SCP infestations has been attached to this document as Addendum TN-4563B.)

Although a large number of factors contributed to the failures during the Tempest Night incident, one key factor seems to predominate: the loss of control and communications. Due to the inability to effectively coordinate efforts, what could have been a severe but containable breach turned into multiple containment breaches of dangerous artifacts. The simple fact remains that, for a period of three hours during the incident, there was no central command authority at Site 17. Individual persons were forced to act as they saw best, with no leadership or directives to guide them.

The way these persons reacted when on their own is disturbing as well. In multiple cases, individuals, believing themselves to be the only ones standing between the world and a full-on containment breach, took desperate measures in order to combat what they percieved as a deadly threat. This was compounded by the aforementioned lack of communication, which meant that incomplete and inaccurate data was provided to the persons involved. The situation has been likened to a group of desperate men lost in the wilderness and resorting to cannibalism, only to discover that they were a half-day's walk from civilization the entire time.

The situation was compounded by the culture of hero-worship among the lower-ranks personnel. Every organization, over time, develops a culture and a "mythology" of stories about famous incidents from their history. Whether by coincidence or design, the majority of the Foundation's "mythology" and culture has focused on glorifying the more grandiose events from our past, as well as certain irresponsible behaviors that, thankfully, never resulted in the catastrophic consequences that could have resulted. When faced with an emergency, these persons understandably fell back to the stories that had become part of their culture, and took actions that coincided with this mindset.

The results, I believe, are plain to see.

Recording seized from MC&D courier
Identity of speakers unknown at this time.

Oh that is just rich…the mighty Foundation, brought low by a bunch of bloody college students.

While it is funny Mrs. Carter, the other directors and I are…concerned.

Why? It's about time those pompous twats got a nice, public black eye.

Again, I agree, however we're concerned. These kids didn't suddenly get to be a threat without help from someone. They're armed up by someone who doesn't want to show their hand.

I suppose that's true, but we're not in any danger from it, our current ties are all covert at the moment.

True, but someone pulled a fast one on us. That does not happen. Ever. Yet somehow, someone armed this group and trained them to the point where they were able to drop a containment site totally off grid, and cripple The Foundation communication relay for a significant period of time. What happens if the puppet master turns his gaze on us?

Randal, I hardly think this-

I know, it is unlikely…but that is not even my foremost concern. Our members expect the world from us, normal reality and laws of physics be damned. We sometimes need those items to meet those requests. Which is easier, the corruption of staff and eventual theft of a item in containment, or the time, energy, lives, and most of all, money expended in the tracking, capture, containment, and study of these items?

…You have shown me the light, Randal. Cheeky, but still valid. I'll see if I can rouse the old fellow, get him to sign

off on an open contract. I don't think we need to tip a hand yet, but maybe we can get those Americans…what are they, blackwood…blackburn…oh dash it, that mercenary firm…

Blackwater, ma'am?

Yes, that's it! I think Marshall may own the staff…or maybe that's Howard, on the board…dash it, one of the two. We'll get some people on the ground, keep an eye on things…if it all goes tail-up, at least we can collect a bit off the corpse before the scavengers move in. I think someone should post Dark anyway, keep him abreast of things.

I…am not sure he's alive, Mrs. Carter.

Fuck and bother. Well, let me know if he is or not when you find out, and post the letter anyway. He'll get it eventually.

Text of Message sent to O5 Council on - - , hours after re-establishment of containment

Dear Sirs or Madams,

Given that you are unable to keep your own affairs in order, we will be cleaning up your mess for you. Be aware that our interdiction teams have orders to shoot to kill on sight any individual who attempts to interfere with their mission.

For your safety and ours, I recommend keeping out of their way.

Sincerely,

Under-Secretary-General D. C. Al Fine
United Nations Global Occult Coalition

To: *05 Command Group*
From : *Site 17 Tech Unit*

Re: *System compromised*

We are still coming back on-line from the attack, however we will be unable to join the larger Foundation network, or connect to anything off-site. The cross-contamination between 682 and 229 has lead to a near-total infection of the on-site network. Thus far, it doesn't seem that either of these items have actually attacked the network, however they are eating up a ton of bandwidth and energy.

To my knowledge, this is the first time 682 has escaped and not gone on a blind rampage. I'm concerned that this is a prelude to something very, very bad…a calm before the storm, if you will. Thus far, we've sealed the site network, and shielded against any ingoing or outgoing signals, but there's not much else we can do. The connections extend everywhere…just waiting for something.

The physical SCP are down on the D-9 level, and we've pretty much lost control of that. The area is too hot to send normal staff to, and all the MTF are running around after the escaped SCP. There are reports of some bad cross-contamination, and 106 has been picking off around one staff member a day.

In short, we need help to bring the site back up. Until D-9 is cleared and re-secured, we can't reconnect to anything.

Surveillance Log 24-IF12- - - , : Infirmary 12, Site 24
Six days after Tempest Night Incident

. : "Hey, motherfucker. How are the legs?"

A. Clef: "They hurt like fuck. Doctors say I'll be walking

again in a year, though.

. **:** "Swell. I brought you a gift."

A. Clef: "… rollerblades. You always were an asshole."

. **:** "I love you too. Jesus, those stupid newbies fucked everything up, didn't they? I read your report. It was a fucking laugh riot. The part where that one fucknut tried to fight the kitskumiho and fell off the balcony and broke practically all his bones had me rolling. I hear he's still in traction."

A. Clef: "He's in the next wing over. Multiple compound fractures. He was stuck there for over forty-eight hours screaming in pain before someone managed to find him. Gangrene maybe set in on his legs. Hopefully the docs can regrow them."

. **:** "I'll bring him a pair of running shoes. He'll love that."

A. Clef: "…"

. **:** "… All right, talk. What's wrong?"

A. Clef: "We did that to him."

. **:** "Bullshit. We didn't push him off that ledge, and we didn't order him to either. Hell, you didn't even tell him to fight that SCP. He did that on his own."

A. Clef: "He did it because we did it first."

. **:** "He was a four-year newbie. We've been doing this all our lives. He was in over his fucking head."

A. Clef: "He should never have tried. We set a bad example for him."

. **:** "What are you, his mommy? Gonna change his diaper and feed him his bottle? He was an adult. He

made a fucking choice, and he fucked up. I'm not gonna lose any sleep over it."

A. Clef: "Did you know the incidence of mental illness among Foundation personnel is going up? It used to be you had to be a ten, fifteen year man before you started getting downchecks for psyche. Now we're getting second-year rookies getting red-marked. Glass thinks it's because they're not trying to fight it any more. He's not sure why, but I know. It's because of you and me. These kids, they look at you and me and Gears and think, "These guys are nuts. Maybe it's okay for me to be." And they just… go over the deep end. They don't even try to stay sane."

. : "What, you're trying to blame this all on me? Fuck you. I do what I have to do to save the world. If I want to have fun along the way, then who the fuck can tell me otherwise? There's too much at stake here to worry about being a nice or responsible person. Someone wants to flip out and eat dog shit or try to fuck a goat, who cares, as long as they do the fucking job? If you can't see that, then maybe you need to get the fuck out."

A. Clef: "Maybe I do."

. : "… well, I'm not wasting a good gift on an emo faggot like you. Give me those rollerblades, I'm gonna give them to Gerald."

A. Clef: "Yeah, you do that, ."

. : "Fuck you too, buddy."

Escapees: **SCP-353, SCP-953, SCP-200, SCP-550, SCP-737**

Related Foundation Tales:

Game Day 1: Johannes Sorts

Game Day 1: Imago
Game Day 1: Preliminaries
Game Day 1: Die Hardest
Game Day 1: Smilers
Game Day 1: Lesley Mause

Game Day Part 1: Attack of the Replicas

Having suffered from sleep apnea for most of his adult life, Dr. Johannes Sorts was quite accustomed to waking up suddenly in the middle of the night (or day) because he had stopped breathing in his sleep.

There was a time that this troubled him greatly, but the constant disruptions kept him from sleeping for too long, or worse, *dreaming*, so he had come to accept them with a bit of gratitude. This was a source of constant concern for the site 17 physician assigned to look after him. Dr. Charlene Robertson had been known to break into his cluttered office/bedroom and coerce him into wearing a CPAP mask so that he didn't suffocate in his sleep.

So when Dr. Sorts woke suddenly to find himself sprawled out in his office chair, he was not immediately concerned. When he heard Dr. Robertson's voice insisting that he put his mask on, he was not immediately concerned.

But when a lifeless, sandy hand was clamped over his face to suffocate him, he began to remember certain things. Leaving his musty office sanctuary at Site 19 on short notice to supervise the handling of several SCP artifacts. Setting up in his slightly less musty office sanctuary at Site 17. Turning down invitations to some social gathering in the break room. Sitting down to write a memo about **SCP-945**'s unacceptable temporary containment conditions but opening up a game of Atom Zombie Smasher on the side and…

Dr. Sorts pushed the dusty clay hand away from his face and gasped, "Doctor Robertson! I'm not supposed to be asleep right now!"

"Very well, Johannes. I will be back tonight to be sure you are wearing your mask. Please get back to work," the figure leaning over Johannes did not make any motion to leave, it just hung over him and stared blankly with painted, kohl-rimmed eyes.

"I have work to do right now, and so do you," Dr. Sorts scrambled to straighten his glasses and get out of his seat, nervously stammering to the clay figurine that was wearing Dr. Robertson's white, bloodstained smock, "You're supposed to be in the medical ward handling trauma cases, remember? There's a lot of new SCPs on site right now so we need all medical hands on call in case of an emergency."

Dr. Sorts was going to miss Charlene fussing over him, if one of SCP-945's shawabti replicas was impersonating her in his office now it meant that she was dead. It also meant that if he didn't destroy that replica or keep it under constant supervision it was going to start killing more people, starting with him.

The figurine turned towards the door "Yes, yes I should be there. There are a lot of bad cases there. But… the medical ward has been damaged beyond repair by an explosion. That is why I came to check on you. You skipped your last checkup, you know. Please take your seat and we'll begin." The shawabti produced a tattered black bag and pulled a scalpel from it.

"Wait! Dr. Robertson, you've been exposed to a class A memetic agent. Regulation says that you need to do as I say in order to prevent a virulent memetic outbreak. Listen to me very carefully. We have to pretend we are in… uh… an action movie."

> **Debriefing:** Dr. Johannes Sorts
> *Excerpt from Interview conducted by O5- , regarding Dr. Sort's involvement in Incident 234-900-Tempest Night-1.*
>
> **O5- :** Was it really necessary to convince the replica of Dr. Robertson that she was your love interest in an action movie?
>
> **Dr. Sorts:** Believe me I wish I had thought of something else off the top of my head. I've been exposed to enough of SCP-945 prior to this clusterfuck, I really didn't want to, you know, improvise a love scene with my colleague's shawabti. I've prepared a full report on that experience by the way. Psych's going to have a field day with it I'm sure.

O5- : What happened next?

Dr. Sorts: Well, last time we had a really virulent SCP-945 outbreak the replicas overwhelmed an entire site. But they also kept it operational — when it became clear to me that every possible bad thing that could have happened DID happen I decided that regardless of the danger the SCP-945 replicas posed they were more valuable as an ally… er… asset, than otherwise. So I set about collecting as many replicas as I could find running around the site and convincing them to play roles in this movie. It was the only way I could claim any authority over the positions those replicas were taking.

O5- : How many replicas did you have under your command?

Dr. Sorts: Never more than about two dozen at any one time, but I think we went through about fifty replicas total.

O5- : How was the replica of Dr. Robertson lost?

Dr. Sorts had someone's red tie wrapped around his forehead, and his shirt was hanging open over his hairy stomach, "Alright men! Let's secure this hallway. I want Johnson, Figgs and Lewis on point! Tiberson, cover me. I'm going in!"

Dr. Robertson's shawabti had tied its smock in a knot across its bust, where it had stuffed two rolls of toilet paper, "Wait! Don't go, I couldn't stand to lose you again!" the clay statue squealed with the enthusiasm of a high school drama student.

"I have to go, baby, we need to secure the medical ward so that you can get back to work on the survivors," Dr. Sorts claimed. He hadn't found any yet, though. Just a batch of replicated security guards who had already armed themselves and were now following his orders and calling him …

"The hall is clear, Commander Badass!" shouted the replica of Lt. Figgs in a much more accurate representation of the late man's voice and mannerisms, "We're go for retaking the medical ward!

Let's move, people! Go Go Go Go Go!"

Dr. Sorts and his impromptu squad of clay soldiers burst into the medical ward, which was a sea of bloodstained, writhing flesh, dripping with maggots. One of the replicas pretended to vomit. Dr. Sorts held his breath on the off chance he would wake up.

The ward was filled with an expanding pile of barely human figures anxiously clutching at each other while slurping bits of scattered and burnt flesh against their faces. Dr. Sorts had no idea what kind of SCP would produce a scene like this, but the nightmare before him was content to keep to itself on the other side of the room.

Dr. Robertson's replica touched his shoulder, "This is a serious **SCP-726** outbreak. We need to…"

The replica trailed off with what could only be described as a gasp, although the clay figure never moved its lips or breathed. But crawling out of the pile of squirming bodies was another replica of Dr. Robertson, this one crafted from living flesh and blood. It slurped at the air and twitched its shoulders before disengaging from the rest of its nightmare spawn, flopping across the broken tile floor like a fish out of water towards the group of clay soldiers.

Dr. Robertson's shawabti pushed forward past the guards, grabbing the remains of a chair and rushing forward to bludgeon its rival duplicate, "No! No! My body is to be at rest! MY BODY IS TO BE AT REST!"

> **Dr. Sorts:** She was within the medical ward when I had the other replicas collapse the entrances with explosive charges. I believe her … I'm sorry. I believe the duplicate was… the duplicates were destroyed in the explosion.
>
> [inaudible]
>
> **Dr. Sorts:** I'm sorry, I need … I need another sedative.
>
> **O5- :** We'll continue this later.

Game Day: Imago

quietwetsmall
twitch
wetsmallernotquiet
turn
smallestLOUDSHINE
stretch
tear

Clem Walsh was having a bad day.

Months ago, he had lucked out on a cushy assignment watching a giant cocoon do nothing for hours on end, giving him plenty of time to read. His coworkers teased him about his choices: "Why're you reading that crap fantasy shit when you're surrounded by so much weird shit?" But he enjoyed escaping into a world where he *knew* there'd be a happy ending. And hey! He had a pretty easy-going boss and he wasn't on the midnight shift like on his last assignment. So things were doing pretty good. Then the building shook and the klaxons went off.

---

turnpull
widenessOUTloudness
REDBRIGHTSHINE
rend
freedom
rend
drywetair
rend
stretch
stand

Clem knew the drill: lockdown the containment chamber first, lockdown the observation room second, contact security and bossman third. One was easy, just a matter of hitting a button, but when he went to lock the observation room door, the damn lock wouldn't engage. He propped a chair under the handle as a stop-gap and went to the phone to call the boss when it rang under his hand.

---

redloudfood
unfurl
looksmell
shakeshake
lookdowninfant
pace
smellnosmell
touch
airhardslick?
memory:gasgrassglass?
lookinfanttalk:lookme

Clem noticed a motion out of the corner of his eye and turned towards the large observation window.

"Jesus fuck me!"

Standing on the other side was a… *thing* that looked like the bastard child of an orgy involving a yellowjacket and an octopus, with a little extra ugly for good measure. It had one of its… appendages on the glass and he could swear the damn thing was looking at him despite the one-way mirror.

---

infantgoodfollow
push
hungeropeninfant
glasstalk:tastetouch
soften
goodsmellinfant

infant:stayfeed

Clem scrambled to clear the chair from the door when the glass began to bubble and warp under the thing's tentacle-claw-leg-thingie. He had just pulled it free when the softened glass broke with a "pop" that he barely heard over the klaxon, and then shattered in its pane. He looked behind him and took a deep breath to scream… then smiled.

---

stayfeedgood
tasteinfanttouch
caress
smellsweetsharp
twine
looktouchtaste
tighten
eatfoodcoppery
savor
satiatefullnessdone
curiosityknow:smellexplore
infantgoodsmell
foodseekknow

« **Imago** | **`BoFA: Inhale`** | **`BoFA: Holding It`** | **BoFA: Exhale** »

Game Day Part 1: Preliminaries

One month before Tempest Night…

A single brown leaf blew through the long-abandoned corridors of Site 17. Skeletons lay in the hallways where they had fallen. An alarm blared through the corridors, the person who activated it long dead. Horrors of all shapes and sizes roamed the facility.

For a moment, the wreck that was once civilization was silent.

Then, a small toy robot appeared. Its neck swiveled around, taking in the new and unusual surroundings. It spoke, with a touch of uncertainty in its synthesized voice.

"THANK YOU FOR PURCHASING YOUR VERY OWN ROBO-DUDE, MADE BY DR. WONDERTAINMENT. ANY ATTEMPT TO OPERATE ROBO-DUDE OTHER THAN IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE PRODUCT INSTRUCTIONS, INCLUDING ANY ATTEMPT TO OPEN OR SERVICE ROBO-DUDE IS LIKELY TO RESULT IN UNPREDICTABLE BEHAVIOR. DR. WONDERTAINMENT IS NOT LIABLE FOR ANY DAMAGE, DESTRUCTION OR LOSS OF PERSONAL OR REAL PROPERTY, OR FOR ANY INJURY, UP TO AND INCLUDING DEATH, TO THE OWNER, THE OPERATOR, OR OTHERS WHICH MAY RESULT FROM THE OPERATION OF ROBO-DUDE FUNCTIONS. BY INTERACTING WITH ROBO-DUDE IN ANY WAY OR BY REMAINING IN ROBO-DUDE'S PRESENCE WITHIN FIVE SECONDS FOLLOWING THE COMPLETION OF THIS ANNOUNCEMENT, YOU ACCEPT THE TERMS AND CONDITIONS DESCRIBED IN THIS ANNOUNCEMENT, AS AMENDED AND SUPPLEMENTED BY DR. WONDERTAINMENT FROM TIME TO TIME WHETHER BEFORE OR AFTER ACCEPTANCE, AND AGREE TO HOLD BLAMELESS DR. WONDERTAINMENT, AND EVERYONE AFFILIATED WITH DR. WONDERTAINMENT, FROM AND AGAINST ALL LIABILITY OR LOSSES RELATING TO ROBO-DUDE. DR. WONDERTAINMENT RESERVES ALL RIGHTS AND REMEDIES,

INCLUDING BUT NOT LIMITED TO INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY RIGHTS IN AND TO 'ROBO-DUDE', 'ROBO-PAL', 'ROBO-ACCESSORIES' AND ALL PATENTS, TRADEMARKS, COPYRIGHTS AND OTHER INTELLECTUAL PROPERTIES EMBEDDED OR EMBODIED THEREIN. GREETINGS, ROBO-PAL."

It stopped and realized it was on its own. For the last few years, Robo-Dude could never remember being alone. As a toy, it only remembered what happened when it was turned on. And when it was turned on, Robo-Dude was never alone. It called out now, for the researchers and doctors who had asked it questions and played with it before.

"ROBO-PAL?"

If toys could be surprised, Robo-Dude would be. For a charred corpse was sitting up, burnt flesh replaced with a cold, serious face. Its security uniform became a grey suit. It looked at him for a few seconds, raising a single eyebrow.

What? He said. **Who are you?**

This Robo-Dude knew!

"I AM ROBO-DUDE, ROBO-PAL. I AM EQUIPPED WITH OVER THREE HUNDRED FUN ACCESSORIES TO MAXIMIZE PLAYTIME ENJOYMENT."

A toy robot? Can robots even dream?

"AFFIRMATIVE, ROBO-PAL. ROBO-DUDE IS FULLY OPTIMIZED FOR NOCTURNAL VIEWING OF CONDUCTIVE LIVESTOCK."

Alright, fine. There's no time to be picky, I need you to -

"ENGAGE IN ROBO-DANCE?"

No, you need to warn -

"ROBO-DUDE IS NOW ENGAGING IN ROBO-DANCE."

Thirty minutes later, Robo-Dude had finished its daily ritual. However, this man was far too old and far too serious to play with toys. Robo-Dude knew that this must be important and stopped dancing one minute early. Some things must be sacrificed for the greater good.

"ROBO-DUDE IS NOW READY FOR INPUT!"

The man smiled with relief and began to speak.

Alright. He said. **In one month, Site 17 will be attacked by an enemy force. I can't tell you who they are, I'm sorry, but you must warn them, or horrible things will happen, do you understand?**

"ROBO-DUDE UNDERSTANDS THIS MISSION, ROBO-PAL."

Good. Now this dream needs to end. Shake yourself awake or somethi - what are you doing?

Robo-Dude looked up at its new Robo-Pal, its chest open and a small canister emerging from within.

"DEPLOYING ATOMIC GRENADE!"

Hold on, wait, NO -

*

For the first time ever, Robo-Dude activated itself. It had a mission now, it had a purpose! And that purpose was…Robo-Dude was not very clever. In any case, it is hard to remember dreams.

And so, Robo-Dude had forgotten.

Game Day 1: Die Hardest

Debriefing: Dr. Michael Edison
Excerpt from Interview conducted by O5- , regarding Dr. Edison's involvement in Incident 234-900-Tempest Night-1.

O5- : Good evening, Dr. Edison.

Dr. Edison: Good evening, sir.

O5- : Please, take a seat. I have a few questions to ask you.

Dr. Edison: …I'm not in trouble, am I?

O5- : No, of course not. This is simply standard procedure.

Dr. Edison: Oh. Okay then. That's fine, I guess.

O5- : Glad to hear it. Now, tell me, exactly where were you when the incident began?

Dr. Edison: Well let's see… I believe I was in the middle of feeding **SCP-391** when I heard the blast. Fearing for my safety, I fled to the nearest security station only to find that the security personnel inside had died prior to my arrival.

O5- : Do you have any idea how they died?

Dr. Edison: No idea, sir. Everyone had a big gash in the back of the head, but it looked like they didn't have their weapons drawn or anything so I guess they didn't fight back.

O5- : Interesting. So what did you do?

Dr. Edison: Well, I took one good look at the security monitors and quickly realized how [EXPLETIVE REDACTED] we all… um, I mean, that we were in the middle of a wide-scale Class- containment breach. I tried to activate the self-destruct sequence manually, but the detonation system was apparently too damaged to respond. So I sent a message over the intercom ordering all essential personnel to evacuate, and ordering all remaining security personnel to enter high alert.

O5- : And then what?

Dr. Edison: Well, then I noticed that **SCP-353** (who had breached containment), was being escorted by a number of masked men towards section [REDACTED], where we were keeping all the biohazardous materials from Site 19. So I… um…

O5- : Well? What did you do?

Dr. Edison: I… went after them. Die Hard style.

O5- : …I beg your pardon?

Dr. Edison: I mean I went after them. Alone. I ran around the site grabbing everything that looked even remotely useful, picked off the masked men one by one using my superior knowledge of Site-17, and squared off with SCP-353 in a climactic showdown inside of the decontamination chamber.

O5- : …

Dr. Edison: …

O5- : …Is there any chance you "forgot" to take your medicine that day?

Dr. Edison: …maybe?

Dr. Edison stared at his watch anxiously. He knew there wasn't

much time, and the rhythmic clacking of 914 only made him even more aware of it.

And then the clicking stopped. Edison's heart skipped at beat as the tiny bell rang, letting him know that it was time to check on his little "experiment". Nervously, he slid the door open to take a look at the results.

At first, he didn't know what to think. At first glance, it appeared to be an orange helmet, similar in form to the bulletproof SWAT helmet he was currently wearing. It even had the kind same "Property Of…" sticker that his own helmet was labeled with. But upon further inspection, he noticed that the accompanying balaclava appeared to be made of rubber, and that there was some form of breathing apparatus in the spot where one's mouth would be should be.

The doctor scratched his head. "Well, it's getting there, certainly."

Suddenly, the radio Edison was carrying on his belt sprung to life. *"Hey! You!"* it said, *"You there! By 914!"*

With a sigh, Edison handed the orange helmet to his assistant, who was similarly decked out in SWAT armor. "Please run this through 914 with helmet 3 on 'very fine', will you? I need to take this call."

Wordlessly, the assistant accepted the helmet and stiffly carried it to 914's input chamber.

Edison, meanwhile, took the opportunity to answer the radio. "Hello…?"

"What the hell do you think you're doing!?" screamed the man on the other end. *"We're in the middle of a containment breach and you're playing dress up! Does that seem like a good idea to you?!"*

"Hey, hey, don't worry about me," replied Edison. "Look, everything's under contro- okay, everything isn't under control, but you have better things to do than worry about some lone-wolf renegade action movie star type… thing. You should get out of here before the shit hits the fan, because if I can't stop Vector, we ALL die."

"Well I'd love to… but I'm trapped in a security station. The ceiling

behind me collapsed, so the door's jammed behind a huge pile of… er…"

"…What? What is it?"

"appleseeds."

"What?"

"a huge pile of appleseeds."

"…I'm sorry, I didn't quite hear that. Did you just say you were stuck behind a pile of apple-"

"YES, APPLESEEDS!" the man screamed. *"THE DOOR IS STUCK BEHIND A FUCKING PILE OF FUCKING APPLESEEDS! WHY THE HELL ARE THERE SO MANY APPLESEEDS I CANT TAKE ALL THESE APPLESEEDS AND ALL THE APPLESEEDS DAY AND NIGHT AND NIGHT AND DAY AND I CAN'T STAND IT ANYMORE WHY WON'T THEY JUST APPLESEEDS APPLESEEDS APPLESEEDS!!!!!"*

Edison paused for a moment to let the man cool off. He could hear a faint sobbing through the radio. "…nice to see you too, Dr. King."

Debriefing: Dr. King

Excerpt from Interview conducted by O5- , regarding Dr. King's involvement in Incident 234-900-Tempest Night-1.
O5- : Now, Dr. King. From what I've heard, you played an instrumental role in directing the flow of information during the incident. Can you please describe exactly what you were trying to accomplish?

Dr. King: Well, I was mostly just trying to find something to keep my mind off the… the… the you-know-whats that were keeping me cooped up in there. I mean, it's not like there was much else I could do other than watch the monitors and call people with the radio. I've really got to hand it to the guys who designed the security system, that security system was state of the art! I don't think

there was a single blind spot in the entire base. I mean-

O5- : …Yes, yes, the art of security is a fascinating one, but I'd much rather hear about your involvement with Dr. Edison's recent… "adventure".

Dr. King: Oh, that… *[NOTE: Dr. King appears to be visibly distressed at this point]* Well… I found Edison with **SCP-912**, making some kind of "Super-Armor" or something using **SCP-914**. He explained that **SCP-353** was making her way section [REDACTED], and that unless he stopped her things would get a million times worse.

O5- : …I see… and how did he plan on doing this?

Dr. King: Well… he never explained the whole plan, but he assured me it was extremely clever, intricate, and well-thought-out.

"I'm going to do something extremely clever, intricate, and well-thought-out that's going to stop Vector and save the world!" Dr. Edison said as he continued to sprint down the hallway. "I'll get back to you when I know exactly what it is."

"Well I hate to burst your bubble, kid," said Dr. King, *"but Vector is five stories down, and the insurgents are practically there. You'd have to move at the speed of sound to make it down the stairs in time."*

Edison chuckled. "Who said anything about stairs?" He screeched to a halt in front of the doorway he'd been looking for, stepped inside, and found himself in an enormous white room, whose only feature was a small, blue pinwheel, sitting upon a pedestal.

"Oh no…" said Dr. King. *"You have GOT to be kidding me…"*

"Yep!" said Edison. "I'm going to use 161 to drill a hole down to section [REDACTED], one floor at a time, and assault them from the

front, holding them off until 912 catches up and surprises them from the back." Edison reached into his pockets, and pulled out a small squirt bottle, which he used to make a series of red security lasers visible. "But first, I need to perform some death-defying acrobatics in order to get past this array of invisible crisscrossing lasers, or else I will be fried to a crisp!"

"Uh, Ed? You do realize I can just-"

Slowly, Edison backed up to the doorway, and began to swing his arms and count. "One… two… THREE!"

And with that, the doctor broke into a mad dash, and completely failed to launch himself into a series of amazing front flips that allowed Edison to weave through the beams like a graceful butterfly. The doctor turned red with embarrassment as he fell flat on his face a good ten feet from the nearest laser.

"Yeah… I'm just going to turn these things off before you kill yourself. Why do we even have a room like this?"

"No idea. It was probably one of Bright's projects." Edison said as he pulled himself upright. "But regardless, now 161 is about to within my grasp, there is nothing left to stop me from saving the Foundation!"

And then a nine-tailed fox tried to bite Dr. Edison's testicles off.

Excerpt from security footage of SCP-161's temporary containment cell (formerly the containment cell of SCP-), detailing an encounter between Dr. Edison and SCP-953 (in vulpine form), accompanied by Dr. King's comments via radio from Security Station .

SCP-953 (in vulpine form) tackles Dr. Edison from behind, knocking him over. 953 then attempts to remove Dr. Edison's armor so it can [DATA EXPUNGED].

Dr. Edison: OH GOD WHERE THE HELL DID SHE COME FROM WHY DIDN'T YOU TELL ME?!

SCP-953: [EXPLETIVE]! How dare you [REDACTED]!

Dr. King: Why does she hate you so much?!

Dr. Edison: HOW SHOULD I KNOW [EXPLETIVE] DO SOMETHING MAN!

Dr. King: I could turn the lasers back on, but-

Dr. Edison: I DON'T CARE JUST- OH GOD, MY [REDACTED]! SHE'S GOT MY [REDACTED]!

"You okay?" said Dr. King, his voice slightly distorted by radio static.

"If you mean, 'am I still alive', then just barely." Dr. Edison groaned. "Man, I can't believe that bitch is still worked up about that…"

"About what?" said Dr. King.

"Well, you know that little disclaimer about not calling 953 a 'Kitsune'?"

"Yeah?"

"Let's just say I watch too much anime and leave it at that." Dr. Edison attempted to produce a faint chuckle from his lame joke, followed by a deep, hacking cough. "She's still there isn't she?"

"Yep. Just outside the doorway."

"Probably waiting for me to start running… dammit…" The doctor slowly began to push himself off the floor, only to have the tip of his nose burnt off by one of the containment beams. "Well, at least I can still move…"

"Just hang tight, Ed. I'll try and find someone to pick you up."

"No way, doc." Edison wheezed. "We're on the clock here, remember?"

"Yeah, but…"

“JUST LISTEN TO ME, DAMMIT!” the doctor shouted. “Everything’s going to hell anyway, so what do you care if I die attempting some sort of ridiculous ‘Action Movie Hero’ plan? This sort of disaster happens only once in a lifetime, and I’ll be damned if I spend it sitting in a corner holding my eyes closed.”

“Are you trying to tell me something?”

“Am I trying to tell you something? AM I TRYING TO TELL YOU SOMETHING!? Yeah, I’m trying to tell you something all right!" Dr. Edison took a deep breath. "It’s Game Day, King. And it’s not just any game, King, it’s the World Series and we’re playing for the Stanley Cup. The other team’s up by a field goal, It’s the bottom of the ninth, bases loaded, 4th down, our star player is in the penalty box, and the big man's about 2 WREAK SOME HAVOC on the court!”

Dr. King was speechless.

“So do you want that gold medal, or are you going to take a penalty kick with the rest of those losers?!”

“…I don’t even know where to begin with that.” said Dr. King.

“That’s what I like to hear!” said Dr. Edison. “Now, on the count of three, I want you to turn off the containment beams so I can grab 161. Ready?”

“Now wait a second, I never said I would-”

“1… 2… 3!”

In a flash, Dr. Edison jolted upright, and sprinting towards the pinwheel, ignoring the stinging from his numerous wounds. Moments later, 953 burst though the door, and began to chase after him.

“Get out of there, Ed!” said Dr. King.

“No! I got a head start! I can make it, I can make it, I can make-”

Security Log- -2

Excerpt from section [REDACTED] security footage.

An unidentified body (presumably belonging to Dr. Edison) falls though the ceiling and lands in the men's room of section [REDACTED]. An audible 'snap' is heard, implying that Dr. Edison has broken most, if not all of his bones.

Game Day Part 1: Smilers

During Incident 234-900-Tempest Night, many junior staff and personnel took part in the attempts to repel attackers by seizing control of already uncontained SCPs or, in some cases, breaching containment of SCPs with the intent of seizing control of them for defensive purposes. A notable example of a failed attempt is the efforts of Junior Researcher David Eskobar, who remains in medical care and has begun psychiatric treatment recently. Relevant information is included below.

Excerpts from Surveillance Logs, Security Cameras 00290001, 00290011, 00290993

0920: SCP-275 confirmed secure, armed guards holding position.

0922: Junior Researcher David Eskobar attempts to instigate security breach at SCP-275 containment cell. Armed guards fire warning shot down hallway. Researcher Eskobar flees.

0944: SCP- confirmed secure, guards having left position but making periodic patrols.

0945: Researcher Eskobar arrives at SCP- containment area. Eskobar attempts to instigate security breach. Armed guards walking past fire warning shots. Researcher Eskobar flees. Guards seen chasing after Eskobar momentarily, then shouting; microphone unable to pick up dialogue.

1010: SCP- confirmed secure. Guards holding position out of sight but nearby.

1011: Researcher Eskobar arrives at SCP- containment area. Eskobar attempts to instigate security

breach. Multiple armed guards rush from concealed locations and capture Eskobar. Eskobar is dragged out of sight.

1030: Researcher Eskobar successfully enters Site 17 video archive.

After-Action Debriefing, Agent /Guard B-3273

Agent : Tell me about Researcher Eskobar's behavior during the beginning of Tempest Night.

B-3273: Christ, he was the same as the rest of them. We heard junior staff running around like hamsters, screaming about “I always wanted to try SCP-this” and “we have no choice, we have to have SCP-that.” It's insulting that almost every one of them forgot that there were still a few guards in the building, still staying on post no matter what was happening. You know, actually securing a few SCPs, not letting them out and hoping everything just turned out okay.

Agent : And you say Eskobar was the same?

B-3273: No, Eskobar was the worst. He hadn't worked here more than a month at that point, and he apparently hadn't read half of the files on the Scips he was trying to break out. He was going to jump on to the table in front of **SCP-212**, figuring it would just turn him into Robocop. You should have seen the look on his face when we told him about the “no anesthetic” part, or the survival rate.

Agent : But Eskobar kept trying.

B-3273: I guess he forgot we still had radios. We were tracking his movements, and by the time he got to , we had decided enough was enough.

Agent : So you moved in to arrest him.

B-3273: As far as I'm concerned, he had enough

chances. We waited until he actually tried breaching containment for the third before we took him.

Agent : And none of the guards were feeling… especially antagonistic towards the researcher?

B-3273: Of course not, sir. We maintained professional conduct throughout the incident. Where possible.

Agent : I'm interested in how Eskobar escaped from containment and broke into Site-17's video archive.

B-3273: I'm sorry, sir. I guess he just got past us.

Agent : I'm especially concerned with how he managed to break in while still handcuffed and gagged.

B-3273: Sorry, sir. I guess he just got past us.

Agent : Were any of you aware of his coulrophobia?

B-3273: Sir?

Agent : His fear of clowns.

B-3273: Not particularly, sir. We would never—well, we would have advised him not to…contain himself in that particular room had we known that, no matter what had happened.

Agent : (sighs) Yes, that's what the others said.

Due to lack of evidence and extenuating circumstances, guards involved in the incident have been cleared of all charges.

Excerpt of Security Log, Video Transcript, Security Camera 00290933

1030: Researcher Eskobar enters Site 17 video archive. Researcher begins demonstrating intense fear and huddling against corner, still handcuffed.

1045: A television turns on. Researcher Eskobar registers acute panic.

1046: Researcher Eskobar appears to lose consciousness.

Suggested modification to `SCP-993` containment protocols, Addendum 993-1:

Given the events surrounding the death of Dr. (see **`Incident Report 993-Gamma`**) and its behavior during Incident Tempest Night, it appears that SCP-993's previous manifestation towards children and exclusion of adults was the result of a conscious choice. SCP-993 is capable of manifesting itself to adults as well as children. However, in order to interact with adults, SCP-993 appears to be able to render adults unconscious. Once unconscious, [REDACTED] (see Security Log Transcript, Camera 00290993)

Excerpt of Security Log, Video Transcript, Security Camera 00290933

1048: Researcher Eskobar appears to regain consciousness. Begins smiling.

1050: Researcher Eskobar rises to his feet, maintaining eye contact with television.

1055: Gag applied to Eskobar's mouth falls out. Hands cease to be restrained. [Note: Handcuff chain was later found to have been severed by unknown means.]

1059: Researcher Eskobar raises his arms outward to the sides, forming a T-shape. Video cuts out briefly. When image returns, Eskobar's hands are pinned to the wall with large spikes; blood is flowing freely down his arms and down the wall. Researcher Eskobar's face is smiling widely, and continues to do so for the duration of the taping (seventy-two hours).

After-Action Summary, / /11:

After the conclusion of Incident Tempest Night, during cleanup operations, Researcher Eskobar was found in Site 17's video archive, badly dehydrated, suffering serious blood loss, and nearing a comatose state, still smiling. Researcher Eskobar was taken to a Foundation medical facility and assigned to psychiatric therapy. The television across from Researcher Eskobar remained on, broadcasting test pattern SMPTE RP 219-2002 (commonly known as “color bars”). Several DVDs were found on top of the television; when arranged in a rainbow shape, markings on the DVDs spelled out “SEASON II!” These discs were revealed to contain videos in the animated style of SCP-993, depicting the deaths of various Foundation researchers during Tempest Night. Some of these deaths were not actually witnessed by any surviving researchers, casting doubt on whether the particular brutality shown to accompany many of these deaths actually happened.

SCP-993's primary role in the videos is narrative in nature, providing commentary for the deaths and making comedic comments about both the means by which individuals died and the appearance of the remains of dead personnel. However, three researchers who were never located and considered MIA, along with two D-class personnel who were believed to have escaped, are shown on the videos. Each researcher is individually shown being knocked unconscious by an unseen attacker and dragged into empty containment rooms. Though the experiences of all three are different, all are assaulted in various ways using different weapons, which appear to be held by the camera's operator. One is shown dying from blood loss during a surgical operation to connect the victim's colon to his esophagus, another dies of cerebral failure during an unanesthetized hemispherectomy, and the final researcher dies of shock after being skinned alive with an industrial-grade belt sander. The two D-class personnel are shown being

sewn to one another at several points and led into an area where SCP- was roaming after breaching containment, leading to dismemberment. All five victims continue smiling broadly throughout their experiences. None of these events can be corroborated or disproved by available evidence.

Game Day Part 1: Mastication, Deglutition, Emesis

"It's beautiful," Dr. Lesley Mause announced, zooming in on the wriggling cells taking up her monitor's screen.

Dr. Drake looked over her shoulder, still wearing the same bored expression he'd had for the same half hour. "It's vomit."

Across the room, two heads swiveled in unison, hawklike, to stare at Dr. Drake. Agent Rose and Agent Walker, security. They did that every time Dr. Drake opened his mouth, each time tingling with almost animalistic animosity. The two ex-members of the Children of the Sun were objectively creepy as shit, she reflected. The way they did so many things in synchronization. You'd think they were twins, but they didn't even look alike, even if their mannerisms tended to be identical Rose (a man) was pale and androgynous, and Walker (a woman) was attractive in a classical fashion and had skin dark as pitch. She'd been working with them almost two years now, and she felt the same affection for them that she might feel for a pair of cats. A pair of extremely murderous cats, anyway.

Plus, they hated Drake almost as much as she did.

"Yes," she agreed, "it's vomit. But that doesn't preclude beauty."

She zoomed out again. Drake pointed at a structure in the gray-green mess. "Is that a bone?"

"Indeed," Mause said. "*Alces alces.* And they're not the only thing our green friend has been eating. I've found at least three different species of squirrel. And what's probably a squirrel. But most of the bones are *Alces alces*."

Drake leaned back in his chair, propped his legs up on the desk in front of him. "What's an *Alces alces*?"

She rolled her eyes in advance. "One of the cervids, a capreoline.

Known in North America, of course, as… the moose."

Drake sniggered. "Moose, eh?" Then sniggered again. "Moose."

Mause's eyes flicked to Rose and Walker. They wore identical expressions of barely repressed fury. Mause, for her part, only felt mild annoyance. Most people knew better than to make that joke in front of Rose and Walker, but Mause heard the joke about every other day. She'd long gotten over cursing Fate for the timing of her transfer to the Special Reconnaissance-and-Research Task Force M-Omega-773 - or, as it was now so wittily referred to by other members of the Foundation, "the Deadly Moose team".

She'd been dumped from Research Team MO3-Gloria with everyone else when the O5s decided they didn't want anyone else poking at 003 and landed her directly in M-Omega-773 just in time for the disaster in which she - and every other member of the team - had stumbled through the corridors of Site 19 crazily warning everyone they came in to "beware the deadly moose". She herself had set up shop in the cafeteria with a shotgun for two hours before security tranquilized her and strapped her to a bed until the effects passed.

Memetics. She hated memetics.

"Yes," she said. "Alaskan moose, actually. *A. a. gigas*. Which fits with where we picked it up. Naturally."

"No Bigfoot bones in there?"

"No." She glared at her monitor. "We're not so sure that this thing has any connection to 1000 after all, I'm sorry to say."

Drake looked at the video monitor. "But just look at it. It looks like a big green ape."

"SCP-1000 instances are brown, black, red, and white in color," Mause said. "They don't come in green."

"Still," Drake said. "My gut tells me there's some connection. Keep looking."

Mause stifled her sigh. Technically, Drake did outrank her. Being on the Deadly Moose team meant you got ridiculously high clearance to a few fairly important SCPs, but outside of those small spheres you were left at basic level 1 access. And the respect that went with that. It didn't help that most of the team's assignments sounded inherently mockable. 'The Bloodstone.' (Also known as the bad-trip ruby, even though it wasn't actually a ruby.) The glorified mechanical people-eating fishing worms. Organic motherboard. ('So can 003 run Crysis?' Jesus, you'd think these people never grew out of the 90's.) Bigfoot, for chrissake. And, of course, the goddamn moose… *thing*.

And now, the weird thing pacing about in the temporary containment cell on the monitor, provisionally classified as Anomalous Humanoid TXCD-R.

The thing whose vomit she was analyzing for the last half hour. TXCD-R was picked up in Alaska only days ago, and had slaughtered half the task force sent to capture it before suddenly going docile and allowing the rattled survivors to bind it in a net and transport it to Site 17's temporary containment auxiliary facility.

It really was beautiful vomit, full of living things she'd never seen, in a rainbow array of colors. Even TXCD-R was beautiful in its own way. She watched it pace, a hulking seven-foot-tall thing shaped vaguely like an ape, covered in what might be a living growth of moss, wide teeth like spades sticking out of its mouth like reversed elephant tusks. The "moss" was growing so fast you could actually see it move if you had the patience. Tiny glittering eyes peered out from under the moss curtains - not just from its "head", either. Tiny auxiliary limbs moved and twitched, peeking out now and then to groom the ever-growing moss.

As she watched, TXCD-R bent double and vomited for the ninth time that day.

"Again?" Mause scratched her head. "It's vomited up almost the entire bodies of everything it's eaten so far. And judging by the bones I see, that would be the last of its meals for the past week." She looked at the screen again. "It's not digesting anything. None of the things in here have been broken down like you'd expect if they'd been in stomach acid for hours. They have signs of chewing, and

not much else. Is it sick or something?"

"I'm telling you," Drake said. "It's got Bigfoot's fingerprints all over it."

"Tomorrow," Mause said. She pushed back her chair. "I'll look more tomorrow."

Excerpt from Video Log, Observation Camera 6320945 (Temporary Containment Chamber for Anomalous Humanoid TXCD-R):

> **0700:** TXCD-R continues to pace back and forth across chamber.
>
> **0756:** TXCD-R abruptly ceases pacing and stands perfectly still until **0811**.
>
> **0811:** Power fluctuation related to explosive event at main Site-17. TXCD-R begins to repeatedly charge the walls of its containment chamber. Local alarms set off.
>
> **0813:** Agent C. Rose and Agent I. Walker open containment chamber left and right ports and shoot TXCD-R repeatedly with tranquilizer darts. TXCD-R does not react to shots except to charge containment chamber ports.
>
> **0815:** Agents Rose and Walker cease attempting to shoot TXCD-R. TXCD-R continues to charge walls of its containment chamber.
>
> **0827:** External power lost. Switching to emergency power. TXCD-R continues to charge walls of its containment chamber.

Mause stumbled into the main observation chamber, eyes bleary. Rose and Walker were waiting for her.

"Wazz going on?" she managed.

"Containment breach at Site 17. Unknown insurgent forces. Tempest Night scenario. Assistant Adams currently coordinating personnel," Rose said.

"No breaches on this Auxuliary Site. Yet," Walker added. "TXCD-R is going to breach the walls of its containment chamber in approximately ten minutes."

"Where's Dr. Drake?"

"Gone to help with the Tempest Night scenario," Rose said.

"Insurgents," Mause said. "Tempest Night? How long?"

"Three hours and eleven minutes," Rose said.

"Three *hours*? Why didn't you wake me?"

"Sufficient sleep is required for optimal bodily function," Rose said.

"Besides," Walker said. "There's nothing any of us can do. We are not equipped to stop TXCD-R from breaching containment. We are under orders to remain here as long as TXCD-R does. On event of TXCD-R's escape, we will attempt to stop it. When we fail, we will track it."

"So you see," Rose said, "there is nothing to be concerned about, for the next nine minutes, until TXCD-R breaches containment. And sleep is very important."

Mause shook her head and watched Anomalous Humanoid TXCD-R hurl itself at the wall of its containment chamber. And again. And then again.

"For now, though," Rose added, "you should put on body armor. In case it's hungry."

Excerpt from Video Log, Observation Camera 6320945 (Temporary Containment Chamber for Anomalous Humanoid TXCD-R) and Observation Camera 6327641 (Temporary Containment Facility 17-K, Exterior):

1132: TXCD-R breaches containment chamber.

1134: TXCD-R exits Temporary Containment Facility 17-K and heads in the direction of Site-17.

1135: TXCD-R confronted by Agent Charles Rose and Agent Iola Walker, armed with S2-05 shotguns. Agents fire on TXCD-R repeatedly without effect. TXCD-R temporarily incapacitates Agent Rose and Agent Walker via physical impact.

1136: TXCD-R continues heading towards Site-17.

1140: Dr. Lesley Mause exits Temporary Containment Facility 17-K, rouses agents Rose and Walker. Mause, Rose, and Walker enter nearby vehicle and drive after TXCD-R.

They'd followed TXCD-R nearly all the way to Site-17. Smoke rose from several of the central buildings. TXCD-R was stopped in the middle of the road, just in front of one of the Site-17 buildings, the side completely blown out by some explosion. Screams drifted out from inside.

Walker stopped the car a respectful distance from the creature. TXCD-R kneeled in the road, and seemed to be pantomiming something.

"What's it doing?" Mause asked.

"It's eating," Rose said.

Mause stared at the pale green creature. It *did* seem to be eating something, except… its jaws were closing on nothing, its hands holding something up to its mouth that wasn't there.

"*What* is it eating?" she asked.

"An instance of SCP-870," Rose said.

"The monster that only schizophrenics can see?"

"The same."

"How can *you* tell?"

Rose shrugged.

TXCD-R jerked its head up. Blinking eyes became visible everywhere underneath the curtains of moss that covered its body.

Then it bounded off. Through the blasted wall, leaping over rubble, and into the Site-17 building.

"Great," Mause said. "Just great. Where's it going now?"

"Isn't it obvious?" Rose said. "It's hungry."

Audio/Visual transcript of `SCP-472` containment chamber

> **1149:** Anomalous Humanoid TXCD-R breaches containment chamber. TXCD-R does not appear to experience any effects from SCP-472. TXCD-R briefly examines SCP-472 and removes it from its pedestal.
>
> **1150:** TXCD-R appears to claw the air while holding SCP-472. At the end of its claws, red flesh appears, spurting blood, apparently extruding from midair. TXCD-R bites down on the piece of flesh and pulls. More flesh appears, with an accompanying tearing sound, splattering blood on the walls of the containment chamber.

Mause was standing in the brand new, still smoking entrance of Site-17 when she heard the scream. A long, low, inhuman shriek that rose and fell for what seemed like an eternity.

"Jesus," she said. "What was that?"

She could hear her heart beating - boom-boom, boom-boom - much too loudly, inside her head -

Mause looked at Rose and Walker for confirmation. She could tell by the looks on their faces that they were thinking the same thing.

"SCP-472 is *screaming*," she said.

Audio/Visual transcript of SCP-472 containment chamber

> **1151:** TXCD-R pulls and rips with its claws and teeth until a two meter length of flesh comes into appearance, detaches from its [still invisible] source, and drops to the ground. The flesh appears to be a collection of organs, including three still-beating hearts.
>
> **1152:** TXCD-R exits containment chamber, dragging the length of flesh behind it, still holding SCP-472. It tears off a chunk from the length of flesh and consumes it as it exits the chamber.

Transcript of Video Surveillance Recording
Location: Checkpoint Camera, Service Entrance H-01

> **1158:** TXCD-R passes camera, still carrying SCP-472. Length of flesh no longer visible. It is confronted by the service entrance by Dr. Carl Drake. Dr. Drake shouts a challenge to TXCD-R, telling it that it "shall not pass". Dr. Drake elaborates that he is in possession of an SCP item. He produces a small gold circlet later identified as Anomalous Item 56428609 [previously categorized by Dr. Drake, not known to have any special effect beyond unusual chemical makeup]. Dr. Drake places the circlet on his head while shouting "Crown of Thorns, activate!" Anomalous Item 56428609 emits a nimbus of glowing light.
>
> **1159:** TXCD-R removes the top of Dr. Drake's head via aggressive mastication. TXCD-R consumes both the top of Dr. Drake's head and Anomalous Item 56428609. TXCD-R exits through the open service entrance.

1200: No further activity.

"It's eating SCPs," Rose said, as a group of other agents carried away Dr. Drake's body. "That's why it killed an instance of SCP-870. And took SCP-472. It's a food source."

"Quite a theory," Mause said. "Maybe that's why it vomited everything it ate… Maybe it wasn't built to be eating … uh, *natural* things, for lack of a better word. Of course, why would it be able to keep down SCP items? It's not like 472 and 870 have anything in common. Or that anomalous item. Natural things have much more in common than anomalous things. How could something evolve to eat anomalous items?"

"Maybe it didn't evolve," Walker said. "Maybe it was created."

Mause shrugged. "I guess we won't know until we get it back."

"Then let's get started," Rose said.

Game Day, Phase 2: Contain

Act 2: This act takes place over an indefinite period of time following the events of Act 1 - somewhere around three to six months, give or take as needed for the purposes of story.

The situation is grim: a major attack on a Foundation Site by a previously unknown force has caused a major containment breach. Dozens, if not hundreds, of SCP artifacts have been released. Other occult organizations, upon seeing these events, are moving in. And to make matters worse, a few of the SCPs in question have their own agendas as well…

The theme for Phase 2 is **CONTAIN**. As opposed to Phase 1, which was about securing the Foundation from an attack, Phase 2 is focused on SCPs in the wild. A few story ideas:

- MTFs capturing escaped SCPs.
- Agents investigating the group that attacked the Foundation and who was supporting them.
- SCPs fiendishly plotting to stay away from the Foundation and carry out their own evil plots.
- Members of other organizations coming into conflict.
- Repercussions of the worst attack on the Foundation in known recorded history.

Drawing from the lessons of Act 1, Act 2 will be more tightly organized than Act 1 was. Instead of a single long storyline that anyone can edit, Act 2 will be divided up into several self-contained short stories. This should keep things more easily readable, as well as allowing for individual short stories as well as collaborations. Also, it should allow for more freedom in how stories get written, as opposed to being limited to the logs and transcripts format.

This page here will serve as an index and reference for the Phase 2 storyline, including a rough timeline and index by storyline.

Finally: there is no "approved writers" list for Game Day Phase 2. Anyone and everyone should feel free to contribute to this as a writer: however, the normal rules for story deletion (deleted at -10 votes) still apply.

We now have a chatroom: #scpgameday on SynIRC

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

(Feel free to edit this as individual short stories get written).

- **Day -???: SCP-953** attacks "YiffCon ," killing attendees. There is one surviving witness. ("And Then I Saw The Light.")
- **D-Day: "Tempest Night" - A major attack on Site 17 results in multiple containment breaches.**
- **Day +0:** The mop-up after Tempest Night begins. (**Antivirus**)
- **Day +1: SCP-953** joins in an uneasy alliance with the Proponents of Paranormal Rights. ("And Then I Saw The Light.")
- **Day +1: Second Language**, in which **SCP-911** visits **SCP-343**.
- **Day +3: SCP-542** and **SCP-347** go to dinner. (**RUN AWAY FOREVURRR**)
- **Day +4:** Agents Kramer and Harken pay a courtesy call to a higher-up at Marshall, Carter, and Dark. (**A Working Lunch**)
- **Day +6:** Agents Kramer and Harken take out a facility run by the Church of the Broken God. (**Like Clockwork**)
- **Day +8:** A visit is paid to a small house in the countryside. (**"The Light At the End of the Tunnel."**)
- **Day +9:** A place between worlds. (**"Tunneling Between Worlds."**)
- **Day +10:** Agent Grims meets the Bagman (**F.U.B.A.R**)
- **Day +11:** An angel encounters the Church. (**Rapture**)
- **Day +12:** Agents Harken and Kramer get new orders. (**Reflections**)
- **Day +17:** A researcher encounters the **SCP-682**/**SCP-229** hybrid. (**Getting Under His Skin**)

- **Day +18:** Mr. Dark arrives on the scene, tired of his underlings' setbacks. (**`Discovered Attack`**).
- **Day +20:** An exchange of emails, a doctor visit and a diary entry. (**`A Breath of Fresh Air: Inhale`**)
- **Day +21:** A shootout in a shopping mall raises more questions than it answers. (**`The World From a Different Angle`**)
- **Day +23:** The remains of a known Marshall, Carter and Dark employee wash up on a beach in Florida. (**`A Little Chat`**)
- **Day +24:** MC&D acquire a new SCP.
- **Day +26:** A strange man is hired by Sir Samuel Valley.
- **Day +28:** Agent D M checks in to command. (**`A Breath of Fresh Air: Holding It`**)
- **Day +31:** The GOC prepares for an attack on the Wanderer's Library. Mister Dark meets with SCP-953. The Foundation goes on the offensive. (**`Angle of Attack`**)
- **Day +35:** SCP-682 escapes the confines of Site 17. (**`Basking in the Light`**)
- **Day +38:** Following a series of devastating attacks, two groups make an alliance against a common enemy. (**`Attacking The Darkness`**)
- **Day + :** "Tempest Night 2" - Reinforced elements of the PPR carry out coordinated attacks on multiple Foundation Sites, as well as those of other occult organizations.

INDEX OF STORIES

Vector of Transmission (SCP-353)

Storyline Coordinators: Clef
Having escaped her captivity, the disease-controlling girl **`Vector`** and her small cadre of fanatically loyal reluctant followers pursue their her own ends.

- **`Point In Line`**: Vector and the PPR have a talk.

Predator (SCP-953, The Proponents of Paranormal Rights)

Storyline Coordinators: Clef
An uneasy alliance between a group of paranormal conservationists and a **`creature out of myth`** yields strange fruit.

- "And Then I Saw The Light." (by Clef). A deal is made. The dice are cast.
- **`"The Light At the End of the Tunnel."`** (by Clef) Alliances and Betrayals.
- **`"Tunneling Between Worlds."`** (by Clef) Things get complicated.
- **`Angle of Attack`** (By Clef, Gears, and Eric_H). Things escalate.

Monitor Lizard Gone Viral (SCP-229; SCP-682)

Storyline Coordinators: GrandEnder
At Site 17, researchers are forced to deal with the consequences of the attack, including a rapidly evolving cyberorganism made up of **`SCP-682`** cross-contaminated with **`SCP-229`**

- **`Antivirus`** (by GrandEnder). Turing complete.
- **`Getting Under His Skin`** (by Drewbear). When the sound gets to be too much.
- **`Basking in the Light`** (by GrandEnder). The Dragon rises.

Pain Train (SCP-737; Marshall, Carter, and Dark)

Storyline Coordinators: Tanhony
A disgruntled former MC&D Employee tries to breed and market

SCP-737 and gets into trouble both with the Foundation and his erstwhile associates.

- **A Little Chat** (by Tanhony) Mr. Jacobs digs a little too deep.
- **Fun** (by Tanhony) Sir Samuel Valley has some fun, then gets down to business.

And In The Wings, Shadows (Multiple subjects and items)

Storyline Coordinators Dr. Gears
Following the actions and movements of those who are using the disaster for their own ends. The exploits of Agents Kramer and Harken, The Bagman, and others.

- **A Working Lunch** (by Clef). Kramer and Harken solicit for a good cause.
- **Like Clockwork** (By Gears, with edits by Clef). A surgical action by Agent Kramer.
- **Reflections** (By Gears, with edits by Clef). Agents Kramer and Harken get issued new orders.
- **F.U.B.A.R** (By Gears, with edits by Clef). A simple recon mission becomes anything but.
- **Discovered Attack** (By Gears, Eric_H, and Clef). Mr. Dark makes his opening moves.
- **Point In Line** (by Gears and Clef). MC&D call in some specialists and make some acquisitions.
- **Angle of Attack** (By Clef, Gears, and Eric_H). Things escalate.
- **Attacking The Darkness** (By Clef and Gears). Things escalate further.
- **Settling Tabs** (By Gears and Clef). Agent Harken follows up a lead.
- **Lost Time** (By Gears). A loney mission on a lonely roof.

A Breath of Fresh Air (SCP-200)

Storyline Coordinator: Drewbear
Following the escape of the newly emerged **SCP-200**, it establishes itself within a small town, with unusual results.

- Imago (by Drewbear). Waking from a long sleep, an adult catches some breakfast.
- **Inhale** (by Drewbear). A small town gets comfortable with a new resident.
- **Holding It** (by Drewbear). A few new faces come to visit and look for a lost acquaintance, while the townsfolk make preparations for a rite of passage.
- Exhale (by Drewbear) *(pending)*. The shit hits the fan, and nobody gets quite what they want.

Other Incidents

Other incidents falling outside the main storylines.

- **RUN AWAY FOREVURRR** (by Rights) Think Homeward Bound. But with SCPs instead of talking animals.
- **"Sometimes You Get the Bear. . ."** (by Clef) Postmortem of a failed op.
- **The World From a Different Angle** (by Clef) Six perspectives on one incident.
- **Rapture** (by azzleflux) An angel encounters the Church.

Game Day Phase 2: ". . . And Then I Saw The Light"

"What am I even doing here?" Sol muttered, watching the man in the wolf suit walk by. "I don't have anything in common with these people."

"These people happen to be our most faithful customers, man," James said. "It's a big hit among furry audiences."

"I know," Sol sighed. "I've seen the fanart. It's not like anyone gives a crap about the writing, anyway, they just want to see the guy who draws the sexy animal girls."

"Not true! The comic gets twice the number of hits that my art does. People come back for your writing, man. We're a team, remember?"

"Whatever, dude. All I know is I'm down the cost of a plane ticket and hotel room, and no one's buying shit."

James rolled his eyes and grinned. "Hey, don't worry, man, we'll at least break even before the con's over. Tell ya what: let's go clubbing after this. Grab a couple of beers and forget about this whole thing. You'll be happy again in no time, man."

"Is it going to be a normal club or one where everyone wears fursuits?" Sol griped.

"It's going to be a furpile. We'll all yiff and scritch each other, then lick each other's fursuits and die of poisoning like in that one episode of CSI."

"Really?"

"No."

"Damn, you got my hopes up."

"Sorry to disappoint you." He glanced down at his watch. "I've got an artist meetup to go to. Hold the fort, try to sell a few books, kay?"

"See ya." Sol gave his friend a lazy wave and leaned back to watch the freaks. Most of them were clustered at the other end of the artist's alley, where the more risqué artists were hawking their wares. He sighed and cursed the day that James had ever convinced him that, "We should totally do a comic together, man." On the whole, he would much rather be sleeping in.

He was startled to realize that someone was standing at his booth, flipping through Volume 1. Her brow was furrowed, and her lips were pursed together as she scrutinized the pages. "You are the writer?" she asked.

"Yeah, that's me. SolKid."

"A strange name."

"It's my internet handle. My friends call me Sol. My parents call me Solomon."

"Mmm." The girl frowned and held the book up to the light, shaking her head. "And so, this is what we've been reduced to," she said. "Masturbatory fantasy fodder."

"It's what the people want. You gonna buy that or not?" Sol asked.

"No," the girl said, putting the book back down in its wire stand. "I think I shall give you something better." She smiled, revealing long, sharp canine teeth: a feral, animal grin. "I think I shall give you something better to write about."

It was only then that Sol realized that the girl was naked.

She had vaguely Asian features: almond eyes and long straight black hair stretching to her knees. Her eyes were yellow, and their pupils were thin slits. Her fingers were tipped with sharp, hooked claws. Nine red, foxlike tails flared behind her.

There was a brief hush. Everyone turned to gawk at her. A few camera flashes here and there. She stood silently, her head tilted

back, eyes closed, hands clenched tightly at her sides.

Then an overweight man in a red vest ran up, yelling, "HEY HEY HEY, NONE OF THAT, THIS IS A FAMILY CONVENTION!"

Her hand flashed out as he reached to grab her, plunged into his abdomen with an unpleasant squelching sound before he even touched her, stepped aside and kicked at his shin, sending him sprawling to the ground screaming and grabbing at his spilling entrails. She opened her mouth unpleasantly wide and swallowed the gory thing clutched in her hand in a single gulp.

Then the screaming started.

Once, when he was a kid, Sol had taken a trip to the Holocaust museum with his high school class. They had seen an image of the inside of one of the gas chambers, where the prisoners had been executed. There were deep gouges in the walls where the desperate people had clawed at them to try and get out, places where they had trampled each other to death trying to crawl over each other to climb higher, in a blind panic. It had been terrifying enough to imagine that happening to emaciated, shaved-head prisoners in a Nazi death camp.

It was even worse when happening to a bunch of brightly dressed fans at a convention.

And then the madness began. He saw a skinny girl wearing cat's ears and a bodysuit screaming and pounding at a wall when an unlocked door was a few feet to her left. He saw a big, tough-looking guy wearing a black t-shirt go berserk and beat a teenage boy to death with a steel chair. A chubby girl walked up to him with empty eye sockets, her crushed eyes weeping blood and fluid. "Maggots in my eyes, get them out, maggots in my eyes, get them out," she wailed.

And while this happened, the girl with the yellow eyes stalked through the crowd like a shark through a school of fish: never stopping, always killing. Here she tore a man's liver out and ate it whole. There, she tore a girl's throat with her teeth. Then she was no longer eating, just killing in a berserk frenzy, screaming mad,

animal cries as she curbstomped a slightly overweight guy with bad acne to death against the concession stand counter.

It was the most beautiful thing Sol had ever seen.

And then it was still. The doors of the hall swung back and forth on broken hinges where the panicked crowd had smashed them down in their mad, panicked exodus. A few unfortunates, trampled under the crowd, lay groaning in pain on the hard concrete floor. She stood in the center of the circle of gore, skin stained scarlet, and she looked up at the hard, stark light of the fluorescent tubes, and said, in a voice made low and harsh with anger and frustration: "It doesn't help. Nothing helps."

She turned to Sol, and there was murder in her eyes. "Go write about this," she said.

And then she left.

"And that was when I understood the truth," the man said. "Just as humanity has tried to sterilize our cities of wildlife and our lives of germs, we've tried to sterilize our minds from the supernatural. The hard light of science has tried to drive the things of myth out of our lives and into the corners of the world. And just like any cornered creature, they are fighting back."

"While this continues, there can be no peace. The only solution is peaceful coexistence with the supernatural, as in the old days before the rise of the worldwide global scientific conspiracy, but as long as organizations like this Foundation exist, there can be no peace. For the sake of peace, they must be destroyed."

"The Serpent's Hand tries, but they are bound by the shackles of their own morals: they are useful to us, in a way, but they have not the will to do what needs to be done. The C.I. is content to lord over their Third World backwaters: like Mengele, they are interested only in their own grotesque experimentation. The Church is interested only in rescuing their "Broken God" from this Foundation. Only we of the Freemind Nation are willing to put our lives on the line for the sake of peace."

"Will you help us?"

The man stared intently at the girl sitting across the table. She had vaguely Asian features: almond eyes and long straight black hair stretching to her knees. Her eyes were yellow, and their pupils were thin slits. Her fingers were tipped with sharp, hooked claws, which she tapped against the hardwood table, where a plate with a liver from a freshly slaughtered, grass-fed, organically raised cow lay on a clean white plate. Nine red, foxlike tails flared behind her in a peacock's fan of swaying reddish fur.

She reached out one hand and, without a word, swallowed the gory chunk of meat in front of her in one gulp.

The man smiled. "Let me tell you about our plan, then…"

Game Day, Phase 3: Protect

Act 3: This act takes place over an indefinite period of time following the events of Act 2 - somewhere around three to six months, give or take as needed for the purposes of story.

Everything has gone wrong. The Foundation is on its back foot. Chaos Insurgency elements are openly attacking SCP Foundation facilities. Marshall, Carter, and Dark are rushing around snatching up everything they can find. The war of the paranormal has gone overt.

The theme for Phase 3 is PROTECT. This is the Foundation's darkest hour. They are in a fight for their own survival. Some story ideas include:

- Tempest Night 2: a massive-scale attack on multiple Foundation sites.
- Pizzicato: Will the GOC join the overt war? And what will happen if they do?

Act 3 is wide-open. Anyone can contribute a story to this metaplot. Go nuts. Refer to other stories. Let's build a world.

This page here will serve as an index and reference for the Phase 3 storyline, including a rough timeline and index by storyline.

Finally: there is no "approved writers" list for Game Day Phase 3. Anyone and everyone should feel free to contribute to this as a writer: however, the normal rules for story deletion (deleted at -10 votes) still apply.

We now have a chatroom: #scpgameday on SynIRC

Game Day Part 3: Synchronous by Roget

Game Day Part 3: Synchronous

Murphy stumbled through the darkened corridor, trying and somewhat succeeding at avoiding the debris that was strewn across the floor. Behind him, indistinct voices still called out, searching for more of his colleagues. Reaching the end of the hall, he began letting himself down the stairs, occasionally glancing over his shoulder to make sure he wasn't being followed.

Goddamnit. They weren't supposed to be here. Site-77 was supposed to be one of the safe ones, the Insurgency was supposed to be more active in America. God damn it. But don't think about that, think about getting out, to the third floor. They have the evac there, and they're holding out. You're gonna make it Murphy, just calm down…

As he reached the second floor landing, a curious thing happened. The PA system crackled on, and a voice began speaking. This was curious for two reasons. One, the power had long ago been extinguished, with hope for emergency power cut down shortly thereafter. Secondly, the voice on the PA was not a voice Murphy recognized from the site.

Hello, Foundation personnel. Do not be alarmed. Will make you all safe soon, so in the meantime please enjoy some music.

A lovely rendition of Led Zeppelin began to play.

The was standing by the ruined stairwell, confused. Looked up to voice, and heard the singing begin. Say hello, make comfortable in new role. Do you remember us?

Murphy bolted. There was something loose here, some skip. Shit. He'd been lucky so far, not running into anything dangerous or scary, but now that luck seemed to have run out. It was still behind him somewhere, probably chasing him. Shit, shit, just keep running…

It was at this moment that Murphy ran directly into a band member, smacking into it as he rounded the corner. Falling to the floor, he scrambled to the opposite wall and stared at it. The band member looked to be a woman, wearing blue and orange tassels with a white uniform. Over her shoulders was a drum. She began hitting it.

Bum bum bum bum bumbumbum

Murphy took off, once again fleeing through the second floor corridors. Each hallway he passed, he saw more members of the band. All playing instruments. The snare drum, the saxophone, the clarinet… he could hear the music. The children were singing.

He could remember now.

But it was wrong.

This wasn't what he was supposed to remember. This wasn't a note, it wasn't anything, he had to get out of here. Murphy struggled to move his foot, but it felt lashed to the floor. He wasn't going anywhere.

We see refuses, to see the music. Remembers, but doesn't believe in what can be done. The children, sweet like a sparrows call, do not bring closer but drives off, away from chorus.

Murphy clenched his eyes shut. "What the fuck do you want from me?"

We wish to bring the music?

"No! I don't want your fuckin' music, let me go!"

Would refuse composition?

"What? Yes, I refuse!"

The composition will be less beautiful without…

"I don't care! Please, let me go!"

Rest.

The force that had been holding Murphy back was suddenly let go, and he crashed forward, tumbling between debris and clutter. It had let him go. Why it had, or what it was going to do next, were secondary matters, because Murphy was free and he was leaving *right now.*

Insurgents After Action Report

During the cleanup of the second floor, we found a bunch of the staff members gathered in a test chamber, playing music like a marching band, obviously due to a Vertigo breaching. We got some guys in earmuffs to secure 'em. They were also singing something, sounded like some 70's music. I don't remember what it was, but I'll tell you when we do.

Also, Shane was telling me we picked up one guy trying to go to the "evac point". We snatched and bagged him, shipped him to the area. Might be a good addition to the testing force, and if he protests y'all can just test stuff on him.

~Wehrner

Gloriana Alexylva Hub

Gloriana Alexylva

A Football Story in Nine Parts

-△-

Part One: Fourth and Long

Part Two: Postgame

Part Three: Coach Panagakos, Eldest and Most Revered

Part Four: The Unforgiving Gridiron

Part Five: Anima Ex Machina

Part Six: TBA

Part Seven: TBA

Part Eight: TBA

Part Nine: TBA

Fourth and Long

"Welcome back, sports fans! This is Hermes Evaristas, and with me as always is Eupraxia Kassandros. If you're just joining us, the score is 24-28, and we've reached the two-minute warning in the fourth quarter of what has been an electric game between our Alexylva University Visigoths, and the Macedonia State Warriors. Before we get back to the game, Eupraxia, I think the focus tonight has undoubtedly been the absolutely incredible play of Alexylva's sophomore quarterback, Cron Apostolou."

"That's right, Herm. Listen, this kid has been on fire the entire night. He's gone 23/26, for 275 yards and two touchdowns, and just cannot be stopped. The Macedonia State defense is just perplexed out there right now, they've got no answers for him."

"But let's also not forget the athleticism and magikcrafting of junior running back, JaMarcus Aurelius. He's rushed for nearly 150 yards tonight, highlighted by a 45 yard run for a touchdown, during which he managed to singlehandedly turn the entire Macedonia State secondary into toads. He really is something special."

"Absolutely. If you didn't know better, you might not think that Aurelius was a walk-on here just three short years ago. Since then, he's been breaking records every season. Truly a force of nature out there."

"Alexylva still has some concerns on the other side of the ball, though. We've allowed three touchdowns from Macedonia State's All-Universal tight end, Darius Lykos. Coach Panagakos, Eldest and Most Revered, will definitely have some work to do before next weekend's conference opener against the Yale Bulldogs."

"Alright, and we're ready to get going. Ball is on Alexylva's own 19-yard line, first down, ten to go. Apostolou is back in the shotgun, two receivers wide to his left, Aurelius back. The ball is snapped… pressure coming from the right, and Aurelius has em with a hex!

Apostolou cuts left, looks, looks, and he's got it away! The catch is by Nereus, with plenty for the first down, and now they're on the 31. Clock is ticking, though, and Coach Panagakos, Eldest and Most Revered, only has one time out left."

"Here's where you have to be careful, Herm. When you're trying to get up the field fast like this, you don't want to make bone-headed mistakes and turn the football over. All you need is consistent play, steady progress, and maybe some heroics from our sophomore star."

"Apostolou still in the gun, motions right, and now he's got a man over there. Looks like a little bit of shuffling on the defense, Aurelius moves left now. Snap is to Apostolou, who looks, looks, fires across the middle, and… no good. Couldn't find his man over there."

"Looks like that was intended to be a short pass to Iason, but he just couldn't get there. Unfortunate to see such a poor throw from a player who, for most of the afternoon, has been lights out with those."

"Clock is stopped now at 1:42, Apostolou comes up under center now. He's bringing a man up right, second down, ten to go. Snap is up, and Apostolou has it! He's running right, now, and looks like he's going to try and hit the marker himself. Oooh, solid contact from the Macedonia State defensive end, Cron really took a hit on that one. Officials are coming out now, let's see if he got enough. They're measuring, measuring… and it looks like he has it! Just barely, but I think he's got it!"

"Herm, that's the kind of drive you want to see in your quarterback. Makes a bad pass, but able to brush it off, keep his eyes on the prize, and keep moving forward."

"Clock is ticking, we're down to 1:15. Apostolou is back, defense is showing blitz, and I don't know if he sees it. Snap is to Apostolou, and there's the handoff! Aurelius cuts left, cuts left, now he's making an endaround the line, and he's got space! He's at the fifty, forty-five, and he's dragged down at the Macedonia State forty-two yard line. Gods, can that kid fly. They've gotta move fast now, time is moving quickly. Apostolou runs up to the line, and he's got receivers

flying now. Yes, you heard that right, the receivers have sprouted wings and have taken to the skies. Looks like Macedonia State is going to counter that with harpoons, so we'll see how this plays out. We're at :56, and the ball is snapped. Apostolou is looking, looking, has a man, and he fires, by Zeus what a throw! Iason has it, and he's avoiding a harpoon, and now another, and looks like the safety is bringing a fireball, yes, yes he is. Iason drops, and is he going to make the sideline? I don't think so. Good for a first down, though, and then some, we're going to be at the Macedonia State 29-yard line."

"You really love to see hustle like that, Herm. Iason saw the fireball coming, and gave it just a little extra to get the extra yards. Coaches have got to love that."

"We're at :37 now, and Apostolou is looking at the sideline. This crowd is absolutely roaring here at the Alexylva University Nike Stadium. Clock is ticking, boys, let's get a move on here. I don't think Cron can hear the sideline! He's motioning, looks like he's going to run the play himself, and he does. Snap is to Apostolou, who hands it off to Kallias in the backfield. Kallias runs left, and is absolutely clobbered by those State linemen, he might even have lost a yard. That's not what you want to see there."

"No it isn't, and I don't know if that was a designed play, or if they were just looking for something to keep moving, but that isn't at all what you need right here."

"Apostolou has it again, and he's looking right. Second down, clock is at :25, and he lets one go… no good. Can't force a pass like that, Cron. It's gonna be third down, eleven to go, with :22 remaining on the game clock. Looks like they've got time for two, three more plays with that timeout in there, so we'll see what they do. Apostolou is back in the gun, two receivers left, one wide to the right. He's got Aurelius back with him, and it looks like the State defense is summoning an elder god on the 15-yard line. Is it… yes, it is Moa, God of Desolation. This throws a whole new hitch in things, Eupraxia."

"Yeah, you can't really prepare for elder gods, Herm. Alexylva is just going to have to figure out how to get past this, and get into the end

zone."

"Apostolou, under center, he snaps the ball, and he has the handoff to- no, he's taking it left! Apostolou is looking left, and the State defense is crashing the line. Cron is stopped, and now… he's thrown it to Aurelius! Aurelius cuts right, and he's got some room, looking for the sideline. I don't know if he's gonna get it, and here comes Moa. No, I think he's been stopped just short, and now Coach Panagakos, Eldest and Most Revered, has called for Alexylva's final timeout. We've got :10 to go, fourth down, on Macedonia State's 20-yard line, one to go. I think Apostolou is going to have to be looking for the endzone on this play, Eupraxia."

"That he is, Herm. With the addition of Moa, God of Desolation in the Macedonia State secondary, this is really starting to look grim for the young quarterback."

"Alexylva breaks the huddle, and now it looks like they're going to line up in a four receiver set, three right, one to the left, Apostolou in the gun. It is absolutely chaos in here, folks, and it's all coming down to this. Apostolou is back, and he's motioning left. Looks like State is going to bring that blitz again, and Moa is just staring down the line now. Snap is up, and Apostolou has it! He's running right, and now we've got another hex on the field. Looks like a swamp plague, that'll trip em up. Cron is running now, he's at the 15, the 10, and here comes Moa! Apostolou cuts left, and there's another fireball! He ducks, slips a corner, and he's got room! Apostolou has one man to beat! He's just… he's got it! Cron Apostolou has got it! He's into the endzone! We've got all zeros on the clock, and Cron Apostolou, sophomore quarterback from Athens, Georgia, has put the game on his back and won one for Alexylva! What a game! What a play! They've got casters on the field, now, they're re-binding the elder god. Ramos comes in for the extra point, and it's good! Whistles have blown, that's the game! Final score, Alexylva University Visigoths 31, Macedonia State Warriors, 28."

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Postgame

***Hail! Hail!**, to old Alexylva!*
Bastion of the noble and the brave!
Glory be to proud Alexylva!
May her mighty banners raise!

Cron Apostolou sat on a bleacher near the back of the locker room, quietly waiting his turn. He turned the game ball over in his hands once, then twice, studying every fiber of its design. His eyes telescoped in until he could see each individual strand of hardened leather. The inner workings of his auditory receptors tightened and contracted, as they listened into the next room. He could hear the sound of a crowd of reporters piping questions at his teammates, his coaches. It was almost his turn.

Cron Apostolou hated postgame. As the thrill of the match wavered and washed away, he felt himself feeling alone in those echoing chambers beneath the stadium. His friends would revel in the camaraderie, the feeling of shared accomplishment, but he did not. Nor could he, not truly. His mental servos were designed for a number of very specific things, a vast number, but not an infinite number. Accomplishment was there, certainly, as was pride, but the feeling of togetherness one might experience after a match was lost on him.

Cron Apostolou particularly hated the interview. Every cog of his being was designed to be the perfect poster child of a resurgent football program; brash, brave, cool under pressure, easy on the eyes, with a keen wit and sharp intellect. But it was all too perfect. In early interviews, there had been questions raised, brows furrowed, suspicions roused. They could not know *they could not know* or it would be all over. Existential fear was there, as unkind as that was, and he felt it every time he had to retract a statement that was too accurate, or pull himself back from releasing a thorough answer too

quickly. *They could not know.*

Finally, it was time. He looked up before the door had even opened, before the assistant coach had even walked across the room to the door, but he heard the footsteps nonetheless. Coach Ragada peeked into the locker room, grin wide on his face.

"Hey chief," he said. "You're up."

Cron stood, but not too quickly. His sharpened his gaze, but not too much. He strode across the room, but slouched slightly and limped ever so slightly with each step, remembering that he had been hit during the fifth minute of the second quarter just above the kneecap, a blow that would usually result in some kind of impediment and that he had calculated out to be a two centimeter bend of the knee every right step and-

Then he was in the press room, and the lights were on him. He squinted against the lights, although he didn't require it. He took his place behind the podium, adjusted his tie and folded back his sleeves. In front of him, Ragada explained that they would only be taking a few moments for questions, as the quarterback had an exam in the early morning and really needed to be getting some rest here soon. Cron's servos spun rapidly. The information on the exam was already there, already processed. Put a pen in his hand and he could've taken it at the podium. But now was not the time for exams. He took a pre-programmed breath.

"Alright, first let me say how excited I am that we were able to pull out a victory over those guys, you know, whenever you're playing a team like Macedonia State it's going to be tough. They're a tough team, but we're a tough team too and tonight really showed that. So, let's take some questions… yeah, over there."

A short student reporter in the second row stood up. "Mario Ivalyn from the Roman Quarterly. Your stat line tonight was impressive, as usual, but there's been some concern about your seemingly adamant stance on not using magic during your play. Any comment on this?"

The tips of Cron's fingers tingled ever so slightly, but not with any

hint of the arcane. No matter how polished his inner workings, no matter how flawless the complexion of the skin wrapped around his metallic frame, no feat of engineering could put fire in those fingertips. He grinned slightly, and his artificial brain found the appropriate lie.

"I just like doing it the old fashioned way," he half-laughed. "Makes it more satisfying when it works."

Another man stood up. "Cron, Olivio Rallut from Alexylva Student Gazette. Any chance you could tell us about your immediate reaction to seeing Moa in the opposing backfield?"

Cron nodded. "I've seen Moa once before, during the Meso-American College game last year, and it's always a challenge, you know. He's got a couple of tells, but when you're face to face with world-ending dark powers, you're always going to be a little nervous. Just gotta buckle down, keep your eyes on the endzone, and slip around a corpse army or two."

This drew a bit of laughter from the crowd, and Cron smiled. So far, nothing too invasive, nothing too telling, no questions he couldn't answer. His eyes scanned the crowd, and then he saw somebody stand in the back of the room. His facial reactions were controlled by an automated system, but if he were capable of spontaneous outbursts, his eyes would've widened dramatically.

"Art Desto, Mediterranean Post. How's that leg doing, Cron? Took quite a hit out there."

Cron's memory servos began to flutter wildly. He went back to the moment of the impact, when the Macedonia State defensive end had sacked him in the backfield. He hadn't seen the hit, was it his left leg or right? He hadn't felt it, he didn't *feel* pain. The gripping sensation that had been so unfortunately ingrained into his mind began clutching its way back towards the surface. Beneath the flesh veneer, the metal was screaming, trying to remember, trying not to break the charade.

"Not too bad right now," he felt his vocal box say. "A little rough out on the field, but I shook it off. It'll take more than that to keep me

down." His facial structures formed a smile, and the room laughed again, but the reporter only narrowed his eyes.

"Big hit, though. And by their five star defensive end, too. That guy has to outweigh you by nearly two hundred pounds." The corner of his mouth turned up. "It's almost like you've got legs of steel, Cron."

The room didn't noticeably hush, but in Cron's mind it might as well have been an echo chamber / *it's an innocent comment, it doesn't mean anything* / **he knows how does he know** / *just ignore it play it off* / **it will ruin everything** / *don't react just do what you always do* / with Cron sitting in the center, consumed with his thoughts. *You're a robot*, his mind shouted at him. **There's no love for robots here**, it shouted back. *Then make them believe you're not.*

"Good trainers, really." Cron smiled that devilish smile again. "Plus, I might've been warded. Can't remember much, in the heat of the moment like that."

The room murmured with the sounds of agreement, and Cron knew the danger had passed. He looked to the back of the room again, and the reporter was gone. A few more inquisitive souls asked their bit of the star quarterback, who faithfully answered and would smile and nod and talk about "teamwork" and "every down counts" and "making something out of nothing". At the end of the session, one last reporter stood up, the national reporter.

"So what do you say, Cron? Excited to get your hands on Yale next weekend?"

In his metallic heart, Cron was a disharmonious cacophony of preset fear and doubt, made only worse by the pressure put on his mental conduits after so much stress throughout the day. He eyed for a moment the door to the locker room, where an ice bath was waiting for him. A soak to cool his components, and to give him time to think.

But the coded grin of the quarterback was unwavering in its optimism. "I can't wait."

Fourth and Long - Hub - Coach Panagakos, Eldest and Most Revered

Coach Panagakos, Eldest and Most Revered

The open-aired cafeteria on Alexylva University's NorthWest Quad was a bustling hub of activity throughout the day, but was rarely busier than it was at lunch. As classes let out and the students filed out the open doors into the fresh autumn air beyond, the wafting scent of fresh meat and drink drew flocks to the long tables and spacious lawns of the quad. This was no less the case for the starting quarterback of the Alexylva Unversity Visigoths, Cron Apostolou.

He wasn't much for hunger, though his artificially constructed body did have functions in place to convert food to fuel. He mostly followed the crowd towards the cafeteria because that's what the crowd was doing, and following the crowd had become his mantra. *Blend in. Don't stick out. Act human.* As he strode idly towards the line of students forming in front of a gyro stand, a towering bulk of a man approached him from behind, eagerly throwing a massive hand across Cron's back.

"Comrade!" Yuri Pato bellowed, his voice sounding through his meaty chest like a man shouting in a cave, "it is good to see you. How is class? You are finish for today, yes? Join Yuri for the lifting the weights, yes?"

Cron smiled. Yuri was a year older than he, but they shared many of the same classes. Yuri had been recruited less for his academic prowess, and more for his towering frame and bulky physique. The offensive line coaches called him "Hadrian", and his fellow linemen called him "Hoss". He was the largest man in the region, but was about fifty cards short of a full deck. He had just come from the Mathematica building, no doubt after leaving Counting 101, a class he had taken three times.

"Yeah, Hoss," Cron said, "let me get something to eat, and we'll head over after we're done. See if Rosco and JaMarcus want to come, too." He paused. "And see if you can find Peter. I want to

work on snap counts with him."

"I do it!" Yuri shouted, lumbering off to find their friends. The sea of people around them parted for Yuri, and promptly closed up as he passed.

Cron worked his way through the crowd, nodding and smiling at the occasional well wishing from his fans and classmates. His appearance around the quad was not uncommon, but there were plenty who could come around just to say a word of appreciation after a big win. He picked himself out a gyro, some fresh greens, and a sparkling tea before sidling up next to a rock on a hill and enjoying his meal. In these few quiet moments, Cron could almost block out the noise enough to actually believe he was—

"Did you hear about that coach at East Byzantium?" Cron heard a voice from behind him say. He leaned around the corner of his boulder, being careful not to raise undue suspicion.

"I hadn't," the other man said. They were two students, definitely not players, and one of them clutched a bright blue scroll Cron recognized as being the latest edition of the *Mediterranean Post*. "What about him?"

The first student shook his head slowly. "A righteous shame. Gods have mercy. Turns out he was implementing technological enhancements into his running back. Steel legs, jet packs, that sort of thing. Unnatural business."

"Gods," said the second man, "a cyborg football player? Blasphemy. Football is meant to be played the way it was designed, for humans, demons, summoned deities, and drunken fans. Next thing you know they'll be trying to get actual robots on the field, too." He spat.

"It's because of all these robot apologists nowadays," said the first man. "Letting robots attend schools and live in our cities. I hear somebody up north even petitioned the government to let them *marry* their robot." He shook his head again. "It's just not right."

The second man nodded in agreement. "I saw in the *Post* the other day where that guy from Portlandis, Vincenti Andersopolis, is even

trying to make *human robots*. Real sick stuff."

"Hard to believe, really," the first man said. "Almost like something out of fiction."

"Nah," said the second, "they'd never make fiction like this. Too unbelievable."

"Hmm hmm," said the first man.

"Mmm hmmm," said the second.

They both nodded furiously in masturbatory agreement, before wobbling to their feet and leaving for their next class. Cron sat silently, the servos in his mind feverishly spinning. *East Byzantium?* His bronze heart shook. *Their running back was Bihgus Diqqus, that's right.* In his mind's eye, Cron could see the replay broadcast—

> *Diqqus lined up in the slot, Iles waits for the snap. Ball is to Iles, he looks left, fakes, fakes, tucks to his right, and Diqqus is open across the field! Iles to Diqqus, and he's got it! He's got— oh, oh my. Diqqus is down, one of the Atlantis defenders had him against a stone-skin, and he's down on the field. My gods, folks, this is not looking good…*

—and remembered how many people had said that Bihgus would never play the game again. He had spent the entire offseason in physical therapy, struggling to do even minor tasks. But when he made his triumphant return by sprinting onto the field at Constantine Stadium, he had made converts of all the nonbelievers.

Until now.

Cron sat in silence for the rest of his meal, idly pushing his greens around until the bell rang. He stood, deposited his trash, and left for his next class.

That afternoon at practice, the team stood in hushed silence as the gathered coaches drew a summoning circle on the ground around a small metal folding chair. The smell of incense hung thick in the air,

and the special teams coordinated lit thirteen green candles to place at ordained points around the circle. When the circle was complete, all of the coaches, except the offensive and defensive coordinators, stepped back to join the team. Coach Demopolous, the offensive coordinator, raised his hands.

“Oh Great and Terrible Champion of the Gridiron,” he said, his voice echoing through the practice facility, “we summon you for this, our last rehearsal before the conference opener.”

Coach Christakos, the defensive coordinator, raised his hands as well. “Guide us in these times, O Bringer of Touchdowns, Architect of Jet Sweeps, Master of the Two Minute Drill. Lead us to victory in your name, Coach Panagakos, Eldest and Most Revered!”

A fierce roar followed, as a rift appeared in space and time before the team. Beyond it, they could see twisting seas, endless worlds, a dimension that knew no boundaries or limitations. Within this gaping maw they saw a grisled, hunched figure, slowly growing closer and larger until it was the size of a man. With a sudden thunderclap and a flash of light, the rift disappeared. Standing in its place was an old man wearing a grey hoodie and sweatpants, his hair trimmed close to his head and his eyes hidden behind large, dark sunglasses. He grimaced around the room, causing the coaches and players to cower.

“You’re late, goddammit,” Coach Panagakos said, his voice a wolfish growl. “I said practice starts, on the field, at four. It’s three goddamn fifty-six; by the time we’re done with warmups it’s going to be quarter after.” He peered at his coordinators over his glasses. “For fucks sake, get it together.”

Coach Christakos stepped forward meekly. “I- I- I’m sorry, Coach Panagakos—”

“—Eldest and Most Revered,” the team said in unison.

“—but th- there was a fire drill in the dormitories earlier this afternoon, which held up class for ten minutes. We assembled as early as we could after classes dismissed.”

Coach Panagakos could have glared a hole through his skull. “Gods, fine. I didn’t want to win this weekend anyway.” He swept his gaze towards the players, who huddled together in terror. “Alright, chucklefucks. We looked like hot asshole on Saturday, and Yale is a whole goddamn tier above *Macedonia State*, and we needed some last second heroics from Plucky the Wonderkid over here to beat them,” he nodded towards Cron, who grinned sheepishly. “We’ve had a few good practices this week, and we’re looking sharp. But if you dick masseuses think that you’ll be able to relax like you did last week, you’re in for an abrupt and brutal throat fucking.”

He gestured with his left hand, and conjured a blackboard. “Yale is bigger than us, stronger than us, and has a better spellcasting unit than us,” he paused, “despite the tireless efforts of our *highly compensated* magic training staff.” His eyes fell on the Magics Coordinator, Coach Balaban, who withered under the Head Ball Coach’s gaze.

“What that means is that we’ll have to play faster than they do, and force them to keep up. Cron, we’re going to be running a lot of option sets, keep them on their toes. Devin,” he looked at the offensive coordinator, “if we see an opportunity to do so, please do not hesitate to use our talented young running back to *fuck them with the ball*. I’m sure you think 150 yards is commendable, but JaMarcus could’ve had three times that number with how little effort they were putting into playing at the line. We could’ve at least *tickled them with the fucking tip*.”

The team waited with bated breath for the next word, but the coach only sighed. “Look, we’ve still got work to do tonight. Our conference is a goddamn bloodbath, and if we want a shot at a championship berth we’re going to need to find ways to win against bigger teams. That starts tomorrow, with the goddamn Yale Bulldogs. Get your asses out of your asses, and your heads out of those asses, and let’s go break some fucking bones.”

The team roared their approval, and scurried away to the practice field. The last person to leave the room was Coach Christakos, who was caught in the Head Coach’s paralyzing gaze. Coach Panagakos hovered across the room to him, stopping just short of the fearful coordinator’s face.

“I win 300 championships with this team over a millennia and a half,” Coach Panagakos said, his words a knife, “and the best you can do is ‘Bringer of Touchdowns’?” He shook his head and floated away. “Goddamn pathetic, Kevin. Get your shit together.”

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Postgame - Hub - The Unforgiving Gridiron

The Unforgiving Gridiron

> Welcome back, sports fans, to Alexylva University Nike Stadium for tonight's matchup between the #3 ranked Yale Bulldogs and your Alexylva Visigoths! I am Hermes Evaristas, and with me as always is Eupraxia Kassandros, and boy oh boy do we have a barn burner for you here tonight…

In the darkness below the world, something stirred.

Anantashesha, the great guardian of the nothingness eternal, whipped around at the sound. His domain was a quiet domain, and he was unaccustomed to any kind of noise. He peered into the black around him, seeing nothing out of the ordinary.

"Hey," he said, calling out into the dark. "Who's out there?"

The eel floated around towards where he had heard the sound, his immensity trailing behind him like a streamer. Squinting his eyes, he stared even harder at the nothing.

"Come on, this isn't funny," he said. "You're not supposed to be fucking around down here. Members only, capiche? Who's out there?"

Suddenly, he found himself looking down at the tiny form of a human man, dressed in a tight-fitting leather uniform, with a glass bowl on his head connected to a long tube. Anantashesha followed the tube up and away from the man it was connected to until it disappeared in the emptiness above them.

"Hello there!" the man said.

Anantashesha brought his face back down until he was level with the man. "Say there," the eel said, "what do you think you're on

about? Don't you know the rules? Nothing is allowed down here." It paused for a second, considering the man. "Who are you, anyway?"

"Me?" the man said cheerfully. "Why, I'm Vincenti Andersopolis, at your service."

"Vincenti Andersopolis, eh?" Anantashesha nodded slowly. "I've never heard of you. What do you do?"

The man made a grand gesture akin to a bow. "I am purveyor of fine automatronics, my good eel. Watches, gizmos, windups, the works. I'm known far and wide as the master of the machine, as it were. Never was there a finer engineer than me, Vincenti Andersopolis!"

"Hmmm, I see." The eel glanced behind him. "You're here alone?"

"I am, yes."

"What are you doing down here?"

Vincenti raised a finger. "A fine question, eel fellow. See, I'm working on a very special project right now, something really spectacular. The brunt of the work is done, see, but I'm finding myself at a bit of a loss for the last piece. I was hoping I might be able to find it down here."

Anantashesha looked around. "Not much to speak of down here, I'm afraid."

Vincenti nodded vigorously. "Yes, well, they wouldn't exactly call it the nothingness eternal if it was chock full of things required by great inventors, would they?" He pulled out a large cloth bag and held it out in front of himself. "No, Mr. Eel, I find myself needing a soul."

Anantashesha did a double take. "A soul? What in the world do you need a soul for?"

"Ah, trade secret, I'm afraid! Too much riding on the success of this one, see! Can't give away too much. I am willing to negotiate, however, so name your price."

The eel frowned. "How do you even know whether or not I've got

souls down here, anyway?"

Vincenti smiled knowingly. "Come now, eel ole boy. We both know the game here. Things die, you filter out the good bits. That's what you're doing down here, isn't it? Can't imagine you're just here for the company."

Anantashesha shrugged admittingly. "Well, you got me there. So say I do have a soul I could give you. What are you going to give me in return?"

Vincenti reached into the bag and quickly produced a large, spider-like animatron.

"This," he said triumphantly, "is the newest in my line of eldritch-eel comfort devices! I call it, the Andersopolis Automatronics Eel-Scratch 2000!"

Anantashesha peered at the strange device. "What does it do?"

Vincenti floated over towards the eel, and slammed the spider against its side. He pushed a big button on the top of the spider, which began to move its legs around in a skittering pattern, digging deep into the eel flesh. Anantashesha writhed and coiled under its touch.

"Ohhhhhhhh god," the eel said. "I never realized how much I itched until just this moment. What a feeling." He unwrapped himself from himself and turned towards Vincenti. "You get me a few hundred of these bad boys, and you can have your soul."

"Deal," said Vincenti.

"One thing, though," the eel said. "These souls aren't exactly what I'd describe as… all there. They've had a bit of a rough go of it getting down here, and most of them are fairly piecemeal."

Vincenti waved dismissively. "No problem there, eel chum. What nature cannot provide, Andersopolis Automatronics will produce!"

The eel whipped around its long tail and extended it towards Vincenti. The man took the tail in his hand, and they shook on it. As

they did, Anantashesha opened its gaping maw, and from the void within a single, shimmering, tattered light emerged. Vincenti beamed in the light it produced, and quickly gathered it into the bag. He reached up, pulled twice on the cord connecting him to the world above, and began to ascend.

As he did, the eel looked up at him quizzically. "Seriously, though. You came all the way down here just for one kind of shitty soul? What in the world would be worth going through all that trouble?"

Vincenti grinned fiendishly as he pulled away. "Have you ever heard of the high-stakes world of first century collegiate athletics?"

Cron rubbed his shoulder empathetically. He knew it was supposed to hurt, but mimicking discomfort was tricky, and everybody was watching. He popped up off the field, right into the face of a Yale defensive back.

“Thou shouldst stay down upon the earth,” the man said, glaring at Cron through his visor, “lest ye fragile bones be broken.”

The towering Yuri Pato, one of Cron’s offensive linemen, stepped between them and snarled at the other man. The defensive back leered at them both, and rejoined his side of the field.

The Alexylva offense assembled. Yuri, the left tackle, and then Borges, Hawkins, Meiner and Ut on the rest of the offensive line. Nereus, Quin, and Iliov were the receivers, and JaMarcus Aurelius the tailback. Ail Hercule stood in as the tight end, and Cron commanded as their quarterback. They all looked to him for guidance. Cron nodded sagely as they stepped into their huddle, and as all eyes fell upon him he delivered his wisdom.

“We’re fucked, lads.”

The scoreboard read 38-24 with 8:23 remaining in the fourth. It had been a miserable game; Yale had opened with a meteorologimancer that had quickly summoned a typhoon, and the rain had yet to let up. The Alexylva defense was exhausted, the offense couldn’t keep up, and Coach Panagakos, Eldest and Most Revered, had publicly

crucified the defensive coordinator at halftime. The situation was dire.

“How’s your shoulder?” Borges said, cautiously eyeing his quarterback.

Cron started to speak, but hesitated. *It hurts.* “It hurts,” he said, “but I’ll be alright. I’m not worried about that as much as I am about flyboy over there.” He nodded towards the Yale backfield, where a winged free safety flapped furiously in the torrential rain. “He’s been a step ahead of me all game, and if he snags one we’re definitely fucked.”

“So what’s the plan?” Hercule said.

Cron furrowed his brow. He could hear the barely audible spinning of servos in his own head, and could feel his probability calculator kicking in. *A passing attack will get you killed, or worse, they’ll pick it off and you’ll lose. Chance of success in the air is 5.45%. Running the ball has been unsuccessful, but you could pull the freshman off the bench and get JaMarcus some rest. All you need are two touchdowns.* “All we need are two touchdowns. I can get us close enough for one, but JaMarcus will need to get the other.” He side-eyed his star back. “Can you do that?”

JaMarcus grimaced. He’d been hit earlier and the defender had torn his leg off. They had managed to patch him up on the sideline, but he was still gimpy. “Yeah, I can do it.”

Cron nodded. “Good. Go back to the bench, send Hollister out. Get some rest during this drive, and come back on the next.”

The running back moved to argue, but realized the truth in Cron’s words. He nodded, and jogged off the field. The freshman back scrambled out to join the huddle. Cron clapped a hand across his back and leaned in.

“Alright,” he said, “here’s how this is going to play out.”

The interior of Andersopolis Automatronics was a busy place.

Machines whizzed and whirred along the walls, pumps in the back of the building cranked over and pushed thick fluids through long pipes, and in the center of it all the company's eccentric namesake was perched furiously over a long table, his eyes darting hither and yon over the project in front of him. He threw a hand out into the air, waving it eagerly.

"Popo!" he shouted across the din. "Socket! 5mm! Come come!"

From underneath a large pile of various machine parts and other refuse, a gnome appeared. She scratched a scraggly beard and grunted before hobbling across the shop towards a large tool chest and diving headfirst into it. After a moment's digging, she emerged with a socket. She lined up her shot, and then flung it across the room into the waiting hand of Vincenti, who effortlessly snagged it without even looking. As he returned to his work, another gnome sidled up beside him, peering down on the subject on the table.

"You think this will work?" the gnome said, scratching at the side of its red pointy hat.

"Navarro, my dear friend," Vincenti said, "of course it will work. I'm Vincenti Andersopolis. What have I ever worked on that *hasn't* worked?"

As Navarro glanced around the room, Vincenti shot him a look. "Learning experiences, Navarro. Not failures. Everything works exactly as planned, or as some variation of planned."

The first gnome waddled over towards the table as well. "Why does Piko get the honourific of his last name, and I'm just Popo? I think Merlo is a fine name."

Vincenti paused and sighed. "Because Popo is a fun name, and it's part of your contract. If you want to be called Ms. Popo Merlo, bring it up during negotiations."

Navarro grinned at Merlo and stuck his tongue out at her. Merlo glared at him.

"Anyway, yes, it's going to work," Vincenti continued. "What you're

seeing take place before you is nothing short of a miracle of science and arcana. They're going to be talking about this one for centuries to come. 'Vincenti Andersopolis, the Man Who Made a Man'. Or something thereof."

"Not really a man though, is it," Merlo said, snatching a half-rotted apple from her pocket and taking a bite. "Just a fancier clock, seems like."

It was her turn to earn a slicing look from Vincenti. "All people are just *fancier clocks* if you want to get technical. Gnomes too. Just moving parts with preprogrammed instructions that follow their design until they run out of juice and shut down. This," he said, extending his arms over the subject, "is just a better version of what we've already got."

"How do you figure?" Navarro said, squinting at the exposed contraptions.

"First of all, stamina. See this?" Vincenti pointed at dark red mass surrounded by wires and banded in metal. "This is a griffin heart, with a few minor variations. Give it a shock and that baby will run unimpeded for a thousand years. I've got it strapped in here to these little capacitors, see, so it'll never run out of juice. Then, strength." He opened a hatch on the side of the machine, and thick cables were visible within, wound around pulleys and stretched tight. "The strength of fifteen men, if pushed to capacity. This thing could wrestle a bear and the bear would look silly."

Merlo peered inside. "That flywheel there. Is that made of the lid of a tin can?"

Vincenti grunted. "Andersopolis Automatronics *has* suffered financially in the not-so-distant past and a shortage of quality materials *has* been an issue. However, I think both annoying gnomes and our customers will see no diminished capabilities as a result of one lackluster flywheel. It's only in there to balance that actuator anyway, and if that actuator is being stressed enough to bend the flywheel then the larger issue is that our subject is at the bottom of the ocean, or under a mountain." He slammed the side panel closed.

Navarro nodded sagely and stroked his beard. “It’s impressive. Looks expensive, though. I assume we’ll be compensated for this?”

Vincenti closed his eyes and smiled. “Substantially.”

“Cool,” Merlo said, finishing the core of her apple in a single bite. “So what’s it supposed to do again? Other than be a robot, I guess.”

“This is no ordinary robot, my vertically challenged friends.” Vincenti stretched out his arms, clapping them both across the shoulders. “This… is a football-playing robot!”

Navarro and Merlo blinked in unison.

“What.”

> Third and goal from the seventeen, five minutes and change to go. Apostolou lines up in the shotgun, now he’s checking the defense… here’s the snap, and here comes the pressure! Apostolou dodges a thunderbolt, and then another, and then- oh my god! Ail Hercule has run into the Yale meteorologimancer, he’s stopped channeling the incantation! The rain has stopped, but we’ve got three linemen barreling down on Cron. He steps left, throws off one, shakes another, and another, *and another my god he’s broken free!* Cron Apostalou at the ten! Cron Apostalou at the five! He’s got one man to- he’s in! Cron Apostalou scores! Alexylva is back in this thing! 38-30, with the kick to come!

Cron jogged off to the sideline and was met by his cheering teammates. Yuri and his offensive line came up shortly afterwards, knocking against his helmet and congratulating him on the spectacular play. Behind him he could hear the cheers of the crowd as Kery Achilles booted it through the uprights, bringing the score to 38-31. There was a sudden hush on the sideline as the air near them crackled and Coach Panagakos appeared in a rush of smoke and ozone. He peered around through dark glasses at his team, before cracking a crusty, broken smile.

“Fucking good, Cron. Makes me wonder why I even pay an offensive coordinator.” He glared at Coach Demopolous, who was cowering at the end of the bench, fearfully clutching his clipboard. “Regardless, we still have work to do. Defense, go pull your coordinator down off that cross and get ready. We’re running short on time, and I don’t want to burn timeouts if I can avoid it.” He pointed across the field with a crooked, clawed finger. “I want you to tell Coach Zhange that she can take her offense and kindly fuck back off to the nightmare dimension she came from. If you need to turn those boys inside out I suggest you do it, before I get the inclination to do it to you.”

The team quickly scuttled off and dispersed, preparing for the kickoff. As he was about to walk away to join his receivers, he felt the Coach’s cold grasp against his arm.

“Listen kid, the theatrics are great, but they’re going to buckle down when we get you back out there. I had Balaban cook up something spicy, and we’re going to catch these fuckers sleeping and shit in their eyes. Look out there,” he gestured towards the field. “See how they’ve been skipping leg day? Weak knees, Cron. You’re going to use this,” he slammed an amulet into Cron’s hand, “and you’re going to blast them in the dick with it. One good wave of force and their ancestors will feel the ACL tears. You got it?”

Cron gripped the medallion tightly and said nothing. The Head Ball Coach didn’t know, of course, but there wasn’t anything Cron could do to make that magic work. He had carefully managed to avoid anyone who might look too closely at his class schedule and see that he hadn’t ever taken anything in arcana, but attempting to cast a spell he was not designed to cast would blow the lid well off of that.

“Coach, I-”

“Good,” Coach Panagakos said as he slapped Cron on the shoulder. “Don’t fuck this up, kid. I’ve got money on this game and I’m not about to pay out anything to that little eldritch minx who thinks she’s a football coach.”

With that, the air wrinkled and cracked again, and the coach was

gone. A horn sounded on the field, and Alexylva kicked off.

A man was sitting naked on a table, his eyes fluttering quickly. In front of him sat two gnomes, both staring nervously at another man, standing behind the naked man, who was turning a crank on a large tool sticking out of the back of the naked man's head.

"That any better?" Vincenti said.

Merlo shook her head. "Give it a little more."

Vincenti grabbed the handle on his crank, and gave it two more solid turns. After a brief moment, the fluttering dissipated and the man sat staring at the two gnomes. He blinked once, then twice.

"Aight," Merlo said. "You're good."

Vincenti closed up the hatch on the back of the man's head and scuttled around towards the front. Booting Merlo and Navarro off of his stool, he perched himself across from the naked man and locked eyes with him.

"Alright," Vincenti said, "let's try again. What's your name?"

The man moved as if to speak, and then caught himself. "I don't know."

Vincenti nodded. "Of course you don't. That's fine. Do you know what you are?"

The man looked down at his hands and flexed them slightly. There was the slightest hint of a squeak as metal and wood rubbed up against each other. "I'm a human?"

"Ehhhh something like that." Vincenti pulled out a stack of cards with pictures on them. "I'm going to show you some images, and I want you to tell me what you think they are. Sound good?"

The naked man nodded. Vincenti flashed the first card.

"That's a fox," the man said.

“That’s a boat,” after the second card.

“That’s a read-option with a halfback draw to the strong side and a weak side drop to cover,” after the third.

Vincenti smiled. “Young man, my name is Vincenti Andersopolis, and while I doubt we’ll see too much of each other in the next few years, I want you to know that I’m very excited to meet you.”

The man looked puzzled. “Why?”

Vincenti stood, gesturing dramatically. “For all these years I, the great Vincenti Andersopolis, have strived to create a better world, a more advanced world, at great financial and emotional cost. After selling both my family’s farm, and my family, in order to keep this lab open and staffed,” he glared down at the two gnomes, “there were many days I wondered if the sacrifices were worth it. But with you… everything changes. With you, they’ll no longer call me ‘The Madman of Portlandis’, or ‘The Crazy Man of the Pacific Northwest’. No, they’ll call me what I have deserved to be called all these long years: Vincenti Andersopolis, The Once and Future King of Machines.”

He gazed wistfully into the middle distance. “Imagine it. One of my Andersopolis Automatronics man-bots on every street corner! Working for law enforcement, fighting wars. Loving, living, dreaming.” He sighed. “It’s a dream come true.”

He motioned to the next room. “Piko, Popo, go get this nice young man some clothes.” He paused. “And get him one of my good penis sleeves. Can’t have a man walking around out there in a tunic without a penis sleeve. Might catch the penis pneumonia.”

The Yale Coach Zhange was furious. Instead of kicking a field goal at the twenty-nine yard line and nearly putting the game out of reach, her quarterback had decided to stay on the field and lob a pass towards the end-zone in order to seal the deal. A well timed diversion led to an Alexylva interception return to the Yale forty-five yard line, and Coach Zhange had come unhinged. In her rage, she tore her quarterback in half and banished both halves to different

nightmare dimensions, and threatened to do the same again. The rain began in earnest as the Yale defense took the field, with only 2:15 left on the clock.

JaMarcus Aurelius followed Cron back onto the turf, slapping him on the ass as he passed him by. “Come on, wonder kid,” JaMarcus said, smiling. “Let’s go shit in their eyes.”

Cron smiled, but anxiety cut through his systems as he felt the medallion in his pocket begin to grow hot. All he had to do was activate the incantation and it would release its energy all at once, but even that was beyond Cron’s abilities. He glanced to the sideline where Coach Panagakos, Eldest and Most Revered, hovered menacingly near the student section.

The Alexylva crowd was deafening, and fires had begun to break out in the crowd. The university police, utilizing trebuchets loaded with stun salts set up in the empty lot outside of the field, began heaving casks of the noxious mixture into the stadium to quell the riots.

They started quickly. A short pass to Nereus for three, followed by a run from JaMarcus and another from Cron to get the first down. They were past midfield, but they needed a touchdown. The clock hit 1:30 as Cron handed off to his star back and JaMarcus disappeared in a flash through the Yale defensive line. He appeared downfield, at the twenty-three yard line, before being swarmed by defenders. 1:12.

On the next play Cron caught a javelin in his non-throwing shoulder, and he could feel his blood dispersion system activating. As he moved to step back into his huddle after a pass thrown into the stands, he felt a sudden weakness on his left side. Looking down, he realized the javelin had nicked a hydraulic line, and he was now leaking fluid. Alarms sounded in his head as he realized he was only minutes from total hydraulic lock. As he hobbled back towards his team, Yuri moved to pull the javelin out of his shoulder.

“No no no, don’t worry about that,” he said, waving him off. “I’ll be fine, trust me.” *That javelin is the only thing holding you together right now. You lose that and you lose pressure on the line, and that’s the ballgame. Suck it up, wonder kid.*

They lined up on the twenty-three, and Cron handed off to JaMarcus. The back tried to cut left and then back around the right, but a Yale precog sleuthed him out and hit him at the line of scrimmage. The clock continued to wind down, and while Alexylva managed to pick up a first down on the next play (an eleven yard pass to the right for the tight end) it was at the cost of precious time. The clock slipped beneath thirty seconds before the team got lined up again. A missed pass stopped the clock, but with only twenty-six seconds remaining the situation was not great.

“Alright,” Cron heard a voice in his head, “the time is ripe. Let’s blow out the asses of these pompous dick shits. Use the spell, Cron. Let’s open this up.” The voice of Coach Panagakos lingered in his ear for a moment more.

They snapped the ball. Cron rolled right, then left, then back right, pursued by Yale defenders. *Twenty seconds.* “Use the goddamn spell, Cron,” the voice said. “What in the everloving fuck are you doing?” *Nineteen seconds.*

Then he spotted JaMarcus streaking into the endzone, the winged defender hot on his tail. *A pass here would result in an interception. 89% chance of failure. An attempt to run into the endzone would result in a sack. 93% chance of failure.* As the world seemed to slow around him and his probability engine began to accelerate to compensate for the influx of new information, he cast his eyes up into the stands. Amid the teeming mass of fans in Alexylva crimson and Yale blue, a man stood alone near the top of the stadium. He wore a long black coat with gold buttons and large, round black glasses. His silver hair tied into a tight bun behind his head, and on his chest Cron could make out the letter A emblazoned on a gold pin.

The curiosity of this didn’t hold him for long, because as his probability engine began to wind down (having finished its calculations), the world around him began to speed up. The closing defenders grew ever closer, their eyes fixed on his like a wolf on its hapless press. In the distance, he could see JaMarcus’ hand, waving in the end zone, his other trying to fight off the defender. And in his head he still heard the voice of Coach Panagakos, screaming at him to use the fucking amulet already. *Sixteen seconds.*

With a sickening crunch, Cron used his free left hand to pull the javelin free from his shoulder. He steadied himself, lined up his shot, and flung the spear across the field and into the unsuspecting side of the winged Yale safety, who screamed and crumpled to the ground. With his other hand, he flung the ball to JaMarcus, who stood alone in the end zone with both hands outstretched. As the ball left his hand, Cron glanced back to the stands. The man in the black coat was gone.

The next thing Cron saw was the blue of three Yale defenders coming down on him as he collapsed to the ground, and the next thing he heard was the roar of the crowd. *For us? For them?* As his body slipped into hydraulic lock, he closed his eyes and took in the sounds around him. His body seized, and the world went dark.

-◬-

Coach Panagakos, Eldest and Most Revered - Hub - Anima Ex Machina

Anima Ex Machina

In the darkness of his unmoving mind, a servo stirred in Cron Apostolou's head.

Just the one, though, and just enough to keep the basic functions working. He saw nothing - not since the moment his body had succumbed to hydraulic lock and he had collapsed to the ground. But his consciousness grasped at sounds, distant as they were. In the moments afterwards he had heard the roar of a crowd, as if through water, though that had faded. The hushed voices afterwards had faded as well, and then another jubilant eruption from the crowd, only this time further away. More hushed voices. An angry snarl. Pacing feet. Nothing.

There was a period of silence afterwards that may have very well lasted a century for as little as Cron could comprehend it. The single spinning servo sliding softly in his skull did little to maintain a sense of self, only keep the lights on. As its gentle hum wore on, Cron felt himself disassociate, and The Thing That Once Called Itself Cron Apostolou came apart from his body. It fell back into the darkness that surrounded it, watching its catatonic form getting further and further away, the dim light around it growing ever fainter until it might not have ever been there at all.

In the quiet black, free from the whispers of the world it had departed from, this spirit stretched and yawned, flexing and bending as if to shake loose the joints that had grown stiff over time. This continued for a short while, as it primped and preened like a cat in a sunbeam, until it noticed a presence that crept up quickly and immediately filled all of the space around it. The spirit turned, and found itself gazing into the confused eyes of Anantashesha.

"Hullo there," the spirit said idly.

The Eel's face pinched slightly. "What are you doing down here?"

The spirit leaned back slightly, trying and failing to take in the Eel in its entirety. "Relaxing. I think I've died."

Anantashesha sniffed. "You're not dead. I could tell if you're dead." It looked around behind the spirit, and seeing nothing, said, "You're not supposed to be hanging around down here, you know. Not good for you."

The spirit shrugged. "I don't know how I got here. I don't know how to get back where I came from."

The Eel nodded slowly, and then its eyes grew wide. "Hang on one second. Don't I know you? You smell familiar. Have we met?" The spirit shook its head, and Anantashesha's brow furrowed. "No, no, I would swear on it. Did you die once? Are you some kind of lich?"

The spirit shook its head again. "I don't know much about myself at all, honestly."

The Eel nodded again. "How much exactly?"

"Enough to be narratively interesting, I guess."

"That's an odd answer," Anantashesha said, seconds before clarity dawned over its features. "That's it! I remember where I know you from. I pulled you out from inside me in exchange for a back scratcher."

"That's gross."

"Yes, yes, that's it. There was that queer little man who came down here in a diving suit looking for a soul. You were that soul, I have no doubts." Anantashesha smiled, pleased at itself. "How have you been?"

"I mean, I'm here again," the spirit said, considering its words, "so I wouldn't say… super."

"There are worse places, trust me," the Eel said, waving him off. "What have you been up to?"

"Playing football."

"Oh!" The Eel nodded. "I don't know what that is, but that's really great. I'm happy for you! Look what you've accomplished! Back in the living world and doing football! That's not half bad for somebody who died once."

The spirit frowned. "You're a god, aren't you?"

The Eel grew quiet.

"Why can't I perform magic?"

"Pfft," Anantashesha said. "Why in the world would you worry yourself about that?"

"It's a thing humans can do, but I can't. Am I human? I feel human."

The Eel shrugged. "Your soul is human. I don't know if your body is human. Either way, that doesn't matter. Plenty of things can create magic that aren't human. Have you ever looked at light spilling through trees in the early morning, or seen fog dance across a lake at dusk? I might just be waxing poetic, but trust me when I say it's a little naive to imply that magic is a strictly human endeavor." It paused. "No, your disconnect from magic is because you died."

"I died?"

"You don't remember it? Hrm. Likely not. Yes, you died once. Your soul was torn from your body and you found yourself here, with me, and went the way all souls go, into that quiet oblivion. Once you pass the Screamers, the connection between your soul and the arcane was severed, and that's basically the ball game with that one."

The spirit's eyes grew dark, and its face downcast. Anantashesha grimaced.

"Look, I'm not the one to be giving life advice, you understand? My whole jam is the meaninglessness of life, how little any of this matters when compared to the never-ending nothing that you find yourself in currently. So take this with a grain of salt when I say that, if you think your not being able to do magic makes you any less alive, or any less… human, I don't know. It doesn't. Your existence

isn't made more or less important because you can conjure fire or fling sparks or anything like that. Your abilities don't make you, you. Hell, the things you call yourselves don't make any of you who you are. It doesn't matter if you're made of meat, or made of metal, or jelly, or what color you end up, or anything like that. This idea of identity is such a silly concept, because you're trying to use words to describe something that can't be described. Your innate you-ness. You get it? You're you, because you're you."

The Eel leaned back and shrugged. "And yeah, someday you'll end up back down here and return to the Silence Beyond, but a thing isn't beautiful because it lasts."

The spirit looked up. "Is that a reference to something?"

Anantashesha waved it off. "Yeah, but you're going to miss that one. Look, just know that if you're getting caught up in some sort of emotional thing because you can't make magic happen, you shouldn't. Magic isn't something you do, it's something that happens to you. I imagine there are plenty of other souls out there that think that your very existence is pretty goddamn magical."

They sat in silence for a moment, and then the spirit nodded. "Thanks. I feel better."

The Eel nodded. "Good. Because I think you're about to wake up."

The spirit squinted up at Anantashesha. "Am I going to remember any of this?"

The Eel shrugged. "Probably not."

And with that, something sharp grabbed the spirit by its back, and it was whisked upwards, away from the encompassing darkness and towards some minute light a lifetime away.

"Bye! Have fun storming the castle!" The Eel snickered to itself. "Shit, he'll miss that one too."

Cron Apostolou heard the sound of idle chatter first, as his auditory sensors hummed back to life. He felt the heart in his chest resume

beating unimpeded, and his lungs filled with air he didn't need. Light crept into the corners of his eyes, and suddenly his vision was flooded with color as his ocular cells woke up. He opened them, slowly, and as his sight adjusted to the light in the room, he made out several familiar faces. His friend Yuri, Coach Demopolous the Offensive Coordinator, JaMarcus Aurelius, and a peculiar man with silver hair and large, black glasses.

Cron blinked, and then blinked again. He stretched his arms and legs, feeling the hydraulic fluid coursing through his veins once again. He moved his jaw side to side, readjusting where it was supposed to sit on his face. Satisfied, he glanced around the room, where its various occupants stood staring at him, most of them white as a sheet.

"You," Yuri said, cautiously, "you see?"

Cron nodded, rubbing the back of his head. His hair was matted and he knew he looked filthy, but he felt good.

"What happened?" he said, his voice jumping out to greet him. "Did we win?"

JaMarcus smiled. "Yeah. Fake extra point. Coach Panagakos, Eldest and Most Revered, went for two. Walk off two-point conversion. The place is lit. They tore down the scoreboard. I heard they laid siege to Troy like, an hour ago."

Cron smiled weakly. Regardless of what was about to happen, that was a small comfort. "How long have I been out?"

"Three hours," a voice said from the back of the room, the energy in it crackling like lightning. Out of the shadows appeared Coach Panagakos, Eldest and Most Revered, his face frozen in a grimace and his eyes burning behind dark sunglasses. "Weren't sure you were going to wake up. Figured I'd have you sent to the dump in the morning with the other broken trash."

It was Cron's turn to grimace. He saw Yuri and JaMarcus' faces grow ashen, and Coach Demopolous nearly faint. Curiously, the man with the silver hair seemed bemused.

"I, uh, I guess, I should-" Cron began, but was immediately halted by a single crooked finger from the Head Ball Coach.

"What you should do, right now, is shut the fuck up." His glare turned towards the other three members of the team. "You three, out. Practice on Monday. If you're late you'll spend a century on the Planet of Hands."

With little more than a sharp gust of wind, the three men scampered out of the locker room, leaving only Cron, Coach Panagakos, and the man with the silver hair. Satisfied that the three were out of hearing range, the Head Coach turned to the silver haired man.

"Alright, time's up. What the fuck is this."

The man nodded curtly. "This is an Andersopolis Automatronics Saker Model 9, a first-of-its-kind humanoid cyborg. Extremely advanced."

Coach Panagakos, studied Cron for a moment. "What happened to it?"

"Hydraulic lock, seems like," the man said. "The spear it caught pinched a hydraulic line, and when it pulled the spear out it lost hydraulic pressure and collapsed. Curious thing, that," the man said, the faintest hint of the idea of a smile creeping across his lips, "it has self-preservation protocols in place to keep it from doing something like that. Odd that it would be so easily able to override them to win a football game."

Coach Panagakos sneered. "You're goddamn right." He turned back towards Cron, looking him up and down. "Who are you?"

Cron's voice was suddenly very hoarse. "C-Cron, Apostolou."

The Coach nodded. "Alright, Cron Apostolou. When were you going to tell me you were a robot?"

"Cyborg," the silver-haired man interjected, an actual smile flashing over his face now.

Cron shifted uncomfortably. "I, uh, well." *Do you lie? Can you lie to a*

demigod? The goose is cooked, you need a way out of this. "I imagine it would've eventually… eventually come up."

"Like fuck it would've." The Head Coach's voice snapped like a chain being broken. "You're meaning to tell me that you were going to wager the best chance this team has had at winning a championship in nearly one-hundred years on something that might've come up, *eventually?*"

Yes. "Yes."

Coach Panagakos rubbed the bridge of his nose furiously. "Do you know why I'm so fucking pissed off at you right now, Cron?"

Cron flinched at the sound of his own name. "Because I'm a-"

Another finger, and more silence. "It's not because you're a goddamn fucking whirly-bird or wind-up or thingamajig or rooty-tooty-point-and-shooty. I don't care whether you're a robit or a troll or a lesbian dog or whatever the fuck you are. We have legitimate snake people in our secondary, Cron, you think for a minute that the thought of playing a robot-"

"-cyborg," the man interjected again,

"-what the fuck ever, you think that bothers me in the slightest?" Coach Panagakos sighed. "When I consigned my soul to the dark powers of the Hereafter and pledged allegiance to the Suffocating Horror, I did it with one goal in mind: win motherfucking football games at Alexylva. You think I gave two shits, while my soul was being shredded by the thousand-hooked arms of Malidramagiuan the Most High Horrific, of what it took to win those football games? You think that, when I was begging the Many-Eyed God of Punishment to be made whole again, the concern of putting a toy in at quarterback even so much as *crossed my motherfucking mind?*"

He spat on the ground. "Because it didn't. I'm here to do two things, Cron. Win football games, and win fucking football games. I don't care about what some shitty newspaper has to say about humans and robots, the same as I don't give a rat's ass about what he'd have to say about the subtle and discrete pleasures of fucking a pig

in the ass. And I'm shitty at you because you were selfish, and you nearly lost me a goddamn football game. If you ever so much as consider, in the faintest and most ethereal daydream, of ever doing that kind of shit ever again, I swear to the Darkness Below and Beyond that I will turn your still-beating heart into a bedpan and shit into your soul for the rest of your miserable, gasping, fetid existence. Are we clear?"

Cron nodded. If he'd been capable, he would've pissed himself.

Coach Panagakos nodded. "Good." He turned to leave. "Hell of a play there at the end, though. Really was something else. Good work."

Cron coughed. "So… so are we good?"

The Coach turned back towards him and shrugged. "You and me? Sure. But after that stunt you pulled tonight, we're being investigated by the NSCPAA Ethics Committee for playing a non-approved individual at quarterback, since robits are technically still against regulation."

"Oh fuck," Cron said.

"Yep. Fuck. And if you can't figure this shit out, and you still end up costing me the season, the carnival of red delights that will come to pass upon you will be such that no man for a thousand years will dare to so much as speak of them. So you two fucking figure it out."

He left the room, leaving only Cron and the silver-haired man standing in the silent locker room. Cron blinked a few times for good measure, then turned to the man.

"Hey Vincenti."

"Hello again, Model 9," the man said, smiling eagerly now. His blue eyes peeked out from behind his glasses. "We've got a lot of work to do with you, and Homecoming is only a week away."

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INFORMATION AND BACKGROUND

THE GLOBAL OCCULT COALITION

From the Desk of the Under-Secretary General

You are here because you want to know more. Whether you're a PHYSICS Division recruit, part of one of our 108 member organizations, an outsider, or simply a concerned civilian, you're here because you've been touched by the ongoing struggle of humanity to survive and thrive in a world where the supernatural is very real. You are here to help our species in its endless war against the dark. To you, I say: welcome.

To those of you who would do harm to humanity, I say this: the Global Occult Coalition stands ready to defend humanity against all foes. Whether it likes it or not.

Sincerely,

Under-Secretary-General D.C. al Fine
United Nations Global Occult Coalition

About the GOC

The Global Occult Coalition was a Group of Interest created by Kain Pathos Crow in the early days of the SCP Foundation wiki. Inspired by a creepypasta about how the Soviet Red Army killed God in the 1950s, it postulated the existence of a separate, but equally powerful, force in the paranormal world. If the SCP Foundation was dedicated to finding, capturing, and containing paranormal objects, the Coalition would be dedicated to a much different, more direct approach: outright destruction of the paranormal.

Since then, the concept has been refined somewhat into the current iteration. The Global Occult Coalition is now intended to be an openly political organization, taking actions that affect the world stage. Seen in that light, their policy of destruction of paranormal objects differs from the SCP Foundation's: if the Foundation are the jailers, then the Coalition are the executioners. But, like any executioner, they cannot act without the permission of a judge and jury… the United Nations' secret Council of 108.

Global Occult Coalition stories take their inspiration from any number of fictional works about global conspiracies that secretly control the world (The Laundry Series by Charles Stross, Delta Green and Call of Cthulhu by Chaosium, the Illuminatus Trilogy, Mike Mignola's Hellboy, etc.), with a strong dose of Tom Clancy style modern-day action thriller. There is still a horror element, but the focus is no longer on the things that lurk in the darkness, but on the people who watch over us in the night.

Contributor's Guide

- **All pages added to the canon must be named using the following format:**
    - Any supplementary documents must be named: "goc-supplemental-" followed by the individual pagename. (example: goc-supplemental-threat entities)
    - Any personnel files must be named: "goc-personnel-" followed by the individual pagename. (example: goc-personnel-D C al Fine)

    - Any tales must be named: "goc-tale-" followed by the individual pagename (example: goc-tale-rascal one actual.)

- **All pages added to the canon must have this page (goc-hub-page) set as their parent to allow for breadcrumbs navigation.**

- Please read through all supplementary documents before writing for this canon. Feel free to contribute to supplementary documents, but keep in mind that if your addition is unpopular, it may be removed.

- Please read through any personnel files before using those characters in your stories. Feel free to create new characters and teams if you wish.

- Keep in mind that many of the things that make a good SCP article do not apply to making a good GOC article. For instance: "fighting good" is generally looked down on on SCP Foundation, as it interferes with the horror feel, but is much more appropriate in Global Occult Coalition.

One last point: the Global Occult Coalition canon began as a separate wiki, but was moved to the main SCP Foundation wiki due to lack of interest, and because it became easier to administrate as a small part of the existing community than as a community of its own. Should the GOC canon grow in size to become unwieldy, it may spin off into a separate wiki once more. By contributing to this canon, you are agreeing that your stories may become part of this new GOC wiki if it is re-created, under the Creative Commons by SA 3.0 license.

Our Mission

To keep the peace and maintain friendly relations between occult organizations, protect humanity against all threats paranormal, parascientific, and paratemporal, and take any actions required to ensure the survival of the human race.

GOC Charter

RESOLVED: That, in the early years of the 20th Century, the rising emergence of hostile paranormal, parascientific, and paratemporal entities constitutes a clear and present threat to the survival of humankind.

RESOLVED: That, in the wake of the Second World War and the concurrent Seventh Occult War, that no single nation can be relied upon to effectively respond to para-threats, due to the concerns of nationalism and international conflict.

RESOLVED: That the necessity of responding to said parathreats is of utmost importance and must, by necessity, supersede any concerns of national, regional, or cultural self-interest.

THEREFORE: We, the undersigned leaders of one hundred and eight major paranormal organizations, authorize the formation of an international organization dedicated to keeping the peace and identifying, neutralizing, and containing said parathreats, being the highest authority in such matters, superseding all national, international, and otherwise corporeal interests.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED: That this Global Occult Coalition shall be placed under the independent Aegis of the United Nations, and that such an organization shall be provided whatever resources necessary in perpetua, and that said organization shall be given the authority to use any means necessary to maintain the peace (or, should peace be impossible, to ensure the survival of humankind).

Signed,

<SIGNATURES REDACTED: CLASSIFIED LEVEL Q BY ORDER OF GOC HIGH COMMAND>

The Fivefold Mission

First Mission: Survival

The Global Occult Coalition shall hold the survival of the human race against all threats paranormal, parascientific, and paratemporal as their highest mission, superseding all others.

Second Mission: Concealment

As knowledge of parathreats would result in mass panic and heavy casualties among the human population, the Global Occult Coalition shall conceal the existence of said parathreats from the general public.

Third Mission: Protection

Although considered expendable if necessary in pursuit of the First Mission, individual human beings (including operatives of the GOC) shall be protected whenever possible.

Fourth Mission: Destruction

As the existence of parathreats is in itself anathema to the survival of the human race, no unnecessary risks are to be taken to ensure the survival of parathreats.

Fifth Mission: Education

The Global Occult Coalition shall make every effort to expand the base of knowledge regarding parathreats.

GOC Divisions

High Command

Coordinates, directs, and administrates the rest of the organization.

- Undersecretariat: Office of the Undersecretary-General: considered a part of the United Nations organization.
- Nexus: Maintains and directs a network of Command Central hubs to coordinate and support local operations.

PHYSICS Division

The GOC's action arm, equivalent to the United Nation's Peacekeeping Forces. Tasked with the observation, investigation, and capture/neutralization of Threat Entities (TEs).

- Assessment Teams: Investigate and observe parathreats.
- Strike Teams: Capture or eliminate parathreats.

PSYCHE Division

The GOC's diplomatic arm. Tasked with liaising with the paranormal community and maintaining peace between humanity and the occult powers.

- Special Observers: GOC agents tasked with observing scientific, archeological, and other investigations for possible emergent parathreats.
- Ambassadors: Maintain diplomatic contacts with non-hostile occult powers.

PTOLEMY Division

The GOC's support arm. Tasked with supporting the other arms of the GOC and maintaining the smooth operation of the organization.

- Quartermasters: Logistics and support. Handle everything from distribution of weapons and armor to coordinating food and supply management at GOC facilities.

- Research and Development: Coordinates research into new technologies by the 108 member organizations, and directs/ funds new research and development.

The Council of 108

The Global Occult Coalition's leadership body. Consists of representatives from 108 of the most powerful occult organizations. Members include:

The Bavarian Illuminati

An organization originally founded in 1776 to oppose superstition and promote human rights. One of the most powerful global conspiracies, and a major supporter of the Global Occult Coalition

The International Center for the Study of Unified Thaumatology

Headquartered in London, and founded by the remnants of the Holy Order of the Golden Dawn, the organization renamed itself after the development of the theory of Unified Thaumatology by J.S. Carver in 1913. The Center promotes the study of Unified Thaumatology (the scientific study of magic and sorcery) and is currently the largest Magical College in the modern world, with campuses in all GOC member countries, including Japan, the United States, South Africa, and India.

The Holy Order of Knights Templar, Reformed

Originally founded in 1119 as "The Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Christ and of the Temple of Solomon." Disbanded in 1312 by the *Vox in excelso* papal bull issued by Pope Clement: remained in hiding until 1939, with the beginning of hostilities in World War II, when it

became one of the major opposing forces to the Ahnenerbe Obskurakorps during the Seventh Occult War. The Knights Templar now exist mostly as an order of chaplains and priests, its military duties mostly supplanted by the PHYSICS Division.

Servants of the Silicon Nornir

A transhumanist organization, the Servants are devoted to the maintenance and worship of three massively powerful sentient supercomputers, named Urthor, Verthandi, and Skuldir after the three Norns of Norse mythology. The Servants believe that humanity's greatest purpose is the hastening of the technological singularity, which will lead to the birth of the "True Silicon Goddess," a supersentient hyperintelligence that will guide humanity to the next stage of its evolutionary journey.

The United Church of Satan, Scientist

An offshoot of **`LaVeyan Satanism`**, the Satanic Scientists believe in the supremacy of human self-will over all "false gods," and are hostile to any and all deities: if God exists, it is the duty of humankind to kill it.

The World Parahealth Organization

The World Health Organization's division for dealing with paranormal diseases, such as hemovorism (vampirism) and transformative lycanthropy.

The Universalist Order of the Æsir

A Scandinavian neopaganist clan, primarily comprised of seers and runemasters. Adherents believe it is the duty of the Coalition to unite all of mankind in order to fight alongside their gods at Ragnorök.

The Chaos Insurgency

The Insurgency is known to have its roots in the Foundation, but the details of their relationship are sketchy - it is not clear whether the Insurgency is a rogue organization spun off from the Foundation, or it serves as a cover organization for Foundation "black ops" operations. The Insurgency possesses fewer parathreats, but is known to use them more publicly and less restrictively.

Structure: The Insurgency appears to be bicameral, with one wing devoted to internal and external military operations and the other to research and implementation, unified under the control of unknown authorities.

Resources: No information is available regarding their sources of funding, membership, and resources at this time.

Standing Orders: Minimal engagement. Insurgency Operatives are to be considered UTEs, Response Levels 2-3 by default. Active operations in progress are to be opposed when discovered, with maximum preservation of enemy material for proper analysis and disposal.

The Church of the Broken God

Members of the Church of the Broken God claim that Threat Entities are fragmented manifestations of a pantheistic demiurge, whom they seek to reassemble as a means to their own deification. Whether successful or not, such an event would necessarily constitute a massive Threat Entity Emergence via hybridization, and may also initiate an Eschatological Event Sequence, either of which would require immediate execution of Procedure Pizzicato.

Structure: The Church is organized in a hierarchical structure nominally led by a man named Robert Bumaro. Each office communicates only with those directly superior, equal, and subordinate to their own. The basic office is that of the chaplain, who directs the activities of a chapel of no more than twenty individuals. Higher orders are responsible for equipment production and Threat Entity storage.

Resources: Church funding is drawn from the resources of its members and used to fund all internal expenses. Church operatives may be equipped with either conventional or TE-derived armaments from their chapel's armory, and are largely unaffected by cognitive-class Threat Entities.

Standing Orders: Engage as soon as possible. Operatives of the Church are to be considered KTEs, Response Level 3 by default, 4 if actively aggressive.

The Foundation

The Foundation is one of the oldest, most enigmatic, and most dangerous organizations involved with the paranormal. The Foundation's mission is the containment and storage of paranormal objects, and they maintain a network of containment sites hidden across the world for this purpose. Although they have similar goals of preserving normalcy (in line with the GOC's Second Mission), their unethical methods and focus on the containment and study of parathreats, even at risk to their own personnel and civilian bystanders, makes them incompatible with Coalition directives.

Although there are no official diplomatic ties between the Foundation and Coalition, the two organizations have carried out several "unofficial" joint operations, as well as having multiple unofficial ties and agreements to help facilitate smoother relations.

Structure: The Foundation consists of a loose conglomerate of researchers and field agents working independently under the direction of an "Overseer Council" of thirteen anonymous individuals. The Foundation's main unit of operation is the "site," or distinct location housing one or more parathreats. Little else is known about the internal organization of this group, except that they make extensive use of condemned criminals as expendable personnel in their experiments and operations.

Resources: Little information is available regarding their sources of funding, membership, and resources at this time, but they are

believed to be extensive.

Standing Orders: Do not engage without authorization from High Command. Foundation Operatives are to be considered Potential Threat Entities, Response Levels 0-3 based on level of hostility. Operatives are encouraged to prioritize the destruction of any Threat Entities before they can be captured by the Foundation.

Marshall, Carter, and Dark, Ltd.

An amorphous company with extensive economic and financial connections, specializing in the obtainment of rare and exotic objects, including material Threat Entities, for wealthy individuals. Direct conflict is rare; the company typically prefers to act via blackmail, extortion, and theft, rather than force. The locations of their known clientele suggest an origin or headquarters in the British Isles.

Structure: No information is available regarding their internal organization at this time.

Resources: Funding is apparently obtained from membership fees and sales. They are not believed to maintain a standing collection of Threat Entities, only a catalog of their existence and locations. Subscribing members are principally wealthy upper-class.

Standing Orders: Minimize interaction. Engage only if attacked. Members should be considered PTEs, and operatives as KTEs with Response Level 1. Report all observations and wait for further instructions.

OBSKURA

Founded in the wake of the Second World War as a successor to the Thule Society and Ahnenerbe Obskurakorps. Originally functioned as the esoterics arm of ODESSA, aiding in that

organization's efforts to transport Nazi war criminals to South America and the Middle East, before spinning off as its own organization with its own goals separate from that of the Third Reich. OBSKURA members seek to apply the principles of eugenics and racial purity to human paranormal abilities, believing that these abilities are proof of "Pure Aryan Blood."

Structure: OBSKURA has a cell-based organization, but with a known leadership caste based out of an unknown location. Regular orders and missives are distributed to the membership from "The Fuhrer," a person who claims to be the heir to Adolf Hitler. These messages generally take the form of rambling monologues dubbed over Nazi propaganda films, with the occasional hand-drawn map or diagram illustrating particular points of interest.

Resources: OBSKURA has inherited several known parathreat-level artifacts originally possessed by the Ahnenerbe and Thule Society. In particular, they are in possession of a Roman Lance claimed to be the "Spear of Longinus," a short-hafted hammer claimed to be "Mjolnir," and several other artifacts considered important to Abrahamic faiths. The authenticity of these artifacts, either from a historical or parathreat perspective, is uncertain.

Standing Orders: Response Levels 2-3 by default. Active operations in progress are to be opposed when discovered. Although the destruction of historical artifacts is regrettable, Coalition operatives should not hesitate to destroy confirmed parathreat artifacts, if in the possession of this organization.

Scarlet Hammer

Scarlet Hammer are the remnants of the former KGB Division of Special Circumstances, responsible for maintaining and utilizing the former USSR's stockpile of paranormal threats. With the fall of the former Soviet Union, several high-ranking officials in the DSC absconded with high-level parathreats, selling them to various organized Russian crime syndicates. At present, Scarlet Hammer acts as the largest arms dealer for parathreat-level weaponry in the

world.

Structure: Scarlet Hammer's leadership remains anonymous: allegedly, the organization is led by a figure known only as "Viktor," believed to be the former Director of the Division of Special Circumstances. The organization is cell-based, with no known permanent base of operations.

Resources: Scarlet Hammer funds itself by selling parathreat-level weaponry to criminal and military organizations around the world. Although their current stockpile is believed to be limited, a single sale can fetch several billion euros. The most recent known sale is a parathreat-grade gold-plated handgun seven years ago to an anonymous radical organization based in Yemen.

Standing Orders: Maintain observation of the organization at Response Level 1. Report any known sales of parathreat weapons immediately, including item in question, payment, clientele, and location of sale. As Scarlet Hammer operatives regularly carry parathreat-level weaponry for self-defense, agents are ordered not to engage without direct orders from GOC leadership, except when required under a First Mission (Survival) imperative.

The Serpent's Hand

The Serpent's Hand is a paraenvironmental terrorist organization opposed to the UN's current policy of containing and destroying paranormal entities to maintain the status quo. Members are often parathreats themselves, and the organization makes the retrieval and integration of humanoid and sentient parathreats a priority.

The Serpent's Hand has come into conflict with the GOC on multiple occasions, resulting in the deaths of multiple GOC operatives, and several complete cells.

Structure: Unknown

Resources: Unknown

Standing Orders: Engage as soon as possible. All confirmed Serpent's Hand members are to be considered KTEs, Response Level 4, by default.

Field Manuals and Guides

- Excerpts from PHYSICS Division Field Manual 1: Operative's Handbook
- Excerpts from PHYSICS Division Field Manual 2: Equipment and Gear
- Excerpts from PHYSICS Division Field Manual 13: Special Circumstances, Humanoid Threat Entities
- Excerpts from PHYSICS Division Threat Entity Database

Lectures and Orientations

- Transcript of a lecture given by Professor on Applied Thaumatology.
- Transcript of a lecture given by Professor on Aetheric Energy and Aspect Radiation.
- Transcript of a lecture given by Professor on Thaumatic Workings.
- Transcript of a lecture given by Professor : Conclusion, Q and A.

GOC Resolutions

+ 1st Session, 1946

- Establishment of a Commission to Deal with the Problems Raised by the Modern Implementation of Thaumaturgical Energy.

[REDACTED]

+ 68th Session, 2013

- Discussion of the Continuing Hemovore Problem.

The Seventh Occult War

An occult war, coinciding with the Second World War, triggered by an attempt by the SS Ahnenerbe and the Thule-Gesselschaft to take advantage of the destruction of **LTE-0913-Ex-Machina** to complete the Rite of Solomon. The events of this war led to the founding of the Global Occult Coalition as a safeguard against further such actions by rogue organizations.

McCarthy-Truman UFO Scandal of 1951

An illegal attempt to militarize parathreat technology by the United States Government leads to the deaths of the first GOC Strike Team (0001 "Alpha"), and the straining of relations between the Coalition and the U.S. Government.

The Cornwall Incident (199)

A cult based around **KTE-9927-Black** ("The Goddess") attempts to complete an illegal magical working. Following a timeline restructuring, GOC Covert Operative "Ukelele" successfully liquidates **KTE-9927-Black** but suffers severe injuries as a result. Marks the only time in GOC history that Procedure Pizzicato has been implemented (albeit unsuccessfully).

- **KTE-6024-Blit-Nuntius**
- Roc Series Deicide Drone, Prototype Model
- LTE-0851-Cetus
- **Archival Document -- HSA-008-Advent**
- **KTE-2013-Kapala-Mendes**
- **LTE-2712-Bosch**

To create further reports, please use **this style template**.

- **It will be fun, they said.**
- **UTE-9839 : Templum-Ebbinghaus**
- **Breaking It All Down On Me**
- **Green Day II**
- **Taking a Break from All your Worries**
- **You Can't Win Them All**
- **Ash and Maple ~ Part 1**
- **Green Day**
- **Be Strange or Be Forgotten**
- **Saudade, vol. 1**
- **Pizzicato**
- Conspiracy
- **The HAMI-BOMBARD Blues, Part I**
- **Exit Strategy**
- T Plus
- Deus Vulture
- **A Man of Clay and Men Formerly Men**
- SCP the Anime, part 4 (Gears/Iceberg, Clef/Kondraki, Rights/Light, Kain, monkey!Bright)
- **Keeping With The Times**
- Transcript of Incident BL-7 Alpha
- "Vigil"
- **That's The Joke**
- **Point In Line**
- **"Sometimes You Get the Bear. . ."**
- "Tempering"
- Aftermath
- "Scramble Order"
- **Nx-03**
- **Not with a Whimper but with a Bang**
- **Avian Anthology I**
- "Special Observer"
- **Transcript Found On Storage Level B 8**
- **The First Fifty-Five**
- **Agent Ukelele**
- Watching Corpses
- **Memorandum Dated 6 November 1944**

- "Joint Venture"
- "Diplomacy"
- "Farpoint"
- **Transcript of telephone conversation, August 9, 1991**
- "Assessment"
- "AWTOK"
- Excerpts from PHYSICS Division Field Manual 1: Operative's Handbook
- **Attacking The Darkness**
- "Strike"
- **Anno Domino**
- Angel Of Red And White
- **The World From a Different Angle**
- **Moonlighting**
- T Minus
- **Angle of Attack**
- **Number One With A Bullet**
- **I Thought You Died Alone**
- Transcript of a lecture given by Professor on Thaumatic Workings.
- "Trauma"
- Girls' Night Out: Raising Hell
- Transcript of a lecture given by Professor : Conclusion, Q and A
- Excerpts from PHYSICS Division Field Manual 2: Equipment and Gear
- Second Watch
- Excerpts from PHYSICS Division Threat Entity Database
- **The Smell of Her Hair**
- Transcript of a lecture given by Professor on Aetheric Energy and Aspect Radiation.
- **Transcript of meeting, June 2 1972**
- "Come into my Parlor"
- **Origin of Clef**
- Excerpts from PHYSICS Division Field Manual 13: Special Circumstances, Humanoid Threat Entities
- "UHEC"
- **Special Assets**
- **A Suicide Note**

- Transcript of a lecture given by Professor on Applied Thaumatology.
- **Items from a Global Occult Coalition Document Bag**
- **Empty Unmarked Grave**
- Iteration 0
- Magic Orientation
- **Unfinished Business**
- **GOIng My Way**
- **Rascal One Actual**
- Global Occult Coalition Casefiles
- **Termination_Order**
- **Clef And Dimitri Hit The Road**
- **Quiet Days**

- **SCP-3046**
- **SCP-2326**
- **SCP-3432**
- **SCP-2748**
- **SCP-3457**
- **SCP-1537**
- **SCP-2173**
- **SCP-2833**
- **SCP-2178**
- **SCP-1704**
- **SCP-2574**
- **SCP-1583**
- **SCP-1548**
- **SCP-3263**
- **SCP-2145**
- **SCP-2713**
- **SCP-2281**
- **SCP-475**
- **SCP-2815**
- **SCP-2461**
- **SCP-2490**
- **SCP-1374**
- **SCP-3117**
- **Allison Eckhart**

- **SCP-065**
- **SCP-3477**
- **SCP-3731**
- **SCP-2556**
- **SCP-2664**
- **SCP-1564**
- **SCP-2228**
- **SCP-2635**
- **Tufto's Proposal**
- **SCP-2069**
- **Wrong Proposal**
- **SCP-2472**
- **SCP-1899**
- **SCP-2002**
- **SCP-2480**
- **SCP-1522**
- **TwistedGears-Kaktus Proposal**
- **SCP-1609**

PERSONNEL DIRECTORY

Some guidelines in creating characters that fit the GOC feel:

Names

- GOC operatives may be identified by their real name, a pseudonym, or a code name.
- When picking a code name, try to pick a name that isn't overly "cool" sounding, that doesn't sound like a video game handle. **This page has some examples of actual fighter pilot call signs and the stories behind them.** Note that few of these stories are particularly flattering to the recipient.
    - Examples: "Bullfrog" is named because he's a big, squat, short fellow with a broad mouth. "Skunkboy" is

named after an incident during his time in the Marines when he failed a stalking test because of a bout of flatulence.

Serial Numbers

- GOC operatives get an eight-digit serial number in the following format: ********/****. The first eight digits is a unique individual identifier. The last three (or four) digits indicates which part of the GOC they serve in (their service code or unit identifier).
    - Most GOC staff have a three digit Service Code. Four digit Service Codes are limited to Strike operatives.
    - Service codes use both numbers and letters as digits. There are 34 possibilties (0 through 9 and A-Z, excluding I and O) for each digit, although letters are less common than numbers.
    - The first digit of the Service Code is always the region in which you serve, with the exception of "7," which represents a PHYSICS Division Assessment team.
    - The last two digits of the Service Code represent your tasking (x31, for instance, represents serving in the Regional Director's office).
    - There is no official list of region or service codes, so that authors and creators can have maximum freedom to make them up as needed.

Unit Identifiers

- PHYSICS Division field operatives eschew Service Codes and use their unit identifier instead.
- Assessment Teams use a three-digit unit identifier starting with 7. Strike teams use a four-digit identifier.
- There is no official list of unit identifiers, but try not to use one that is already being used by an established unit.

Creating an Assessment or Strike Team

- Assessment/Strike Teams are identified in three ways.
    - Unit Heraldry (a unique symbol or coat of arms identifying the unit). Although not required, Assessment Teams usually use a cartouche (oval) shape for their heraldry, while Strike Teams use a heater (shield shape).
    - A three or four digit Unit Identifier number (three digits starting with 7 for Assessment, four digits for Strike).
    - Strike Teams usually also have a unit motto or slogan. Assessment Teams usually don't bother.

D.C. al Fine

"D.C. Al Fine" is the code name for the current Director of the Global Occult Coalition. She is known to be a European female of unknown age and nationality.

In accordance with the Information Secrecy Act of 1949, all other information about this individual is classified.

Assistant Director "Celesta"

Serial Number: **84300007/431**
Title: **Assistant Director of Field Operations, France Division**

+ show block

Real Name: **[CLASSIFIED]**
Nationality: **French**
Gender: **Female**

Date of Birth: **7/16/1964**

Biographical Information

Focused and dedicated, AD "Celesta" is currently a woman of French nationality known for her abrasive personality but unquestionable liquidation record. Highly resistant to external oversight in operations under her direction. Trained by [CLASSIFIED], details withheld.

Career Service Vitae

[PRIOR CSV INFORMATION CLASSIFIED]

- Promoted to Assistant Director of Field Operations, French Division, 3/21/07 following death of former Assistant Director [CLASSIFIED]
- [CLASSIFIED]
- [CLASSIFIED]

Assistant Director "Oud", aka "Tariq Ahmed Khalid"

Serial Number: **70300019/931**
Title: **Assistant Director of Field Operations, Afghanistan Division**

+ show block

Real Name: **[CLASSIFIED]**
Nationality: **Kurd**
Gender: **Male**
Date of Birth: **[Classified]**

Biographical Information

Began his career as a GOC informant before being recruited into PSYCHE Division as a special operative. Rose through the ranks and became a regional director in the Kabul region, where he served during the U.S. invasion of the mid 2000s. Multiple complaints for abrasive behavior towards subordinate officers.

Career Service Vitae

[CSV INFORMATION CLASSIFIED]

A four-man Assessment Team based out of Noxon, Montana. Originally founded as "Assessment Team 735 Lightning Mace," was nicknamed "Sparkplug" due to the poor art quality of the unit's original heraldry. Unit designation was reassigned after two years in service.

- **Heraldry:** Cartouche. A silver gauntlet holding a mace between two lightning bolts over a scarlet field, bordered in black. Unit number "735" at the bottom of the cartouche.

"Bullfrog"

Serial Number: **43856518/735**
Title: **Team Leader**

+ show block

Real Name: **Jeremiah Carter**
Nationality: **American**
Gender: **Male**
Date of Birth: **[CLASSIFIED]**

Biographical Information

Former U.S. Army Ranger, received field-commission as

an officer after first tour of duty. Transferred to 1st SFOD-D after 12 years in service. Recruited to PHYSICS Division following retirement from U.S. military service.

Career Service Vitae

[CSV INFORMATION CLASSIFIED]

"Fartboy" "Skunkboy"

Serial Number: **43852165/735**

+ show block

Real Name: **[CLASSIFIED]**
Nationality: **American**
Gender: **Male**
Date of Birth: **[CLASSIFIED]**

Biographical Information

Former U.S. Marine. Completed Scout Sniper Basic Course on [DATE]. Was recruited into PHYSICS Division following completion of term of service.

Career Service Vitae

[CSV INFORMATION CLASSIFIED]

"Kitten"

Serial Number: **43857764/735**

+ show block

Real Name: **Tabitha St. Matthews**
Nationality: **[CLASSIFIED]**
Gender: **Female**
Date of Birth: **[CLASSIFIED]**

Biographical Information

[CLASSIFIED]

Career Service Vitae

[PRIOR CSV INFORMATION CLASSIFIED]

- [CLASSIFIED]
- [CLASSIFIED]

"Spider"

Serial Number: **43861212/735**

+ show block

Real Name: **[CLASSIFIED]**
Nationality: **[CLASSIFIED]**
Gender: **Female**
Date of Birth: **[CLASSIFIED]**

Biographical Information

Recruited to ICSUT in [DATE]. Completed First Circle (Adept) course of study on [DATE]. Recruited into PHYSICS Division on [DATE], joined Assessment Team

753 "Sparkplug" on [DATE]

Career Service Vitae

[PRIOR CSV INFORMATION CLASSIFIED]

- [CLASSIFIED]
- [CLASSIFIED]

A Strike Team based out of Kilkenny, Ireland. Specializes in global rapid response by apportation.

- **Heraldry:** Heater. A *bendlet argent* over a gold sword, point down, over an azure field with gold border. Unit number at *chief* on a white scroll with black borders. Unit motto at *base* on a white scroll with black borders.
- **Unit Motto:** "Break Em' Down."

"Fox"

Serial Number: **42921102/1102**
Title: **Team Leader**

+ show block

Real Name: **[CLASSIFIED]**
Nationality: **[CLASSIFIED]**
Gender: **Female**
Date of Birth: **[CLASSIFIED]**

Biographical Information

[CLASSIFIED]

Career Service Vitae

[PRIOR CSV INFORMATION CLASSIFIED]

- [CLASSIFIED]
- [CLASSIFIED]

"Jackal"

Serial Number: **41021124/1102**
Title: **Team Executive Officer**

+ show block

Real Name: **[CLASSIFIED]**
Nationality: **[CLASSIFIED]**
Gender: **Male**
Date of Birth: **[CLASSIFIED]**

Biographical Information

[CLASSIFIED]

Career Service Vitae

[PRIOR CSV INFORMATION CLASSIFIED]

- [CLASSIFIED]
- [CLASSIFIED]

"Pockets"

Serial Number: **43855511/1102**
Title: **Communications and Technical Specialist**

+ show block

Real Name: **[CLASSIFIED]**
Nationality: **[CLASSIFIED]**
Gender: **Male**
Date of Birth: **[CLASSIFIED]**

Biographical Information

[CLASSIFIED]

Career Service Vitae

[PRIOR CSV INFORMATION CLASSIFIED]

- [CLASSIFIED]
- [CLASSIFIED]

"Tosser"

Serial Number: **43851126/1102**
Title: **Medic**

+ show block

Real Name: **[CLASSIFIED]**
Nationality: **United Kingdom**
Gender: **Male**
Date of Birth: **[CLASSIFIED]**

Biographical Information

[CLASSIFIED]

Career Service Vitae

[PRIOR CSV INFORMATION CLASSIFIED]

- [CLASSIFIED]
- [CLASSIFIED]

"Redshirt"

Serial Number: **44307084/1102**
Title: **Esoterics Specialist**

+ show block

Real Name: **[CLASSIFIED]**
Nationality: **Israeli**
Gender: **Male**
Date of Birth: **[CLASSIFIED]**

Biographical Information

[CLASSIFIED] Also, it is worth noting that Specialist Redshirt has been injured in the line of duty on 14 separate occasions. These injuries do not impair his ability as a field agent.

Career Service Vitae

[PRIOR CSV INFORMATION CLASSIFIED]

- [CLASSIFIED]
- [CLASSIFIED]

"Arsegike"

Serial Number: **44297251/1102**

+ show block

Real Name: **[CLASSIFIED]**
Nationality: **[CLASSIFIED]**
Gender: **Male**
Date of Birth: **[CLASSIFIED]**

Biographical Information

[CLASSIFIED]

Career Service Vitae

[PRIOR CSV INFORMATION CLASSIFIED]

- [CLASSIFIED]
- [CLASSIFIED]

"Ferret"

Serial Number: **44307084/1102**

+ show block

Real Name: **[CLASSIFIED]**
Nationality: **[CLASSIFIED]**
Gender: **Male**
Date of Birth: **[CLASSIFIED]**

Biographical Information

[CLASSIFIED]

Career Service Vitae

[PRIOR CSV INFORMATION CLASSIFIED]

- [CLASSIFIED]
- [CLASSIFIED]

"Cartman"

Serial Number: **44752412/1102**

+ show block

Real Name: **[CLASSIFIED]**
Nationality: **Canadian**
Gender: **Male**
Date of Birth: **[CLASSIFIED]**

Biographical Information

[CLASSIFIED]

Career Service Vitae

[PRIOR CSV INFORMATION CLASSIFIED]

- [CLASSIFIED]
- [CLASSIFIED]

"Shatner"

Serial Number: **41212342/1102**

+ show block

Real Name: **[CLASSIFIED]**
Nationality: **[CLASSIFIED]**
Gender: **Male**
Date of Birth: **[CLASSIFIED]**

Biographical Information

[CLASSIFIED]

Career Service Vitae

[PRIOR CSV INFORMATION CLASSIFIED]

- [CLASSIFIED]
- [CLASSIFIED]

PHYSICS

- **Strike Team 0001 "Alpha"**: The first Coalition Strike Team, formed of former SS and Ahnenerbe operatives defecting to the Coalition. This Unit Designation and heraldry is no longer used, having been retired after the deaths of the entire team in the McCarthy-Truman UFO Scandal of 1951.
- **Strike Team 1121 "Noble Phantom"**
    - "Agent Madrigal": Helped to edit and write the latest edition of the informal handbooks issued to GOC operatives. Known for adding pithy commentary on various subjects.
- **Strike Team 2209 "Steelheads"**: Involved in a raid on a Serpent's Hand cell in Las Vegas some years ago.
- **Strike Team 9999 "Max Damage"**: Operates and deploys the Coalition's force of Ultra Heavy Engagement Chassis (Orange Suits).

CASEFILES CANON TALES

by Clef

A series of tales, each one illustrating a mission in the life of a different aspect of the Global Occult Coalition.

- Assessment - Assessment Team "Sparkplug" goes on their first mission with a new member, and Council politics raise their ugly head.
- Strike - Strike Team "Broken Dagger" kicks some ass without bothering to take names.
- Special Observer - Knight and Zhao and the Temple of Doom.
- Farpoint - Callahan arrives at a GOC forward operating base for his new assignment, and makes some friends.
- AWTOK - "FUCK YOU I'M A DRAGON"
- Joint Venture - Just add white doves.
- Trauma - Scars and memories.
- Tempering - It's not always the hottest flame that makes the best steel.
- Vigil - For the Fallen.
- Diplomacy - Visiting prisoners of war is one of the duties of the International Red Cross.
- UHEC - This site has worked 30 days without an injury.
- Scramble Order - "We need you to come in within the hour."

by **spikebrennan**

- **Memorandum Dated 6 November 1944**
- **Transcript of meeting, June 2 1972**
- **Transcript of telephone conversation, August 9, 1991**

- Transcript of Incident BL-7 Alpha - by Clef. Assessment Team "Sparkplug" finds something horrible in the woods.
- "Come into my Parlor" - by Clef. "… said the Spider to the fly."

Excerpts from PHYSICS Division Field Manual 1: Operative's Handbook

Preface

We live on a placid island of ignorance in the midst of black seas of infinity, and it was not meant that we should voyage far.
- H.P. Lovecraft
- "The Call of Cthulhu"

"Fuck that shit. Let's find out what's on that horizon."
- Agent "Madrigal"
- Strike Team "Noble Phantom"

For most of human history, our species has been at the mercy of powers foreign to, and supposedly greater than, ourselves. Magical or religious, extraterrestrial or extradimensional, these parathreats have been the Damocles Sword hanging over the head of our species since the first apes came down from the trees - or out of the water, based on which evolutionary theory you ascribe to.

No longer. Our species is now taking back control of our destiny. We are now at war with That Which Should Not Be: the Real fighting against the Unreal. And you, as a Coalition recruit, are one of the heroes who will serve a vital role in that war.

This manual is not meant to be a comprehensive guide to parathreats. Reading it will not teach you how to defeat a physical god. That knowledge will come with time, and experience. Instead, it is meant to serve as a distillation of the fundamental principles learned by PHYSICS operatives since our founding in the late 1940s, broadly applicable in all parathreat scenarios. Think of it as the foundation upon which you will build your skills: broad, plain,

largely invisible, but vital nonetheless.

Five Precepts

1) You are expendable.

There are over six billion human beings living in the world today. You are one of them. Cold-hearted as it may be, given the choice between the two, humanity wins every time. Before anything else, you must come to terms with this fact: not only for yourself, but for your friends, family, and loved ones. If the time should come that you are asked to make the ultimate sacrifice, you must do so swiftly, resolutely, and without hesitation. A moment's delay could be disastrous.

2) You are not disposable.

The Coalition doesn't have limitless reserves. Our numbers are small enough, and the threats we face terrible enough, that we cannot afford to lose a single operative to accident or stupidity. Your life is a vital resource to be nurtured and husbanded, and if it must be spent, it must be used to maximum effectiveness before it is lost.

3) Knowledge is power.

The threats we face are numerous, and each one is unique. In order to combat them effectively, we must know what we are facing. Information, more than any bullet or blade, is our weapon, and we need as much of it as possible. Keep no secrets from your comrades or superiors. If you learn something, pass it on as soon as possible. If you are killed, your last act before dying should be to try to make sure someone knows how you died.

4) Don't question it, just accept it.

There are things you will never know. There are things that the human mind can't comprehend, and other things that you will simply never find out. If you obsess over the things you do not know, you will become distracted and lose focus. As much as you can, focus on the Here and the Now.

5) You are only human.

You will make mistakes. You will grow tired and weak. There will be moments when you act stupidly and other moments when you express unexpected brilliance. You cannot let failure allow you to fall into despair, or success to lead to arrogance. Down either path leads disaster.

The Golden Rule

Never work alone.

Preparation

1 Then shall the kingdom of heaven be likened unto ten virgins, which took their lamps, and went forth to meet the bridegroom. 2 And five of them were wise, and five were foolish. 3 They that were foolish took their lamps, and took no oil with them: 4 But the wise took oil in their vessels with their lamps.
- Matthew 25:1-4

You can't cut with a dull knife, you can't drive a car without gas, and you can't face world-ending parathreats without being prepared, body and mind, for what's coming. Your handlers and trainers will take care of the specific things you need to learn to prepare for your job. This section of the manual is meant more to outline things you can do above and beyond required training to maximize your chances of survival… and more importantly, your ability to complete your mission.

Body

- **Keep Healthy:** This goes without saying. Eat healthy, make sure your innoculations are up to date, don't slack off on PT. If you have any pre-existing conditions, make sure your teammates know how take care of you in case you are incapacitated. If you have any new health issues come up, make sure someone else knows, even if it's as minor as a cold or a sprained ankle from playing basketball. In the field, in a crisis situation, is the last time to find out a team member has a severe fever.
- **Know How to Fight:** PHYSICS Division has many assets if you want to brush up on your personal combat training. Make use of them.
- **Practice Flight:** Practice your escape and evasion techniques: learn how to climb a fence (chain link and barbed wire), break a window safely, kick down a door, and most importantly, how to fall safely without injury. When the shit hits the fan and you have to get out of there, know how.
- **Be Ready for the Worst:** Make sure your first aid and CPR certifications are up to date. Keep your issued medical kit on you at all times, and know how to use it on yourself and others.

Mind

- **Stay Healthy:** Your mind is your most important weapon. Make sure it is healthy. Get regular psych evaluations, and follow the recommendations of the shrinks. Addictions and phobias can cripple performance at the worst possible time: have them treated right away. Watch your comrades too: if one of your team members starts to behave in an unstable manner, contact an evaluator for an assessment. Don't try to cover for your friends: it's better to get them help now than to

let minor issues become major ones… or worse, let a cognitohazard fester in the mind of your teammate.

- **Train Yourself:** Observation and situational awareness are vital in this job. Practice both. Logic puzzles are another good way to hone your mind. Broaden your knowledge base as much as possible: you never know when a minor factoid will turn out to be vital.

- **Learn to communicate:** If you don't know the local language, then at the very least, learn how to say the following words and phrases in the country you'll be operating in:

    - Yes.
    - No.
    - Help.
    - Emergency.
    - Danger.
    - Do you speak [language]?
    - Stay away.
    - Drop the weapon and lay down.
    - I need a telephone.
    - Where can I find a doctor?

- **Know Your Enemy:** Read after-action reports. Read Threat Entity dossiers. Talk to more experienced field operatives about their experiences. Find out everything you can about the parathreats you may face. The greatest fear is the fear of the unknown: make sure you have as little to fear as possible.

Gear

- **Choose the Gear that's Right For You:** Everyone is different. Your armorer and quartermaster can help you to find the perfect gear to fit your unique needs.

- **Know Your Gear:** Learn the quirks and foibles of every piece of equipment you carry, from your weapon to the buckles on your pack to the way your wallet sits in your pocket.

Experiment with different ways to carry and pack your gear until you find one that works well. Keep them maintained and always be aware of their condition. A frayed backpack strap might not seem like a big deal back at base, but it will be a big deal if it breaks on you in the field.

- **Don't Get Too Attached:** We all have our favorite gear. Sometimes it's not available. Things break, get lost, or get taken away. There will also be times when you have to abandon gear to make a hasty retreat and re-equip while in the field from what you can find. Familiarize yourself with as many different types of equipment as possible. A crisis situation is not the time to learn how to drive stick.

PHYSICS Division uses six broad "Response Levels" indicating the priority of concern and general level of force authorized by the individual operative.

Response Level 0: No Threat

Keep under occasional observation. Do not engage without permission from Central Command, unless immediate First, Second, or Third Mission concerns arise.

- The majority of paranormal phenomena discovered by the GOC fall under this category, being mere curiosities rather than threats. As liquidation of said phenomena would not be worth expenditure of assets, these paranormal entities are left in place.

Response Level 1: Minimal Threat

Keep under continual observation. Do not engage unless immediate First, Second, or Third Mission concerns arise.

- In many cases, GOC operatives will be assigned to Response Level 1 phenomena on a permanent basis, either as observers or as liaisons in the case of sentient beings. These

require constant supervision, but if properly isolated, have a minimal risk of Mission concerns.

Response Level 2: Sub-Moderate Threat

Keep under continual observation. Engage when convenient with minimal use of force.

- Response Level 2 is the first level of "parathreat," or paranormal phenomena determined to be a threat to the GOC's First through Third (Survival, Concealment, Protection) Missions, requiring a Fourth Mission (Destruction) response. In the case of Response Level 2, the primary threat is to the Second Mission (Concealment), requiring a subtle liquidation approach to avoid breaching secrecy. Response Level 2 missions are most often carried out by Assessment Teams or Special Observers, as employing Strike assets would be too high-profile.

Response Level 3: Moderate Threat

Keep under continual observation. Engage as soon as possible.

- Response Level 3 is reserved for those parathreats determined to fall under a Third Mission (Protection) threat, requiring immediate destruction to avoid danger to life and limb of civilians and bystanders. In this case, Second Mission (Concealment) concerns do exist, but should be considered secondary to Third Mission priorities. Response Level 3 missions are most often carried out by Assessment Teams with Strike backup in case of escalation.

Response Level 4: Severe Threat

Keep under continual observation. Engage as soon as possible. Excessive force authorized.

- At Response Level 4, severe Third Mission (Protection) concerns are present, including possible First Mission

(Survival) priorities. Second Mission (Concealment) concerns are partially waived when any breaches can be dealt with in a localized manner. Fifth Mission (Education) requirements are also waived in cases where other Mission concerns supercede. Assessment Teams are not authorized to carry out Response Level 4 missions except in case of extreme emergency, except as backup and Overwatch for Strike assets.

Response Level 5: Immediate Threat

All operatives to engage on sight, using any means necessary.

- Second Mission (Concealment) concerns are fully waived. Strike Teams are authorized full use of Tangential Technology when dealing with Response Level 5 threats. In special cases, Third Mission (Protection) concerns may be waived in the case of a severe First Mission (Survival) concern. Response Level 5 Missions generally require multiple Strike and Assessment teams, as well as outside assets, whether from Coalition member bodies or non-Coalition organizations.

Response Level 6: Pizzicato

Procedure Pizzicato is the final Emergency Response Procedure, to be executed in case of Threat Entity Emergence at a massive level. Procedure Pizzicato is to be executed in the following instances.

- Commencement of any Eschatological Event Sequence past the Point of No Return.
- Failure by rival agency to maintain containment of their own Threat Entities.
- Emergence on a worldwide scale of a large number of Threat Entities, causing a worldwide Second Mission failure.

Note that execution of Procedure Pizzicato will, by necessity, result in an irreversible Second Mission (Concealment) failure in order to allow for a First Mission (Survival) success. Third Mission (Protection) goals are secondary: normal avoidance of civilian

casualties is to be second priority to maintaining Minimum Repopulation Margin among the survivors.

Procedure

- Activate all sleeper units in rival agencies.
- Alert all allied government agencies and allied government officials.
- Mobilize all PHYSICS Teams.
- Publically acknowledge existence of Global Occult Coalition, existence of rival agencies, and existence of Threat Entities.
- Request for global martial law.
- Request worldwide protective curfew on all civilians.
- Establish and/or refresh KTE Termination Triage Sequences for all Threat Level 2 and 3 entities.
- Execute Termination Triage Sequences.

Force Authorization

- Units are authorized to request and/or use any necessary force in execution of Termination Triage Sequences.
- All restrictions re: NBC weaponry, Memetic Cognitohazard Cascade Sequences, and Nanotech Grey Goo items withdrawn.
- All restrictions re: use of Tangential and Plus Generation Technologies withdrawn.
- Acceptable Collateral Damage: 90% of worldwide human population.

Excerpts from PHYSICS Division Field Manual 2: Equipment and Gear

INSERT QUARTERMASTER DIVISION LOGO HERE

Overview

Whenever possible, PHYSICS Division makes use of current-generation technology in order to minimize Second Mission (Concealment) impact should equipment be lost or abandoned in the field. However, the nature of the occult threat faced by GOC Operatives means that some use of advanced (downstream) technology beyond current norms is required. The following is a brief overview of terminology used to refer to downstream technology.

Generation Zero

Also known as Current Gen or Gen0. Refers to any technology that is readily available at the current level of technological advancement. Loss of Gen0 equipment is generally of minimal concern. The majority of equipment issued by Quartermaster Division is Generation Zero technology.

Generation Plus One

Also known as Gen+ or +1Gen. Refers to any technology considered cutting edge or advanced given the current level of technological advancement, but could conceivably exist as a prototype or specially constructed item. Loss of Gen+1 technology may necessitate action by PSYCHE in order to minimize impact to Second Mission concerns, but is generally not a cause for undue alarm.

Generation Plus Two

Also known as Gen++ or +2Gen. Refers to any technology clearly beyond the ability of the current level of technological advancement to produce. All Gen+2 technology issued to GOC Operatives must include a readily accessible self-destruct device to prevent downstream technology from falling into the hands of the public.

Tangential

Also known as GenAlt or TanGenT. Tangential Technology is any technology that relies on principles other than those of science, such as magic or faith. Tangential Technology not in the possession of a GOC Operative may be considered a Known Threat Entity. Loss of Tangential Technology may require a Response Level 5 action to prevent the item from being discovered by the public.

Mk VII Standard Field Dress (Black Suit)

GEN+1

History

GOC Operatives are often required to operate in a variety of urban environments, in close proximity both to dangerous Threat Entities and the civilian population. In the interests of Second Mission (Concealment) concerns, Quartermaster's Division developed the Standard Field Dress in the early 1970s to act as a low-visibility defensive garment for agents in the field.

Early SFDs suffered from several weaknesses: they tended to be heavy, restricting in movement, uncomfortable in heat or cold, and could not be made in any color aside from their undyed black. This resulted in the early "Black Suits" paradoxically causing their

wearers to become more visible than if they had worn normal tactical gear. Since then, advancements in materials technology have allowed for greater comfort and lesser visibility in the garments worn by modern field agents. However, these garments are still informally referred to as "Black Suits" for tradition's sake.

Overview

The MkVII SFD is the current iteration of PHYSICS Division's standard duty garment. Modern Black Suits come in a variety of different fashions for various situations (ranging from high-society formalwear to thrift-store discards for blending in with transient populations). In light of changing threat conditions and advances in technology, this garment is constantly being revised and upgraded. The most recent official model incorporated the following characteristics:

- A form-fitting ballistic-fiber undergarment worn next to the skin, made of +1 Generation nanofiber, rated to stop handgun rounds with standard powder load at point blank range.
- +1 Generation nanofiber threads integrated into key points in outergarments to provide additional protection. Combined with undergarment, must be rated to stop rifle rounds with standard powder load at a distance of twenty meters.
- Micronized communications gear located in the collar and cuffs of the garment, or integrated into jewelry.
- Augmented Reality system integrated into eyewear or disguised as a cosmetic accessory.
- Personal Computing Device (PCD) integrated into a cellular phone, implanted as a cybernetic enhancement, or disguised as footwear, with satellite connection to GOC data network.
- Emergency toolkits and weapons, miniaturized and disguised as necessary, are provided by Quartermaster's Division for specific missions upon request.

Black Suits might not be the sexiest combat dress PHYSICS issues, but they've saved more lives than any other piece of tech we've developed. They're heavy, itchy, and smell funny until you break them in, but the first time one of them stops a bullet that should have

killed you, you'll come to see them in a whole new light.

Agent "Madrigal."
Strike Team "Noble Phantom."

Mk IV Infiltration Uniform (Grey Suit)

GEN+1

Overview

The Grey Suit is the current iteration of battledress issued in cases where stealth is prioritized over protection. Grey Suits consist of a full-coverage garment made of "chameleon cloth," which incorporates minute chromatophores similar to those found in cuttlefish or chameleons. Hundreds of small cameras incorporated at strategic points take pictures of the surrounding environment and project them onto the opposite side of the garment.

The end result is an adaptive camouflage system which (unfortunately) falls far short of a true invisibility cloak: the low resolution of the surface causes the image to be blurry or distorted, and it cannot project light or reflections. In addition, the lag time of the system means that movement of the viewer or wearer will disrupt the image. However, its use of only +1 Generation technology, and the significant advantage it grants to stationary wearers, makes it a useful addition to an Assessment Team's arsenal.

Additional tarpaulins and cloaks made of chameleon cloth are often used in combination with the Grey Suit when setting up stationary hides in the field.

Here's something they don't tell you in the official documentation: talk to your quartermaster, maybe slip him a twenty or buy him a case of beer (the good stuff),

and give him your weapon. He'll bring it back to you covered in chameleon cloth, with an interface that can hook into your greysuit. That way, your weapon can be invisible too. Technically, he's not supposed to do that in case you lose your weapon in the field, but everyone does it and High Command turns a blind eye. Besides, without the proper command signals, it just looks like a commercial aftermarket neoprene slipcover.

Agent "Madrigal."
Strike Team "Noble Phantom."

Mk II Combat Garment (White Suit)

GEN+2/TanGenT

Overview

Reserved strictly for use by Strike Teams, White Suits represent the epitome of PHYSICS Division's battledress technology. The suit comprises three components:

1. A close-fitting undergarment, derived from the Black Suit, that provides last-ditch protection to the wearer's torso, as well as incorporating waste collection ports and a water-cooling system to prevent buildup of residual heat.
2. A rigid suit of battle armor with pseudomyomer exomusculature and full hazardous environment protection, powered by a micronized fuel cell located in the lower back.
3. An invisibility cloak generator, incorporating Tangential Technology to bend light around the subject, providing full invisibility.

As White Suits employ a large amount of +2 Generation and Tangential Technology, all units are equipped with a self-destruct device to prevent them from being captured or discovered by outside personnel.

Word of advice if you end up in Strike: get as much body hair removed as possible. I don't care how you do it: laser, electrolysis, whatever. Those damn White Suits fit so fucking tightly it's not uncommon for guys to get their pubes or leg hair stuck in the joints and ripped out when they bent their knee or hip the wrong way. Also: check, double check, and triple check that your skinsuit is fitting tightly, without wrinkles or bunching, before you climb into the hardsuit, unless you like blisters all over your chest, hips, shoulders, or groin. It wouldn't hurt to invest in a really good jock strap, either, if you're so endowed.

Agent "Madrigal."
Strike Team "Noble Phantom."

Mk. III Ultra-Heavy Engagement Chassis (Orange Suit)

GEN+2/TanGenT

History

The Ultra-Heavy Engagement Chassis fulfills a niche role in PHYSICS Division operations: namely, engaging massive or heavily armed Threat Entities. In the past, encounters with such entities could be resolved only by evacuating the area and escalating to Response Level 5. Furthermore, in encounters against enemies armed with heavy weaponry or armor, Strike Operatives tended to fall short due to a lack of armored cavalry support. In light of this, a new system was developed to provide both the ability to engage massive KTEs, as well as provide rapid and mobile heavy armor support.

Mk. I and II U-HECs suffered from multiple drawbacks in their design: for instance, the ground pressure caused by a bipedal machine the size of a tank caused severe damage to paved roads, as well as resulting in the machine and operator bogging down or

collapsing urban structures. Further problems included operator exhaustion, overheating, and balance issues. As time went on, however, advancements in the fields of nanotechnology and Tangential Technology allowed U-HECs to be built lighter, faster, and much more responsive. The modern U-HEC (the Mark III "Orange Suit") is a much more mobile and agile unit, although still requiring infantry support from Strike assets.

Overview

U-HECs are designed for situations in which a Threat Entity possesses extreme destructive potential, such as a large cryptid, Tier 5 or higher energy manipulators, or persons with access to heavy weaponry. As stealth is practically impossible due to the size of the unit and the noise caused by its operation, U-HECs are equipped with "Banshee" audio-visual cognitohazard generators to induce panic in non-inoculated personnel. Believing that the system is more effective if it has the full attention of the target, some U-HEC operators use bright colors or gaudy ornamentation to draw the attention of the enemy.

The exact construction and composition of the Mark III U-HEC is classified, but are known to include:

- Buckypaper bilayered with dilatant gelatin in order to absorb shock from bullets and explosives.
- Silicon nanofluid cooling system integrated into a bodysuit similar to that worn with the White Suit.
- Pseudomyomer exomusculature similar to that used in the White Suit, but augmented with miniaturized high-torque electromechanical servos for greater strength at the cost of some response time.
- Ceramic plating to reduce electrical conductivity.
- Vaporizing liquid extinguisher for protection against flammable agents.
- Ultra-high-molecular-weight polyethylene (UHMWPE) outer shell.
- Full environmental hazard protection, including toxin filters and rebreathers.
- OCULUS sensor suite, including VERITAS imaging system.

- Ram-Air Parachute system for aerial deployment.
- "Firestorm" Antipersonnel Directional Explosive (ADE): scaled up version of the "Roomsweeper" hemispherical claymore mounted on the White Suit. This system was added to early U-HECs after an incident in which a U-HEC operator, cut off from infantry support, was overwhelmed and killed by multiple enemy infantry who climbed onto the suit and prised the operator out of the pilot compartment. The system consists of a series of directional mines mounted on the exterior of the unit which can be set to detonate at the command of the operator.

I've operated with U-HECs six times, and each time, it's been fucking intense. Even if you're inoculated against the cognitos, it's fucking terrifying to see that huge thing smashing through small buildings and shrugging off small arms fire like rain. I can't imagine what it must be like for anyone who has to go up against that thing with the full force of the Banshee shrieking at them: shitting their pants and running screaming for the hills is the kindest thing I've seen happen.

The downside is, it's easy to feel invincible with a giant fucking golem smashing everything in your wake, but that's when things get the most dangerous. Not everyone turns and runs. Some people respond to abject terror by going violently berserk. Plus, even when you're wearing a tank, there's plenty of things out there that kill tanks just fine. Some of them are out of Banshee range, too. So if you ever have the honor and privilege to wear an Orange Suit, remember: you're not invincible, even if everyone else acts like you are. And that thing you're wearing makes you the biggest target on the battlefield.

Agent "Madrigal."
Strike Team "Noble Phantom."

Mk. IV Sub Aquatic-Low

Pressure Environment Suit (Blue Suit)

GEN+1

History

Early GOC underwater operations utilized SCUBA gear and wetsuits no different than those used by military or civilian divers. The limits of this system soon became apparent: lack of protection from water-borne threats made it completely unsuitable for GOC mission objectives. As time has passed, SALPES has evolved as well: the modern variation is a far cry from the crude systems used in the post World War II era.

Overview

SALPES is utilized for underwater operations (both termination of KTEs and investigation of PTEs) when a full Atmospheric Diving Apparatus (hardsuit) is unavailable or inappropriate. The most recent version of SALPES includes:

- Water electrolyzer for production of hydrogen and oxygen while underwater.
- Hydrogen powered fuel cell for the SALPES electronic systems.
- Form-fitting buckypaper garment bilayered with dilatant gelatin to provide ballistics protection, with Nichrome heating element.
- Water-resistant "Trident" model OCULUS vision-enhancement equipment.
- Rebreather system/SCUBA gear, depending on mission parameters.

Mark IV Vital Energy Radiation

Imaging Tactical Awareness System ("VERITAS")

TanGenT

Note: Because of the sensitive nature of this technology, all information regarding the true nature of Etheric Resonance Imagery (ERI) is classified Level Q by order of GOC High Command. This document will cover only the operation of the VERITAS device by GOC Field Operatives. The device itself is classified as "Black Box" technology and should not be repaired by anyone other than an authorized Coalition technician. ERI technology is to be considered Tangential Technology, and must be outfitted with a self-destruct device to prevent downstream technology from being released to the civilian population.

Overview

The VERITAS Resonance Imager is a fourth-generation device based on the principles of Etheric Resonance Imagery originally discovered by Semyon Kirlian in 1939. This is not to be confused with what is commonly known as "Kirlian Photography," which is a simple corona discharge phenomenon. Prior versions of the system (including COLLICULUS), required a separate Resonance Imager and Viewer, making the system too bulky to be carried by a single person. Recent miniaturization advances have allowed the entire system to be incorporated into a single headpiece, most commonly combined with low-light, infrared, and ultraviolet imaging technology in the OCULUS vision enhancing headset.

Like all ERI devices, VERITAS functions by detecting the distinctive Aetheric Energy Fields (AEF), or Elan Vital Energy (EVE) given off by living creatures during the course of normal life functions. By measuring the wavelengths and intensity of these energy fields, information regarding the nature of the life form, its mental and physical state, and any paranormal alterations can be determined.

In its simplest configuration, a single VERITAS unit can be used to

detect the presence of higher life forms, even through a wall or other vision-obstructing obstacle. However, the device's true potential is only reached when two or more units function in tandem. By triangulating the position and nature of various AEFs, a three-dimensional map of the area (including the locations of all hostiles) can be provided to a mission commander or overwatch.

Excerpts from PHYSICS Division Field Manual 13: Special Circumstances, Humanoid Threat Entities

Introduction

Reality Benders (Type Greens) have a certain mystique among GOC operatives. Some operatives even argue that it is impossible to terminate a Type Green, and it is suicide to even try. The kill record of our organization says otherwise. The key to terminating Type Green entities lie in finding and taking advantage of their few weaknesses. In 95% of cases:

- Greens cannot predict the future and can be taken by surprise.
- Greens have limited range and cannot affect what they cannot perceive.
- Greens cannot impose their will on anything if they have no will to impose.
- Greens have human foibles and can be manipulated emotionally and/or rationally.

Sequence

99% of Type Greens undergo the following sequence of psychological changes as their powers progress.

PHASE 1: Denial: The subject refuses to acknowledge their ability to warp reality. The Type Green will attempt to rationalize away their abilities by various means. In some cases, the Type Green will end here: their ability will be self-suppressed, and they will not proceed. However, most then proceed to:

PHASE 2: Experimentation: The subject acknowledges their abilities and begins to test the limits of their powers. In general, Type Greens

tend to experiment in one of two patterns: slowly, methodically, and carefully, advancing a small amount at a time, or in a small number of sudden jumps. In any case, the subject will generally remain in this mode for some time, before proceeding to:

PHASE 3: Stability: The subject reaches the limit of their powers, and determines the boundaries of their abilities. The Type Green achieves control over their reality shifts, and can manipulate them as necessary. More importantly, they can choose not to utilize their abilities, if needed.

Phase 3 is usually characterized by attempts to live a "normal" life. The subject will continue in normal routines, and aside from necessary precautions to prevent losing control, will utilize their abilities only in private, and only in a manner that will not harm others. These Type Greens may be classified as Threat Level 1 (monitor, do not engage), but should be monitored closely, due to the risk of proceeding to Phase 4.

PHASE 4: The Child-God: Sadly, the majority of Type Greens will eventually progress to Phase 4. During this phase, the reality bender becomes obsessed with the power it possesses and will attempt to utilize it for personal gain at the cost of others. This phase is marked by reduced empathy for other humans, inability to accept personal faults, and increased megalomania.

Although warning signs are numerous, the key aspect of a Phase 4 is the use of their abilities to manipulate other humans. Teenage and young adult Type Greens will typically use their abilities for sexual purposes, while children will attempt to make strangers their "friends." Older adults may attempt to manipulate others for love or financial gain. Although a few cases have resulted where the Type Green then reverts to Phase 3, 99% of them will remain at Phase 4 until eliminated. For this reason, Phase 4 Type Greens should be considered Threat Level 5 (Immediate Threat) and eliminated immediately, as they represent a major threat to all aspects of the Fivefold Mission.

Termination

Any attempt to eliminate a Type Green must take into consideration the three factors for Dynamic Entry in close quarter battle.

Speed: Type Greens are able to quickly react to any threat. In order to ensure a successful kill, the operation must take no longer than one second from initiation of hostilities to termination of subject. This is the average time it takes for a human being to reflexively react to an unexpected threat or event.

Surprise: Type Greens are able to quickly adapt to known threats. It is recommended that a bluff play be carried out: an overt threat is to be presented to the subject for them to fixate upon, while the actual kill is carried out from an unexpected direction.

Violence of Action: The kill method chosen to eliminate a Type Green must ensure a successful termination on the first shot. Sniper weapons should utilize large caliber rounds, preferably hollow-point for maximum expansion, or armor-piercing, as needed. Firearms are, of course, a secondary kill choice: explosives are recommended, but may not be usable due to collateral damage risks. If firearms must be used, multiple shooters should be present, and all should aim for head shots, if possible, or center torso shots if necessary.

Example

(Names have been redacted for security purposes)

Subject Alpha ("Alice") was a 90 year-old Caucasian woman living on a farm house in Town A ("Anytown, USA"). Alice first came to the attention of the GOC following reports of "ghosts" haunting the fields outside her town. Initial covert investigation was able to rule out the presence of actual spectral entities through VERITAS scanning. Further investigation was approved. A GOC Special Observer ("Oscar") proceeded to Anytown with a full support team, posing as the cast and crew of the reality television program "Ghost Finders Inc."

Subject Alice was discovered to be living alone with two cats. She had been widowed three years prior, and her children all lived out of

state. Subject Alice proved personable and charming, and often engaged the operatives in conversation and provided them with tea and home-baked cookies.

Oscar soon determined over the course of the next few days that Alice was the proximal cause of the apparitions, as they only appeared when Alice was either asleep, or not present. Upon engaging her in further conversation, he discovered that she was a lapsed Catholic, now agnostic, who expressed a desire to believe in an afterlife but was not satisfied by her faith. Agent Oscar theorized that Alice was a subconscious Type Green who was expressing her grief over her husband's death by manifesting apparitions of his ghost.

Following a lengthy philosophical discussion, including a discussion of Pascal's Wager, the apparitions increased in strength and clarity, allowing Oscar to obtain a clear photograph of the entity. He then presented the photograph to Alice for identification. To his surprise, Alice identified the photograph not as her husband, but as Subject B ("Bob"), a young man with whom she had been acquainted during her younger years.

Alice claimed that she and Bob had been romantically involved in the early 1940s, but their relationship had been suspended when Bob was drafted into the Second World War. During that war, Alice made the acquaintance of her eventual husband: a factory worker who had been classified 4-F due to a leg injury caused by an automobile accident. Two days after Bob received her "Dear John" letter, he was killed in Normandy during Operation Overlord.

Alice's heightened emotional state caused the apparitions to increase in frequency and intensity, including physical manifestations. After a GOC operative was injured by a Luger bullet fired by one of the "ghosts," Central ordered termination of the subject. Operative Oscar requested permission to attempt a nonlethal "Soft Kill," citing Second Mission (Concealment) concerns. Permission was granted.

No record remains of Operative Oscar's subsequent conversation with Subject Alice, but it convinced the Subject to manifest an apparition of "Bob" that night, the first time that she had manifested

an apparition in her own presence. After receiving emotional closure with what she believed was the spectral entity of her old lover, the apparitions ceased manifesting entirely. Subject died three nights later in her sleep of natural causes. No further paranormal phenomena have occurred in the area since Subject Alice's death. Operative Oscar was commended for his actions.

Overview

There are over one hundred known instances of parathreats that operate by animating the corpses of the dead, ranging from simple prions to complex nanomachines. New ones are discovered on a regular basis, as diverse as the situations in which they are encountered. For this reason, Coalition operatives should familiarize themselves with the following three-step mnemonic (also known as the "SEX" method, for **S**ecure, **E**valuate, and e**X**terminate), for dealing with Type Gray outbreaks.

Secure

The first priority in any Type Gray outbreak is to **Secure** the area in which the outbreak is taking place. The following tasks should be carried out, in order of priority (most vital to least important). Individual situations will, of course, require revision of this general order.

- Establish Worst Case Scenario fallback plan. Coordinate with security assets re: authorized Response Level.
- Lock down the infested area and establish a secure perimeter. No persons are to be allowed in or out of this perimeter. Security personnel are to be informed to shoot on sight. Should GOC personnel be unavailable, local law enforcement or military assets may be commandeered under a standard cover story.
- Establish a headquarters within the infested zone. Said headquarters should be secure, and preferably non-adjacent

to civilian defense points, so that compromise of civilian defenses will not threaten GOC assets.
- Locate and make contact with any remaining civilians. Do not attempt to move civilians to headquarters zone: any civilians surviving within the infested area are to be left in place.

Evaluate

Because of the large number of Type Gray threat entities, it is imperative to establish the nature of the particular Type Gray outbreak. GOC personnel are to liaise with any medical or scientific personnel within the infested zone, and make first-hand observations of infested threat entities. Analyze collected data and refer to GOC Type Gray database. If Type Gray threat is determined to be a Known Threat Entity, refer to the Sterilization Manual for the particular KTE.

Should data be insufficient, or if the parathreat is determined to be an Unknown Threat Entity, the following information should be recorded.

Note: Due to multiple breaches of quarantine, GOC personnel are no longer to attempt to capture a live specimen of either infested persons, or the Type Gray threat entity itself, until the infestation is pacified. All Type Gray threat entities under observation and study are to be destroyed immediately upon determination of an effective Kill Method.

Nature of physical and mental changes in the infested personnel.

All Type Gray entities work by animating deceased matter. However, the amount of physical and/or mental faculties remaining after infestation vary between Threat Entities. Initial observation of infested individuals should establish three facts:

- Remaining physical capacity: Speed of movement, agility, and strength.
- Remaining mental capacity: Ability to solve problems, collate

data, sensory capacity.
- Social characteristics: Remaining pre-death personality or memories, presence of hive mind or internal factions.

In most cases, Type Gray entities cause a 50% or more loss of physical capacity and reduction of mental capacity to simple hunger. Hive minds and internal factionalism have been recorded in less than 10% of cases. In most scenarios, a Type Gray infested human is slow, mindless, and violent.

Method of Transmission.

Many Type Gray threat entities are non-transmissible: infestation must take place directly towards dead flesh. However, many others can be transmitted through bodily fluids, through localized energy life forms, or through magical/religious means. Until said means of transmission is determined, all GOC personnel are to utilize Class 1 Isolation Gear. *Note: following the outbreak of the Memetic Cognitohazard Type Gray threat entity KTE-5321-Blit-Gray, "Eyeblight," all Class 1 Isolation Gear has been revised to include visual distortion lenses.* In addition, the GOC team on-site are to determine whether the Threat Entity is transmissible to humans only, or (should the Entity be able to infest animal or plant life) which forms of life are vulnerable to infestation.

Effective Kill Method.

In past experience, the following kill methods have been proven effective in Type Gray outbreaks.

- Immolation: 99.9%
- Destruction of Brain: 72%
- Bodily Trauma: 54%
- Toxins: 3%
- Other: 2%

Assessment of Effective Kill Method (EKM) should be carried out in the following manner.

1. Locate a single Type Gray infested human and establish a kill

zone. Test subject is to be secured, if necessary, to ensure sharpshooter accuracy.
2. Establish perimeter, including fall-back plan and fire support.
3. Sharpshooter armed with scoped rifle, including underslung launcher, fires two rounds into center of mass. Assess result. If method is effective, cease testing.
4. Sharpshooter delivers headshot. Assess result. If method is effective, cease testing.
5. Sharpshooter loads and fires incendiary grenade. Assess result. If method is effective, cease testing.
6. Sharpshooter loads and fires chemical grenade loaded with "Zee-Be-Gone" toxin cocktail. Assess result. If method is effective, cease testing.
7. If standard kill methods prove ineffective, withdraw to headquarters and contact GOC high command for further instructions.

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eXterminate

Following establishment of security, and determination of an Effective Kill Method, GOC Strike personnel are to sweep the infested area according to standard "Clean and Sweep" protocol. Personnel are to report back every two minutes with status update. Should 25% of sweeping personnel be lost, mission is to be aborted, GOC personnel withdrawn, and Response Level 3 assets deployed to incinerate infested zone. Should losses exceed 50% at any point during withdrawal, remaining personnel are to be considered expended, and immediate Response Level 3 operations carried out.

Introduction

A Regenerator (Type Red) is an overarching designation for any individual who possesses the ability to reconstitute damaged tissue and limbs. Contrary to popular belief, a Type Red is **not** indestructible. Numerous methods exist for disabling the regenerative ability of a Type Red, or liquidating the Type Red

despite their abilities. In some cases, Type Reds will self-terminate through uncontrolled use of their abilities: however, most cases will require intervention by an operative.

Forms

Flawed Regeneration: This form of Type Red is low threat and can usually be engaged by a single operative. When injured, instead of replicating the lost tissue, the Type Red's body will instead fill the gap with a material unsuited to the area. For example, if a Flawed Regenerator experienced the loss of an arm, there is a chance it will be replaced with a large growth formed from tooth enamel. This form of Type Red will typically kill itself via accumulated minor injuries, if left alone.

Limited Regeneration: This form of Type Red possesses the ability to slowly reconstitute lost tissue, and in some case limbs. Limited Regenerators can prove dangerous in combat situations, as permanent injury is difficult to maintain. See Techniques for more information on how to permanently liquidate them.

Full Regeneration: This form of Type Red possesses the ability to regenerate lost tissue and limbs in a matter of seconds, making liquidation or permanent injury impossible. See Techniques for information on how to incapacitate this form of Type Red.

Expanding Regeneration: To date, seven Type Reds of this form have been discovered and incapacitated. Engagement by anything less than a Response Level 5 effort comprising multiple Strike Teams is not recommended. Expanding Regenerators possess not only the ability to regenerate lost tissue and limbs, but also generate further limbs and organs, often drastically increasing in size during the process. This combination makes Expanding Regenerators formidable opponents. Further information on how to incapacitate this form of Type Red can be found in Techniques.

Identification

Initial identification of Type Reds usually takes place when an observer reports a person suffering an injury that heals unusually quickly. An Assessment or Strike team will then engage the target, move them to a secure location, immobilize them, and administer a sharps test. A small incision is made to the subject's palm, and the rate and nature of rapid healing assessed.

Capture

Type Reds are difficult to liquidate in the field. Operatives will often have to capture the subject before transferring them to another location for final liquidation.

- Injury to the legs is effective against Limited Regenerators and some Full Regenerators.
- Alternatively, multiple and repeated injuries to the body will often incapacitate some Full Regenerators while their body repairs the injuries.
- A knife, stake or other sharp object can be forcibly embedded into the brain. Although the Type Red will attempt to regenerate brain and skull matter, the sharp object will prevent full regeneration. Recommended point of insertion is the base of the skull, through the brain stem and upper spinal cord.
- In the case of Expanding Regenerators, liberal application of fire is recommended. This may make it difficult to capture or transport the still-burning subject.

Techniques

Incineration: The Type Red is placed into a mobile incineration trailer, which is then primed and ignited. Depending on the level of regenerative abilities, multiple applications of fire may be required. In extreme cases, incineration may be required in perpetua.

Submersion: The Type Red is placed in a sealed container which is then completely filled or immersed in water. This will cause the Type Red to drown, regenerate brain functions and subsequently drown again, rendering the Type Red effectively incapacitated. An

alternative to this method replaces the water with earth, concrete, molten metal, or another solid.

Corrosion: Similar to Submersion, but replaces the water with high molar acid.

Erosion: The subject is reduced to multiple smaller pieces by cutting or abrasion. In some cases, this can be effective on its own. In other cases, Erosion may be used to enhance the effectiveness of one of the other liquidation methods.

Extreme cases may require the use of multiple methods in rapid succession.

Overview

While multiple parathreats possess shapeshifting abilities, the "proper" shapeshifter is a particularly tricky target to engage. Their familiarity and reliance on their trait potentially gives them advanced mastery and skill in using it, especially if they are a mortal species (where creativity and ingenuity are common). If unprepared, a Type Yellow could give the veteran operative a hard time, whether pursuing them or facing them.

NOTE: Not all entities that possess shapeshifting abilities are applicable to the following methods. For more information on those entity types (such as Therianthropes, Paranormal Coulroform, and most strains of Hemovores), please see their specific entries (*Talbot*, *Harlequin*, and *Wallachia* respectively).

Classification

Type Yellow entities are classified into the following categories, each associated with a symbol for simplicity:

- Transformation Type: Defining the full extent of the transformation.

    - Limited Transformation: Where the entity can manipulate only part of their body, whether it be one part at a time or one part exclusively. Associated with the letter "A".
    - Full Transformation: The entity has full control over their appearance. Associated with the letter "B".

- Transformation Speed: How long it takes for the entity to transform.

    - Slow: The process of transmogrification happens over a long period of time, ranging from several minutes to an hour. Associated with the letter "I".
    - Moderate: The process takes place over a few minutes. Associated with the letter "J".
    - Instant: Transformation takes place almost instantly. Associated with the letter "K".

- Transformation Quantity: How many forms the entity can take.

    - Uni: Only having access to one form. Associated with the letter "O".
    - Multi: Having access to multiple forms. If an entity has full transformative abilities, an amalgamation of forms may exist. Associated with the letter "P".

- Transformation Capacity: Types of forms that are able to be taken.

    - Norm: Being limited forms that resemble subjects considered consistent baseline normalcy. Associated with the letter "X".
    - Para: Having forms that resemble those considered consistent with the paranormal, or have no counterpart outside of the entity (or similar subjects). Associated with the letter "Y".
    - Poly: Possessing access to any form conceivable. Associated with the letter "Z".

In this way, operatives can be more specific when describing the capabilities of a Type Yellow. For example, a subject that possesses

the ability to transform their head into that of a hippopotamus, over the period of a minute, would be an A-J-O-X Type Yellow, while a subject capable of imitating any living thing it has seen in five seconds would be a B-K-P-Z Type Yellow.

Tracking

Keeping track of an entity that can change its form (or has no definite base shape at all) is understandably difficult; finding a fleeing target that can become as small as a mouse in no easy task. However, one must keep in mind that a Type Yellow entities obey the conservation of mass and energy. When changing shape, they will release, absorb, or produce large amounts of Aspect Radiation (either from the creation or disposal of mass by conversion, or by accessing higher or extradimensional body parts), causing their EVE signatures to light up Yellow (this is where the term "Type Yellow" come from, along with the semi-constant bands of yellow seen in their EVE signatures). Aside from the obvious benefit of tracking fugitives with ERI imaging technology (such as the VERITAS Resonance Imager), this phenomena will also produce mild ARad flux, affecting the immediate area in minor or moderate ways (such as the prickling of the skin, increased distress in wildlife, changing of air currents, etc.).

Engagement

Standard weaponry is variable in effectiveness against Type Yellows, depending on the form one is currently in. The presence of thick hide, unusual body composition, deadly and the potential rapidity of changes will make a fight long and hard. Since attacking the body is not reliable, the first option should always be to attack the opponent's mind. Tranquilizers are preferred, as they will bring down a subject without much trouble. Psychotropic drugs will impair the ability to react coherently to attacks but will cause irrational behavior, making apprehending the subject difficult. These, alongside rapid action and surprise, can be vital to bringing down a Type Yellow without an aforementioned fight. However, if a subject

is capable of manipulating individual organs and bodily functions/ systems, the overclocking of the circulatory and urinary systems may reduce the risk of drug-based assault.

Trickery and confusion can be useful as well; tricking a subject into a smaller or weaker form has been shown to be extremely effective. The change to the former is particularly useful, as such beings are, with the trade-off that they are harder to find and engage if let out of captivity.

If the previous options are not possible and head on assault is the only thing left available, keep in mind the goal of physical attack should never be to kill outright but to wear away with the opponent's stamina and will. This way, they will not be able to offer much resistance during the actual liquidation or apprehension. Wounds inflicted may change along with the subject, becoming the equivalent size for the new form, and potentially be more devastating. In some cases though, the changing between a small form and a large one may reduce the size of inflicted wounds. However, foreign objects will not; bullets and other objects lodged in the flesh will cut or irritate the tissue during transformation. Therefore, using weapons that will inflict wounds that contain such objects, such as shrapnel grenades and caltrops), is preferable. The use of anticoagulants is also suggested, but not necessary.

Confinement and Liquidation

Captives' bindings are suggested to be made so that they will quickly constrict as well as being resistant to force, to prevent escape via rapid expansion or further shrinking. Captives should also be sedated, or otherwise, rendered unconscious. A secondary container should be used as a backup, in the case that the first bonds are broken.

Liquidation should be no hard task, as most Type Yellows have no specific ways of preventing death. Neurotoxins are preferred, but disabling the spinal cord or other methods of disabling the nervous system are also recommended. Execution by firearms is possible, but not recommended, due to secondary mission concerns. If violent

action is necessary, standard "Hard Kill" precautions are to be implemented.

Excerpts from PHYSICS Division Threat Entity Database

Introduction

The Global Occult Coalition classifies paranormal Threat Entities into five broad categories, based on the general knowledge available regarding said entity. Threat Entities are named using the following format:

- A three-letter code indicating threat category.
- A unique casefile number.
- One or more codeword descriptors.
- An informal description of the threat entity.

EXAMPLE: **KTE-7912-Spiral Blackchild:** "Alternate Dimension Portal, Cornwall."
The nomenclature indicates that this is a Known Threat Entity (**KTE**), casefile number 7912, that it is both a localized space-time rupture (codeword **Spiral**), and that it was created by a demi-deity (codeword **Black** [demi-deity], modifier **-child** [paranormal artifact created by]).

This list represents only a sampling of the several hundred codewords used for Threat Classification. For a complete list of codewords and their definitions, please consult your PHYSICS Division handbook.

Humanoid

Humanoid Threat Entities are broadly classified using a color-based classification system. Examples include:

- **Type Black:** Demi-Deity.

- **Type Blue:** Thaumatologist.
- **Type Green:** Reality Bender.
- **Type Grey:** Reanimated Post-Mortem.
- **Type Red:** Regenerator.
- **Type Silver:** Infectious Hazard.
- **Type White:** Atypical Angel.
- **Type Yellow:** Shapeshifter, Psychic, or other anomalously enhanced humanoid

Non-Humanoid

The following are common codewords used for Non-Humanoid living beings.

- **Blackwood:** Former human.
- **Corona**: Lifeform of extraterrestrial origin.
- **Cetus:** Massive aquatic lifeform.
- **Denver:** Temporally-shifted lifeform.
- **Fiji:** Cryptid (An autochthonic lifeform whose existence has been suppressed due to Second Mission Concerns).
- **Goodrick:** Thaumatological lifeform.
- **Hogweed:** Botanical in nature.
- **Moro:** Human-created lifeform.
- **NACL:** Non-Autochthonic Lifeform. This codeword is only used when a lifeform is determined to be non-native to the current spacetime, but its origin has not yet been determined.
- **Plague:** Infectious microorganisms.
- **Ragweed**: Lifeform originating from an alternate universe.
- **Schopenhauer:** Genius Loci. Codeword refers to a lifeform embodying or animating geographical features.

Artifacts

Pertaining to Threat Entities that are human-made objects.

- **Alexandria:** Bibliographical in nature.
- **Blaecca:** Computing machine.
- **Caliburn:** Object designed for use as a weapon.

- **Flint:** Monetary object.
- **Kapala:** Ritual or religious object.
- **Knickknack:** Wearable object.
- **Velveteen:** Animate object.

Extranormal

Pertaining to fundamental universal constants.

- **Clockwork:** Temporal alteration.
- **Ex Machina:** Deity.
- **L'Engle:** Higher Dimensional anomaly.
- **Parallax**: Spatial alteration.
- **Spiral:** Space-time rupture.

Organizational

- **Argead:** Relating to the paranormal organization **`"Alexylva University."`**
- **Burnout:** Relating to the liquidated terrorist organization **`"Prometheus Labs."`**
- **Carcinoma:** Referring to the terrorist organization "The Chaos Insurgency."
- **Copernicus:** Relating to the paranormal religion "The Fifth Church."
- **Disco:** Relating to the criminal syndicate **`"The Chicago Spectre."`**
- **Einherjar:** Relating to remnants of the Ahnenerbe and Thule Society, particularly the legacy organization "OBSKURA."
- **Ford:** Relating to the denominations of the paranormal religion "Church of the Broken God."
- **Heru**: Relating to the paratech manufacturer **`"Anderson Robotics."`**
- **Kewpie:** Relating to the paranormal organization **`"The Foundation."`**
- **Kringle:** Relating to the paranormal organization **`"Doctor Wondertainment."`**
- **Lerna:** Relating to the terrorist organization **`"Serpent's`**

Hand."

- **McConnell:** Relating to the criminal organization **"Marshall, Carter, and Dark Ltd."**
- **McGinnis:** Relating to the paranormal organization "Herman Fuller's Circus of the Disquieting."
- **Mendes:** Relating to the paranormal religion **"The Children of the Scarlet King."**
- **Moreau:** Relating to sects of the paranormal religion of **""Sarkicism."**
- **Reefer:** Relating to the loosely associated paranormal network **"Gamers Against Weed."**
- **Retcon:** Relating to the retroactively active ancient **Daevite civilization**.
- **Teresa:** Relating to the interfaith NGO **"Manna Charitable Foundation."**
- **Trinity:** Relating to the faith-based NGO "The Horizon Initiative."
- **Venice:** Relating to the paranormal organization **"The Factory."**
- **Warhol:** Relating to the terrorist organization "Are We Cool Yet?"

Political

These code phrases are only used if the parathreat was created or is being fielded by the government organization in question.

- **Andromeda:** Islamic Republic of Iran.
    - *Andromeda Sesame:* **Office For The Reclamation of Islamic Artifacts**.
- **Aurora:** Former Empire of Japan.
    - *Aurora Glory:* **Imperial Japanese Anomalous Matters Examination Agency** (defunct).
- **Flanders:** Relating to the dreamscape constructs of **the Oneiroi**.

    - *Flanders Fever:* Oneiroi Collective.
    - *Flanders Lucid:* Oneiroi West.
    - *Flanders Rapture:* **`Xiupania`**.

- **Renegade:** United States of America

    - *Renegade Latrans:* **`Unusual Incidents Unit`**, Federal Bureau of Investigation.
    - *Renegade Lupus:* Bowe Commission.

- **Scarlet:** Former Soviet Union.

    - *Scarlet Dagger:* GRU Division "P"
    - *Scarlet Hammer:* "Viktor" branch of Russian Mafia.

Threat Warnings

- **Blit:** Cognition hazard.
- **Bosch:** Eschatological threat.
- **Burrhus:** Compels action (conscious).
- **Ebbinghaus:** Memory-affecting.
- **Faraday:** Electromagnetic Hazard
- **Freud:** Compels action (subconscious).
- **Lovelock:** Ecological threat.
- **Mendel:** Genetic alteration.
- **Pygmalion:** Parathreat creation.
- **Smitty:** Teratogenic.
- **Typhon:** Kinetic danger.
- **Van Allen:** Ionizing radiation hazard.

Modifiers

- **-buster:** Threat entity whose purpose is to destroy another Threat Entity or Entities.
- **-child:** Created by another Threat Entity with a particular codephrase.
- **-morph:** Threat entity created during liquidation procedures for another Threat Entity.

Known Threat Entities are those paranormal entities which have been clearly identified as Threats and slated for response.

Access KTE-0706-Black

Threat ID: KTE-0706-Black "Subject Able"

Authorized Response Level: 4 (Severe Threat)

Description: Component Able is a humanoid threat entity, apparently in its late twenties, approximately 2m tall, weighing approximately 80kg. Subject normally dresses in a manner adorned with demonic imagery, and prefers black leather clothing. In addition to the standard full suite of superhuman abilities (Strength, Speed, and Regeneration, all at Class 1 or higher) Subject possesses the ability to manifest bladed weapons from an unknown source. Subject is highly skilled in close combat, and appears to use an unknown martial combat style that is not currently on record.

Psychological profile indicates that Subject is primarily motivated by ennui: Subject appears to derive satisfaction only from the act of killing, especially if said acts are carried out against a "worthy foe." Subject always appears to engage the most dangerous perceived threat first, and will bypass lesser threats to do so: Operatives should take this into consideration when preparing a plan of action.

Component Baker is an engraved stone cube 3.66m (12ft) on a side, sealed with 21 locks (one large lock surrounded by twenty smaller locks in a circle). Component Baker-Two is contained within, and comprises a 2.13m (7ft) tall stone coffin, secured with chains of unknown composition. Component Baker-Two is capable of regenerating Component Able from any remains, and of reforming it should all remains be destroyed. As stated above, Component Baker is to be considered the primary threat and should be secured as

soon as possible.

Rules of Engagement: KTE-0706 Black (hereafter referred to as Subject) comprises two components. Component Able is to be engaged with extreme caution: entity is a highly lethal combatant and has caused the deaths of over one hundred operatives to date. Component Able is never to be engaged at close range, but from as great a distance as possible. Headshot by sniper is the preferred method of termination.

Upon termination, Component Able will begin to reform inside Component Baker, returning to full threat efficacy within several weeks. For this reason, locating and destroying Component Baker is necessary for complete liquidation of the Subject. Operatives who have information leading to the discovery of the location of Component Baker are to immediately report said information to GOC High Command.

History: <CLASSIFIED LEVEL Q BY ORDER OF GOC HIGH COMMAND>

Appendix 001: Field Operatives indicate that KTE-0706-Black is currently in the hands of the Foundation. Operatives are hereby ordered to focus all efforts upon that Organization to locate and recover Component Baker.

Appendix 002: Per Field Report from Operative Crane, Coalition Operatives are hereby advised that the Foundation has begun fielding Component Able in combat situations, supported by a six to twelve-man support squad.

Appendix 003: Due to unacceptable casualties in the last three engagements with Threat Force Able, all Field Operatives are to cease and desist engaging Component Able under any circumstances save self-defense. Operatives are to refocus efforts upon locating and

destroying Component Baker.

Access KTE-0937-Velveteen

Threat ID: KTE-0937-Velveteen "Sixth Chair."

Authorized Response Level: 3 (Moderate Threat)

Description: Several kg of material comprising primarily of oak splinters and upholstery. Previously a chair made of oak and leather in the shape of a reclining female. Type III spatial transit entity.

Rules of Engagement: To be engaged only by deep cover operatives. Object is extremely hostile to the Coalition and its agents. Object is to be destroyed by incineration if the chance arises.

History: Initially one of a set of six matching objects originally constructed by KTE-7201-Pygmalion ("The Carpenter") as a gift to [IDENTITY REDACTED]. Classified a Second Mission threat in . Creator, customer, and artifacts were all liquidated by a GOC Field Operator cell. All other objects were successfully incinerated: KTE-0937-Velveteen was disposed of by maceration after a mechanical failure in the incinerator device. Artifact proceeded to escape through teleportation, and has since been responsible for the deaths of several agents. Believed to currently be in the possession of The Foundation.

Addendum:

> KTE-0937-Velveteen is an object lesson in the importance of following proper operating procedure. Due to the lack of vigilance by the agent on the scene, the object's threat level was escalated, the object itself was not successfully disposed of, and it has since fallen into the hands of a hostile agency. A single failure by a single operative resulted in

the deaths of six. Remember this the next time you think about cutting corners.

— Assistant Director "Kipling"

Access KTE-1181-Plague Grey

Threat ID: KTE-1181-Plague-Grey "Infectious Slime Mould"

Authorized Response Level: 3 (Moderate Threat)

Description: A yellow-green myocetezoan protist. Life cycle begins as a single-cell ameboid which normally feeds upon bacteria and other protists. Upon encountering another member of the same species, the organisms will mate and then form a plasmodia that will then expand, consuming all food matter it encounters. When all available food matter has been consumed, organism will solidify, form sporangia (fruiting bodies), and release spores, which hatch into single-cell ameboids, resuming the life cycle.

Organism's designation as a parathreat is due to its behavior upon encountering human brain tissue. Should the ameboid cross the brain-blood barrier and enter the brain, it will begin feeding upon human glial cells and replace human brain tissue with the plasmodia substrate. Secondary plasmodia will migrate through the blood stream to the skin pores, at which point the organism will form structures similar to sporangia which will begin producing a pheremone-like substance.

The host body will then be compelled to travel to a public space, whereupon the pheremones will attract other humans to its current location. Upon detecting a sufficient number of human hosts within a particular distance, organism will then begin to reproduce at an exponential rate, building up pressure within the skull until the host body's cranium bursts, spreading spores and plasmodia and infecting all nearby human hosts,

resuming the life cycle.

Rules of Engagement: Infected hosts are to be terminated by gunfire and the host bodies disposed of by incineration. Avoid head-shots, as this may result in premature detonation of the subject's cranium and cause the infection to spread. The preferred method of termination is by a long-distance precision gunshot to the heart by a marksman: should close-quarters combat be required, all operatives are to be issued MOPP gear and placed in quarantine for a period of no less than 72 hours following the operation.

Should the infection escalate to the point where it threatens to spread from the quarantine zone, escalation to Response Level 4 is authorized. At this point, the entire quarantine zone should be sealed off and sanitized by incineration. Any persons attempting to leave the quarantine zone will be terminated by gunfire followed by santization by incineration.

Access KTE-2013-Kapala-Mendes
Access KTE-4503-Ragweed-Faraday

Access KTE-2683-Yellow-Lerna
Access KTE-1742-Fiji-Hogweedmorph
Access KTE-3317-Green-Sunset
Access KTE-1229-Flint

Unknown Threat Entities are those parathreats whose existence can be inferred, but whose identity has not been positively established.

Potential Threat Entities are paranormal entities who are not yet considered Threats, but have a high likelihood of becoming Threats.

Threat Entities that have been confirmed destroyed. Records maintained for archival purposes only.

Access LTE-0913-Ex-Machina

Threat ID: LTE-0913-Ex-Machina - "Semitic Solar Deity"

Authorized Response Level: 1 (Monitor for signs of re-emergence, do not Engage)

Description: LTE-0913-Ex-Machina (hereafter referred to as "Subject") was an energy entity revered as a god by several Semitic tribes during the fourth millenium BCE.

History: Subject was successfully captured and destroyed by a cabal of German Occultists circa 1882 CE. Destruction of Subject resulted in severe psychic backlash, leading to ennui and feelings of nihilism in several psi-sensitive subjects: one, in particular, wrote a text in 1883 mourning the death of said Subject:

> God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?

Appendix 001: Although this operation was carried out before the founding of the GOC, it was one of the pivotal events leading to the founding of this organization.

<CLASSIFIED LEVEL Q BY ORDER OF GOC HIGH COMMAND>

Subsequent events (The Seventh Occult War) devastated the paranatural world and came close to

causing an Eschatological Event Sequence. The Coalition was subsequently founded to act as a safeguard against further rogue operations, and as a means of replacing the lost protection afforded by <CLASSIFIED LEVEL Q BY ORDER OF GOC HIGH COMMAND>

Access LTE-2101-Freud Warhol

Threat ID: LTE-2101-Freud-Warhol - "Street Theater"

Authorized Response Level: N/A (Confirmed Destroyed, File Archived)

Description: LTE-2101-Freud-Warhol (hereafter referred to as "artifact") was a psychomechanical device concealed in New York's Central Park from an unknown date until / / , when it was recovered and destroyed by a Coalition recovery team. Artifact consisted of three components:

1. A power supply consisting of an array of four lead-acid automotive batteries and an induction charger drawing electricity from the city's power grid.

2. A control unit consisting of a CPU, solid-state hard drive, and timer.

3. A Type-2 psychic broadcast unit capable of 200 kilorhines of output.

Artifact was programmed to trigger once every ten to thirty days, upon detection of a minimum required number of persons within its broadcast range. Artifact would then assume direct psychic control of all individuals within broadcast range, designating certain individuals as "actors" and others as "audience." "Actors" would then proceed to perform one of the plays of William Shakespeare, chosen at random, for the edification of the "audience."

At the conclusion of the performance, Artifact would emit a high energy psychic burst that would erase the memories of the past performance from all subjects. Side effects include headache, disorientation, and nausea.

History: Existence of artifact was first discovered following reports of strange behavior among the homeless population of Central Park from residents of the surrounding area. Artifact was recovered, catalogued, and destroyed by a Coalition field team disguised as New York City Power Authority employees.

Appendix 1: The following fliers were discovered posted around Central Park 24 hours after destruction of LTE-2101-Warhol.

> TO THE SERVANTS OF THE MAN
>
> Three questions:
>
> When free speech is curtailed, what will there be left to say?
>
> If a tree falls in the forest and there's no one there to hear it, is it still art?
>
> Are we cool yet?

Access LTE-3410-Clockwork Green

Threat ID: LTE-3410-Clockwork Green "The Slow Kid"

Authorized Response Level: N/A (Confirmed Destroyed, File Archived)

Description: Subject was at time of liquidation a Caucasian male twenty-one (21) years of age and a Stage 4 Type Green (Subtype Clockwork) Known Threat Entity. Initial Identification was made by Observer [REDACTED] after being alerted by local law enforcement of a bank robbery involving an anomalous entity. Surveillance footage of the firefight recorded the

Subject utilizing its anomalous ability to affect incoming gunfire from armed police response units. Three (3) law enforcement officers were wounded during this incident.

Liquidation: Due to the high profile of the initial incident, expedited liquidation authorization at Response Level 2 was given by Assistant Director "Celesta" on / / to field units in the local area. Due to the ground-floor location within a populated area, the method of termination selected was a night-time raid utilizing suppressed small arms fire at close range.

Appendix 1: Encounter Report

> **Date:** / /
> **Subject:** KTE-3410-Clockwork-Green
>
> **After-Action Report Summary:** Upon breaching the building, Liquidation Team One was beset by a large number of pre-prepared booby traps set out by Subject. While none of these were immediately lethal, the distraction was sufficient to allow the Subject to escape the building while setting off an Improvised Explosive Device.
>
> At this time, we do not believe that the Subject was aware of our mission; the ambush was merely consistent with that of precautions undertaken by a paranoid schizophrenic with undue access to dangerous materials.
>
> One LT Operative KIA, two WIA. Team Leader has volunteered to head up follow-up investigation and re-acquire Subject.
>
> **Status:** Mission Failed, Subject at Large

Appendix 2: Liquidation Report

> **Date:** / /

Subject: KTE-3410-Clockwork-Green

3410 terminated by small arms fire at close range, body removed and incinerated as per standard procedures. Guess the fucker can't stop bullets fast enough if you're in his face, but I can't do anything about the bullet now.

- M.E.

Status: Mission Success, Subject Liquidated

Appendix 3: Oversight Annotation

Operative has been reprimanded for his unprofessional solo liquidation of KTE-3410-Clockwork-Green. While Subject was successfully liquidated, his acting alone while motivated by retribution as well as the resulting creation of a new Non-Threat Entity that is now under Foundation control are regarded as unacceptable risk under Second Mission concerns. Operative has been suspended for a period of no less than three (3) months pending review.

Appendix 4: Identity Redaction

In order to protect the identity of the agent involved in these incidents, agent's name has been removed from this version of the Threat Entity casefile.

- SN/ec, Records Department

Access LTE-4201-Velveteen

Threat ID: LTE-4201-Velveteen "Ghost Ships"

Authorized Response Level: N/A (Confirmed Destroyed, File Archived)

Description: Two fishing trawlers, each 39 meters in length, designated Component Alpha and Component Bravo. Component Alpha was distinguishable from

Component Bravo due to extensive hull damage caused by impact with iceberg. Entities were animate and apparently sapient and displayed companionate behavior towards one another.

Liquidation: Due to increasing Second Mission Concerns due to increasing reports of "Ghost Ships" by local sailors, LTE-4201 Velveteen was approved for liquidation by the Council of 108 on // . Strike Team "Ocean Thunder" was tasked to eliminate the target. Strike Team perished after successful liquidation of Component Alpha, when Component Bravo collided with their vessel at hypersonic velocities, resulting in the loss of all hands. Component Bravo subsequently self-terminated.

All members of Strike Team "Ocean Thunder" were subsequently awarded the Aegis of Humanity (post-mortem).

Appendix 1: Memorial Message, issued on // .

> FOR IMMEDIATE DISTRIBUTION TO ALL GLOBAL OCCULT COALITION MEMBER ORGANIZATIONS
>
> GOC High Command has just learned that Strike Team "Ocean Thunder," based out of Dutch Harbor, Alaska, was lost with no survivors this day, after an encounter with a dangerous Threat Entity. Strike Team "Ocean Thunder" was carrying out the liquidation of a major Second Mission Threat, and had destroyed one of the two Threat Entities, when the second collided with their vessel at high speed. Despite a heroic rescue attempt by Assessment Team "Spinnaker," all members of Strike Team "Ocean Thunder" had perished by the time they were plucked from the sea.
>
> Our hearts go out to the friends and families of

the dead. Their sacrifices will not be forgotten.

Signed,

Under-Secretary-General D. C. Al Fine
United Nations Global Occult Coalition

Access LTE-2712-Bosch
Access LTE-0851-Cetus

Access LTE-5230-Fiji-Aurora-Glory

Spurious Entries
Database entries that were later confirmed not to exist. Records maintained for archival purposes only.

Non-Threats
Paranormal entities that are not considered Threats. Records maintained for observation and liaison purposes.

Persons of Interest
Non-paranormal persons of interest to the GOC due to their involvement with parathreats.

Transcript of a lecture given by Professor on Applied Thaumatology.

"Good evening. Please have a seat. You will find wine, water, bread, and salt at the back of the room, if you require refreshment. Also coffee and donuts and all the rest of that stuff. And go easy on the wine. I have rarely met a PHYSICS operative who could maintain decorum around free alcohol.

"While you get your refreshments and get seated, let me talk a little bit about rituals.

"Bread and salt is a traditional means of greeting distinguished guests in Eastern Europe. Unsurprising, after all: bread being considered the staff of life, salt being an expensive but necessary supplement in those days. It was traditional for the guest to tear a piece of bread off the loaf, dip it in the salt, and consume it. Does this ritual sound similar to anything else you may have encountered? Ah. I see that the Protestants in the room understand immediately. Yes, it is similar to the communion method known as intinction, where the bread is taken from a loaf, dipped in a common chalice, and the elements taken together. I see that some of the Catholics in the room are a bit confused. As are those of you who grew up in an environment where Holy Communion was taken in a different manner. In both cases, the ritual is a symbol not only of welcoming, but of fellowship. It is for that reason that we consider it an act of fellowship to 'break bread' together. Why so many dates begin with or include a meal.

"Also, water. When Saladin captured the Crusader leaders at Hattin, there was a man among them named Reynald de Chatillon who he hated over all else. Chatillon, in Saladin's opinion, was a cruel and untrustworthy man who broke his vows and acted with great perfidy towards the faithful of Allah. When the nobles of the Crusaders were brought to his tent, Saladin provided water for the Crusader King: Guy de Lusignan. The King, of course, passed the water to his

friend, Reynald de Chatillon… at which point, Saladin pointed out, very curtly, that it was Guy who had given water to his hated enemy without his permission. Providing water to guests in such an arid region was considered a promise that no harm would come to them. Saladin, intending to kill Reynald, was very intent that his actions not be seen as breaking a sacred vow.

"Nowadays, we provide donuts and coffee as a courtesy to guests who may miss their breakfasts by coming to these seminars, and as a means of making sure that you do not need to leave to eat or drink, should you require refreshment. But it is not difficult to see a common line between this seemingly mundane courtesy and the sacred rituals of our past. All of which is a long and convoluted way for me to say, as all of you get to your seats: welcome.

"Allow me to introduce myself. My name is . You may call me Professor. I am a Professor Emeritus at the Massachusetts campus of the International Center for the Study of Unified Thaumatology: ICSUT. My specialty is in Constructed Intelligence. The cat is my companion, Midnight. This lecture is intended to give you new PHYSICS operatives a working understanding of the basic principles behind Unified Thaumatology. Don't think that after this, that you can perform a working or summon an Outside Intelligence. But I hope that this short lecture will give you some understanding of what it is that we Type Blues do, and how we do it.

"We begin with first principles. Thaumatology is the study of magical principles as a practical science. In many ways, it is similar to Physics, except that it is born from very different principles. For instance, modern physics may be said to begin with the principles of Newton's three laws of motion. Thaumatology begins with a very different set of basic laws, called the Law of Contagion and the Law of Similarity. They may be summed up thusly: 'The part affects the whole,' and 'Like produces like.'

"You can already see where this runs into a problem. Physics already teaches us that these two principles are invalid: if I break a piece off of this loaf of bread and burn the piece, it doesn't cause the rest of the loaf to char. Neither does powdered rhinoceros horn cure male impotence, no matter how similar that appendage might look to

a male penis. Which leads us to the third basic principle of magic, originally stated as: 'Magic requires a talented practitioner.' Only certain types of people can perform magic. How and why was never established. And this was the state of practical thaumatology for hundreds of years… up until the early 20th century.

"You see, up until that point, thaumatology… or magic, as it was still known back then… was in a crisis. Advances in science and physics were beginning to crowd out the grey areas that they had relied on. Practitioners were beginning to lose effectiveness. Theories were brought up ranging from human expansion changing the flow of mana in the world, to the very progress of science changing reality into a more stable state. Practitioners even went so far as to deliberately isolate themselves from modern society in order to avoid having their minds contaminated by scientific discoveries… up until a man named Heisenberg proposed a stunning proposition in 1927.

"Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle states that when dealing with a particle, the more precisely its location in time is known, the less precisely its current location is known. It was not this theory itself that galvanized the thaumatological world, but its correlating principle: observation changes the world. That is when the third principle of magic was revised from 'Magic requires a talented practitioner,' to 'Observation changes Reality.' Or, more simply put… certain minds can change the way the world works.

"Incidentally, it is now believed that Type Green reality benders may be persons with unusual talents in this area, hence the alternate name 'Outside Observer' proposed by some. There is, in fact, a movement to reclassify both Type Green reality benders and Type Blue thaumaturges within a single category. I don't know what we'll call it: Type Teal? Type Aqua? We shall see.

"As time went on, and new theories about quantum mechanics arose, the magical community came to realize that their world had more grey areas than they had anticipated. Nearly overnight, the magician changed from the reclusive hermit hiding from the world, into the young scientist, eagerly exploring it. Even the name of the field changed from the staid and superstitious 'magic' to the much more scientific 'thaumatology.'

"… then the Seventh Occult War broke out… and we faced the consequences of this new science, just as the world faced the sobering consequences of the nuclear age, leading to the formation of the Global Occult Coalition. But that is a lecture for a different time.

"So. What can an old wizard like me tell you about thaumatology?

"First of all… remember those three basic principles: Like Produces Like. The Part Affects the Whole. Observation Changes Reality. It is that third principle that is the main focus of modern thaumatology: the isolation of the EVE quantum, the fundamental unit of living energy, has taught us **how** observation changes reality. It is the guiding principle behind the COLLICULUS imaging system. And it has led to new technologies that would have been unimaginable just one hundred years prior.

"For instance: all of you have had a colloidal silver pattern tattooed somewhere discreet on your body. This is a vital defense against thaumatological attack: All of us shed bits of ourselves wherever we go, ranging from skin cells to hair cells. Were you not protected, a single hair from your body could be used to do you great harm. The wards break the quantum linkages between your living body and the unliving parts that it sheds, helping to protect you from your enemies with voodoo dolls. On the other hand, we can use those same principles to our advantage: getting a hair or DNA sample from a target could allow a GOC thaumatologist to track the person where our technological means cannot. Something to consider prioritizing when you're in the field.

"Let's go to something a bit more spectacular. This is an Apportation circle. It's basically one big magical quantum teleporter: it basically convinces every particle in your body that it should take the infintesimal chance that it's somewhere far away, rather than where it should be. It require incredible amounts of energy… and the process of forcing the universe to express such an improbable state causes many other improbable things to occur. We call it backlash, and it's the reason why we don't use Apportation as much as we could: every time we do, something weird happens, and we're generally in the business of stopping weird things from happening,

not causing them.

"Yes, hands down, I know this sounds like a bad Douglas Adams story. Did you know he was inspired by quantum physics? Food for thought.

"Here's one more practical application to consider. Say hi to Midnight. Midnight here is what we called a 'familiar,' now better known as a Construct Intelligence. Think of her as a piece of pure intelligence given feline form. Where did that intelligence come from? Ah. These are the questions, aren't they? The ones we're trying to answer.

"Because thaumatology is a new science. It's been studied for years, but as mythology and superstition. It's only in the past fifty years or so that a real study of it has been made. And we've got a lot of things left to learn.

"In any case, I hope that I've helped to break some of the misconceptions around thaumatology, and illustrated a few places in which laypersons like yourselves can utilize it for your benefit. I'll be taking questions now.

Transcript of a lecture given by Professor on Aetheric Energy and Aspect Radiation.

"Good afternoon. I hope you had a pleasant lunch. Please be seated, and we will resume with the second portion of this seminar.

"The first portion of my lecture covered the three fundamental laws upon which thaumatology is based, and the ways in which they may have an effect upon a PHYSICS Division operative's choices in the field. At this point, I am going to proceed to a somewhat more esoteric field: Elan-Vital Energy and Aspect Radiation.

"EVE is the fundamental energy that powers thaumatology. What EVE is, we are still trying to understand. It appears to be somehow linked to the Observer Effect directly. It has been described as 'life energy,' or 'magical particles,' but such terms are gross oversimplifications. If you are interested in the more esoteric aspects of EVE theory, you will find some recommended reading in your seminar syllabus. But for now, I will simply discuss the aspects of EVE that are pertinent to a Coalition field agent.

"EVE is emitted by living things. It is also often emitted by paranormal objects. EVE emission is not a perfect indication of whether or not a person or object has paranormal properties, but often, that is the case. Higher and more intense levels of EVE are generated by beings with higher levels of sapience: their Observer Effect is stronger, thus their EVE levels are stronger as well. Humans over Animals, Animals over Plants.

"Interestingly enough, the Goddesses that the Servants of the Silicon Nornir operate also generate EVE energy. Food for thought.

"Training you on recognizing and identifying EVE patterns is beyond the scope of this one-day seminar: you'll be provided a handbook with common patterns and schemes to recognize and memorize. But for now, let's try it out.

"On the table in front of you, you'll find a COLLICULUS Aetheric Resonance Imager[1]. I've already set up the imaging nodes, so all you'll need to do is put on the headset. But before you do that, let me give you a quick rundown on how to use it.

"The system can be put on like any other personal image enhancement headset. It can be worn using a headstrap, or attached to your helmet. Other variations attach to your rifle's Picatinny rail. There are three components: power supply, headset, and image processor. For now, the power supply will be the extension cords at your tables, and the image processor should be left on the surface of the table.

"When I tell you to do so, and not before, pick up the image processor and turn this wheel here all the way to 0. That's the image brightness control. You also want all three of these switches: "CAL," "VIS," and "ARI," set to the "ON" position. Only then will you flip the power switch and put the headset on. After that, you can adjust the image brightness until the calibration bar at the bottom of the screen is properly adjusted: you should see eight distinct squares, each one a different shade of grey, ranging from near-black to near-white.

"Go ahead and put them on now. I'll be coming around to help anyone who's having problems.

"Everyone all set? Having fun? Interesting stuff, isn't it?

"What you're seeing in the COLLICULUS headset is the EVE energy being given off by you and your classmates. You'll see that different people have different color and shape patterns. Over time, you'll learn to read and recognize these patterns. A skilled COLLICULUS operator can not only detect a person, they can also read their emotional state and some paranormal properties.

"They can also see through walls. In a moment, I am going to activate a secondary COLLICULUS array located in the conference room next door. If you will please all direct your attention to the front of the room…

"There we go. Location and position of every human being in the

room next door, through the walls. I am now going to ask you to set the VIS switch to "OFF," but keep your thumb on the switch, please. It might be a bit difficult for you to find it once you've turned off visible light processing.

"Interesting, isn't it? How you can see the entirety of the next room? Aetheric Resonance. Older models of the ARI system could only directly detect EVE emission patterns. The newest ones can also use EVE interaction with inert matter to draw a map of the surrounding area. The resolution isn't very good at the moment, but we're already working on the next-generation technology.

"Ah. I can see that someone noticed that Midnight here comes off as a bit different. Midnight, if you'll recall, is a Constructed Intelligence. That is, to say, she is a piece of raw mind put into the form of a cat. You'll notice that there are some unusual spikes in her aura signature, as well as some dips that don't appear in human beings. Her color scheme also tends towards blue significantly more than the rest of the class.

"Aha! And now the gentleman in the front row has recognized something else as well… my aura pattern also tends blue. And now you're remembering that "Type Blue" is the GOC designation for thaumaturges… Not a coincidence, I assure you. The image processing software is designed to process the EVE signature of a thaumaturge as blue. Same with Type Reds and Greens. Type Blacks… they're another story.

"In any case, take a few more moments to experiment with the COLLICULUS system. I'll be coming around to answer any questions you may have."

"I'm going to end this segment of the seminar with a discussion of Aspect Radiation, or ARad. EVE, you see, isn't just an indication of the Observer Effect. It's also a transformative power in its own right. When EVE intensity gets to the point where it can alter or change reality, that is what we call Aspect Radiation.

"So, to answer the first question: Aspect Radiation is simply EVE in concentrations high enough to cause reality warping effects. Think

of it as gamma radiation: Gamma rays are simply the upper end of the electromagnetic spectrum, the same spectrum that contains X-Rays, visible light, heat, and radio waves.

"We categorize Aspect Radiation along three axes: Hue, Pitch, and Weave. Plus Intensity, that's four characteristics that should provide a solid description of the level of reality alteration that we might be dealing with.

"Intensity is measured in Caspers, a term which has a very technical definition that I will not get into here. One hundred Caspers is considered normal "background" radiation levels. At one thousand, you may start seeing paranormal effects. At ten thousand plus, you are seeing severe and immediate reality alteration. Word of advice: unless you are specially trained to deal with reality alteration scenarios, you should avoid any ARAD field higher than one thousand.

"Hue. Originally, Hue used six of the seven colors of the rainbow. That turned out to be a problem… people would call in "Type Blues" with ARad characteristics reading "3 thousand, Black, Flat, Tight," and people would get confused. So we extended the scale a bit and changed the terms. The Hue scale is now: Ruby, Topaz, Lemon, Malachite, Sapphire, Ebony, and Over-Ebony. Or, you could just say Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue, Black, and Over-Black if those colors sound too frou-frou for big, manly soldiers like yourselves… but you might confuse people.

"One common misconception is that Hue is a measure of the danger level of Aspect Radiation. Not the case. Hue is actually a measure of… I guess the best way to put it is how "blatant" the change is. For instance, a Ruby change might just be an acceleration in the decay rate of a small amount of radioactive material, while an Over-Ebony alteration changes the past fifty years of history to add an event back in the past that didn't occur before. On the other hand, Pitch, Weave, and Intensity also need to be considered… A Ruby level alteration that causes a sub-critical mass of plutonium to reach prompt criticality is a much more severe event than Mussolini having tea instead of coffee for breakfast one morning.

"Pitch is what mages used to call "White Line" versus "Black Line"

magic: how destructive a particular burst of Aspect Radiation is. It comes in five categories: Double-Flat, Flat, Natural, Sharp, and Double-Sharp. Double-Flat is the most destructive, the most disruptive to the operation of the mundane universe. Double sharp is the most constructive: these changes tend to become integrated into the very fabric of reality itself. This is not to say that Double-Sharp is necessarily good… if you want an example of a hostile Double-Sharp working, consider the anomalous Daeva Civilization: an ancient civilization of bloodthirsty thaumaturges that, periodically, have their decline and fall a few years later than before. That's a Double-Sharp Over-Ebony scenario right there.

"Finally, Weave. Comes in four varieties: Sparse, Loose, Tight, and Locked. Explaining it is… difficult… mostly because it's the only characteristic of Aspect Radiation that we don't have a way to detect. The only way to assess Weave is by direct observation by a Type Blue like myself. But what you need to know is: Sparse is vague and strange. Loose is a little more understandable. Tight is usually about where we get to what most people think of as "magic" or "reality warping" - the purview of Type Blues and Greens. And if you ever hear "Locked," turn and run like hell, because there's a Type Black in the area.

"All of this must sound complicated, because it is. I'd have to give you an undergraduate level course in basic thaumatological physics to explain further. But this all relates to one of the big questions I keep getting asked: namely, why doesn't the Coalition use magical workings for everything? Why do we need Strike Teams and Assessment Teams?

"The reason is backlash. Every time you utilize Aspect Radiation to make a change in reality, it bounces off the fundamental fabric of existence and causes a secondary effect called Backlash. The formula for measuring Backlash intensity is a bit complicated, but it can be summed up like this: A percentage of the original spell's Intensity. Opposite Pitch. Opposite Hue. Same Weave.

"So let's say I perform a working to create a door in that wall, where there wasn't one before. That might be… 3 kilocaspers, Ebony, Sharp, Tight. I plug the numbers into my formula here… and I can expect a backlash of 1.75 Kilocaspers, Ruby, Flat, Tight. Maybe I

suddenly give off a burst of gamma radiation. Maybe the carpet in a five meter radius bursts into flame. Maybe there is a burst of light and a glowing pattern of runes. In fact, when I do my working, I'm going to be trying to redirect the backlash into as harmless a pattern as possible. That's why thaumatologists use casting circles and geometric patterns: to redirect the backlash into predictable patterns.

"On the other hand, there are some workings that we still haven't figured out how to reabsorb all the backlash from. The most notorious being apportation. Altering reality so that quantum tunneling causes a large amount of mass to instantly appear somewhere else… it's a really ugly alteration, and the ARad backlash is huge.

"Worst of all, backlash itself is a burst of Aspect Radiation which can itself cause backlash… and so on and so forth. In fact, one theory as to why paranormal objects exist is that the Big Bang was the most powerful magical working in the universe… and it's still backlashing upon itself, causing reality to bend and alter at regular intervals.

"I'm starting to see that I'm losing some of you. Let's take another break, and when we get back, we'll talk about killing things and having sex."

Thaumatology Seminar Series
« **Basic Thaumatology** | **Return to GOC Hub** | **Thaumatic Workings** »

Footnotes
1. Since the recording of this Seminar, COLLICULUS has been retired and replaced with the more advanced VERITAS system.

Transcript of a lecture given by Professor on Thaumatic Workings.

"I see that my little statement last time got everyone's attention. Let's get into it.

"Every thaumatic working, whether it's carried out using eye of newt or a desktop computer, has four components: the Source, the Shaper, the Target, and the Sink. You might think of them as the components of a firearm: the Source is the propellant that drives the entire process. The Shaper is the barrel and firing chamber that directs the force of the explosion. The Target is the bullet that is driven down the barrel, the effect you're trying to perform. And finally, the Sink consists of the recoil compensation mechanisms.

"There is, of course, a fifth component that isn't an actual part of the working: the Practitioner. That would be you, the finger that pulls the trigger.

"I see I'm starting to lose some of your attentions, so please direct your attention here.

"I knew that would get your attention.

"What you are looking at is not only an orgy, but the source of a thaumatic worki— yes, she does have impressive breasts, and—"

<pause>

"Do I have your attention again? Thank you.

"As I was saying, what you are looking at is the source of a thaumaturgical working. Remember what I said before about Pitch of aspect radiation: Sharp is creative, while Flat is destructive. And there are few acts more creative than the act of reproduction… or more destructive than the act of murder.

"… I'll give you another moment.

"All right, let's continue.

"The examples I've just shown you are extreme, but they are also clear examples of two different very extreme kinds of thaumaturgical Sources. In each case, the practitioner was attempting to "pitch" their energy source hard towards Sharp or Flat. What kind of working do you think they were trying to perform?

"… actually, no. In both cases, the practitioner was attempting to perform the same working: namely, the creation of a Constructed Intelligence… or the summoning of a demon, as was said in the older days. In both cases, the end purpose of the ritual pitched strongly towards Sharp, or creation. The difference came in just how patient the practitioner was in setting up their Source.

"Remember what I said about Backlash? When a working is performed, the excess energy bounces off the fabric of reality and rebounds… at an opposite Pitch and Hue. Hue is generally easy for the practitioner to shape right out of the source… what is harder to shape is Pitch. The latter working began with a Source that was Pitched strongly Flat: destructive. The energy was then channeled into a simple working at a low Hue: the circle of light that you see appearing around the practitioner's feet. The remaining energy Backlashed at an opposite Pitch: Strongly Sharp and opposite Hue: High Ebony, heavily creative and heavily blatant. The energy was then recaptured and worked into the final spell. Thaumatologists call this a Speckmann Rebound.

"Allow me to show you an example from an actual PHYSICS Division operation. A Strike Team, equipped with Current Gen technology is raiding the home of a rogue thaumaturge. Teams Alpha through Delta provide perimeter security, while Echo Team acts as the assault element. Echo Team's point man enters the working area and discovers the following scene: Two persons engaged in sexual intercourse, one of them the Type Blue. Across the room from them, a Class 9 ectomorphic entity is taking shape. Meanwhile, the walls are starting to light on fire. You are Echo Team's point man. What do you do?

"Terminate the Type Blue? That is one option… but the working is already in progress. There is a lot of free Aspect Radiation being generated. If you terminate the controlling agent… well, unless you're a Type Blue yourself, you're going to end up on the wrong side of a high amount of wild EVE. Not a good place to be.

"Terminate the ectomorph? I did mention it was a Class 9, wasn't it? And the team had Gen +0 Technology? Not a winning proposition there.

"What the Echo Team agent did instead was terminate the Type Blue's sexual partner. The agent recognized that the working's Source was the same Pitch as the Target… namely, both Sharp, or creative. He then shifted the energy of the Source powerfully towards Flat… towards destruction. The end result disrupted the still-forming ectomorph and caused the working to fail. It also had the side effect of creating a mist that quenched the flames caused by the backlash. On the other hand, it resulted in most of the team having to be treated for steam burns.

"Yes, sir, you had a question?

<pause. audience laughs.>

"… I actually don't find that question particularly funny. Actually, the gentleman had a good point. If the source had been a human sacrifice instead, one method to disrupt the working could have been to introduce a strongly Sharp pitched energy into the working: and yes, I suppose that making love inside the Source area would have worked. On the other hand, I doubt that any man… or woman, for that matter… could be heroic enough to maintain arousal in the presence of a rapidly forming hostile Class 9 ectomorph… or skilled enough to complete in time to disrupt the working. In that case, a better response would be to disrupt the initial working that is being used to shift the Pitch of the spell: the Speckmann's Rebound. Destroy the heat sinks or light sources that are being energized to create the backlash.

"Alternatively, you could push the original practitioner into the target area and terminate him there, introducing a surge of Flat Aspect Radiation into the circuit after the Rebound. I know at least one team

that dealt with a nasty working in that manner. It has the disadvantage of leaving no one to question afterwards.

"In practice, of course, most modern thaumaturges prefer to use less dramatic Sources for their workings, mostly because the majority of the workings we perform don't require that dramatic of a Pitch, but also because we've learned techniques to alter the pitch of a working more precisely: they're less efficient than Speckmann's Rebound, but far more controllable. The most common Source thaumaturges use these days, in fact, is a simple drop of blood: blood is fairly neutrally pitched, and can actually provide quite a bit of EVE if properly Sourced. At higher energy levels, there is the Everhart Resonator. The conversion rate from electricity to Aspect Radiation is inefficient, and still requires a thaumaturge as catalyst, but it's still the most convenient way to generate high levels of EVE.

"As an example: a simple apportation working, like the one that transported your squad here, would require thirty human sacrifices… or an hour-long orgy with over one hundred participants. I suppose that would be more entertaining to watch than an Everhart Resonator slowly spinning up for a few minutes… but not exactly the thing one can order up at a moment's notice.

"We will take one final break for dinner, and when we return, I'll wrap up my lecture, and answer any remaining questions you may have."

Thaumatology Seminar Series
« Aspect Radiation | Return to GOC Hub | Questions and Answers »

Transcript of a lecture given by Professor : Conclusion, Q and A

"And we're back for the last session of this seminar. We're almost done. I just have a few more things to say, and then we'll be able to break for the night.

"I do want to address one thing that I was asked over dinner… namely, now that Unified Thaumatology exists, can it be considered a grand unifying theory for the paranormal?

"We would like that to be the case… but sadly, the answer is 'No.' Unified Thaumatology does provide a strong basis for the study of magic: we believe that it may also have implications into other fields. But there are places dealing with the paranormal where the theory starts to break down.

"Two very large examples are Type Green Reality Benders and Type Black or Ex Machina Divinities. Remember what I said before, that every thaumatological working has a source and causes a backlash. Type Greens violate both of those rules: they are able to alter reality without a Source, and their alterations do not cause backlash. There are a lot of theories as to why this may be: one theory is that the backlash is shunted into a parallel reality… perhaps as a paranormal phenomenon for them to deal with? Another theory is that the backlash is absorbed into the Type Green's own consciousness. Perhaps that explains why so many go insane. Unfortunately, we don't have the answer to that. It's one field that the Institute is devoting many resources to study. Progress is, by necessity slow, as is any study revolving around Type Greens. It's hard to collect useful data when that data could be manipulated by your test subject.

"Type Blacks and Ex Machinas… they're even stranger. Their effects are similar to thaumatology and reality bending, but they don't seem to obey any of the thaumatological laws we've

encountered. There are no bursts of Aspect Radiation caused by their abilities. They can't even be detected through Aetheric Resonance Imaging. In fact, the code word designation for a demi-divinity, 'Type Black,' comes because many of them simply don't have aetheric auras… sorry, EVE patterns… at all. We have no idea what these things are… except that they are very powerful, and in many cases, hostile to humanity.

"Then there are the many threats you might face that have nothing to do with Aspect Radiation. Anomalies in space-time. Cryptids. Mad cyborgs. Telepaths. The truth is, the more we learn, the more we realize that the world is a stranger and more terrifying place than we did before we began our study. For each answer we find, two more questions are raised.

"But that's the nature of scientific inquiry, after all.

"If there is a point to this seminar, however, I hope it is this: that you came away from here with a basic understanding of what thaumatology is and what it is that thaumaturges do. Part of the fear and power of magic was that it was so mysterious. By peeling away some of that mystery, it is our goal to arm you with the strongest weapon you will need if you ever come up against a thaumatological threat: the knowledge that you, as a non-thaumaturge, are not helpless. A student of mine once gave me a novel with a line I enjoyed greatly: 'No matter how subtle the wizard, a knife in the back can seriously cramp their style.'

"I will now be taking questions."

Can Sharp and Flat can be tied to sex with protection, or in vitro fertilization?

Well, yes. But in practice, the procreative act is most effective when done for the purposes of procreation between two persons. I suppose if I had to list them on a sliding scale, it would probably be in-vitro, masturbation, nonprocreative sex, procreative sex, with childbirth somewhere near the top as well. Then again, there are also acts of sex that tend strongly towards Flat. I won't go into details here. I'm sure you can think of them.

Why use blood? Couldn't you just get some jugs of milk at a supermarket if you need EVE?

You could, but the longer that a bodily fluid is separate from the body, the less effective it becomes. Same with dead bodies… at some point, a dead body or jug of milk ceases to be a living thing and just becomes… a thing. Although I suppose that breast milk for lactating persons could work in a pinch… blood is simply more universal. And there's a bit more dignity in cutting your thumb with a secespita than in the alternatives.

Have there been any attempts to utilize type greens in the same way that type blues are employed? Or has it always been recognized as too dangerous to consider?

I cannot speak for the Coalition on that, but yes, there have been attempts to utilize Type Greens. They have invariably failed, due to the tendency of Type Greens towards megalomania, and the difficulty in taking them down if they break control.. Although rumor has it that there have been one or two successful cases. The two most common suspects are D.C. al Fine and the Cornwall Hero.

Is the Coalition squeamish about using anomalous means to combat parathreats?

That depends on your definition of anomalous. The official position of the Global Occult Coalition is that Type Blue thaumatology falls under the realm of "tangential technology," not anomalous parathreat. Those of us employed by the Coaltion have sworn the same oaths as the rest of you. We are still human. We still want to protect humanity. And we do so with all the talents at our disposal.

The eventual goal of thaumatological research, after all, is to incorporate magic theory into our modern understanding of physics. Once that is done, won't the concept of "magic" have been finally destroyed?

There are ways to eliminate parathreats aside from a bullet.

If the Coalition had to look at itself as a parathreat,

what threat level would it be at? What would it take for it to grow a threat level?

If the member organizations of the Coalition were to turn against the best interests of humanity, it would result in an immediate failure of all missions, probably requiring a Pizzicato Level Response. The Coalition exists, however, to prevent such events from occuring.

It is, however, interesting to contemplate what might happen to the Coalition if its major rivals were eliminated or incorporated into its ranks. Absolute Power corrupts absolutely, after all.

Perhaps it is best that no one organization controls all the power in the paranormal world.

Where is the point at which thaumatology becomes inefficient and impractical when compared with technology, even 0+ technology? I mean… I'm thinking about the previous example involving a bus ride and/or a massive orgy, it is clearly impractical. Does magic require more effort than what it's worth for important material changes?

In many cases, yes. For instance, it's easier to build a rifle using a factory than a working. It's also much more useful to take a cab downtown than it is to apport there.

Where thaumaturgy excels is when you need to do the impossible. For instance: you need to get a Strike Team from Michigan to Siberia… in one hour. Thaumaturgy. You need to get into a person's files and erase their identity? Thaumaturgy.

Speaking of which, that does remind me of a case where thaumaturgy proved to be 100% more effective than anything that normal technology could do: I oversaw an identity reassignment to a young trans woman joining the Coalition. I don't care how good of a surgeon you are, you'll never perform a sex reassignment good enough to result in a fertile adult human female.

Is information gathering easier and cleaner than reality bending? I heard of a Type Blue agent using a

subject's hair to determine their relative position within an unmapped forest area. Can that have a backlash, or does it have less negative consequences?

In many ways, every thaumatological spell is a form of scrying: remember that it all comes down to the observer effect, and how hard you observe. Locating individuals is a common spell, and in most cases, the backlash is easily manageable through shunts and sinks. It's a fairly low-Intensity application, for one: remember that backlash occurs proportionate to the original spell. If the original spell only used a small amount of energy, the backlash is usually negligible.

That is, of course, assuming that we're doing looking cross-or upstream… sorry. Into the present or past. Downstream scrying… that is to say, predicting the future… is much harder, like riding a mountain bike uphill as opposed to laterally or downhill. In fact, the most effective downstream scrying working to date is the Silicon Nornir… and they require two entire supercomputers calculating and scrying upon the present and past in order to drive a third cluster performing the future sight.

Sorry, Sir, I just wanted to thank you for a wonderful presentation and ask you… is there any chance whatsoever that religious groups built around certain miracles or portents are actually the inheritors of Type Green or Type Blue founders? Do we have evidence on the matter?

Yes, there is a chance. Yes, we do have evidence. No, I'm not going to tell you who.

I'm not sure I got that right a couple of hours back, sorry. Is a Type Red able to bend reality in any way?

That depends on the type of Red we're talking about. Many of them simply have accelerated healing systems. Many others, however, especially Expanding Regenerators, are the result of out of control thaumaturgical powers. Remember that Type Red is an indication of effect, not source.

For how long can Aspect Radiation related to a Blue event remain in the environment?

Proportionate to the intensity, pitch, hue, and weave. In general, these three factors tend to increase Aspect Radiation duration: greater intensity, lower hue (that is, tending more towards Ruby then Ebony), and tighter weave. Pitch tends to degrade, over time, towards the center: it will usually swing back and forth for a bit, before slowly settling down, rather like a pendulum.

Of the three, however, weave is the single most important aspect to determining ARAD longevity. There is a reason why the tightest level of Weave is called "Locked."

If one part affects the whole, couldn't you use any object to change the nature of the entire universe?

Yes. But it's a matter of inertia. Namely, that the universe shows a resistance to change. And the more you try to change, the more energy it requires, and the more difficult it becomes. For instance, it could be possible to change the gravitational constant of the universe using a grain of sand. We would need to devour the entire energy output of around one hundred thousand galaxies the size of the Milky Way to do so.

What's the difference between a Type Black and a type Ex Machina?

A Type Black is a human being that exhibits the characteristics of a Type Ex Machina. Ex Machinas tend to operate at a much higher level than Type Blacks. But functionally, in thaumatological terms, they're pretty much identical.

Are there any types of thaumaturgical resources other than vital energy?

There are, but EVE is the most efficient energy source we've found so far. And in many cases, what we thought were alternative energy sources to EVE turns out to be EVE in a different form… Ley Lines, for instance, were once thought to be an alternative energy conduit to EVE, before we came to realize that it was EVE pitched and hued

in a combination we'd never seen before.

The current cutting edge in EVE research is consolidating Elan Vital theory with the Grand Unified Theory. Exciting stuff.

> **Has anyone ever tried to use thaumaturgy to deal with global issues like war and hunger? And if so, how come they never worked?**

They did. We called it the Cornwall Incident: a Type Black, in alliance with a large coven of Type Blue allies, attempted a massive magical working to end human pain and conflict. The end result threatened the end of the human spirit.

You see, war and hunger all derive from dissatisfaction with your current status quo. When you are completely satisfied with your status quo, you have no motivation or desire to do… anything. Getting rid of war and hunger and pain required getting rid of jealousy… getting rid of identity. And there were some who felt that sacrifice worth it.

If it weren't for the heroic actions of a few Global Occult Coalition, humanity as we know it would cease to exist. We still strive to end war and hunger… it is the goal of the United Nations, after all, to promote Peace on Earth. But we have to do it the long hard way. The short path is paved with good intentions.

> **Whenever I imagine magic, I think of old guys in robes, holding staves and wands and stuff like that. Did you guys ever use any of that stuff?**

I've got my ceremonial robes, hat, and staff in my office. Interesting fact: the wizard's stave originates not only from the very practical walking stick, but also from the staff used to mark time in ancient shamanic rituals. Early thaumaturges also found them useful for inscribing circles: much easier to draw from a standing position than having to drop down to your knees. The idea of the magic wand, I think, probably originates from the practice of using live cuttings from trees in ceremonial practices.

We use them about as often as modern scholars wear cap and

gown, or use quill pens and inkwells. Some older institutes and GOC member organizations still require them: same with grimoires. On the other hand, I can get a much more precise pattern using lasers and mirrors, or even a high resolution LCD screen. The modern thaumatologist generally has less to do with old guys in robes carrying staves, and more to do with younger people in jeans, carrying laptop computers.

Of course, some claim that the ceremony and emotional state that comes from wearing a fancy robe and hat and carrying a staff can help the thaumaturge perform their working. If it works for you, more power to you. Me personally, I think that robes are way too breezy and staffs are a pain in the ass to carry around.

What is the process for becoming a Type Blue?

If you figure it out, publish your results. There's a ten million dollar prize on the line for the first person who figures out how that works.

Because really… no one knows. We just don't know why it is that some people gain the ability to manipulate magic and others don't. It seems to be linked to genetics in some cases. In other cases, it seems to be linked to intelligence, or close proximity to magical effects. But then there are 'wildcat' mages that appear out of nowhere, defying all perceived factors.

The best analogy I've seen is cancer. There are a lot of risk factors involved in whether you will get cancer: age, genetics, environment, exposure to carcinogens, and so on and so forth… but whether or not you're actually going to get cancer is mostly a matter of luck.

"I guess that's everything then. I've got one more thing to say, then you're all dismissed.

"The consumption of alcohol is a pretty-much universal means of establishing brotherhood and friendship. You see examples all the way from Christ's Last Supper, to the cult of Dionysus, to frat and stag nights all around the world. I personally am a fan of sessions: similar to the Chinese *yum cha*, where the drinking and eating is secondary to the fellowship and conversation around the table.

"What I'm trying to say is: the seminar may be over, but there's no reason why the conversation has to end. Feel free to meet me at the enlisted club, and I'll buy the first round of drinks."

Thaumatology Seminar Series

« **Thaumatic Workings** | **Return to GOC Hub** | **END»**

Roc Series Deicide Drone, Prototype Model

PHYSICS Records

Equipment Dossier Excerpt

Jointly-Constructed Airborne Engagement Drone (J-CAED)

+2Gen/GenAlt

History

The concept for the Jointly-Constructed Airborne Engagement Drone was developed at the request of the Coalition by a venture consisting of members of **`the paratech manufacturer "Anderson Robotics"`** and personnel of PTOLEMY Division. J-CAEDs were designed as remote liquidation tool for level 5 and 6 Threat Entities, specifically those of mythological significance, serving as an alternative response to the use of Ultra-Heavy Engagement Chassis, thus preventing the potential loss off Coalition operatives. The choice of a large imitation of a falcon-like bird was chosen as per request of GOC member organizations (such as Pr-Ankh-n-Ab [The Djehutian House of Life], Haudenosaunee [League of Paramerican Nations], Society for Olympian Restoration, and others), who pushed this design to provide occult symbolic protection[1] to the drones. As of time of writing, the first prototype (codenamed "PERSEUS") is currently being constructed, completed an will be field tested within a time range of four to five months.

Overview

The J-CAED is a heavy engagement drone (designed to vaguely resemble a raptor, or bird of prey), remotely controlled by a "pilot" from the regional central command center. The drone achieves flight

via both anti-gravity generators located on the lower half of the body and the movement of wings for propulsion and steering. The exact composition of the J-CAED is classified to all except for High Command and those assigned to Project ROC. Some of the more notable specification are included below, as to give the reader an idea of what the J-CAED is capable of.

- A majority of design aspects were carried over from similar machinery such as the Mark III U-HEC ("Orange Suit") and the Merlin Series Aerial Drone.
- Regenerative metal hull (carried over from the Anderson robotics Aplomado Series Facility Defense Unit product). Wings possess feather-like structures, made of the same material, which can be dislodged and fired at targets[2].
- Electric generators, able to create massive electrical sparks (similar to those produced by Tesla coils and electrical storms), located in regular intervals on the surface of the drone[3].
- Thaumatological wards, located on the inside of the drone's hull, as well as in the hardware, to prevent thaumatological assault.
- A modified Scranton Reality Anchor, located in the chest, to prevent manipulation of the drone by Type Greens and similar entities.

PSYCHE Records

History of Project ROC (cont.)

The first prototype (Codenamed "PERSEUS") showed prowess in test runs and was field tested against a manifestation of KTE-4503-Ragweed-Faraday ("Non-Terrestrial Cloudbank"), the most readily available threat, which had appeared in the Yukon wilderness.

Involved Assets included:

- 6 Operatives from Strike Team 2654 – "Weathermen".
- Operative "Deskcat" (controlling PERSEUS remotely from

Central Command).
- *GOCA Amelia*[4].
- J-CAED-01 (PERSEUS) (Remotely controlled by Operative "Deskcat").

Threat Entity Database Entry

Threat ID:

KTE-4503-Ragweed-Faraday – "Non-Terrestrial Cloudbank"

Authorized Response Level:

4 **(Severe Threat)**

Description:

A Biological airborne mass (hereafter referred to as Component Alfa), superficially resembling baseline terrestrial cumulonimbus clouds. The surface of component is covered with eyes, tendrils, and mouths, apparently serving no functional purpose. Capable of generating electrical discharges (Component Bravo) that can inhabit electrical devices (causing Alfa Component growth within), as well as act as baseline terrestrial lightning. Electromagnetic means can repulse and destroy both components. Entity manifests in the baseline via a Spatial Tear (Component Charlie), speculated to connect to either a pocket universe or parallel reality. If left unchecked, Alfa and Bravo Components will expand from the Charlie component indefinitely.

Rules of Engagement:

Remain in cover to prevent electric shocks. Do not use or expose electrical devices not covered in electric repellent shielding. Do not directly engage without wearing a Mk. II Electrical Protection Gear. The only effective method of liquidation is the aforementioned

Electromagnetic means (such as Electromagnetic Ballista or Mk. VI Handheld Electromagnetic Manipulators). Assessment Teams who encounter the parathreat in the field are to take cover and call for backup. Strike Teams are to locate Component Charlie and close it via Scranton Reality Anchors or similar reality distortion suppressant, then liquidate remaining Components.

History:

The entity was first encountered in 1947 during Operation CHALLENGER[5], when a bank of the Alfa Component was observed over an ODESSA/OBSKURA encampment. Coalition scientists theorized that experiments made by involving reality probing attracted the attention of the parathreat to the baseline, however, due to the complete destruction of the facility by the entity. The KTE has manifested multiple times since, but usually far between other points of manifestation both in time and location.

[…]

Appendix IV:

As of 1963, the use of thaumatological methods to suppress the Charlie Component have been replaced with newly invented Scranton Reality Distortion Technology.

Appendix V:

As of the 23rd recorded assault on KTE-4503 by the Coalition, no +1Gen or +2Gen paratechnology may be used when interacting with the parathreat.

PHYSICS Records

Assault Report 4503-23:

> **3-4-2017, 16:30:** KTE-4503 manifestations spotted. GOCA Amelia approaches.

3-4-2017, 16:35: GOCA Amelia reaches KTE-4503. J-CAED-01 launched and engages KTE-4503 with "combustive hull" maneuver. Assault proves effective. KTE-4503 turns all attention on J-CAED-01. J-CAED-01 moves away from GOCA Amelia, which is subsequently free to locate breach.

3-4-2017, 16:45: 25% of manifestation's mass liquidated by J-CAED-01.

3-4-2017, 16:48: Connection to J-CAED-01 lost. GOCA Amelia activated Faraday Hull Shield to block assault from manifestations. Search continues, but is slowed by assault.

3-4-2017, 16:53: GOCA Amelia assaulted by J-CAED-01, which is deemed compromised by KTE-4503. Anti-parathreat ballista engaged on J-CAED-01.

3-4-2017, 17:19: Breach located via EVEDAR System. Assault on J-CAED-01 continues.

3-4-2017, 17:23: J-CAED-01 succumbs to damage and falls. GOCA Amelia suffered moderate damage, with 3 operatives injured during assault.

3-4-2017, 17:26-17:30: Breach reached. Onboard SRA's activated. Breach fully closes after 3 miniutes. SRA disengaged and Ballista engaged on remaining KTE-4503 mass.

3-4-2017, 18:45-18:47: KTE-4503's mass fully liquidated. J-CAED-01's crash site located. Recovery of J-CAED-01 commenced.

3-6-2017, 19:21: J-CAED-01 fully recovered from crash site.

PTOLEMY Records

AOD (Armaments Used in Destruction) report from the files of Horrace Wallace, Quartermaster Seargent-Sector 10

Quartermasters Division-

Item	Designatio	Title	Qty
1	+2Gen-AGB	GOC Anti-grav Battleship *Amelia*	1
Notes: Ship's hull received 45% damage from the PERSEUS Unit. Sent in for drydock at Airbase Renegade Bravo. Approximate repair time is 5 weeks.			
2	+2Gen-SRA	Scranton Reality Anchor	4
Notes: Functioned as normal, no additional notes.			
3	+2Gen-FHSG	Faraday Hull Shield Generator	1
Notes: Partly overloaded. Minor circuity repairs needed.			

4	+2Gen-EMagB	Electromagnetic Ballista	24
Notes: Approximately an average of 67% of battery spent during engagement. Retired for 4 days to recharge.			
5	+1Gen-EVEDAR	EVEDAR Location System.	1
Notes: Functioned as normal, no additional notes.			
6	+2Gen-J-CAED-01	Jointly-Constructed Airborne Engagement Drone, Prototype 1 (PERSEUS)	1
Notes: Shot down after Internal Hardware was compromised by paratheat. Onsite appraisal deemed the drone irreparable. Wreckage			

sent to
Airbase
Renegade
Delta for
further
analysis.

To: GraceSaker@AndersonRobotics,
Matthew@AndersonRobotics,
Clara@AndersonRobotics, cog.ymelotp|
eignetubilah#cog.ymelotp|eignetubilah, cog.ymelotp|
eigneecnal#cog.ymelotp|eigneecnal, …
From: cog.ymelotp|eigneretnuh#cog.ymelotp|eigneretnuh
Subject: PERSEUS failure

Prototype got infected by sentient electromagnetic energy and was shot down. We need to go back to the drawing board, fix this problem, and suss out any similar problems in the design so this doesn't happen again. Meeting at 10:00 Hours.

Hunter, Engineering, Ptolemy Division, United Nation Global Occult Coalition.

To: cog.ymelotp|eigneretnuh#cog.ymelotp|eigneretnuh
From: GraceSaker@AndersonRobotics
Subject: RE: PERSEUS failure

Expect all Anderson personnel except for P. Richards to be accounted for (Peter's caught the flu).

I would like to bring up our previous recommendation on changing of the body plan of the drone. The raptor design choice and the difficulties surrounding accommodations for it are the likeliest culprits for the failure.

-Grace Saker, Anderson Robotic, Roc Project.

To: GraceSaker@AndersonRobotics,
From: cog.ymelotp|eigneretnuh#cog.ymelotp|eigneretnuh

Subject: RE: RE: PERSEUS failure

Sorry to hear about Peter, hope he gets better. As for the problem you've brought up, the council has made it clear they want the drone to fit the occult significant they want. I've made requests for a change, but as it stands, we're stuck with this design, so we'd better not waste time complaining and fix it.

Hunter, Engineering, Ptolemy Division, United Nation Global Occult Coalition.

PSYCHE Records

History of the ROC Project (cont.)

J-CAED-01 was compromised during assault and accompanying Strike Team was forced to neutralize the drone. Wreckage was returned to Airbase Renegade Delta and dismantled.

The second prototype (Codenamed "PROCNE") was constructed with counters to defects seen in its predecessor (such as the insulation of hardware casing to prevent parathreat inhabitation) and other minor improvements to design. Prototype was field tested against KTE-7651-Wiseman-Burrhus ("Lady of Gibraltar") alongside Strike Team 4306 – "Big Fat Greek Culling".

PHYSICS Records

AT/ST Patrol Report (Debrief)

Involved Assessment/Strike Team:

ST-4305

Filing Operative:

"Mulliner" 8428A531/4306

Mission (Location/Objective):

TE manifested on the "Rock of Gibraltar" landmark, in the eponymous nation. TE displayed mental dominating abilities on locals, and appeared to be the cause behind recent missing persons within the area. We were sent in alongside the new J-CAED prototype to neutralized the threat, and recover the missing locals, if possible.

Encounter Report/Enemy Description:

Large feminine humanoid, suspected to be Hamlet-Class Ectomorphic Entity[6] by the assessment team. Entity's apparel resembled that of Nasrid Grenadian culture. Capable of taking control of the minds of others and bending them to its will, seemingly by overwriting their personality and memories (I'm sure the average Gibraltarian wouldn't know Arabic).

Encountered TE and affected locals near "Tower of Homage", remaining ruin of Moorish Castle, while we swept over the area in the whirly. They'd been digging in the ground, looking for something I guess. Most of the locals immediately charged as soon as they knew we were there. PROCNE tried hitting them with some sort of electrical discharge. Didn't work, so we had to take them down the hard way. All nonlethal and most of the lethal methods at our disposal had no effect. Complete destruction of the body deemed necessary, so we busted out the flamethrowers. PROCNE had engaged the TE head on while we cleared the other.

At this time, some of the children[7] had stopped digging and said something in Arabic to the TE. No idea what they said, but the entity immediately stopped engaging PROCNE and disappeared into the hole. PROCNE dropped a small barrage of explosives over the hole and somehow that cleared away the remaining soil (makes sense to me), revealing some stone structure. TE rose

from the cracks causes by the explosions, now bonded to a corpse. I'm pretty sure it was beginning to do some form of working, but PROCNE promptly attacked the entity and bit its head off. TE was drained from the corpse while it was doing that. All the remaining children collapsed immediately after that.

Results:

PROCNE's pilot tells me the TE's being stored inside PROCNE for the moment. The remaining children are in a catatonic state, and are are currently being loaded onto the whirly with the corpse.

Personnel Condition:

A few bruises, but nothing serious. PROCNE's shutdown right now; pilot says all power is currently going towards holding the TE.

Conclusions/Recommendations:

Judging by architecture and the presence of a recently disturbed grave, I'd say the structure the TE was trying to dig up is its tomb. There are markings on the floor, which suggest some kind of working. We should probably send some PSYCHE or ICSUT people over here to figure out what its plan was.

As for the TE itself, we could potently lean something or other about the working and whatever system was used when it was living. All the same I think it would be better if we liquidated it. It clearly has a mind control thing going on and I don't want it loose with access to coalition weaponry.

I'd suggest the folks over at CAULATICA use the cover story of a serial killer or something for this whole mess.

PROCNE did pretty well I think, all things considered. I mean sure we did have the Bone Suits and the

Ghostbusters[8], but we weren't prepared for any workings. Without PROCNE, we probably would've had to deal with a much more dangerous threat. If it matters, I'd say we'd have a lot more bodies to bury, and longer report to file. Send our regards to the engineering team.

PSYCHE Records

History of the Roc Project (cont.)

J-CAED-02 succeeded in neutralizing the threat and was sent for Airbase Barcid Echo for a final checkup. After minor repairs, the drone was then transported to Airbase Gaulle Alfa for preparation for transport to Airbase Renegade Alfa for christening…

Footnotes
1. Citing the prevalence of raptors as protections within mythological and heraldic lore (i.e. the appearance of Ra, Heru-wer, and Heru-sa-Aset, the eagle's place as the sacred bird to Zeus, the role of thunderbirds in most Haudenosaunee member's mythology, etc.).
2. Inspired by the mythological "Stymphalian Birds".
3. Inspired by the Greco-Romanic deity Zeus/Jupiter/Jove's power over lightning.
4. A Coalition Anti-gravity Battleship.
5. Post-Seventh Occult War operation, involving the search and destruction of escaped Nazi occultists (such as former members of the Thule Society and Ahnenerbe Obskurakorps) in Central and Southern America.
6. An apparition bound to an area due to a need for some action to be completed ("unfinished business").
7. PHYSICS operative slang, taken fromGOC Threat Entity naming cryptonym conventions.
8. Slang for standard anti-ectomorphic equipment.

Transcript of Incident BL-7 Alpha

Sparkplug: Assessment Team 735, comprising three members: Team leader "Bullfrog" (Sparkplug 1), marksman "Fartboy," (Sparkplug 2), driver "Kitten" (Sparkplug 3).

Central: Central Command

Sparkplug 1: Sparkplug to Central. Come in, over.

Central: Sparkplug, this is Central. How do you read, over?

Sparkplug 1: Reading loud and clear. We are beginning our approach to the target area, over.

Central: Roger that, Sparkplug. Be advised that aerial reconnaissance reports the presence of a third party in the area. Best guess is that it's either a Foundation Task Force or a Chaos Insurgency cell. Best estimate on numbers: between four to twelve operators. You are not to engage unless fired upon. Please acknowledge, over.

Sparkplug 1: Fuck. That's all we need. Goddamn it. Couldn't get an easy job just once in our fucking… uhhh. Copy, Central. Beginning approach to target area now. Over.

Central: Roger, Sparkplug. Oh, and uhh… be advised, your radio switch might be stuck or something. We'd love to give you an easy job for once in your fucking lives too. Over.

Sparkplug 1: … fuck. Thank you, Central. Out. Hey, Fartboy, help me fix this fucking thing, it's al-[transmission ends].

Sparkplug 1: Sparkplug to Central, come in, over.

Central: Sparkplug, this is Central. Reading loud and clear, over.

Sparkplug 1: Be advised, Central, we've made contact with the aforementioned third party. Looks like they've set up a roadblock across the main road leading to the target area. Official story is that the park is closed off for safety reasons after the recent thunderstorms. I think we managed to convince them we were just a couple of rednecks going hunting, though. Over.

Central: Understood, Sparkplug. Were you able to determine who they were? Over.

Sparkplug 1: Well, Central, there was a big white van behind the two "park rangers" with a logo reading "Sierra Conservation Project" on the side. You tell me. Over.

Central: Heh. Got that. All right, Sparkplug, we'll proceed under the assumption that the strike team in the area are a Foundation Containment Team. Over.

Sparkplug 1: Either that, or the Chaos Insurgency's decided to pull a fast one on us. Over.

Central: Not their M.O. A group that calls themselves the 'Chaos Insurgency' isn't really the type for subtlety. Still, keep an eye out for anything odd. Over.

Sparkplug 1: Roger. Will proceed to… hand me that map, Fartboy… all right. Ummm. Will proceed to grid reference… Charlie-Seven… by foot. We'll be leaving the Barrett with Three: if we get caught in one of their sweeps, it'll be kinda hard to convince these guys we're just a couple of lost hunters if we're carrying a mil-spec fifty-cal sniper rifle with us. ETA four hours. Over.

Central: Roger, Sparkplug. Out.

Sparkplug 1: Sparkplug to Central, come in, over.

Central: Sparkplug, this is Central. Reading loud and clear, over.

Sparkplug 1: Central, we have reached the Area of Operations.

We're setting up our observation post now, then Fartboy and I will get a bite to eat. So far we have not seen a thing, except for a few deer and some rabbits. Will let you know if we see anything. Otherwise, we'll report back in at… 2100 hours, local time. Over.

Central: Roger, Sparkplug. 2100 hours local time. Out.

Sparkplug 1: Jesus Christ, I'm fucking starving. Let's see what I've got… fucking meatloaf? Godda-[transmission ends]

Sparkplug 1: Sparkplug to Central. Come in, over.

Central: Sparkplug, this is Central. Reading loud and clear, over.

Sparkplug 1: We've got eyes on a probable threat entity… in grid reference… uhhh… Delta… Six. Clearing just south of the lake. Entity is approximately… what do you show that as, Fartboy? Two meters?

Sparkplug 2: More like three.

Sparkplug 1: Yeah. Entity is approximately three meters in length from muzzle to mid-torso. Streamlined body form, darker underbelly, pale back. Skin texture appears… slick and mottled. Kind of like a snake or a salamander. Break.

Sparkplug 1: Two arms, strongly muscled, set behind a short neck. Big eyes… possibly nocturnal or cave-dwelling. Looks like a carnivore: big, sharp teeth with sharklike serrations. Some sort of quills or feathers coming out of the head. I don't see any claws, but… strike that. Entity has retractable claws in addition to manipulating hands. Break.

Sparkplug 1: Be advised, entity is badly injured. Evidence of a second set of limbs: exposed, broken bone spurs sticking out above the shoulders. Possibly used to be wings. Entire lower half of body is missing, but intestines and viscera are visible. I am tentatively classifying it as a cryptid, rather than altered wildlife or NACL[1]. Please acknowledge. Over.

Central: Roger, Sparkplug. You have eyes on a possible threat

entity: initial classification is Cryptid. Approximately three meters in length, assumed carnivorous due to serrated teeth and retractable claws. Possibly nocturnal or cave-dweling. Streamlined body, mottled skin, slick texture, darker underbelly, pale back. Severely injured, with possible severed wings. Entire lower half is missing, viscera and intestines visible. Over.

Sparkplug 1: That's correct, Central. Sparkplug 2 will upload photographs short—.

Sparkplug 2: I've got movement, Bullfrog.

Sparkplug 1: Wait one, Central.

Sparkplug 1: All right, Central. We've got a… looks like a… yeah, definitely a bear… approaching the threat entity. Threat entity is… ooh. Yeah. Threat entity has just attacked and killed a… looks like an adult black bear. Yeah, I'm going to second Fartboy's estimate. Definitely—.

Sparkplug 2: Not bad work for a thing with its legs torn off.

Sparkplug 1: Turn off your comm, Fartboy. You're on the channel.

Sparkplug 2: Oops. Sorry.

Sparkplug 1: All right. Saying again: Entity has just attacked and killed an adult black bear and is now feeding on it. Confirmed it as a carnivore. Over.

Central: Roger, Sparkplug. Do you think you can retrieve the threat entity? Over.

Sparkplug 1: [exhales] I'm going to have to say no, Central. It's just too damn big for the two of us to carry out. Might be able to get some tissue samples though. Over.

Central: Acknowledged. Your call, Sparkplug. Over.

Sparkplug 1: Acknowledged. Stand by. Hey, Fartboy, you think you can take this thing down? … yeah, I know. I'd rather have the Barrett right now too, but we don't, so we should do the best we can with

what we've got… yeah. Heart shot is out. Can't see us getting a round through that huge ribcage. Through the eye, then. Nice, big target. All right. You shoot, I'll spot. Sparkplug to Central. We're gonna see if we can kill this thing, then we'll head down there and try to get you guys some tissue samples. Over.

Central: Acknowledged, Sparkplug. Also, uhhh… be advised your radio switch seems to still be sticking. Out.

Sparkplug 1: Fuck, is it still doing that? I'm gonna kick Kim's ass when I get back home, issuing me a broken piece of sh- [transmission ends].

Sparkplug 1: — how's it look?

Sparkplug 2: [muffled, indistinct].

Sparkplug 1: Well, don't shoot, then.

Central: Dammit, not again. Central to Sparkplug, be advised your radio switch is stuck again. Please acknowledge, over.

[extended silence.]

Central: Sparkplug, this is Central, please come in, over.

[extended silence.]

Central: Sparkplug, this is Central, fix your damn mic, over.

[extended silence.]

Central: Fuck it, I give up.

[extended silence.]

Sparkplug 2: [muffled, indistinct].

Sparkplug 1: … all right, shoot it.

[gunshot.]

Sparkplug 1: Nice. Clean hit, straight through the eye— oh fuck! He's not happy! RUN!

[movement, hurried running.]

Sparkplug 1: Aaaah, fuck!

[breaking branches, loud thumping.]

Sparkplug 1: Aaaaaah, fucking shit, my fucking back, goddamn it… I'm fine, I'm fine, just… just need a moment. Is it still chasing us?

Sparkplug 2: [muffled, indistinct].

Sparkplug 1: Fucking hell. Aaaaaah… stupid stupid stupid… goddamn it, I know better than that. Shit shit sh-[transmission ends].

Sparkplug 2: Central, this is Sparkplug, come in, over.

Central: Sparkplug, this is Central. We just heard a gunshot, followed by Bullfrog shouting in pain. What the hell just happened, over?

Sparkplug 2: What? Oh. His fucking radio must have gotten stuck again. Uhhh… yeah, mission report follows. We successfully infiltrated the target area undetected and made visual contact with a wounded threat entity. We then decided to kill the target and retrieve tissue samples. Initial shot penetrated the eye and entered the braincase. However, the threat entity proceeded to attack the team, necessitating a quick withdrawal. Break.

Sparkplug 2: During the process of withdrawing, Bull, umm, tripped over a sapling and fell. He's fine, but he tweaked his back pretty bad and sprained his ankle. Please advise, over.

Central: Acknowledged, Sparkplug. Please clarify: you shot this thing through the eye, and it turned and charged you? Over.

Sparkplug 1: Central, this is Bull: that's correct. Thing had a good bit of its brain blown out and it still tried to kill us. Would advise coming back with heavier weaponry before we try to take it down

again. Anyway, it's gone back to chewing on that dead bear carcass now. Over.

[extended silence]

Central: All right, Sparkplug, bring it in. Start heading to the highway at grid reference India-Four, we'll exfil you from there. Sparkplug three, do you copy, over?

Sparkplug 3: Central, Three. ETA 1 hour. Will update. Three out.

Central: Sounds good, Three. This is Central, out.

Sparkplug 1: Acknowledged, Central. Sparkplug One Out. Well, this turned out to be a clusterfuck, didn't it? Can't believe I tripped over a fucking tr—[transmission ends].

Footnotes
1. Non-Autocthonic Lifeform

"Vigil"

"The Coalition Memorial consists of three underground facilities. The first is the outer museum, in which a number of relics and memorabilia important to the Coalition are preserved and displayed. The second is the Alpha Mausoleum: a set of four empty sarcophagi reserved for the remains of the first Coalition Strike Team, in anticipation of the day when they shall be returned to us and laid to rest in their proper place. The third is the Grid, the Coalition's columbarium, in which the cinerary urns or relics of every fallen Coalition Operative is stored.

"There are twelve men in a shift. Each shift begins precisely at midnight or noon, Greenwich Mean Time. One hour before the shift change, the doors to the outer chamber will be opened, and your shift will assemble in the hallway leading to the outer chamber. A uniform and weapon inspection will take place at this time. Your uniform will be the Dress Black uniform, and it will be perfectly pressed and cleaned. Your grooming will be immaculate. Your weapon, an M1 Garand that was used during the Second World War, will be in perfect firing condition, it will be unloaded and safed (but a full clip of ammunition will be carried on your person), and it will have a fixed bayonet shined to a mirror polish. Failure to maintain standards may result in your dismissal from the Guard.

"The shift begins with the changing of the guard. The shift that is coming off-duty will verbally report any changes in situation to the oncoming shift. The shift leader will relieve the prior shift of duty, and they will file out of the chamber at a measured and respectful pace.

"The Guard has three duties which they must carry out. The first duty is to maintain the watch. At all times except during the first and last hour of the Shift, there shall be two Guards in the chamber of the Alpha Mausoleum. There is a three-and-a-half meter wide red carpet in the center of the mausoleum, and it is fourteen meters in length.

"The patrol begins with two guards stationed on opposite sides of the carpet, exactly 13.75 meters apart: hashmarks have been placed on the carpet for this purpose. Beginning with the right foot, they will march at a pace of one 0.625 meter stride per second for twenty-one seconds, before halting and waiting 21 seconds. They will then perform a right face, take five steps forward, and wait a further 10 seconds. They will then perform a second right face, take 21 steps forward, before halting and waiting 21 seconds. They will then perform a right face, take five steps forward, and wait a further 10 seconds. They will then make a final right face, returning to their starting position.

"If the circuit is performed properly, it should take two minutes to complete one full circuit. Twenty-five full circuits will be performed each hour, giving ten minutes for a changing of the guard. Each member of the Guard, except for the Shift Leader and Assistant Shift Leader, will perform this duty twice per twelve-hour shift: once while beginning their patrol in the inner position, and a second time beginning their patrol at the outer position. The Shift Leader will assign watches and be responsible for coordinating the changing of the guard.

"In addition to maintaining the vigil at the Alpha Mausoleum, every three hours, beginning at one hour past the beginning of the shift, ten members of the Guard will perform the Patrol of the Grid. The Grid is a rectangular lattice of tunnels cut into the stone. Each tunnel is three meters tall and three meters wide. Beginning at the entrance to the grid, each member of the Guard will walk their assigned Patrol route. If all ten Guards walk their route perfectly, there will be no collisions, and all ten will return to the entrance of the Grid at exactly fifty minutes after the Patrol begins, in time for the changing of the Guard at the Alpha Mausoleum.

"The second duty of the Guard is the maintenance of the facility. The first hour of the shift will be devoted to inspection and cleaning of the Alpha Mausoleum. Any dust or debris must be removed, and the Shift Leader will perform a white-glove inspection at the end of the hour, before the first patrol is assigned.

"In addition, during the last hour of the Shift, all twelve members will inspect and clean a section of the Grid or outer Museum, assigned

by the Facility Supervisor. Again, any dust or debris must be removed, and the Shift Leader will perform a white-glove inspection at the end of the hour, before assembling to stand relieved and go off-duty.

"Any damage to the Grid or Mausoleum is to be reported to the facility supervisor as soon as possible.

"The third duty of the Guard is the protection of the facility. The Guard will remain ever vigilant against intrusion, mishap, or natural disaster. They will watch over the Grid and Mausoleum and will faithfully discharge their duty to our honored dead.

"When not actively patrolling, Guards are allowed to rest in the lounge provided in the outer Museum. At all times, they shall act with decorum and respect appropriate to the hallowed nature of this facility.

"Additional duties may also arise due to special circumstances, such as holidays or the interment of a fallen comrade.

"Your vigil will be a lonely one. There are few visitors to this place. The sun does not shine here. The only light you will see will be from the light bulbs overhead. And this is where you will remain for twelve hours every three days.

"But as lonely as your duty is, it will be a sacred one. For you have been entrusted with protecting those of your comrades who have given their lives to protect humanity. Here are the remains of those who have died unknown to the ones they saved.

"Carry out your duties perfectly. Make them proud.

"Training begins at 0500 hours tomorrow. Dismissed."

"Tempering"

Spider had been walking up the mountain trail for a good half hour, and her feet were starting to hurt. It didn't help that she was carrying a heavy backpack: she'd done long ruck marches in training, but she'd been out on rehabilitation for a long time and knew she was out of shape. Hopefully, the rest of this trip would help.

Thankfully, she could already see the small log cabin up ahead. A thin stream of smoke emitted from the brick-and-clay oven nearby. The high, metallic sound of hammer on steel could be heard even at this distance.

She hiked her backpack a little higher, took a drink of water from her camelbak, and forged on.

Hopefully, the blisters would be worth it in the end.

"So you've finally come down to visit, huh, girl?"

Heinrich Guggenheim looked exactly like one would expect a dwarf to look: short, stocky, and massively built, with forearms the size of hams and fists the size of small kegs. He was a middle-aged, balding man with a neatly trimmed, white beard and intense, beady eyes, and his face and arms were marked with dozens of small, pale burn scars. He stepped back and looked Spider up and down once, and laughed out loud. "Looking good. You're wearing that new body well."

"Thanks," Spider said, smiling. "Complete thaumatological identity reassignment will do that. Given that I'm gonna be spending a lifetime working for the Coalition, the least they can do is let me feel comfortable in my own body."

"And now that you're settled in, you've come to visit old Guggenheim for those knives he promised you, huh?" The old man laughed out

loud. "All right, girl. Let's see what I can do."

Heinrich let out a low, impressed grunt as Spider unwrapped the heavy, silk-wrapped package she'd been carrying strapped to her backpack. "Is that real?"

"Yeah," Spider said. "It fell over Siberia a few years back. I've been buying up as many pieces as I can."

He picked up one of the fragments of meteoric iron and weighed it in his hand contemplatively. "High iron content," he said. "But are you sure it's going to be enough to make three knives?"

"It doesn't have to be. We can fill in with regular iron if we need to. Sympathy and Contagion will transfer its properties over."

Guggenheim nodded. "I've been saving a good solid ingot for you. From the days back when you were apprenticing with me. Got a lot of history behind it. We smelt it into blanks along with this, and it'll work out great. Which brings us to the question of payment."

"You're not going to bring up Brisingamen again, are you?"

"You said it. Not me. It does have the weight of tradition behind it," Heinrich smirked.

"Unlike Freya, I have something better to barter with than gold." She opened up her backpack and pulled out two corrugated cardboard cylinders.

"18 year?" Heinrich asked.

"25. Two of the Yamazaki. And one 30-year Hibiki."

"… yeah, that'll do nicely," Guggenheim laughed. "You could have gotten this done for 12-year, you know."

"I know. But I want it done quickly, before the Coalition calls me back up again. I'm technically on 'psychological rehabilitation,' but the shrinks think that doing this will help my healing process. Even so, they won't let me stay for too long."

"Yeah, I heard," Guggenheim admitted. "Good on you getting back into the game." He raised the bottles of dark amber liquid to the light. "For this? Yeah, I'll get it done fast. But you'll be helping me."

"Wouldn't want it any other way."

"So you're wanting the full set, then?" the smith asked. He sketched out the broad outline of three knives on a sheet of butcher paper on the roughly hewn table in the cabin's kitchen. "Athame, boline, and secespita?"

"Yeah," Spider said, sitting down across from him.

"Any particulars in design?"

"I'll leave that up to you, as the expert."

"Mmmm. Boline's easy. You want a hawkbill blade. Concave cutting edge. Well suited to cutting mistletoe and tree branches. And the athame… straight blade, double-edged dagger, with a broad fuller so we can carve in some runes. Secespita's the tough one. Some people prefer a clip point: gives you a sharper tip, but drop point's better in my opinion. Less chance of slicing open the guts if you do haruspicy."

"Not much call for that these days."

"Not much call for hand-forged ritual knives, either. But then again, you've always preferred the traditional methods." Guggenheim quickly sketched out the details of the three knives in charcoal, filling out the details. "The athame will be the largest. Boline and secespita will have at least partial serrations. Full tang wootz steel. You'll want sheaths too, right? Leather's the best material for sheaths."

"They have to go onto tactical webbing. Maybe I should see if the armorers can adapt the sheath from an OKC-3S or something."

"Nylon ruins the purity. Leather's better."

"There's no proof that storage in plastic or synthetic fibers can disrupt the EVE signature of a ritual device," Spider pointed out.

"You want my help, or don't you? Leather sheaths. You can attach your nylon loops and stuff to them if you must, but the part that touches the blade must be leather."

"If you insist. Do you have any?"

"I do, but for these knives… hmm." Guggenheim leaned back in his chair and ran a hand over his balding pate. "Can you still handle a bow and arrow?"

Spider knelt at the base of the tree, arrow nocked to her bowstring, and took a deep, cleansing breath, clearing her mind of all distractions. She could feel the cool air of the forest all around her, caressing her face and throat. It was soothing. Calming. Still.

Memories of a childhood spent in the woods. Trudging through the forest following her father's orange vest. Listening to him give advice on how to stalk the prey, how to hold perfectly still, how to respect nature and all its living things. The pride in his eyes when she'd shot her first buck: single rifle bullet through the heart. A good kill.

Remembering her father's eyes reminded her of worse days. Angry voices and narrowed eyes. Raised voices. A slamming door.

She hadn't heard from her family in years. Not that they would recognize her. She'd changed too much since then.

She sometimes wondered if they thought of her. She wondered if they'd declared her dead yet.

She wondered if her father had forgiven her.

The sound of a snapping twig roused her from her thoughts. She opened her eyes very slowly, careful not to move from her crouching position in the bushes.

The stag was an old, powerful buck, with twenty-point antlers and greying fur at its muzzle and throat. It scanned the treeline warily before emerging to dip its head and nibble at the berries and salt she had laid out in the clearing.

Spider slowly raised the bow and drew the arrow back to her ear.

She released the string smoothly, and the white-fletched missile leaped from the string with a sharp hiss.

It struck home with a dull thud, penetrating right behind the shoulder.

The deer leaped away, bellowing in pain and terror. It turned to run, but collapsed within a few steps and lay still on the leaf-strewn ground, sides heaving.

Spider drew a second arrow from her quiver and got to her feet. Approaching quickly, but carefully, she advanced to around ten feet and fired a second, precise arrow through the dear's heart.

The beast quivered once and then lay still.

Grabbing the dying animal by the antlers, she drew the blade of her hunting knife across its throat.

Warm blood spilled over her hands and pooled underneath the animal, staining the fallen leaves bright red.

She took a moment to cut a sprig from a nearby tree and place it in the animal's mouth. Breaking off a twig from that branch, she dipped it in the blood and put it into her hair as a souvenir of the day's hunt.

Then, working quickly, she used the knife she'd cut the deer's throat with to draw a circle around the carcass.

She wondered if she should do this next part skyclad. She decided against it: the weather was far too cold to be gallavanting about naked in the woods, no matter what the ritual significance.

She removed the arrows and put them side: one of them was reusable, the other had broken when the beast rolled over onto it. She then turned the deer onto its back and, starting with the sternum, opened up its belly with a slow sweep of the hunting knife.

The intestines spilled out, warm and steaming, onto the forest floor: she lifted them in her arms and tossed them to the south, trailing out

of the deer's belly like a long cord. The lungs she pulled out through the ribs, spreading them open like eagle's wings. The liver and heart she kept, putting them aside for later.

It was long, bloody, tiring work, and the sun was setting by the time she finally got to her feet. The skin, head, haunches, and much of the meat she took with her. The rest she left for the wolves and scavengers to return to the earth. Wiping a few flecks of blood off her face, she bowed once to the setting sun and turned to make the long hike back to Guggenheim's cabin.

Guggenheim poured some of the deer's blood over the chunks of iron, glass, sand, and charcoal inside the clay crucible. He tossed the heart onto the charcoal before sealing up the clay-and-brick oven and igniting the flames.

They dined that night on venison steaks and potatoes, after Spider had cleaned the hide and set it in a barrel with salt to cure. They would stay up all night pumping air into the oven through the great bellows, keeping the flames alight.

Dawn came, and with it came the opening of the oven, and the removal of the crucible. Guggenheim smiled as he saw the glowing ingot emerge from the slag and clay. "Good steel," he said. "It'll make good knives."

"The best," Spider agreed.

He added the deer's liver to the coals of his forge: it sizzled and smoked as he plunged the ingot into the hot coals. Spider helped him to pound the steel into a long, thin blank, raising and slamming down the heavy steel hammer until her back ached and her arms felt like jelly. Then, with chisel and hammer, he divided the glowing steel into three pieces.

Long days passed. While Guggenheim devoted himself to heating, pounding, and shaping the blanks, Spider finished cleaning and curing the deer's hide. She chose one of its antlers, and two of its ribs, and saved them for handles. The meat she cured, salted, and dried into jerky.

The beast had given its life for her, and she would make use of it to the very end.

The first blade Guggenheim finished was the athame: long and slender, double-edged, with slender quillions, a broad fuller inset with silver runes. She carved the handle out of good, solid oak, stained black, carved runes into them and inlaid them with silver. This was the ritual blade, the one that she used to draw circles and cut through the ether.

The second was the boline: curved and short, with a concave edge and a blunt tip. She made this handle out of the deer's antler, carving and polishing it into a smooth hilt. This was the working blade, the one she could use to cut herbs and mistletoe, a tool for everyday work.

Those two blades would never draw blood. But the third was the secespita, the killing blade, the knife of sacrifice. This one Guggenheim made with a sturdy drop point and a razor-sharp edge. She carved the handle out of bone, taken from the deer's ribs, the bones that lay close to the heart.

The night after Guggenheim finished the third knife, she took it with her into his rabbit pens and picked out a big, fat one ready to be eaten. She held the struggling animal down on the oak stump and cut its throat.

The blood spilled out over her hands once more, and she shivered as she raised it to her lips and tasted the life-blood of the dead creature. She drew the circle with the point of the athame and burned the sage that she had cut with boline. She inhaled the smoke and closed her eyes and slept that night under the stars, wrapped in the hide of the deer she had killed, with the knives she had crafted from its body resting around her at three points of an equilateral triangle.

Three knives. One meant for harm. The second meant for harvest. The third for power. The tools of her craft.

"You happy with them?" Heinrich asked the next morning. He'd put a final polish on the blades, and now they lay on a blanket made of soft deerskin: the long, slender athame, the short, hawkbilled boline, the broad secespita. They shone like rippling water, beautifully damascened. Forged from the same steel under the same moon, shining like stars.

"They're perfect," Spider said. She wrapped them in the deerhide and bound them in leather cord. She would have the hide tanned into hard leather, and would bring it to the Coalition's armorers to craft into sheaths for these new knives of hers.

"Did you find what you were looking for?" Guggenheim asked.

"… I think so," Spider replied.

"Then good luck down there, girl," the old man said, and he leaned forward to kiss his student on the forehead. "And take care of yourself."

"I will," Spider whispered.

Tears welled up in her eyes, and she sat down hard, silent sobs shaking her body.

Guggenheim sat down next to her and put his arm around her shoulders. They would sit like that together until the pain stopped and she could stand on her own once more.

"Spider."

"Bullfrog." She sat down across from her team leader at the conference table, nodding to him respectfully. "Kitten. Skunkboy."

The four of them took their seats around the table as Bullfrog turned out the lights and brought up a map of a small coastal town up on the projection screen.

"This is Dunwich, Massachusetts," he said. "It's a neutral zone between humanity and the Subpelagics, and one of the few places where cross-breeding between the two species takes place. The

town has been neutral ground for both parties for at least one hundred years. And last week, that neutrality was broken…"

He went over the details of the incident, the rising diplomatic tensions, the emergency treaty that narrowly averted all-out war between humanity and the dwellers of the deep. "Our mission is to find out what's actually going on," he concluded. "We'll be seconded to PSYCHE division's investigative team. Our job is basically to be on hand if and when they need someone with combat experience. In the meantime, we'll assist with the investigation as best we can. Are there any questions?"

No one answered.

He took a deep breath. "All right, then one last thing." He turned on the lights, illuminating the room fully and casting the shadows away. "We've been hurt," he said, his voice low and husky. "And this is our first time back out in the field. And what makes the hurt worse is that it was one of us… it was me… doing a lot of the hurting. I still think that our team is solid. I still think we're strong. But… if you need to do anything… to say anything… so that we can put that hurting behind us and get the job down… I'm here. And I'm ready."

There was silence, broken only by the sound of the projector's cooling fan slowly turning.

Spider licked her lips and breathed in very slowly, then out just as slow.

"Bullfrog?" she said.

The big man's mouth twitched once. He turned and looked her in the eyes for the first time in over a month.

"I'll follow you wherever you lead me," she said. Her voice shook a bit, and she cleared her throat. "Even into hell."

Bullfrog nodded at that. For a moment, she thought she could see moisture well up in his eyes, but then he blinked and set his shoulders, and his eyes had returned to their usual cool, calm, flint-like hardness.

"Then let's move," he said. "Meet up in the hangar at 1800. And pack heavy. We may be there for a while."

"Sequence"

« **Trauma** | **Return to GOC Hub** | **Vigil**»

"Scramble Order"

Skunkboy knocked on the apartment door. There was no response.

He knocked on the door again. Still no response.

He very carefully stepped to one side of the door and pressed his ear against the wall. He thought he could hear the sound of footsteps and a low, muffled, masculine curse.

Oh. Crap.

Skunkboy took a deep breath. He pulled his pistol from his waistband holster. Checked the chamber for a round. Made sure the magazine was seated. Checked the safety.

He laid the pistol on the ground where he could grab it quickly, then rummaged around in his jacket pocket for his breaching kit.

A moment later, the door opened.

He froze.

Spider was standing in the doorway. Her cheeks were flushed and her hair was disheveled and her eyes were angry. She was wearing a black silk nightgown, embroidered with red-and-gold spiders.

It was immediately obvious to Skunkboy that she wasn't wearing underwear.

Ohhhhh… Skunkboy thought. And then *… crap.*

"Sorry about this," he said cautiously. "We tried to contact you by phone, but you weren't picking up."

"I'm supposed to be off-duty," Spider said coldly. "Couldn't this wait until morning?"

"It seriously can't," Skunkboy said. "Scramble Alert. We need to deploy as soon as possible."

"Fuck," Spider growled. "All right. You may as well wait inside, so the neighbors don't freak out about an armed psychopath in the hallway."

She turned away and re-entered her apartment. Skunkboy carefully gathered up his weapon and breaching kit and followed her inside.

"Nice place," he said admiringly. "I like the *shoji* screens. Adds a bit of coziness. Breaks up the big empty space."

"Also helps the *feng shui,*" Spider explained. "Prevents the positive energy from flowing out and breaks up negative energy trying to come in." She seemed to be getting grumpy now, which was better than pissed off in Skunkboy's book. "There's water in the fridge if you need it. Bathroom's down the hall."

She marched into the next room and closed the door behind her. Skunkboy heard muffled conversation coming from within.

His throat suddenly felt very dry. He decided to avail himself of the water and ice dispensers set into the fridge.

He was just taking a sip when the bedroom door opened and a young man walked out, shrugging into a dark blue blazer. Skunkboy looked over the newcomer with a discerning eye. Nice cheekbones. Strong jawline. Good abs.

Nice…

The stranger picked up a half-empty bottle and two champagne flutes from the lacquered wood coffee table. He flinched as he looked up and saw Skunkboy standing in the kitchen, sipping his glass of water. "Um. Hi," the stranger said nervously.

"You're Flintlock, right?" Skunkboy asked. "From PTOLEMY division? Public Relations and Information Concealment?"

"Yeah. You must be, uhhh…"

"Skunkboy. Team sharpshooter. I'd offer to shake your hand, but you're busy."

"Oh. Yeah. We were just, uhh… having an evening…" Flint's face flushed pink, which he tried to hide by rinsing the champagne flutes out in the sink. Skunkboy could smell a whiff of Spider's perfume coming off his skin, and noted that the top button of his shirt seemed to have come loose.

He briefly considered one of two courses of action to take and settled on the more entertaining one.

"Did you cut yourself shaving?" he asked.

"What?" Flint replied.

"You've got a little red on your collar," Skunkboy said. He pointed at a patch of smudged lipstick on Flint's shirt collar and was gratified to see the other man start to stammer.

Bam. Right through the X-Ring on the first shot.

"Stop harrassing my boyfriend, Skunky," Spider said. She emerged from the bedroom wearing a black turtleneck and slacks, her hair tied up in a loose bun, her bug-out bag slung over her shoulder. "All right, hon, I'm out," she said to Flint. "Just remember to lock up when you leave."

"Come back safe," Flintlock said.

Spider paused to give Flintlock one of those slow, lingering kisses that makes everyone else in the room cough and look at their watches, which Skunkboy did. "All right," she said. "Let's get going."

Damn. Out-maneuvered.

Skunkboy ceded this round to Spider.

"So what the hell is going on that they're issuing a Scramble Alert to an Assessment Team, of all things?" Spider asked on the elevator ride down.

"I have no idea. They don't tell me these things," Skunkboy said. "All I know is that Bullfrog needs us back at HQ within the hour, no questions asked."

"I am a mushroom," Spider grumbled.

Kept in the dark and fed bullshit. "Hoorah, Semper Fi, Do or Die, and *Tennouheika Banzai.*" Skunkboy said.

The elevator continued its slow descent down towards the basement of the apartment building.

"So…" Skunkboy said.

"So…" Spider agreed.

The elevator continued to descend.

"You've been dating that guy for a few months now," Skunkboy said.

"I have," Spider agreed.

"… I hope I wasn't interrupting, like… you know. THE night," Skunkboy said.

"We've slept together before," Spider said.

"Oh. Cool."

The elevator continued to continue to descend.

"He treating you right?"

"… do you mean in bed or in general?" Spider asked.

"Yes."

Spider shrugged, and a small, pleased smile appeared on her face. "Well, he calls after each date. He picks up the check at dinner, but doesn't flip out if I want to pay for half. And he brings me flowers."

"Nice," Skunkboy said.

"… plus, he does this thing with his tongue that's like… really good."

"Niiiiice," Skunkboy said, grinning. "High five."

They exchanged high fives, and Skunkboy ruffled the smaller woman's hair. "If he ever hurts you," he said, "Let us know."

"Thanks," Spider said, "but if he hurts me, I'll take care of him myself."

"Really?"

"Contagion is an interesting thing. You can attack someone through their toenail clippings, hair clippings… but bodily fluids have some of the strongest links," Spider explained. "That's why a lot of mages are celibate."

"Really. Huh." Skunkboy said thoughtfully. "So after sleeping with him…"

"I could wither his balls into raisins and make his piss feel like glass and fire. And that would just be for starters," Spider said.

"Remind me never to date Type Blues," Skunkboy said, laughing. "You mages are scary."

"Mmm… there are benefits," Spider said smugly.

"Huh." Skunkboy was about to ask more, but then the elevator dinged and the doors slid open.

"Where are you parked?" Spider asked.

"Visitor spot number six," Skunkboy said. "This way."

The two of them continued across the parking structure towards visitor parking.

"So yeah," Spider said. "My focus of study has been on neo-traditional thaumaturgy. Studying traditional forms of magic and updating them to modern understandings of thaumatology."

"Yeah. Hence the knives and the mistletoe and stuff."

"Mm hmm," Spider said. "Well, my current focus of study is O.T.O. Ordo Templi Orientis. Aleister Crowley and stuff like that. Most of his stuff is bunk, but there's enough info in there that I've been researching and refining down into the useful core."

"… I have no idea what you're talking about. Or how that relates to your boyfriend."

"Crowley did a lot of work in sex magick," Spider explained. "And the better the orgasms, the more energy generated."

"… huh. So basically, you've been spending your research budget from ICSUT…"

"Practicing better ways to fuck my boyfriend," Spider said, sounding unbelievably smug.

"Nice." Skunkboy popped open the trunk of his car, and Spider tossed her bag inside. "Found anything useful?"

"A little bit. Mostly academic, though. Not much there that I can use in my day job. I mean, I can't exactly carry a vibrator and scented candles into the field." She opened the door of the red sports car and climbed into the front passenger's seat.

"You'd be surprised. I've seen weirder things in the field." Skunkboy slid into the driver's seat and buckled up.

"Oh?"

"Yeah. Hang on, I need to give Bull a call." Skunkboy dropped his smart phone into the docking port on the dashboard of his car and pressed a couple of buttons. The phone lit up and began to dial as he started up the engine and pulled out of the parking spot.

Click.

"Skunkboy, this is Bullfrog," a baritone voice said. "Go."

"I've got Spider, and we're on our way in," Skunkboy said. "ETA

fifteen minutes."

"All right. Kitten's already here. Meet us in the briefing room and I'll explain when you guys get here. Bullfrog out."

Click.

"So yeah," Skunkboy said, as they drove out of the parking structure. (A pale blue line of runes across the driveway glowed briefly as they passed: the protective ward confirming that everyone in the car was in it of their own free will). "You ever meet Knuckles? From 792 Fire Lance?"

"… yeah?"

"Brings a fleshlight, dildo, and lube every mission."

"… why?!" Spider exclaimed incredulously.

"Man, I don't know and I don't fucking want to know. Or how the fuck he got the handle 'Knuckles' in the first place. Dude's fucking strange." Skunkboy stopped at the red light, leaned his elbow against the driver's side door and watched the cross-traffic drive by. "He's one of the best safecrackers in PHYSICS Division, though. There's that."

"… so he's really good at putting long, thin, hard things into tight cracks? Working in tight spaces?" Spider smirked.

"Ha! I didn't even think about that angle." The light turned green, and Skunkboy continued on. "And that's not even getting into the condoms, tampons, pads, and other shit we use as field-expedient solutions. Sometimes I think we just do it to fuck with Q Division."

"Man, don't even get me started on Quartermaster Division. You know they've got digi-cam tampons in stock?" Spider asked.

"Really? Why the fuck would you need tactical tampons?" Skunkboy wondered.

"Having your period in the field? But if they're gonna get all bloody anyway, what's the point?"

"I mean, I can kinda understand the wrappers and applicators and shit being digi-cam, but the tampons themselves? I mean, it's not like they make us digi-cam our shell casings." Skunkboy made a left turn at a yellow light and pulled onto the freeway. "Plus, isn't that dangerous? Dyeing tampons, I mean. Toxic Shock Syndrome and shit like that?"

"Man, I don't even know. Q Division is a bunch of fucking weirdos," Spider said. "That bald asshole with the Batman tattoo on the back of his head…"

"Spencer?"

"Yeah, that motherfucker," Spider griped. "Every time I go down there, he tries to tell me that I should trade in my 1911 for a USP. 'Bigger magazine,'" Spider said, doing a passable imitation of a gruff, Southern accent. "'Yew don' wanna be stuck out thar in the shit wit' only seven rounds in yer mag, do ya little lady?' Fuck off! As if I'd ever be able to shoot one of those big-ass double-wides with these tiny hands," Spider grumbled.

"Spencer's a fucking tool," Skunkboy agreed. "Go to Vic instead. Little old dude with the Colonel Sanders beard. He's old-school."

"Yeah, I know Vic. He looks at me as if I'm a three-headed kitten or something. And I've heard some of the shit he says in the mess hall. Dude's 'phobic as hell."

"… huh. Really?" Skunkboy said curiously.

"Well, I'm not sure. He could be calling me 'that he-she from Sparkplug' with the best of intentions," Spider said sarcastically.

"… well. That's disappointing as shit. And against policy." They pulled into the parking lot of a nondescript office building, crossing another line of blue runes that glowed briefly as they passed. "You should take it up with Schowalter in HR." Skunkboy popped the trunk and pulled his bug-out bag and rifle case, slinging the latter over his shoulder.

"It's not worth rocking the boat over," Spider insisted, retrieving her

bag from the trunk.

"Bullshit. You're not at your best if you don't trust your Quartermaster. And if you're not at your best, it puts the rest of us in danger. Talk to Angela. She'll straighten Vic out." Skunkboy closed the trunk, and the two of them headed into the building.

"I guess. It's weird, though. I've put up with that shit all my life, but I didn't figure it would keep on going after I went for full identity reassignment. I mean, shit. I'm female down to the DNA now. No different from Kitten or Fox," Spider grumbled.

"Eh. There's always gonna be some asshole hates you for no good reason, and they'll justify it any way they can. Human nature." Skunkboy walked to the elevator, hid the button from view with his body, and turned the "up" button so that the arrow faced down, pressed it three times. "Anyway, talk to Angela. She'll work it out."

"I guess. You think it might cause problems between us and Q Division, though?" Spider wondered.

"I don't know. But you think you're the only one Vic's talking shit about behind their back? Best to let HR deal with it and smooth this issue out for you."

The elevator went ding, and the doors opened. Spider and Skunkboy walked in, and the doors closed. Shortly afterwards, the back wall of the elevator slid open, revealing a second elevator with bare steel walls and floor.

Skunkboy pressed the button for the bottom level, and the elevator descended into the hidden section under the unassuming office building. "Anyway, if you don't want to talk to HR, I'll do it for you," Skunkboy said. "I won't even mention your name."

"All right. That's fine, though, I'll talk to Angela once we get back from the Scramble," Spider said. "Speaking of which, we'd better get our game faces on, and find out what the hell is so important that it's worth pulling me out of bed for." Spider paused. "You weren't in the middle of anything too important, were you?"

"… Powerpuff Girls marathon," Skunkboy admitted.

"… really?"

"Sister asked me if I'd come over and watch her daughters for the evening," Skunkboy said. "If you think YOU were pissed, imagine how Vicky felt when I told her she had to come home from her date early."

"Shit. Now I feel bad."

"Eh. Her date was trash. Didn't even walk her to the door."

"What a fucking asshole," Spider agreed.

Skunkboy opened the briefing room door, and they walked inside.

"Sequence"

« **UHEC** | **Return to GOC Hub** | **END** »

"Special Observer"

"It's the same old story that it's always been," Dr. Elaine Wicks said. "The farmers and ranchers keep slashing and burning their way into the forest. When they encounter the local tribes, they drive them off, sometimes by force. There are supposed to be laws in place to protect them, but the local governments are less than eager to enforce them. If you could put a word in with your superiors…"

"I'll pass your concerns on to them," the man known as Joseph Knight said, "but I can't guarantee that they'll take action. I'm only here to assess the historical significance of the find."

"Of course. That's what UNESCO needs to be concerned with," Dr. Wicks said bitterly. "Protecting the ruins. Those have world significance, don't they?"

"The United Nations is, of course, concerned with the human rights of the indigenous inhabitants," Knight replied. "But that doesn't fall under my jurisdiction. I can promise, however, that your concerns will be passed on to the relevant authorities."

"That's all I ask," Dr. Wicks said. "The Yashiwa are a fascinating tribe, and it would be a crime if their culture and heritage were destroyed so that Americans can get fat on hamburgers…"

"I prefer tacos," Knight said. "If you'd excuse me, ma'am?"

He nodded respectfully to the doctor and walked out of his trailer into the stifling heat of the Amazon rainforest. His thin shirt clung to his body, and the chirruping sounds of insects and brightly colored birds surrounded him like a kaleidoscope of sound. The camp was a small one: several tents, a latrine, and a trailer with computers, satellite uplink, and a gasoline-powered generator augmented by solar panels. The structures were arranged in a loose semi-circle at the base of a massive temple: hundreds of meters tall, made of hand-cut stone, covered in crumbling reliefs and tangled masses of

vines. Thirteen archaeologists and anthropologists had come to this place to study the so called "Yashiwa Pyramid," already being hailed as one of the biggest archeological finds of the century.

Mister Knight, and a few other members of the team, were here for a different reason.

He saw James Zhao wave to him, and nodded to the young Chinese-American man, before jogging over next to his colleague. "Can you confirm?" he asked.

"Not yet," Zhao said grimly, "I'm still trying to figure out what's going on here."

"Damn," Knight sighed. "Have you managed to slow down the progress?"

"I've convinced the teams that we need to catalog and study the exterior in-depth before we even think about entering the structure," Zhao said, "but it's only a matter of time before one of them slips their leash and tries to open up one of those doors. I can't exactly tell them not to open up King Tut's tomb, can I?"

"Do your best," Knight said. "Seriously. Try hard. The Council was adamant on this point: whatever's inside here, it caused half of their oracles to have a foaming fit when the discovery was announced. We cannot let this place get opened until we figure out what's inside. If someone does, and something bad happens… well, the last thing I want to do is to have to blame the Yashiwa for the massacre of a bunch of students. The 'murderous marauding savages,' thing doesn't really go over well, these days. Besides, they seem like nice people."

"Speak of the Devil," Zhao sighed. On the other side of the camp, a slight, rangy man with leathery, caramel-colored skin was walking towards them. He carried an ornately decorated blowgun-cum-spear-cum-walking stick in one hand, and his shirtless body was covered in ornate, interlocking tattoos. Out of respect for the newcomers, the man had traded in his traditional garments of woven plant fibers for a pair of brightly colored shorts. He had also traded in his traditional hand-woven sandals for a pair of leather Birkenstocks:

that had less to do with respect, and more to do with comfort. Yashiwa shoes were notoriously uncomfortable.

"Mister Tashika," Knight said, inclining his head respectfully. "It is good to see you again."

"And you, Mister Knight," the man said. His English was tinged with a low, guttural accent: the Yashiwa language was largely glottal. "Your studies go well?"

"They do indeed. We've been studying the bas-reliefs on the walls of the pyramid," Knight said. "They're fascinating. Do you know anything about them?"

Tashika laughed out loud and shook his head. "I wish I could tell you that this was an ancient holy site to my people, and maybe even quote you some ancient story passed down from mother to daughter for countless generations… but the truth is, I don't know shit. The Yashiwa never came here often. There's no river here, the soil is bad, and the hunting poor."

"Which is the interesting thing, to me," Knight mused. "People don't often build huge buildings out in the middle of nowhere. Buildings this big usually get built where there's some kind of natural resource to draw upon. A river for trade or fishing. Fertile ground for farming. High ground, for defense and isolation. Not to mention that you don't often find temples without ancillary buildings around them…"

"Ancillary?"

"Secondary," Knight clarified. "Things like homes for the priests, or farms to feed them, or to house craftsmen or merchants. Those almost always pop up around religious centers like temples. It's not often that you see a single building like this out in the middle of the jungle."

"Then maybe this isn't a temple?" Tashika suggested.

Knight paused for a moment, carefully choosing his next words before going on: "There's really nothing else it can be," he said, trying to keep his voice calm: Tashika was treading dangerously

close to the truth here. "A building this big, what can it be?"

"I do not know," Tashika said. "But…" he laughed nervously and rubbed the back of his head. "Shit. This is going to make me sound like some ignorant tribal…"

"You're anything but ignorant, Tashika. Just go on and tell me."

"All right," the Yashiwa man said, sighing. "Look. Our village has this… this old woman. Crazy old crone. We call her the Great Mother. They say that she can see the future. It's all ancient legends and myths, but it's part of our culture, you understand?"

"Yeah," Knight said. "Shamans and wise women are universal." He vaguely remembered meeting the old woman when he and the UNESCO team had made their introductions to the local Yashiwa tribes. He remembered a withered old woman with one arm, leaning heavily on a stick, glaring angrily at the interlopers into her village. He also remembered Zhao telling him that the woman's EVE signature was showing distinct tendencies towards extrasensory perceptive abilities…

"It's all bullshit, but… well, the Great Mother's insisting that we move to our winter grounds early this year. That's a thirty mile journey through the jungle. We usually don't make that journey until a few months later in the year, but… she's insisting that disaster's going to befall us if we remain here, and she's got my father so riled up that he's agreed to move the tribe early this year." Tashika laughed nervously, hiding his teeth with one hand. "It's all tribalist bullshit, but the older folks are taking it seriously. So it looks like I won't be able to help you guys out any more."

"That's a shame," Knight said, and meant it. Tashika had been a treasure: a Yashiwa man, raised in the culture of the tribes, but raised in the city, and college educated, to boot. He had been invaluable in smoothing out negotiations between the UNESCO team and the Yashiwa, and Knight was certain that he was going to miss the young man. "Maybe when you come back to your summer grounds, you and I can meet up again."

"If you are still here," Tashika agreed. "It may be that you find out all

you need to know about this place before then, and you will go home."

"Perhaps," Knight agreed.

"I'll go let the others know," Tashika said. "Thank you for your help… and for your respect, Mister Knight. Good day. Mister Zhao."

"Tashika," Zhao said, extending his hand in friendship. "Good luck. I'm going to miss you."

"And I you, Mister Zhao."

The young man inclined his head respectfully to Knight, then walked away to say his goodbyes to his friends on the rest of the UNESCO research team. Knight shook his head, brow furrowed in worry. "Jimmy? Why does an old proverb about rats and sinking ships come to mind?"

"I was thinking the exact same thing," Zhao admitted.

"Mister Knight?"

Knight awoke slowly, to find Zhao leaning over his cot. The young man's face was drawn with worry.

"Mister Knight," Zhao said. "I think it's happened."

"What's going on?" Knight asked, suddenly alert.

"Timothy and Jonas are missing. And one of the temple doors is open."

"Damn," Knight growled. "I thought I had at least another week before one of those kids tried something stupid…"

"I don't think it's their fault. You'd better come see."

Knight understood the moment that he came out of his tent. It wasn't hard to miss the knocked-over tent on the edge of the camp, guylines snapped, steel poles bent in two. One of the nylon walls

had been shredded, as if by some massive claw. There was a dark blotch on the ground that looked a lot like blood.

"Who else knows?" Knight asked.

"Two other researchers. Lin and Tamaki. I think that's it."

"All right," Knight said coldly. "You talk to them. Get them to keep quiet. Tell them it's a bear or something, and we're going after them. I'll get the gear."

Knight strode quickly across the camp to the equipment tent, where he unlocked a box of gear that he had kept sealed since arriving in South America. Inside, there were two headsets, a pair of M-4 carbines, ammunition, and a satellite phone.

He took out the rifles first, checked to make sure that the chambers were empty, and put them aside. Knight then picked up the satellite phone and dialed a number that didn't exist in any phone directory on Earth.

"Central," a soft, feminine voice said. "Report."

"Central, this is Tasker One," Knight said. "Authentication Code Victor Assegai Nine Two Two."

"Tasker One, Central confirms. Bringing up your casefile now… transferring you to your appropriate controller. Wait one, please."

Knight picked up one of the two headsets, checking the OCULUS rigs' batteries and doing a quick diagnostic, while Journey's "Wheel in the Sky" played over the phone. The phone picked up before the song had a chance to repeat once.

"Tasker One, this is Central Authority. Report, over."

"Central, Tasker One. I've got two missing civilians, and the temple doors have opened. I'm about to enter the structure with Tasker Two. Third Mission Priority. I am escalating to Response Level 3. If you don't hear back from us within three hours, consider it a Response Level 4 emergency. Please confirm. Over."

"Tasker One, Central confirms two missing civilians, temple doors open. Central confirms your escalation to Response Level 3. Central will escalate to Response Level Four at 0600 hours, local time. Over."

"Thank you, Central. Tasker One out." Knight hung up the satellite phone and hung the unit from his belt buckle. He picked up an empty day pack and packed in food, water, medical supplies, and a laptop computer. Zhao joined him in the tent shortly after, and Knight helped him to pack a day pack of his own.

The two men emerged from the tent, carrying their assault rifles and wearing their night vision goggles. He could see two of the researchers from the UNESCO archeology team standing by the tents. Lin raised her eyebrow in alarm, at seeing the two men dressed like special operations soldiers.

"All right," Knight said shortly. "We've got two missing personnel, possibly kidnapped. Zhao and I are going to see if we can get them back. Lin, if you don't hear back from us by 0600… sorry, 6 'o clock… take everyone, pack them into the vehicles, and drive towards town. Find the nearest American Embassy and tell them what happened."

"What did happen?" the hapless Lin exclaimed. "I don't get this at all!"

"Terrorists," Knight said grimly. "I think they kidnapped Tim and Jonas. I'm going to see if we can't find them."

"But…"

"Lin," Zhao said softly. "If we don't come back, the terrorists could come after the rest of you. You need to make sure the team gets to safety. You're in charge here."

Lin hesitated to say more, then, finally, just nodded. "Be safe," she said.

"Terrorists, huh?" Zhao whispered, as the two men started jogging towards the temple.

"The catch-all explanation for all weirdass activity," Knight agreed.

Through VERITAS, the interior of the abandoned temple seemed to glow with a sickly greenish light, the patterns vaguely resembling those of blood splatters or nails being raked across stone. Greenish mist seemed to swirl around the two men, raising goosebumps on their bare arms. The image of a flayed skull raced towards Knight, lipless mouth open in a wordless scream, then vanished into the darkness.

"Bad things happened in here," Zhao whispered.

"Very bad," Knight agreed. It took a lot of emotional and spiritual violence for EVE signals to linger as deeply as these did. There had been murder done in this place… and worse.

"Knight," Zhao said softly. He gestured to a spot on the ground that had a brighter VERITAS signature than the others. Knight dropped to one knee and ran his hand over the pool of brightly shining white light. His fingertips came away sticky.

He put his fingertips to his nose and smelled blood.

"It's fresh," he said. "Couldn't have been shed more than a few minutes ago. I think we're catching up to them."

It was then that Knight heard the moaning.

It was very soft, and very low, no louder than a kitten's cry, but it was low and guttural, and tinged with a nasty wet sound. It was coming from deeper into the temple. Further into the darkness.

"… you know." Zhao quipped. "It's at this point in all the horror movies that I always started yelling at the girl not to go into the dark scary temple. Just go home. Who cares what's in there…"

"Yeah," Knight agreed. "But…"

He raised the rifle to his shoulder and continued to walk down the dark, mildewy hallways. Closer to the sound.

The light was dim. It was the color of fireflies. Thousands of them. It flickered and glowed dimly, up ahead in the dark.

Knight stepped into the central chamber, and he felt his gorge rise. The thing in the center was a mass of… matter… about knee high. It was spongy, laced with tiny holes about the width of a pencil. Thousands of small, glowing maggots writhed and burrowed their way through the mass, their tiny bodies inching forward bit by bit, slowly but surely.

The thing on the top of the mass wasn't Jonas. Not any more. Its eyes were frozen open in terror, its mouth wide open in shock. One of the maggots was eating its way out of his lower lip, as three more burrowed their way into his left eye. His hand was outstretched towards Knight. The skin was slowly dripping off it, like a melting candle.

Knight reached out with his weapon and gently poked at Jonas's hand. It indented slightly under the touch, leaving behind an impression of his rifle's muzzle. Like wax.

"Soap," Zhao whispered. "They're turning into soap…"

"Goddamn," Knight whispered. He studied the mass a little closer. There, huddled up next to Jonas, his arm and torso melting into the other man's was Timothy.

"All right," Knight said. "We're out of here. Seal the door, get the UNESCO team out of here. Call in STRIKE. This is way above our…"

"Sir?" a soft, female voice said behind them. "Mister Knight?"

Knight spun around, rifle raised, to find Lin standing behind him. "Mister Knight," Lin said. "I left Tamaki in charge. He's getting everyone ready to move, but I thought you could use the help— OH MY G—"

Zhao grabbed the young Chinese woman before she could scream, slapped his gloved hand over her mouth and held her down while she struggled. Something moved inside the glowing chamber, and

Knight spun around to see…

Maggots. Glowing ones. Thousands of them, bursting from the mass of soapy-waxy material that had once been Jonas and Tim. They crawled over the damp stone, across the ancient bas-reliefs and over the mold and slime, and they were racing towards him in a glowing tide, terrifyingly fast, and Knight turned to Lin and Zhao and screamed for them to run even as his feet turned towards the exit and he bolted for his life…

He heard Zhao scream as the things caught up to him and Lin, heard Lin start to shriek a moment later. Then he felt his ankles give way, and he collapsed to the floor, banging his chin hard against the stone and seeing stars.

Knight spun around, rifle raised. The glowing green tide was wrapped around his ankles, dragging him towards that mass of soap and wax and horror in the center of the chamber. Lin and Zhao were already in it, already starting to melt, already starting to have those horrid green maggots crawl in and out of what had once been flesh and was now closer to soft cheese.

His left arm was already crawling with the maggots. He had to drop his rifle to pull off his daypack and unzip it. He grabbed the laptop computer and held it to his chest tightly. His eyes were gone, already eaten by those crawling worms. He had to find the power switch by feel. Hold it down for five seconds with the computer's screen closed.

He was already dead when the bomb exploded.

"… holy shit," Fox said softly. "Holy fucking shit."

What had once been an ornate stone temple was now a crater in the ground. Three hours had passed since Central had awoken Strike Team Broken Dagger and apportated them into the South American jungle. Now, as the twelve members of the Strike Team advanced towards what should have been an ancient archeological site, all they could see was a wide crater, filled with glassy rubble, in the middle of the rainforest.

"Ever seen something like this before, Jackal?" she asked her XO, as the rest of the team split up to search for survivors.

"Once," Jackal admitted. "In Cornwall."

"Fucking Cornwall," Fox agreed.

"Ma'am?" Arsegike said, over the comms. "I think I found something."

"On my way," Fox said. She got back to her feet and jogged over to where the other soldier was looking down at something in the tall grass.

It was a pair of OCULUS headsets, glowing softly, their visual components and visors melted and burned, but their recorders intact. The two items were laying on a patch of grass, in which a complex geometric form had been burned, reducing the plantlife to white ash.

"Emergency Dump," Jackal said. "Someone hit the panic button."

"Bag it," Fox said. "I'll report this in."

Arsegike pulled an evidence bag from his thigh pocket and gingerly picked up the two black boxes, dropping them into the mylar container and sealing it with double-sided tape. His OCULUS visor would record the location and the time of discovery, but he jotted down a quick note on the outside of the bag in permanent marker nonetheless.

"So what was this?" Jackal asked. "A failed mission… or a successful one?"

Fox didn't have an answer for him. She still couldn't decide how to answer that twelve hours later, when the helicopters came to take them home.

"Sequence"
« **"Strike"** | **Return to GOC Hub** | **"Farpoint"** »

"Joint Venture"

"This is a really dumb idea," Skunkboy muttered. He shifted his weight on the chameleon-cloth pad he'd been laying on for the past thirty-six hours. He was pretty sure he was developing some sores on his elbows and knees. Worst of all, he was running out of bags to store his piss in, and pretty soon, despite all the immodium and MRE peanut butter, he was going to have to take a shit… and it was a choice between sneaking into the building and risking getting caught, or taking one of the alternatives that would make him even more miserable.

All in all, it was pretty much like any other mission for a scout sniper, except that he was laying all alone on the roof of a Hong Kong skyscraper rather than in the middle of the woods or the desert. On the other hand, there was the fucking noise. Even with the plugs in his ears, the dull roar of the building's ventilation equipment was beginning to rattle his jaws.

He blinked back the exhaustion and closed his eyes for a few moments to clear the blurry double-vision from them, then lowered his face back to his spotter's scopes. Hong Kong at night was actually kinda pretty, he decided. It was just a shame that he wasn't going to have the chance to do any sightseeing. Except for a small stretch of warehouses near the docks.

A flicker of light and movement caught his attention. He swung the scope around very slowly, then nodded to himself and keyed his throat mike for the first time in over six hours. "Sparkplug Two to all units. How do you read? Over."

"Sparkplug one, reading loud and clear."

"Three, loud and clear."

"Four, loud and clear. Over."

"Got it. Everyone reading loud and clear. Two here. I've got a mission report: Opposition elements are approaching the docks on schedule. Convoy consists of four vehicles, description follows: One convertible sports car, red, highly customized. Two SUVs, both black. One van, also black. VERITAS reads… two persons in sports car. Four persons each in the SUVs. Two persons in the van… no VERITAS signature from the back of the van. All persons read as baseline humans, no parathreats. Break."

"Um, Four here," Spider said, interrupting Skunkboy. "You're certain there's no VERITAS signature from the back of the van? There should be at least one. Over."

"Two here. Wait one." Skunkboy adjusted the settings on his VERITAS scope and did a second scan of the van. "Yeah, no dice, Spider. Nothing, over."

"That's not right. The manifest included at least one living creature… damn it." Skunkboy heard Spider mutter under her breath. He was sure that the team's thaumatologist was pacing back and forth again, as she tended to do when agitated. "Damn."

"Do you want to abort, Spider?" Bullfrog interrupted.

"No. I'm good," Spider said. "But keep a close eye on them for me. I don't know what's going on."

"All right, then. Mission is go. If the shooting starts, I initiate. Acknowledged?"

"Two here. We wait until you shoot or order it. Over."

"Three," Kitten said. "You start the shooting. Over."

"What do I do if we start shooting?" Spider asked.

"Hit the deck and find some cover," Bullfrog said. "And hope you don't get shot."

"That's not a very comforting prospect." Spider said sardonically.

"It'll have to do. Let's cut the chatter. Out."

Skunkboy adjusted his stance and stretched his toes out a little bit. Just a little longer, and it would all be over.

"Lao Feng isn't going to like this," Zheng muttered.

"Lao Feng can kiss my ass," Yang said. "His superstitions haven't gotten us anywhere. Meanwhile, the Silver Swords are cutting into the market… girls, guns, and drugs aren't going to cut it any more. We need to get in on this on the ground floor."

"This isn't like running hookers or heroin, or even guns," Zheng insisted. "This is more like getting involved with dealing nukes or chemical weapons… I don't like this."

It wasn't a new argument: the two men had argued these points many times in the past few days. Every time, the disagreement ended the same way.

"You'd rather let Shi Wang Zhou and his thugs run all over us? You'd rather see that dogfucker Lefty feeling up your little sisters?" Yang growled. "Because that's what's going to happen if the Silver Swords get a lock on the market."

"You know I don't want that, but… shit. This is fucking scary."

"Keep it to yourself, then," Yang muttered. "I don't want you pissing yourself in front of the foreigners."

"You know I've got your back, bro."

"I know you do," Yang agreed. "All right. Game face, lil bro."

The red convertible pulled up to the warehouse and came to a halt, followed shortly by the two SUVS and the van carrying the goods. Yang's brow furrowed as he looked into the dimly lit, empty warehouse.

"I thought they'd bring more people," he admitted.

"Arrogant fuckers," Zheng agreed.

He got out of the convertible and jogged over to the first SUV, rapping on the window. It rolled down, tinted glass giving way to reveal a huge man with a sardonic grin and an ugly, puckered scar running across the entire left side of his face.

"What's up, Yang?"

"They've only got three people. I don't want to spook them. So have the rest of the boys wait outside," Yang said.

"Shit, you sure that's smart? What if something goes down?"

"Shit's much less likely to go down if the foreigners don't think this is a fucking setup. Everyone stays outside," Yang insisted. "But keep an eye out… and make sure everyone's armed."

"You got it, bro."

Yang took a moment to adjust the collar of his shirt in the reflection on the side of the SUV, before rejoining Zheng by the convertible. "Ready?" he asked.

"Yeah, let's go."

There were three of them waiting inside the dimly-lit warehouse. Two of them looked like brainless thugs: one of them a tall, muscular looking woman with bored eyes and short-cropped hair. The other was a short, stout looking man with a big beard, whose ill-fitting suit strained to contain his broad chest. Yang marked them as soldiers. Probably bodyguards for the third: an Asian woman wearing a well-tailored suit: fairly young and attractive in a broad-hipped sort of way. She was nervous, despite her best efforts to hide it: she kept pushing up her glasses and fiddling with her expensive-looking tablet computer. Maybe a new lieutenant for the actual boss.

"You're late," she said irritably, as Yang walked into the warehouse. "And you brought too many people with you."

"Are you sure you didn't bring enough?" Yang said, grinning disarmingly. "If I were carrying that much cash on me, I'd have brought more than two guards."

"I did," the young woman said curtly. She fiddled nervously with a lock of her hair. "Tell the thug outside to please look down at his chest before he gets any more ideas about sending teams to flank us."

Yang turned and looked out the door, and pursed his lips, before nodding to Zheng.

"Cuntface," Zheng growled into his walkie-talkie. "Quit trying to be clever and tell the boys to go back to the cars."

"But…"

"Look at your chest, you fucking idiot," Zheng snapped. "The foreigners have you in their sights."

There was a brief bout of cursing over the radios, as the scar-faced goon finally saw the red dot floating on his chest, and a flurry of movement and shouting as a bunch of guys sheepishly emerged from the shadows and jogged back to the cars.

"I thought that snipers usually don't use laser sights," Yang mused. "Especially not visible light ones."

"Consider it… making a point," the woman said, sighing with relief. "Now that we've gotten that out of the way, shall we move on to business?"

Skunkboy carefully turned off the laser pointer and slid it back into his pants pocket. It was a silly trick, but one that worked pretty well for intimidation purposes.

The taller one with the fancy silk shirt nodded to his friend, who growled a couple of words into his walkie-talkie. The big van pulled away from the two SUVs and began backing up towards the warehouse door.

"Shit," Skunkboy whispered over the comms. "I don't have a line of sight to inside the van."

"Watch the fuckers outside," Bullfrog muttered. "Let Kitten and I

worry about the van."

"Boss, there's eight of the motherfuckers outside," Skunkboy griped. "Even I can't take on eight of them."

"Then get the leader and keep the rest of their heads down, if it comes to that," Bullfrog said, "and we'll help out as soon as possible."

"Easy for you to fucking say," Skunkboy muttered, but he ducked his head back down and continued to scan the exterior scene through his rifle scope.

Just to be sure, though, he made sure he had a round in the chamber.

The van doors opened, and the young woman's brow furrowed. She reached into the back of the van and rattled the bars of a heavy-gauge wire cage. "… it's dead," she said.

"It was alive when we left," Yang insisted.

"Well, it's dead now," the woman hissed. She rattled the bars of the cage again and threw her hands in the air. "What am I supposed to do with a dead specimen?"

"Stuff it and mount it? I don't know…"

"Wait," the woman snapped. "Are these cage bars steel?"

"Is that a problem?"

"Yes, it's a problem! These things are allergic to ferrous metals!" the woman shouted angrily. "No wonder it died on the way here! It was probably dead of shock before it got halfway here! And your brainless thugs didn't notice?"

"Kai?" Yang growled.

"… we heard it yelling and thrashing!" the younger man admitted. "But we thought it was just…"

"You stupid dogfucking idiot!" Yang shouted. "You didn't think to tell me?"

"But…" Kai halted and bit back the rest of his words, before bowing his head respectfully to the older man. "No excuse, sir."

"Get the fuck back in the van and start unloading. I'll deal with you later," Yang shouted. He turned back to the woman and gave her his best, most charming smile. "Now… I deeply apologize for…"

"I'm not paying full price for the shipment," the woman interrupted. "Two million only."

"That's half of what we agreed upon!" Zheng objected. "Just because one stupid animal is dead?"

"That stupid animal was the most valuable thing in the shipment. All the rest is trinkets. Two million. Take it or leave it."

"We'll take it," Yang said curtly. He turned to his friend and said, in a low voice, "You want them to start dealing with the Swords instead?"

"… two million isn't enough. We can't arm ourselves on two million. We need at least three," Zheng pointed out.

"We'll make do with two million for now. And we'll set up a second shipment for the foreigners."

"That's not going to help if the Silver Swords make their move before then."

"Then we'll just have to pray that they don't," Yang said. "Maybe you should invest some of that two million in incense for the gods."

He slapped his friend on the shoulder and turned back to the foreigners. "Two million."

"Oh, thank fucking God," Skunkboy sighed. "You have no idea how close that ugly dude out here came to shooting. He actually had his gun out of its holster."

"Well, it's over now," Bullfrog said. "So get packed up and let's get the fuck out of this country."

"All right, I'll see you… wait one." Skunkboy halted as something moved in the corner of his field of vision. He panned the scope down and to the left. "Fuck!" he snapped. "Boss, I fucked up!"

Yang was surprised when the big foreigner, the man, put his hand to his ear and shouted, "Situation report!" in English, very loudly. He was even more surprised when the foreigner grabbed the young woman by the shoulder and pulled her away from the van and pushed her to the ground, one hand dipping into his jacket as he did so.

"What the hell is this?" Yang shouted.

"We're about to get hit!" Bullfrog snapped. "This is a fucking setup!"

Yang turned to yell for Cuntface Teng and the boys to get ready, but as he turned to face his soldiers, he realized that all eight of them had their guns out… and pointed at him.

Oh. So it's THAT kind of setup.

He grabbed Zheng by the collar and pulled him to the ground just as the shooting started.

It was really too easy, in the end. All but two of the boys were in on the plan, and those two were in the warehouse with Yang and Zheng. It was too bad that his plan to sneak a few guys to block off the back exits had failed, but he would make do with two-to-one odds.

Cuntface Teng wasn't exactly the brightest bulb in the pack, but he was smart enough to see where the tide was turning. And the tide was most definitely turning away from Lao Feng and towards Shi Wang Zhou. Not that he had anything against the old man, but there was no way the family was going to survive, not against the resources the Silver Swords could muster.

Lao Feng was old school. He believed in the gods and the spirits. That sort of antiquated mindset wasn't going to work any more.

It was a shame that a bunch of good boys were going to die, good boys that Shi Wang Zhou could use. At the very least, he'd get to see that faggot Yang get it.

"Skunkboy!" Bullfrog shouted over the comms. "Take these fuckers out!"

"Can't!" Skunkboy shouted back. "I've got three fucking vehicles full of fucking Triads coming up the road!"

"Shit!" Bullfrog shouted. He was seriously hating this entire fucking mission. Bullets were snapping past his head and splintering the wooden crates behind him and punching holes into the side of the van. He could already see one of the Triad guys laying on the ground in a pool of blood. A second was huddled behind the van's wheel, weeping and cursing as he tried to stop a wound in his leg that was pouring blood. A second burst of gunfire skipped off the concrete and into his gut, and he slumped over, breath gurgling.

The two remaining gangsters had managed to get behind cover along with his team: the boss guy with the fancy shirt and his friend with the angry eyes. They had pistols in their hands, and were firing wildly over the tops of the crates, before ducking back down as another burst of gunfire stitched through the air.

The situation, Bullfrog realized, was looking pretty much unsurvivable. He was pinned down by a force with superior numbers and firepower. He had the advantage of cover for now, but it was only a matter of time before the enemy managed to flank him. Then he was going to die.

It was time to do something stupid.

"Kitten!" he shouted.

The tall, wiry woman glanced up from her position. Her expression had not changed one bit from its usual boredom, even when a close

burst caused a bullet to whip by so close to her face that it actually ruffled her hair.

Bullfrog slid his pistol across the concrete to his teammate. "Go start some shit," he shouted.

Kitten's eyes lit up. Her mouth twisted into a fierce, angry grin. Bullfrog saw her draw the biggest fucking knife he'd ever seen from some hidden sheath under her suit jacket and hold it in her teeth. She closed her eyes for a moment, inhaled once long and slow, exhaled sharply.

Then she moved.

Skunkboy had a bit of a love-hate relationship with the United States Marine Corps. On the one hand, they'd taken half a decade of his life, forced him to endure shitty food and idiotic colleagues, and basically given him nothing but hatred and contempt for the modern military. If he had to deal with one more slogan-spewing jarhead in his life, it would be too much. When the recruiter had asked him to re-up after his first term of service, he'd laughed at the guy to his face.

On the other hand, there were times when the Marine Corps way of doing things could be useful. Like when you were a lone marksman on the roof of a Hong Kong building trying to stop three big vans full of bloodthirsty Triad gangsters.

At times like those, there were few things that felt more comfortable, more familiar, to him, than his old Parris Island indoctrinations.

"This is my rifle," he murmured, as he shifted over to his weapon and lined up his shot. "There are many like it, but this one is mine."

He was going to have to time his shot perfectly. It would be best if he could catch the convoy just as they were about to exit where the street narrowed, between two warehouse buildings.

"My rifle is my best friend. It is my life. I must master it as I must master my life."

The driver… that would be a tough shot. Maybe he should go for the engine instead?

"My rifle, without me, is useless. Without my rifle, I am useless. I must fire my rifle true."

Deep breath. Inhale. Exhale. Take up the slack. Line up the shot. Get into the rhythm of your own beating heart.

"I must shoot straighter than my enemy who is trying to kill me. I must shoot him before he shoots me."

Crack.

The first round was a good one, but Skunkboy was already working the bolt and lining up his second, even before the first round hit home. He had barely enough time to see the bullet punch through the hood of the vehicle, enough time to see the hood start to spew smoke. He fired his second shot, was gratified to see the driver's side window shatter, but the driver had slammed the brakes so hard that the car behind it rear-ended the lead vehicle. He saw the driver stumble out of the door and start yelling and waving to his allies.

"I will."

Crack.

Skunkboy saw the driver of the lead car stumble and slump to the ground, rolling in agony as he clutched his abdomen. The guy riding shotgun was trying to lean over and get the car moving again, so Skunkboy put another round through the hood, for good measure.

Then he got to work.

Cuntface Teng's first warning was when the two smoke grenades came rolling out from the dimly lit warehouse and began spewing red smoke all over the area, causing the world to become shrouded in a scarlet mist. In the light of the streetlamps, it gave the entire place a hellish air.

"Watch it!" he shouted to his teams. "They may try to escape

through the smo—"

There was the sound of rapidly moving feet. He saw the tall female foreigner sprinting across the open court. Her eyes were wide and wild, and she had a giant knife in her teeth and a gun in each hand.

Cuntface Teng wanted to laugh. Everyone knew that there was no way in hell to shoot straight with a gun in each hand! The foreigner had been seeing too many John Woo action movies!

He ducked behind the van as a wild fusillade of gunfire snapped towards him and the boys. The shots were mostly wild, and failed to hit anyone, as expected. All he'd have to do is wait for the bitch to run out of ammunition, and then…

He saw Loverboy Lu go down. Something spun in the air where it had bounced off his forehead: one of the two pistols the bitch had carried. Fatheaded Kai tried to shoot her, got his submachinegun kicked out of his hand, and then she beat his face in with the butt of her empty pistol before slashing open his throat with that huge fucking knife.

She'd never intended to hit anyone.

The pistols were just to keep him and his boys' heads down while she closed the distance.

She slid the empty pistol back into the direction of the warehouse, where the big male foreigner stopped it with his foot and reloaded it. He raised the pistol in a two-handed grip and began firing slow and methodical, hugging the wall of the warehouse.

Within a few moments, six of his guys were down. Two more killed by that crazy bitch with the knife, two of them shot by the big male. Teng's will broke. He turned and ran for it.

As he fled, he could hear the screaming of his two remaining guys. After a few minutes, he couldn't even hear that any more.

Skunkboy often thought that an enemy unit in panic mode looked a lot like an anthill, after someone had poked it with a stick.

There were a bunch of the Triad guys milling around, pointing in every direction, shooting out windows at random and yelling at each other a lot. It was almost comical.

A moment like this didn't seem to deserve the solemnity of the Rifleman's Creed. It was time for something a little more… upbeat.

"We shoot the sick, the young, the lame, we do our best to maim," he hummed. He knew he had the biggest grin on his face. He didn't care. "Because the kills all count the same…"

Crack!

"Napalm sticks to kids…"

He ejected the magazine of his rifle and laid it neatly next to the two empty mags he'd already gone through. He carefully seated his third magazine, worked the bolt, and raised the rifle back to his shoulder.

"Flying low across the trees, pilots doing what they please…"

Crack!

One more Triad down. That made four.

"Dropping frags on refugees… Napalm sticks to kids…"

All things considered, this was actually going pretty well for him.

"Situation report!" Bullfrog snapped, as the firing ceased.

"I've got the backup pinned down," Skunkboy reported. "Looks like they're getting ready to bug out."

"Eight down," Kitten said. "One got away. The scarfaced one that started the shooting."

"I'll find him," Zheng hissed. "Lao Feng isn't going to let him get away with this. Ten good soldiers dead in one night."

"I know," Yang said grimly. "But for now…" He turned back to the

Asian woman who he had thought was their leader, and bowed deeply and respectfully. "My apologies," he said. "I was unable to control my men, and put us all in danger. If you had not been ready for them, we would have all lost our lives. I promise you, we will find the traitor and exact our punishment against him."

"When I find him I'll feed him his own balls raw. After I cut off a finger for each of our brothers he killed," Zheng agreed.

"I think I can help you with that," Spider said. She pushed her glasses up into place, and her dark eyes were fierce and angry.

Cuntface Teng wept as he staggered through the alleyway alone.

It just wasn't fair. This wasn't how it was supposed to happen. American bitches weren't supposed to murder ten trained Triad killers with a knife and a pistol. He, Cuntface Teng, was supposed to be the terror of Lao Feng's soldiers. The terror of Lao Feng's soldiers wasn't supposed to run from a battle with pants stained with urine and a giant gash across one arm.

He was going to have to go to Shi Wang Zhou. It was his only choice. That faggot Yang would make sure everyone knew what he had done… and the Families didn't treat traitors very well. He'd gambled and lost… it was time to get out of the game before he lost his entire stake.

He was stepping out into the light of the rising sun when he felt the pain stab into his lower abdomen. He screamed as he crumpled over and clutched at his stomach… then began to howl in agony as a burst of blinding pain started at the base of his spine and raked slowly up his back. Then he clutched at his eyes and wept as what felt like pure fire stabbed into his optic nerves.

As the sun rose over Hong Kong, the man they called Cuntface Teng writhed and howled in agonizing pain, unable to do anything but huddle in the shadow of the abandoned warehouses and scream.

Spider gave the burlap doll one more vicious stab in the groin for good measure, before pinning it to the side of the van with Kitten's knife. She had stitched the doll together many weeks before, filling it with graveyard earth and a dash of silicon oxide. It only needed a link to her intended victim to provide the contagion it needed to find a target… a link like the blood Kitten had drawn when she had, spectacularly, slashed open the unfortunate Teng's arm with her kukri.

"Are we done here, Spider?" Bullfrog asked.

"Yeah, we're done." She turned to the two Triad leaders and slipped back into her childhood Mandarin. "You'll find your traitorous dog of a former colleague at the east side of the docks. He'll be screaming in agony. Don't take the knife out until you find him."

"… who the hell are you people anyway?" the fancy man in the nice shirt asked.

"… don't worry about it," Spider replied, smiling disarmingly. "Better to think about what you guys are."

"Which is?"

"The ones who rooted out the traitor working for Shi Wang Zhou, and brought him back to Lao Feng alive."

She hopped into the back of the van alongside Kitten and Bullfrog, who had finished loading the goods into their vehicle while she had performed her working. She gave the two perplexed-looking Chinese gangsters a cheerful wave as the three of them drove out of the warehouse.

"You do realize," Kitten pointed out, "that we need to retrieve Skunkboy, evade the Hong Kong police department, and somehow make our way back home now, right?"

"Yup," Bullfrog said.

"Just wanted to be sure." The tall woman leaned back her seat and closed her eyes.

A few moments later, she started snoring.

"Sometimes, I envy that crazy bitch," Bullfrog admitted.

"That wasn't exactly what I had in mind when I agreed to this joint operation," D.C. al Fine said to the shimmering image of the old Chinese man sitting in the chair across from her.

"The objectives were met. The shipment was stopped. The mole was rooted out, and soon Shi Wang Zhou's illegal operation will be halted," **Lao Feng, Leader of the Immortal Lily Brotherhood** said. He picked up a teacup that didn't exist in al Fine's office and took a small, measured sip, before wiping the rim with a napkin and putting it back down on the tea table.

"We also shot up a Hong Kong warehouse, killed over a dozen guys, and brought the attention of the Hong Kong PD upon the entire thing," al Fine pointed out. "I hope whatever you found out from the informant was worth it."

"It was. We confirmed that Shi Wang Zhou found and took over an abandoned Factory manufacturing plant and reopened it. He has been pumping out threat entity-level artifacts daily. His quality is shoddy, but his prices are much cheaper than his competitors." Lao Feng laughed and shook his head. "The irony was not lost on me."

"Will you need our help in taking them down? I could dispatch a couple of Strike Teams."

"The day that the Immortal Lily Brotherhood needs your help in a war against its rival gangs is the day that we finally join your Global Occult Coalition," Lao Feng said, smiling politely. "No, I thank you for your help, but we shall handle this matter ourselves."

"Just so long as you hand over all Factory assets to the Coalition," al Fine insisted.

"Of course. I have no desire to get involved in paranormal matters. The affairs of ghosts and gods are no place for a simple Hong Kong businessman."

"You are going to have to, eventually. It's not a good sign that two of your most trusted lieutenants tried to pull off a paranormal arms deal right under your nose," al Fine pointed out.

"I knew of their plans long before. If I had not wished to root out the traitor in my organization, we would have… had words… long before. As it is, I feel I owe Yang an apology… and an explanation. Perhaps it is time to tell him what the Immortal Lily Brotherhood really is."

"He might not be happy. He signed on to join a Triad gang, not an ancient Chinese order of monster hunters."

"He will adapt. Good bye, Ma'am."

"Good bye, Lao Feng."

"… You know," Zheng sighed. "One of these days I'm going to end up following you into an early grave."

The two gangsters were sitting together on the balcony of one of the Immortal Lily Brotherhood's safe houses, watching the sun set over Hong Kong. The city, Yang thought, had never looked more beautiful.

"No one says you need to follow," Yang pointed out. "You could just run."

"Dying would be easier," Zheng said. He put his hand over that of his friend's, and leaned in to kiss the other man on the cheek. "As it is, you owe me for this, my brother."

"Dinner at the Lucky Dragon, then? Once the heat dies down?"

"That would be a good place to start." Zheng laughed. "And maybe now we can enjoy ourselves without that homophobe Teng giving us shit."

"It would be hard for him to call me a faggot with no tongue," Yang agreed.

He kissed Zheng back, and the two men shared a brief moment of affection, before walking back into the apartment and turning out the lights. Outside, the sun finally dipped below the horizon, shrouding the city in twilight.

"Sequence"

« **"AWTOK"** | **Return to GOC Hub** | **Trauma**»

"Diplomacy"

"It's good to see you again, your majesty," Chris said, as he took a seat on the camp chair and gratefully accepted a cup of water from a raccoon in a green wool tunic.

"Thou speakest with a forked tongue," **replied the red-furred fox seated across from him at a computer keyboard.** "Else thou wouldst free our people from bondage at the hands of their captors." The words lingered on the computer screen across from Christopher. He wasn't sure who'd managed to set up Carolingian miniscule as the font, but it was appropriate, he admitted.

"Our agreement with the… with your captors… only extends as far as this," Chris explained. "And it was a concession hard-won."

"These villains are truly the most ignoble of heathens," scoffed the fox. "Would that we had our good sword and shield and a further twoscore brave knights: we would show these heathens how good Christian men do battle. Nay, we would ask simply for one man: Rafaelo, wisest of crows. No doubt he would have contrived some infernal machine or clever strategem to make good our escape. But in the absence of valor and wisdom, we must instead turn to the virtue of fortitude, and endure the manifold indignities heaped upon us by our villainous captors." Eugenio the Second (by the Grace of God, King of the Forest, Lord of the Plains, Duke of the Grand Fir and the Undergrowth, Count of the Swamp, Warden of All the Streams and Rivers, and Lord Protector of the Cities of Man, Defender of the Faith), paused in his typing, tilted his regal head to one side and scratched behind his ear, worrying at a flea that had been pestering him for some time.

"We continue our efforts to ransom your majesty and free him and his men from their captivity," Chris lied, "but I have not come here to speak of such matters."

"Then speak, good sir. Let us know how we may be of assistance to the Chinese Empress."

Christopher St. John Smythe-Bromstead winced inwardly. Explaining D.C. al Fine's position in the Coalition to Eugenio the Second hadn't been easy. Second Mission considerations had forbidden him from explaining the exact nature of the Global Occult Coalition. The best he'd managed to do was to convince the fox that he was an emissary of a foreign Empress. (He still wasn't sure how the Fox had drawn the conclusion that the "far-off kingdom" he represented was China, of all places.)

"Her Imperial Majesty faces a dilemma," Chris said through gritted teeth. "A dilemma which could easy be solved with the aid of thy royal self. The dilemma concerns the Thirteenth Crusade."

"That was none of my doing," Eugenio the Second retorted, curling his tail around his red-furred body. "**'Twas the doing of Duke Casper Bushtail, a knight great in courage but not overly blessed in brains.** 'Twas his decision to gather up his brethren and strike out for the Holy Land without the full might of the Forest at his back."

"A decision he made on the basis of your Majesty's decree…"

"Our decree was that an army should be gathered for the purposes of taking back the Holy Land," Eugenio insisted. "Not that Duke Bushtail and his kin should sally forth willy-nilly like cats driven by a washer-woman. Often have we regretted this fact, for were that brave knight and his cohort by my side, we would not now be languishing in captivity."

… mostly because you'd be dead. The Foundation doesn't put up with escape attempts lightly, Chris thought. "Nonetheless," he said, "the Duke and his kin are not at thy majesty's side. And now they have found themselves in dire straits. They have set up a stronghold in a distant land," *If the next city over in Scotland can be considered distant, that is,* "and they are now besieged on all fronts," *I guess that's not a bad way of saying that the Coalition and Foundation are getting ready to burn down their damned castle for scaring the shit out of that Girl Scout troop that found their fence made of severed*

rats' heads on the end of tiny little pikes. "They have sworn to fight to the death. I have come on behalf of the Empress to see if a way can be found to spare the lives of these brave warriors." *And if I had it my way, I'd let those MTFs burn the damn castle down with flame throwers and thermite. Damn the Scary Lady for trying to get me to find a 'soft kill' solution to this bloody mess.*

Eugenio the Second, son of Eugenio the Just, Regent of the Granite Throne and Ruler of the Forests, sat down on his haunches and laid his chin dejectedly atop his forepaws.

"We are tempted to tell thee nay," he replied, after a long period of contemplation. "We have known the horrors of captivity. We have suffered greatly the outrages these heathens have inflicted upon us. Did you know that they have… have mutilated the Brothers Douglas, and their sister besides? Unmanned them they have, and done worse to the lady. 'Twas an outrage not to be borne."

"I am… aware… of those misdeeds. Suffice to say that they shall not be repeated," Chris said carefully. *And I'm pretty sure even the Foundation isn't going to try to neuter any more of these guys, either. Not unless they want another PHYSICS Division Strike Team getting ready to blow this place to smithereens.*

"… then we shall do as you counsel, Sir Christopher. Though it sticks in our craws, we shall write a missive to Duke Bushtail and his fellows urging them to surrender. But in return, thou must do one thing for us, Sir Christopher."

Here it comes, Chris sighed.

About an hour later, he finally emerged through the airlock door, clutching the rolled-up parchment sealed in red wax in one hand, carrying his folding camp chair in the other. The masked guard stationed at the door took the document from him as he emerged, placing it inside a small plastic tube and sending it up a pneumatic pipe to parts unknown.

"There," Chris growled, to the balding white-coated man standing before the bank of computer monitors. "You heard what he wanted.

Now get it to him."

"I will have to clear it with my superiors first. This request was already made, and it was denied," the balding man replied.

"Are you going to make me into a liar? I gave my word of honor back there. Shook his… paw… and swore on the good name of God and all my descendants. You've already got a priest coming by once a month. Transfer him to this project full-time. Let them build their damn church."

"You made that promise, not me. The best I can promise is that I'll bring it up with my superiors," the balding man insisted.

"Then do it. Now. And make it very clear to them that failing to do so will not put the Foundation in the good graces of the United Nations."

"You sound angry, Mister Bromstead."

"You're damn right I'm angry!" Chris shouted. "I spent years… over a decade, even… building up diplomatic relations with these guys. We were on the verge of relocating them without incident. But the Foundation just had to come in and do a grab-and-snatch right under our noses. And now they're riled up and angry. You're sitting on a powder keg here. You heard the way the fox was talking. At some point in the near future, they're going to decide they've had enough and martyr themselves for Jesus. And your damned leadership isn't making it easier by arbitrarily denying them their freedom of worship!"

Chris stormed out of the room, ignoring the other man's loud protests and rebuttals: he was in no mood to hear any of it. He grabbed the black canvas hood out of the guard's hand and put it on over his own head, tying it shut, before letting the guards manhandle him into the back of the car.

He heard the car door slam shut, and the vehicle pulled away into parts unknown. It would be another hour before he arrived, give or take fifteen minutes, depending on how long the driver wanted to drive around in random circles.

"Sequence"

« Vigil | Return to GOC Hub | UHEC »

"Farpoint"

"You nervous?" Jericho asked.

"A bit," Callahan admitted. "After all, this is gonna be a long trip."

"Don't worry about it so much," Jericho said. "It's going to be a lonely, exhausting, and stressful job, but you'll be saving the world. Besides, it's only seven billion klicks. Practically next door."

"Yeah, well. I'll miss ya, buddy. Watch the fort."

"Keep safe."

The two PHYSICS Division operatives gave each other a high five which became a handshake which became a bro-hug which became a real hug, because no matter how big of a badass manly PHYSICS Division Strike Team operative you were, having one of your best friends leave for a ten year shift on the other side of the solar system was a bit of an emotional moment. No homo and all that, but Callahan admitted that he was going to miss this asshole. Even if he did steal all the beers out of the fridge.

"Operative Callahan?" the man in the white coat said. "I have your final mission briefing ready for you."

"Doc, I've been training for this mission for the past year. I think I know what's going to happen," Callahan said.

"Nonetheless, regulations are that I need to read you these briefings before you're allowed onto the apportation pad," Doctor Benjamin Flaherty (Ph.Th.D) said.

"All right, hit me," Callahan sighed.

"I'll make it fast," Doc Flaherty reassured the agent. "Here goes. In a few minutes, you will be transferred from this ship onto a barge located in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. That barge will then be

apported by thaumatological working to Farpoint Forward Operating Base. The barge will carry supplies and replacement personnel for Farpoint Station. You recognize, by so volunteering for this mission, that apportation is a difficult, dangerous, and unpredictable process, and that your safe arrival at Farpoint is not guaranteed. You also recognize that the process of apportation carries with it the possibility that your mind may become affected by a cognitohazardous entity. You finally recognize that Farpoint Station is located in a dangerous operating area, and that you may suffer death, dismemberment, or injury due to the hazardous nature of the duty. Finally, you recognize that this assignment is for no less than ten years, and that rescue or evacuation from Farpoint Station is next to impossible, even by apportation, due to the distances and lack of thaumatological personnel at the destination. Do you so acknowledge these statements as made to you?"

"I acknowledge," Callahan said.

"Please sign here."

Then there were another twelve statements to be made, another series of documents to sign, one last health checkup, and a final reckoning of all of his earthly assets, should he not return from where he was going. Finally, Doc Flaherty put all of the papers into a manila folder and passed Callahan a portable hard drive.

"What's this, Doc?"

"It's got every movie that came out this year on it, plus the full runs of a bunch of TV shows, and a bunch of porn," Doc said. "Those guys at Farpoint need some distractions."

"Sounds like I'm going to be the one needing this," Callahan laughed.

"You're more right than you know. Good luck, Cal."

Callahan gave the Doc one more handshake, then turned to walk down the ramp and onto the LCAC.

He stepped aside for a bit as a rather large cylinder was loaded onto

the hovercraft by handtruck. The tech secured the cylinder to the cargo compartment wall, then took a seat in the chair opposite. A few minutes later, the hovercraft emerged from the cruiser's well deck into the morning light, heading towards the pair of barges that were floating in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

"Everything fitting well?" the technician asked, his voice sounding dull and tinny through the helmet faceplate.

Callahan nodded and gave the man a thumbs up. The technician nodded and gave Callahan a handshake, then closed the hatch of the capsule, leaving Callahan alone with his thoughts, the sound of the air slowly circulating inside his suit his only companion.

Through the capsule window, he could see the bright blue Pacific Ocean stretching to the horizon. Two small ships, (two of the seven that formed a circle around the barges) floated in the distance, the thaumatological resonators on their decks softly glowing in a dim bluish-purple light. Somewhere out there, a literal army of thaumatologists were shaping and working the flow of EVE through the resonators, forming a working circle around the floating barges.

"All right," he heard a voice say over his comms loop. "We're at T-Minus five minutes. I need a go/no go for launch. Node 1?"

"Go, sir."

"Node 2?"

"Go."

"Node 3?"

"We're Go, sir."

"Node 4?"

"We're Go."

"Node 5?"

"Go."

"Node 6?"

"That's Go, sir."

"Node 7?"

"All's good. Go."

"Payload?"

"Go," Callahan said into his mic.

"Targeting?"

"Go," said another voice over the loop.

"Enviro?"

"We're Go."

"Computers?"

"Go."

"I have all stations reporting Go for Launch. Resuming the clock at T-Minus five minutes and counting."

"Node One, Energizing."

"Node Two, Energizing…"

The next few minutes were a flurry of activity as the thaumatologists did their thing. Technical jargon and status reports flowed back and forth in a smooth exchange of information. Complications arose and were swiftly dealt with. And throughout all of it, the steady, periodic calls of, "T-Minus four minutes…" '"T-Minus three minutes…"

And then it was "T minus ten… nine… eight…"

"Arcing."

The window of the canopy suddenly darkened as white-hot arcs of energy erupted from the resonator's thirty-foot tall antennae, forming a giant, glowing star of energy in the middle of the ocean (with the barges and Callahan in the center). Callahan felt his hair stand on end, saw EVE sparking off of the glass and metal of the capsule walls…

"Seven… six… nodes at one hundred percent…"

… the air around him roared and screamed as tremendous amounts of magical energy were channeled into the structure of the working…

"… three… two… one, cast—"

The announcer's voice was suddenly cut off, just as the world went black, and Callahan suddenly found himself 6.7 light-hours away from the rest of his comms loop.

It was as if someone had turned off the lights on the world. The sunny, bright, Pacific Ocean had vanished, leaving Callahan in utter darkness, just before a sudden loud thunderclap rocked the capsule.

Back on Earth, there was a loud, crashing thunderclap as the air rushed in to fill the void left by the disappearing barges. All seven ships rocked violently as the powerful waves pushed them back and forth. The thaumatological backlash was almost worse: a good portion of the ocean water turned into blood, staining the ocean deep red. Halfway around the world, a volcano that had not existed until then suddenly erupted for the ninth time in one hundred years, and just as quickly vanished from reality.

And somewhere on Pluto, two barges appeared in the center of a carefully drawn apportation circle, covered in the frost and snow that had once been a few hundred cubic meters of air and seawater that surrounded the two vessels.

And then, as Callahan's eyes adjusted to the darkness, he saw the most beautiful stars he'd ever seen in his life.

"… and transfer complete," Davis said. "We've got our reinforcements."

"What does VERITAS say?" Ricci asked.

"… scanning now. I've got parathreat signatures in Barge 2… as expected. Looks like it held."

"And our newcomer?" the base commander asked.

"He checks out clean. Stressed and terrified as hell, but no hitch-hikers."

"All right. Send out Richards and Carter," Ricci said. "And let's see what Santa and his elves sent us this year."

The rapping on the windowpane startled Callahan out of his awed inspection of the gorgeous night sky. He turned his head to see a man in a spacesuit (gold-tinted visor raised to reveal his face), waving cheerfully at him. As Callahan watched, the stranger plugged an audio cord into a port on the surface of the capsule. "Test, test, test, test," a voice rang in his ears. "This is Richards, to capsule passenger. How do you read?"

"Loud and clear, Richards," Callahan replied. "I'm Callahan."

"Cool. Nice to meet ya, dude," the man said. "Just hang tight for another moment. We'll get you out of there."

Callahan waved back, and the space-suited man moved on, continuing his inspection of the two barges for unexpected complications.

It was a half hour later when the man returned, with a second agent in tow. Callahan felt a couple of thuds as something was attached to his capsule, then the world tilted upward slightly, and he felt himself move. Glancing out the side window, he could see that some sort of forklift, with its entire structure covered in insulating panels, had lifted up his capsule and was carrying it across the surface of the ice-covered rock. The man inside the vehicle (a broad-faced man with a big orange beard), waved cheerfully to him, then went back to

the delicate procedure of moving the crew capsule to its destination.

A few moments later, Callahan saw his new home come into view: a low series of structures, most of them in the shape of cylinders resting on their sides, illuminated with pale, bluish lighting. The logo of the Global Occult Coalition was inscribed on the side of each one. To one side, a bunch of open-topped crates held what appeared to be garbage bags or some other refuse.

Some wag, he saw, had put up a sign outside the biggest building.

"Welcome to Farpoint Station," it read. "Population 12."

There was a figure in a space suit standing next to it. As Callahan passed by, he took down the plate that read "2" and put up one that read "3" in its place.

The first impression that Callahan got when the airlock doors opened was one of claustrophobia. Everything was cramped and tight-looking, and every single wall, floor, and ceiling surface was covered in instrumentation, equipment, supplies, or lockers.

The second impression that he got was the smiling woman standing in the middle of the room, wearing a loosely fitting set of grey trousers, jacket, gloves, as well as a full coverage face mask.

"WELCOME TO FARPOINT!" she shouted, her voice muffled and tinny through the suit helmet. "I'M A.D. RICCI. HANG TIGHT, GONNA CHECK THE INSIDE OF THE CAPSULE FIRST."

Callahan nodded, then waited for a few minutes as the woman pulled herself into the capsule in a slow, languid motion, like she was underwater. It took her a few minutes to run the scanner all along the walls, floor, and ceiling of the capsule, checking for dust or hazardous chemicals. She then raised a bulky, older-model VERITAS unit up and did a scan of his EVE signature, checking for any parathreat hitchhikers. Finally satisfied, she then put the scanner away on a holster at her hip and leaned her head in close to Callahan's helmet.

"YOU CAN OPEN UP YOUR SUIT NOW!" she shouted.

Callahan nodded and reached up to undo the collar of his helmet. The air hissed slightly, and he breathed in his first breath of air in his new home.

It smelled kinda like armpits.

Ricci laughed as Callahan's nose wrinkled. "Yeah," she admitted. "It doesn't smell so great in here… but we've got a dozen… a baker's dozen now… anyway, we've got thirteen guys living in an enclosed environment, breathing in each other's body odor. You get used to it after a bit."

"That explains the crate of air fresheners?" he asked, gesturing to a small, sealed box in the corner.

"Yeah," Ricci admitted. "They don't last, and after a while you get sick of the pine tree smell, but… it helps." She helped Callahan to undo the harness of his capsule, then pulled him to his feet. In the low gravity of Pluto, they rose up nearly all the way to the ceiling before coming back down to ground.

"Wow," Callahan breathed.

"Yeah," Ricci laughed. "That's another thing you'll take a while to get used to. Anyway, welcome to Icetown… the GOC's most 'forward' Forward Operating Base."

"Your job is mostly going to be blue-collar," Ricci explained. "Expanding the base, now that you've brought the new module. Maintaining the systems. Watching over the Depot. And, of course, taking readings and doing analysis of the Deep Space Warning System."

"Do the probes ever pick up anything?" Callahan asked.

"Sometimes. I'll explain later. "She looped her arm into a handle next to a low doorway and slid it open. "So this is your room for now," she said, gesturing to the interior of a storage cabinet filled with insulated bags of water. "We'll put down a sleeping bag for you. It'll only be

until we finish installing the new habitation modules you brought up. Then we're all moving in to our nice, new quarters."

"What will you do with the old ones?"

"We didn't have any," Ricci admitted. "We've just been sleeping wherever we can find space. I usually do it in the commander's chair up in C and C."

"That… sounds rough."

"You've got no idea," Ricci sighed. "At least I wasn't here when they were doing initial installation. Those guys had to live in their suits for a solid week before they could get the core modules set up. Not a fun time."

"I met one of them, during training," Callahan admitted. "Agent Xiphos."

"Oh? Swordy? How is that old fart? Haven't seen him since he shunted home."

"He twitches a lot. And still walks with a cane."

"Course he does. Tough bastard like that wouldn't stay in a wheelchair for long." Ricci grimaced and shook her head. "Full gravity's a bitch. Anyway, leave your stuff here. I'll show you the bathroom and galley."

"… and here we are," Richards said, grinning broadly "The Depot. The Coalition's solution for things they can't kill or negotiate with."

The structure was massive: about the size of an aircraft hangar. All throughout the structure were cages, crates, and other containers, all of them open to the vacuum and freezing cold of deep space, each one labeled and numbered and marked with the seal of the Global Occult Coalition.

"Where do you want this one, Richie?" Carter asked, as he maneuvered the small forklift into the building.

"Let's see… Section Three," Richards said, consulting his ruggedized tablet computer. "Next to the Heat-Eater."

Carter deftly maneuvered the device into the back of the building and laid the cylinder down next to a big crate with a temperature gauge that hovered somewhere around absolute zero.

"So, Callahan," Richards asked. "What's in that thing, anyway?"

"The container?" Callahan asked. "Type Red. Expanding Regenerator. Fire didn't work, so they tried ice. That worked, but when it thawed out, it kept coming back to life. So they kept it suspended in liquid nitrogen until it could come out here."

"Makes sense," Richards said. "Hey, want to see our UFO?"

"You mean the actual Zeta Reticulan scout ship? It's here?"

"Yup," Richards said, grinning. "And if you're real nice, I'll even let you sit in the pilot's seat."

"Sounds like a deal."

"You have no idea how good it is to taste actual chocolate again," Ricci crooned, as she took a bite of the Milky Way bar. "Oh God, it's like tasting heaven."

"Hey, boss," Vandenberg said, grinning, "You give me your orange and I'll give you my candy bar."

"Screw that, Van," Ricci laughed. "I'm going to savor every bite of this orange. It's the first time I've had one in a year."

"I thought you guys had an aeroponics garden?" Callahan asked.

"It doesn't have oranges," Ricci pointed out. "Kinda hard to grow an orange tree aeroponically. It does okay for tomatoes and onions, though."

"Ding ding ding!" Carter shouted. He tossed a silvery drinks bag to Callahan, who caught it. "All right, guys. A toast to our new crew

member. To Callahan! And may he find his place with us among the ice and the dark!"

"Hear hear."

"Cheers."

"I'll drink to that."

Callahan nodded gratefully to Carter, then took a big swig of his drink, only to gag and gasp when, instead of the expected water, something closer to pure ethanol hit the back of his throat.

Everyone laughed and cheered and clapped him on the back.

"Jesus Christ!" Callahan groaned. "Where the hell did you find this stuff?"

"We distill some of the leftover carbs into alcohol," Carter grinned. "I've got a still."

"And High Command allows this?" he gasped incredulously.

"High Command knows that we're out here for the long haul, our bones slowly turning into mush, surrounded by helium lakes and hydrogen snow, watching and waiting over the biggest depository of frozen parathreats in the solar system short of the Foundation's own stockpiles, and looking out for alien invaders. We do our job… they forgive us our indulgences."

"Then in that case," Callahan sighed, "I'm glad that part of what I brought along were a bunch of crates of orange juice powder. Screwdriver, anyone?"

"… and contact," Carter said, as the two structures met up.

"Hard dock," Vandenberg announced, as the locking latches hooked into place.

"Expanding the structure now."

In the monitor, Callahan could see the first of the four new habitation modules for the base slowly accordioning open, sliding and locking into place like the world's most complicated and high-tech pop-up book. On another monitor, he could see Carter slowly backing his forklift out of the cylindrical micrometeorite shield that the operatives had constructed from flat-pack parts over the course of the past week. When it had finished deploying, the habitation module would be separated from the hard outer shell by a gap of about three inches of vacuum: good insulation, and good micrometeorite shielding as well.

"… and that's deployment complete," Carter said. "Let's put the end cap on, and check out our new digs."

"Base Commander gets first dibs!" Ricci declared.

"Sorry, Boss," Carter laughed. "We agreed to draw straws, right?"

"This seems remarkably unfair," Ricci complained.

"You're the one who suggested it, Boss," Carter pointed out. "You can't complain if you lose at your own game."

"Whatever. You're all a bunch of assholes," Ricci pouted.

Callahan yawned as he bounced slowly down the corridor towards the galley. It was "night" shift, around the time when most of the station's inhabitants chose to take their sleep cycle, and he needed a warm drink.

He filled up a hot chocolate pouch with hot water from the galley, logged the requisition on the galley computer, and started to head back to the storage closet that was still his quarters until the second hab module finished construction. As he did so, he noticed a low, soft light coming from CIC.

He lifted his way up the ladder and into the base command center, which was located on an elevated module overlooking the rest of the base. The entire upper half of CIC was a giant observation dome made up of thirteen windows in three concentric circles, and it had

some of the best views of the entire base.

Ricci was there, sitting in the commander's chair. She had a blanket wrapped around her, and she was staring intently into the night sky, at the endless expanse of untwinkling stars. She turned to look at Callahan, then smiled at him as she snuggled up in the blanket and stared out into the universe.

"Ever think about why we're out here?" she asked softly.

"… to protect humanity?" Callahan replied. It was the Strike Team answer to that question. "To watch for extraterrestrial threats. To guard the Depot…"

"No," Ricci said, shaking her head. "We could have put the Depot on Antarctica. Or the Moon, for that matter. And we could watch for extraterrestrial threats just as well using ground-based radar installations."

Oh. "Then why?" Callahan wondered. "Why go through all this trouble to build a base out here on Pluto?"

"… if you can answer that question," Ricci said, smiling wistfully, "You'd make thirteen people very happy… but I think I have an answer." She turned in her couch to face him, resting her head on the crook of her elbow. "Why did you volunteer for this assignment?" she asked.

Callahan grimaced. He knew this was going to come up sooner or later. "I was in Strike," he said softly. "… I killed a lot of things… a lot of people. And then I couldn't keep killing. I was done shooting things." He took the seat next to her at the operations center, and played idly with a frayed bit of upholstery on the left armrest. "And when I heard about this assignment… I figured it would be a good chance to do something else. To help the GOC in a way that didn't involve killing people any more."

"For me, it was Assessment," Ricci said softly. "There was a school in Newark. A Katie took out an entire third grade classroom. I had to watch and monitor it happening. We didn't have the assets to take it down. By the time Strike arrived…" She shuddered inwardly at the

memory.

"So that's why Farpoint exists?" Callahan asked, bitterly. "So the GOC can stash away its broken agents somewhere far away from the normal people?"

"… I don't think that's it either," Ricci said. She sat up and took a moment to wrap the blanket around her shoulders. "I think it's simpler than that. I think… we might be an emergency backup supply for humans, in case Earth gets destroyed. Or maybe we're meant to be a bunch of canaries in the coal mine against alien invasion. Or maybe we're just here to prove that humanity could do this… even if we had to do it in secret from the rest of the world. Maybe we're here so that when humanity finally reaches this far… they'll be able to see that we've already been here all along… and we're waiting to help them reach even further."

She got up from her chair and let the blanket fall. She was wearing a tank top and shorts, Callahan saw, and he felt his heart race as the low gravity did charming things to her bustline…

"… maybe we're out here just to be humans," she whispered, as she slid into the chair next to him and kissed him.

Afterwards, he laughed at the absurdity of it all, as they cuddled together under the blanket under the starlight.

"I have to admit, this is a new one for me," Callahan chuckled.

"There's a first time for everything," Ricci giggled. "Just think, though… if only we could tell the world. We could answer so many questions for them about sex in space…"

"I'm ready to keep experimenting if you are." Callahan grinned.

"We've got another hour until night shift ends," Ricci pointed out.

"Plenty of time."

Up above them, the stars slowly turned in their unending dance.

"Sequence"

« "Special Observer" | Return to GOC Hub | "AWTOK"»

"Assessment"

"It's far too early to put Team Sparkplug back in the field."

D.C. al Fine, the **Undersecretary-General of the Global Occult Coalition**, stood in an expanse of empty blackness, surrounded by one hundred and eight points of light. Today, she'd decided to look like Audrey Hepburn, complete with Givenchy dress, umbrella, and fancy hat. On the other hand, Audrey Hepburn never had cold, sinister eyes, or a haughty, domineering expression. D. C. al Fine wore the appearance of the famous actress well, but she could never shed the harsh edges that had given her the nickname, "The Scary Lady."

"The first thing you have to understand is that Team Sparkplug is one of our best Assessment Teams," she explained. "Between the three veterans, they have over thirty years of experience in the paranormal field. As a team, they've had over a dozen successful missions. They were a finely tuned instrument… and then they lost one of their essential components. It has been replaced, yes, but they have not had time to adapt to the change in team composition. You're asking them to go back into the field after only a few months. It's too soon."

One of the points of light flashed brightly, expanding into the form of a tall figure in a black robe, limned in violet light. The caption hovering at chest height identified the avatar as belonging to **Lord Marcus Crowley, Antipope of the United Church of Satan, Scientist.** "Your concern for your operatives is commendable, Madam," the robed figure intoned, "but unnecessary. Your operatives are ready. Do not let your mind be clouded by self-deceit."

"The auguries concur with His Wickedness," said a young woman dressed in white gowns, holding a skein of threads between her hands. She was identified as the **Speaker to Humans of the Silicon *Nornir*.**

"Is this a true Concurrence, or simply a Majority Report?" al Fine asked.

"Concurrence," the Speaker to Humans said. "Urthor, Verthandi, and Skuldr are all in agreement as to the correctness of this action."

"Personal feelings must be set aside. Action must be taken. The Council is in agreement upon this matter," Lord Marcus said. "Do not allow yourself to sin in this matter by choosing stupidity over wisdom."

All around her, one hundred and eight stars blinked and dipped themselves in wordless agreement.

"Then I will take the Council's advice under consideration," al Fine said. "If there are no further matters, then I will consider this Conclave adjourned."

One by one, the stars blinked out, leaving al Fine floating silent and alone in the void. She closed her eyes and opened them again slowly, finding herself in her office on the 40th floor of the UN Secretariat Building, overlooking Manhattan. She rubbed her forehead and took a moment to compose herself, waiting for the nausea of Convergence to fade.

The Undersecretary-General picked up her phone and dialed a number that didn't exist. The call went through before it had finished ringing once.

"Get me PHYSICS Division," she said.

"What do you know about The Foundation?" Bullfrog asked.

"They're one of… if not the largest… paranormal organization that is not a member of the Global Occult Coalition. They focus primarily on the capture and acquisition of paranormal objects. They maintain a large network of hidden containment sites across the world, making them one of the few non-Coalition organizations that have a global presence, alongside the Serpent's Hand and the so-called Chaos Insurgency. Standing orders are to avoid engaging Foundation

agents in the field, except in extreme emergencies. Response Level 3."

"All right." Bullfrog nodded. "You've proved that you've read the handbook. Now tell me what you really know about The Foundation."

Spider sighed inwardly, taking a deep breath. "They're hoarders," she said. "Unlike some organizations, they don't seem to have any political or economic agenda for what they do. What little exploitation of parathreats they do seems primarily oriented towards funding their operations. They had a brief alliance with the U.S. government's Bowe Commission, but that fell through. Officially, they're a rogue organization. Under the table, however, they seem to have a lot of support from national governments that don't want to deal with the Coalition's red tape and regulations. They also have an odd obsession with a particular three-letter sequence. At first, we thought it had something to do with their official motto, but the current theory is that the linguistic sequence has occult significance to them, considering that it comes up in the names of their front companies as well as their internal documentation. Current directives regarding the three-letter sequence is to avoid using it whenever possible, on the off-chance that Principle of Contagion could be used to breach internal organization security. Our computers can't even use Secure Copy Protocol because of it."

"Not bad," Bullfrog said. "That's a pretty complete picture… from the point of view of a desk worker. Now let me give you the field operative's version."

The big man cracked his knuckles and leaned back in his seat as the small private plane continued its long flight above the clouds. "The part of The Foundation that a field operative is most likely to run into are their Containment Teams. They're about equivalent to a PHYSICS Assessment Team. They're damn good. We're pretty much evenly matched in terms of training, equipment, and support. Where we differ, however, is in our mission and our goals."

"The Foundation is mostly interested in finding, capturing, and retrieving parathreats," Bullfrog went on. "Their equipment reflects that: a lot of nonlethal weaponry and capture gear. Whereas a

Coalition team is primarily focused on the Fivefold Mission. Nowhere in that Mission does it say that we need to bring in every parathreat we find alive."

"More importantly, most of the Foundation's assessment work is going to be done by conscripts: 'D-Class Personnel,' they call them. Political undesirables and convicted criminals forced into dangerous situations where they don't want to send actual Task Force members. So morale among their teams tends to be low, given that about half their team doesn't want to be there and doesn't want to do the mission."

"Long story short, it's very possible for a good GOC Assessment Team to sneak in past the Foundation, scoop out the find from under their noses, and get out of there before they even know we were there. We've done it in the past, when the Foundation moved in after we'd already scoped out a parathreat. Standing orders are to avoid contact with Foundation personnel whenever possible… but that doesn't mean we have to sit idly by and let them pick up parathreats willy-nilly," Bullfrog concluded.

"In fact, it's probably a good idea to keep as many parathreats as possible out of their fucking hands," Skunkboy said. He sat on a seat across from Bullfrog, flipping through a pornographic magazine with bored detachment. "We don't know what the fuck they're doing with them… but it's probably best not to let them stockpile too big of what could be a paranormal arsenal."

"Of course, this all assumes that we're running into a Foundation Containment Team, and not a Mobile Task Force," Bullfrog explained. "Those are their varsity. Their elites. Think of them as Strike."

"If we run into an MTF, we let them take the parathreat," Skunkboy agreed. "Shadow them, log the capture, try to gather as much information as we can, but don't get close to them."

"Got it," Spider said, mulling the information over. "Do we have any diplomatic channels with them? Any contacts, any agreements?"

"The Coalition does. We don't," Bullfrog explained. "A few former

GOC members have gone over to the Foundation, and vice versa. And there have been a few times when our organizations have been in agreement about… a particular course of action… and ended up working together. On the other hand, the Coalition's official stance is that the Foundation, as a rogue organization, gets no official recognition by the Council, and especially no invitation to join the Coalition itself."

"What Bull is trying to say is that we try to play nice, but never think we're friends," Skunkboy said. "Keep your allies close and your enemies closer. That sort of thing."

Spider nodded in reply, jotting down a few notes into her notebook, using a fountain pen with beautiful ivory-like inlays that were actually made from the femur of an executed murderer: an ancient and crude (but effective) deterrent against magical spying. "Anything to add, Kitten?" she asked the fourth member of the team, who was currently doing rapid sit-ups in the aisle.

The seven-foot tall woman paused in the middle of her stomach crunches and ran a hand through her hair, her stern expression not changing. "No," she said curtly, before turning over and doing push-ups, her taut muscles straining with exertion.

Bullfrog shrugged. Kitten never had much to say.

There was a soft dinging sound in the passenger compartment, followed by a brief burst of static. "Captain speaking. We're about fifteen minutes out from the airport. I'm going to ask you to return to your seats, fasten your seatbelts, and return all seats and tray tables to their upright position. Time at our destination is four PM. Weather is 80 degrees and sunny."

Spider folded up her notebook and tucked it into her messenger bag, next to her grimoire, tablet computer, and a dog-eared copy of "The Complete Poems of Robert W. Service." "Any last words of advice?"

"Yeah. Relax. You'll do fine," Bullfrog said.

"Not that it'll help you if it all goes to hell, but at least you'll feel good

that you didn't get killed because of something stupid you did," Skunkboy interjected.

"Can the attitude, fartboy," Bullfrog growled.

"Yes, sir. Semper Fi, and off we go into the wild blue yonder," Skunkboy muttered.

The sick feeling in Spider's stomach as the plane came in for a landing had nothing to do with motion sickness.

I feel ridiculous, Spider thought, as she glared at her reflection in the mirror. She looked like some kind of bad video game version of what a soldier should look like.

The Mark Three Infiltration Skinsuit was definitely an effective piece of personal armor, but it had the unfortunate side effect of being a close fitting, lightly padded slate-grey bodysuit. Which, she ruminated, would probably look just fine on a busty bombshell with silicone breasts and an hourglass figure, but was not particularly flattering on a wide-hipped academic who, despite several months of intense physical training, still couldn't quite get rid of the baby fat around her waist and stomach.

The effect was even more striking on a short, squat, and muscular middle-aged man with broad shoulders and thighs like tree trunks. Bullfrog stalked into the room and glared at Spider for a moment, before making a couple of adjustments to the straps. "Keep it loose around the chest and waist," he suggested, "so that it doesn't interfere with your breathing."

"Kitten's got all of her straps tightened to the maximum," Spider pointed out.

"Kitten's crazy."

Good point. Spider waited patiently as Bullfrog made a few more minute adjustments to her combat webbing and her various pouches and attachments. "Wish I'd had more time to get you used to the Grey Suit," he said, lips pursed in concentration. "There's a knack to

wearing it that you don't have yet."

Not my fault that they pulled us out of training this early, Spider thought. She waited until Bullfrog was finally satisfied with the state of her gear, before picking up her PDW and slinging it over her shoulder. The lightweight weapon still felt awkward and unfamiliar to her, despite the time she'd spent training with it.

Kitten and Skunkboy were waiting for them in the briefing room, having already changed into their own skinsuits. Kitten, Spider noted, had armed herself with a futuristic-looking carbine and a handgun, as well as a frighteningly large knife slung at her left hip. Skunkboy was carrying a semi-automatic rifle with a complicated-looking scope, as well as a large-caliber handgun, while Bullfrog was carrying a squad automatic weapon with a large box magazine. The three of them handled their weapons with practiced ease born from long years of practice.

"Camo check," Bullfrog said.

The four of them tapped the controls on their helmets, and the grey cloth over their bodies and weapons blurred and fuzzed. Chameleon Fabric wasn't a true invisibility cloak: all it did was match their surroundings as best it could, using reactive pigment packets, not unlike those in the skin of the creature from which it took its name. The downside was that it only really worked well in darkness or at a distance, and only if the wearer didn't move. The upside was that unlike a lost invisibility cloak, losing a section of chameleon cloth wouldn't necessitate bombing fifty miles of countryside to make sure +2 Generation technology didn't fall into the wrong hands.

"Last-minute update," Bullfrog said, as the four team members made their final preparations for the mission. "Overwatch thinks that a Foundation Containment Team is in the area, looking for the parathreat. Standard doctrines apply. Avoid contact, don't get caught, and try not to shoot them. Any more questions?"

None.

"Then let's head out."

The road was not a good one: rough, full of potholes, unpaved, winding, and uneven. It wouldn't have been so bad if the vehicle, at least, had decent shocks. As it was, every little bump and rock on the road was transmitted through the car's terrible suspension, through the thin padding of the seat, and directly into Spider's ass, thighs, and spine.

Skunkboy was the driver: he drove with the lights off and the dashboard light unplugged, carefully making his way up the mountain road solely by the dim light of the stars, enhanced by his augmented reality visor. The wide lenses of the headpiece made him look like a kind of bizarre beetle: the eerie, pale starlight didn't help. He let out a low, muffled curse as the car rocked back and forth after running over a particularly large and sharp-edged rock that sent a particularly nasty jolt into Spider's coccyx. "ETA?" he whispered to Kitten.

"Two minutes," the amazonian woman whispered back. "Turn into the clearing up ahead. We'll go the rest of the way on foot." Kitten was riding shotgun in the small SUV: partly because she was the navigator for this mission, partly because her tall body wouldn't fit easily into the cramped back seat.

After a few more moments of jostling and bouncing, the car finally turned off into a small clearing in the woods, before coming to a halt at the base of a large sycamore tree. "Gimp masks and visors," Bullfrog said. "From this point on: no voices, no faces."

Spider slipped on her own AR visor, tightening the straps firmly in place. As she'd practiced, she closed her eyes and counted to ten before opening them again. The image was dark and indistinct, but a small adjustment on the mask's left-hand slider brought the image back into focus.

OCULUS was PHYSICS Division's four-function enhanced vision suite, combining low-light vision system with infrared imaging and ultraviolet. A fourth vision mode, VERITAS (because some goon in R&D had decided that naming it VITAL ENERGY RADIATION IMAGING TACTICAL AWARENESS SYSTEM was worth getting a cool-sounding Latin acronym), was based on Gen +2 super-technology. It utilized True Kirlian Imaging technology to detect the

life energy of living beings: Elan Vital Energy, or EVE. Seen through VERITAS, her teammates were black silhouettes surrounded by blazing auras: Skunkboy was chaotic and energetic, Bullfrog was intense and focus, Kitten was cool and calm, like rolling waves.

Spider raised her hand to the sky. Her own aura was flashing brightly, erratic and uncertain, like static electricity arcing off her fingertips.

She switched back to low-light mode, then pulled the hood of her infiltration suit over her head (visor and all) and zipped the collar closed. Their masks pulled down, the four members of Assessment Team Sparkplug looked like nothing more than faceless robots from a schlocky sci-fi film. Bullfrog took a moment to help Skunkboy draw a camouflage cloth over the vehicle, then turned to face the other members of the team, tapping his throat twice to indicate a comms check.

"Sparkplug Three, Mic Check," subvocalized the tall amazon.

"Sparkplug Two. My mic sounds nice check one," quipped Skunkboy.

"Sparkplug One. How read?" Bullfrog said.

"S-" Spider swallowed hard and cleared her throat. The small noise sounded dreadfully loud in the silent night. "Sparkplug Four," she said at last. "I read loud and clear. How do you read?"

"Loud and Clear," Bullfrog said. "Team Sparkplug is in position. Central, how do you read, over?"

"Central reads loud and clear," a low, male voice said into their earpieces. "Be advised, Sparkplug, Overwatch has confirmed Foundation assets in your area. We estimate you have about a one hour head start on them. Best to move fast."

"Acknowledged. Out." Bullfrog raised his weapon and drew back the bolt briefly, before letting the heavy weapon rest across his body. "Move out. Three, take, point. I'll bring up the rear."

The tall, anonymous, masked figure that had to be Kitten nodded

briefly to Bullfrog, then quickly moved off the mountain path and into the woods, followed by the other three members of Team Sparkplug.

Her thighs burned, and her feet hurt. It was difficult to breathe through her mask, which covered up her nose and mouth. She could smell the stink of her own sweat and fear, mingling with the faint chemical scent of the chameleon fabric, trapped under her mask. All in all, Spider wasn't enjoying this march one bit.

She took a moment to sip some water from her camelbak pack: the straw ran under the hood of her suit, so that she could drink from it without having to unzip the gimp mask. The water tasted flat, warm, and slightly plasticky. She was thirsty enough that she didn't care.

The team had been walking for a good two hours when they encountered the Foundation. Kitten was the first to hear them, raising her hand and cocking her head to one side, then quickly gesturing to the rest of the team before darting into the low bushes. Kitten immediately followed Bullfrog off the forest trail, slipping behind the wide roots of a tall oak tree before hunkering down and engaging the camouflage on her suit. Bullfrog scattered a few leaves and twigs over her to help break up her outline before himself taking cover a few feet away. He too engaged his camouflage, fading away until he appeared to be little more than a slightly odd-looking lump of rock among the brush.

Kitten winced and shook her head as the first of the Foundation personnel came into view. They were riding ATVs: four wheeled all-terrain vehicles, powered by single-cylinder motorcycle engines that roared loudly. They even had their headlights on. Four of the vehicles were ridden by men wearing digi-cam and combat vests, two men per vehicle. The fifth also had a man in an orange uniform sitting on a small cart behind the driver. He alone was unarmed, and his hands were chained to the cart.

The driver of the lead vehicle raised his hand in the air, and the small convoy came to a halt. The riders of the two lead vehicles came together to consult over some kind of map, while the other members of the team stretched out and relaxed.

The passenger of the fifth vehicle (the one in the cart) cleared his throat. "Hey, can you guys let me out of this thing?" he asked. "I gotta take a piss."

"Hold it," his driver (jailor?) said. "We're almost there."

"Dude, I seriously gotta go. Unless you want me to piss in the cart."

"Shit. All right, keep your hands where I can see them," the driver said curtly. Another guard drew his pistol and kept it pointed at the prisoner the entire time that the driver undid the chains, careful to keep one hand on his own weapon the whole time. And then, to Spider's horror, the passenger walked straight over to the oak tree behind which she was hiding and unzipped his pants.

She winced silently, willing herself to hold perfectly still, as the scent of ammonia rose in the night air. He didn't actually piss on her (thank God for small mercies!), but she was certain, at any moment, that he was going to notice how the light bent oddly at the base of the tree, if he didn't hear her heart pounding like a bass drum first…

The man in the orange jumpsuit whistled a cheerful tune as he finished his business, shook himself off, and zipped back up. Spider willed herself to slowly exhale as the Foundation agents regrouped, then breathed shallowly until the convoy had driven away. Only then did she risk raising her head slightly and scanning the clearing for the other team members.

She nearly screamed when Bullfrog tapped her on the shoulder, but managed to silence herself by biting her tongue until the urge passed. Bullfrog waited patiently for her to calm down, before gesturing to her to follow Kitten and Skunkboy along the path. "Central, Sparkplug," she heard him subvocalize. "Be advised have encountered Foundation personnel. Opposition is riding ATVs. Over."

"Acknowledged, Sparkplug. Central Out."

"What happened to our one hour head start?" Skunkboy whispered over the comms.

"We didn't figure they'd be on ATVs," Bullfrog said. "We didn't figure they'd be that stupid."

"They're gonna beat us to the scoop, Bull," Skunkboy pointed out.

"Keep off the comms," was Bullfrog's only reply.

It was another solid hour of marching by the time that Assessment Team Sparkplug finally caught up with the Foundation Containment Team. By the time they did so, it was all over.

The parathreat was laying on the ground, struggling under a net lined with silver threads. Three of the Foundation agents were wounded, two with wounds that didn't look survivable. The prisoner in orange sat off to one side, his face splattered in blood, shuddering with fear.

Spider couldn't help staring at the captured parathreat. She'd never seen a unicorn before. It didn't look nearly as beautiful as the shimmering horses that she'd had on the covers of her folders in school. It did look vaguely horse-like, and it did have a horn, but the resemblance ended there. No twelve-year old girl would ever have wanted scabrous scales, a ragged lion's mane, or the tail of an ox on her magical pony.

"Central, Sparkplug," she heard Bullfrog whisper over the comms. "Have made contact with parathreat. The Foundation got to it first. Please advise, over."

"Sparkplug, this is Central. The Foundation cannot be allowed to capture the parathreat alive. Proceed at your own discretion. Please acknowledge, over."

"Central. Sparkplug confirms, Foundation will not be allowed to capture the parathreat. Out."

Spider felt another wave of nausea rise in her gullet. It was the only possible choice. The Sidhe would never countenance having one of their sacred beasts held prisoner by humans: part of the thousand-year treaty between the Fair Folk and the human race included the

right to take vengeance upon any human being who violated that pact. What she knew of the Foundation, they would never willingly give up a unique paranormal specimen, either.

Her imagination painted vivid, gory images of trees unfolding into magical doors, and hundreds of lithe, skeletal beings wearing crowns of antlers riding forth on the backs of tigers and stags, wielding swords made of pure starlight. She imagined the ancient peace treaty between humanity and its alternate-universe counterparts broken: all-out interdimensional war. Even if the Wild Hunt was defeated, there was no way that the GOC's Second Mission of concealing the existence of the paranormal from humankind could survive a full-out war with the kingdoms of Faerie…

"Suggestions, team?" Bullfrog asked, interrupting her train of thought.

"Give me a minute to set up. I can put two bullets into the unicorn's head. It's better than letting them take it alive," Skunkboy said curtly.

"Better still if it lives," Kitten pointed out. "There's seven of them still standing. We each take two, the rookie takes one and the prisoner, then we let the target free at our leisure."

"Killing them is going to piss the Foundation off big time," Skunkboy pointed out. "Do we really want to risk that?"

"It's better than letting them piss off the entire Winter Court," Kitten shot back.

"I'm saying, we shoot the unicorn, and all the Foundation gets is a funny looking dead body," Skunkboy retorted. "We—"

"I get it. Spider," Bullfrog interrupted. "Your input."

Damn it. "Wait one," Spider subvocalized. Her head was spinning. This was way too much for her. Her first mission, and she was stuck in the middle of the woods, facing a possible paranormal war, caught in the middle of a choice between pissing off the most powerful of the Faerie Kingdoms, and one of the most powerful

human paranormal organizations in the world. Her mind was still reeling from the horrors that could be unleashed this night. To cap it all off, she was wearing a ridiculous skin-tight catsuit, carrying a gun she barely knew how to use, and she was smelling vaguely of pee…

… smelling vaguely of pee…

She carefully took a few steps back from her hiding spot and turned her face away from the Foundation agents. She very slowly undid the zipper on her mask, pulling the garment off over her head. She took a moment to breathe in a deep breath of fresh air, then held the hood up to her face and took a small, experimental sniff.

Yeah. She could definitely smell the faintest scent of urine in the fabric. Some of the piss from the prisoner must have splashed onto her mask while she lay hiding.

"Spider?" Bullfrog's voice sounded curt and impatient.

For the first time in this horrible, irritating, exhausting mission, Spider smiled.

"I think I have a third option," she said.

It took them another half hour to find a decent spot in order to perform the working. In the meantime, Skunkboy reported, the Foundation was taking the time to patch up their wounded comrades and prepare to move the unicorn out by cart.

Bullfrog helped her to drape the camouflage cloth over her head and upper torso, while Spider pulled out her ruggedized tablet computer and brought up her grimoire. The screen was set low enough that it was nearly impossible to read except by the light of her goggles: she brought up the spell she wanted and double-tapped the screen, causing the complicated fractal to appear in all its eye-searing glory.

She took the piss-stained hood and laid it in the center of the pattern, then pulled the black-handled athame from her pants pocket and pricked her left thumb with its tip. A single drop of blood welled up against her skin before falling onto the cloth, causing the fractal

image to flare briefly.

She placed the black-handled knife on top of the hood, closed her eyes, and reached out.

She could almost hear the voice of her Applied Sorcery professor now: "The Principle of Contagion is one of the most laws forms of magic, and forms the basis of the oldest workings still taught by the Center. The principle is simple: **Once Together, Always Together**. The part influences the whole, and two things that have been in contact with each other maintain a magical link with each other. It's the reason why voodoo dolls require hair or nail clippings from the intended victim as part of their construction, why relics of saints and martyrs are revered and treasured, and the basis of an oddly strident memorandum to all GOC male operatives regarding the proper disposal of used condoms after sex…"

A few drops of dried-out urine weren't the best link Spider had ever used, but she'd made do with worse.

D-75213 wasn't a bad man. True, he'd killed a man, but the bastard'd had it coming for what he'd done to his little brother. He'd taken the deal that the man in the black suit had offered him for one simple reason: one month was better than fifteen to life, any way you looked at it. The sooner he could serve his time (whether that time was spent behind prison bars, or serving as bait for monsters out of fairy tales), the sooner he could go home to take care of his mama. At any other time, he couldn't have been convinced to do what Spider was going to make him do, but he'd just nearly been killed by a motherfucking unicorn, and his head wasn't in the right place…

D-75213 wasn't consciously aware of reaching out and pulling up one of the seven silver stakes that held the unicorn down under the net. The unicorn, however, noticed immediately. It tore the net free from the remaining stakes and lunged for freedom. It didn't intend to kill D-75213, but he was in the way…

The pearlescent horn slashed the confused convict in twain and bounded away into the darkness.

"FUCK!" Lombardi shouted, as the creature galloped into the woods. He chased it for a few meters, but quickly gave up, letting out another low curse and shaking his head angrily. "All right, pack it up, boys. This mission's a bust."

"We can still go after it, Max!" Vance shouted.

Max Lombardi wheeled on his protege, grabbing the younger man by the collar. "You want to go chasing after a unicorn without a virgin as bait? Be my guest! I'll even pitch in for flowers at your funeral. Me, I'm packing it up and calling it a night. We've got three down and we've lost our rabbit. We're operationally ineffective!"

"Why the hell did he do that?" Beckett asked. "Why did he pull the stake? He knew what would happen, didn't he?"

"Did he? I don't know. I don't fucking know. All I know is that we're aborting the mission. I'll call it in. God-fucking damn it, what a fucking waste…"

Vance shook his head, but didn't argue further. As the sun rose, the seven remaining members of the Foundation Containment Team packed up the remains of their three colleagues (and one D-Class personnel) and prepared to head back home.

They found the unicorn silently grazing on the short grass at the edge of a ring of mushrooms. It was a surreal sight, seeing that grotesque creature clipping the grass with its sharklike teeth.

Its head snapped up and stared directly at them as Assessment Team Sparkplug stopped at the edge of the clearing. The four of them froze in place, staring silently at the deadly creature.

The unicorn snorted, then slowly walked towards Spider and dipped its head down to her, nuzzling against her outstretched hand.

Spider gulped nervously as the creature rubbed its nose and face against hers, the coppery, ketone-laced stench of its breath wafting all around her like a miasma of death.

Then the sun rose, and it vanished in the blink of an eye, leaving

behind a swirling cloud of fireflies that, just as quickly, vanished from view.

"I didn't figure you for a virgin," Bullfrog said softly.

"After my identity reassignment? Yeah. I guess I am," Spider whispered.

She rubbed her face, where the unicorn had nuzzled her. It came away holding a small, glassy scale. The scale itself soon faded away into powder, leaving behind no trace that it had ever existed.

"All right," Bullfrog said, clearing his throat. "We've got a long walk back. Let's get started."

D.C. al Fine closed the mission report and tossed it into her desk, on top of a neat stack of printouts, readouts, and reports.

"All things considered," she said to no one at all, "Assessment Team Sparkplug did better than anyone anticipated."

"The auguries never lie," the Speaker to Humans replied, her image coalescing into view on al Fine's computer screen. "The Silicon goddesses foretold this result."

"As did His Satanic Majesty," whispered Marcus Crowley into her ear. Each word brought with it the scent of brimstone and the undertones of the screaming of the damned. "You were wrong to mistrust their abilities."

"Then why do you sound so disappointed?" al Fine asked.

"We do not—"

The Undersecretary-General opened up another file folder and tossed it into the desk. "The full report of the augury by the Silicon Nornir," al Fine said. "And don't ask where I got it. I'm not going to tell you. The Nornir did predict a 95% chance of mission success. But they also predicted a 50% chance of increased tensions with the Foundation. Which is interesting, because there are other teams that had around the same chance of mission success, but much lower

chances of pissing off the Foundation."

"And as for you… the Satanic Scientists have always objected to the Coalition's maintenance of the Arthurian Charters with the Kingdoms of Faerie, haven't they?" al Fine went on. "And the most likely scenario if Team Sparkplug didn't manage to piss off the Foundation was increased tension with the Fae. And suddenly and coincidentally, I have two organizations who have never given each other the time of day forming a voting bloc to push the Council to have me put Team Sparkplug back in the field. Interesting."

"I don't know what you're implying—."

"I'm not implying anything. I'm saying it outright. Don't use PHYSICS Division to advance your own personal agendas again," al Fine said curtly. "If I ever get another whiff of that from either of you…"

She raised her hand and tapped a button. Immediately, the images of both Marcus Crowley and the Speaker to Humans flinched as two Strike Teams appeared out of thin air at their respective locations, deactivating their invisibility cloaks and raising their rifles to their shoulders.

"… I know who you are and where you are," she concluded. "The next time you see these guys, it'll be the last thing you ever see."

"You can't—"

"The hell I can't. First and Second Mission priorities. 'Survival of the Human Race' and 'Concealment of the Paranormal World' trumps protecting the lives of two individual humans. This meeting is adjourned."

She tapped her keyboard a second time. The Strike Teams lowered their rifles, re-engaged their invisibility cloaks, and faded back into the darkness.

The last thing D.C. al Fine saw before the representatives from the Silicon Nornir and the Church of Satan (Scientist) vanished from her computer screen were the angry and astonished expressions on their faces. They wouldn't soon forgive this.

Then again, neither would she.

"We now begin the most important phase of any mission," Bullfrog said, raising his beer mug. "Post-mission beers with the team. To a successful mission, and none of us getting hurt or killed!"

"And to a piss-stained mask saving the day," Skunkboy added.

"Hear hear."

The four team members clinked glasses and took long sips of their foamy brew: Lucky Killigan's house draft. The bar didn't exist on any maps or in any directories: technically, it was an illegal operation, without a liquor license. Given that the owner, bartender, and all the guests were all GOC operatives, the local government were understandably lax to bust them.

Spider took another long sip of her beer, savoring the cold, bitter brew, before putting the glass down and clearing her throat. "I don't want to be morbid," she said delicately, "But there is something I've been wondering."

"Go, Spider," Bullfrog said, pouring himself another beer.

"How did Beagle die?" Spider asked.

The other three members of the team froze in place. "You mean you don't know?" Skunkboy asked.

"His file just said 'Killed in Action.' It didn't say anything more than tha—"

"He got eaten by a dragon," Kitten said.

"Technically, a Non-Autocthonic Lifeform from another dimension…" Skunkboy pointed out.

"It was three hundred feet long. It had scales, it flew, and it breathed fire."

"It didn't technically breathe fire. It spat a colloidal white phosphorus

and sodium—"

"Dragon," Kitten insisted.

"Fine, it was a dragon." Skunkboy said. "In any case, it ate him."

"Roasted him alive and ate him like a piece of popcorn chicken," Kitten agreed.

"You know what his last words were? 'Hang on, you guys. I've got this.' What a fucking idiot."

"To Agent Beagle." Bullfrog said, raising his glass again. "The bravest, most glorious, most fucking idiotic man I ever met."

"Hear hear."

They clinked glasses again and drank.

"AWTOK"

"… lately," Jenny said, "I've been feeling a lot more dragonish."

The other nine people sitting around the circle nodded and made sympathetic noises, as Agent Griggs suppressed a groan.

"I've been hoarding cash," Jenny said, "and feeling greedy and gluttonous. Yesterday, I cooked a meatloaf… and I ate it all in one night. And I've been really wondering what it would be like to sleep on a bed of coins…"

So what you're saying is that you're a fat, greedy bitch? Griggs thought.

"… I really don't know what to do. On the one hand, I want to express my dragonish side a bit more. But on the other hand, I've gained ten pounds, and my friends and family think I'm being weird…"

That's because you are weird, you stupid cow.

"Well," Loredinal, Master of the Summer Court of the High Elvish Legions (better known as Tom Smith of La Jolla) said, "Can any of us think of anything that could help our draconian sister with her problems?"

"I can!" said the peppy young Kasumiko (born Vanessa Charleston of San Diego). "Jenny, maybe you should try roleplaying things out? If you ever feel like kidnapping a maiden, maybe you could have a friend volunteer to get tied up for a bit?" She bounced up and down in her chair, the fake fox ears she wore waving a bit in response.

"I don't know if my friends would be up for that," Jenny said, smiling. "And honestly, it's not really the whole kidnapping maidens thing that's getting to me. More the eating too much and wanting to hoard things…"

"Nightshadow?" Loredinal said to Griggs. "You've been quiet. Anything to add?"

"Hm? Not really," Griggs said. "Sorry I've been distracted lately."

"Ah. Problems with the rest of the Vampire Council?" Loredinal asked sympathetically.

More like problems with the rest of you delusional fucks. "You know I can't talk about that, without breaking my vows," Griggs said slowly and carefully.

Everyone else around the circle nodded sympathetically. "Well," Loredinal said. "I think we've done some good work. Just something to keep in mind, though: AWTOK has been snooping around recently, and we're worried that they may try a snatch-and-grab. Remember what happened to Bianca…"

That angry teenage girl who you swore were kidnapped by government agents, but turned up in a crack house in Compton?

"… and be safe. Meeting adjourned."

Everyone stood up and started to gather their things. "By the way," Jenny said. "I'm feeling hungry. Anyone want to come with me to get a burger?"

"Meat? Ugh," Loredinal shuddered.

"I can't eat gluten," Razorfang the White-clawed pointed out.

"I'll come!" Kasumiko giggled. "Wanna come along, Nightshadow?"

Maybe, if it meant I could put a bullet between your eyes. "I don't eat meat, remember?" was all Griggs said.

"Awww… that's right. Welp. Time to go! Ta ta!" She grabbed Jenny by the arm and dragged the quiet girl out of the room.

Thank God, Griggs sighed.

He drove three blocks away before pulling into a parking lot and taking out his cell phone. He checked his contacts, found the number for his AWTOK handler, and hit the "dial" button.

AWTOK here, the voice said, after the first ring. **Report.**

"They're a bunch of stupid kids playing elves and dragons," Griggs sighed. "I've been spending the past three weeks going to their stupid meetings. Can I stop now?"

Have you confirmed whether any of them are actual past-lifers or nonhumans? the voice asked.

"What? No. I haven't confirmed anything, because there's nothing to confirm! It's just a bunch of stupid kids playing make-believe!" Griggs repeated.

Unacceptable. Capture them and bring them in for further experimentation.

"… damn it, are you kidding me?" Griggs groaned. "You want me to bring in a bunch of stupid kids just in case one of them turns out to actually be some kind of magical fairy person?"

You have your orders. AWTOK out.

Griggs groaned and rested his head against the steering wheel as he heard the dial tone.

"Shit," he groaned. "Now I gotta rent a van."

"… oh, hey, Nightshadow!" Loredinal said, smiling. "You're here early."

"Was just thinking that maybe I could help out a bit, with the snacks or something," Griggs said. "I've kind of been a bit of a jerk recently."

"Understandable. Vampire court politics being what they are. Kasumiko is in the kitchen, making guacamole. Maybe you can help her out?"

"Sounds good." Griggs said. His index finger gently rested against the small vial in his coat pocket.

In the kitchen, the cute young woman with the fox ears on her head was humming quietly to herself as she pitted and peeled a large number of avocados. "Nightshadow!" she squealed, before giving Griggs a big hug. "Good to see you!"

"Loredinal was just asking if you needed some help with your guacamole?" Griggs asked.

"Nah. I'm just setting up my second batch of avocados so that I can make a second batch quick when the first one runs out," Kasumiko said, giggling. "Why don't you take this bowl out to the snacks table?"

"Sure thing," Griggs said. He calmly picked up the bowl of guacamole, carried it out to the snacks table, then, after glancing to either side to make sure he wasn't being watched, opened up the vial of liquid and poured it into the bright green dip. He took a moment to stir it in with the big wooden spoon, and, having completed his mission, slipped the vial back into his coat pocket and…

"So, what is it?" Kasumiko asked coldly. "Flunitrazepam? Gamma-hydroxybutyrate?"

Griggs spun around just in time to get the darts of Kasukimo's TAZER in his chest. He fell to the ground screaming as the lightning coursed through his body.

"LORE!" Kasumiko shouted.

"On it!" Loredinal shouted back. He raced into the room, carrying some kind of crazy headpiece that looked like a colander with a ton of wires attached to it, and put it on the still-twitching Griggs' head.

"You motherfuckers!" Griggs shouted. "Fucking… **I WILL FIND AND CONSUME THEM! NOTHING CAN HALT THE HUNGER OF THE AUTOCH!**"

"I'm losing it!" Loredinal shouted. "Damn it! Containment is failing…"

"Exec— SHIT!" Kasumiko shouted, just as Griggs levitated two feet off the ground and lunged for her, his mouth stretching impossibly wide open, revealing a gaping maw filled with razor-edged teeth. Loredinal dove for him, tried to pull him off, only to be flung across the room by a massively powerful arm, slumping, unconscious, to the ground. Kasumiko struggled and screamed, trying to reach her TAZER, but the thing that had been Griggs was too damn strong, and it was choking the life out of her, and her vision was blurring and starting to darken, and…

… and then Grigg's head vanished, bitten clean off by a gigantic saurian head covered in adamantine scarlet scales.

The headless corpse of Griggs fell to the ground, as the dragon that had killed him spit its head out onto the carpet. A thousand motes of shimmering light, and Jenny Lee fell to the ground, blood staining her mouth and the front of her shirt. She rolled over and threw up on the kitchen floor, then started to cry.

"Shit," Kasumiko groaned. "Fucking shit…"

"… how long until you think that it'll find another host?" wondered Agent Lore of Assessment Team 296 ("Eagle Pavise").

"The Autoch? No idea. Sometimes it takes a year. Sometimes a month. Sometimes only a day." Agent Miko put her hand on her partner's shoulder and gave it an encouraging squeeze. "We'll find it. Look on the bright side. No one got offed by it this time."

"We've still got a lot of amnestics to give out," Lore pointed out, "and a PTE to evaluate."

"Why don't you let me handle that part?" Miko said. "You help coordinate the cleanup."

"Of course," Lore sighed, but he straightened up and walked back into the house to help the Laundrymen deal with the evidence.

Miko took a moment to compose herself, then walked across the back yard to where the miserable-looking Jenny still sat on the stone

bench, the front of her black T-shirt still covered in blood, bone, and vomit. She shuddered as Miko sat down next to her and put an arm around the younger girl.

"Nice work, kiddo," Miko whispered, stroking her friend's hair. "Nice work."

"I don't know what happened I just came in to help out and saw him choking you and I got so mad and the next thing I knew I was thirty feet tall and I was biting his head off and…"

… and then it was time for the weeping, and the screaming, and the angry shouting, and then the nervous laughing. It was a good long while before Jenny was looking a bit more like her old self again. But it did, eventually, happen.

"… well," Miko laughed, ruffling her friend's hair. "… I hope you've had your fill of damsels in distress for a while."

"For a long while," Jenny agreed, laughing nervously.

She was going to be okay, Miko thought, and she stood up. "Look, Jenny, I gotta go help clean this stuff up," she said. "There's a guy coming… think of him kind of like a social worker for people like you… and he'll help you get situated in your new life. Now that you're an 'out' para-entity, you're going to have to deal with some extra shit."

"All right," Jenny said, taking a deep breath. "Will I ever see you again?"

I hope not, Miko thought, but she gave Jenny a weak smile and stood up to go back into the house.

"Miko?"

"Hm?"

"Are you really a kitsune? And is Loredinal really a…"

"Prince of the Elves?" Miko laughed. "Past lives and alien souls? Nah. I don't believe in that stuff. It's make-believe."

"Sequence"

« "Farpoint" | Return to GOC Hub | "Joint Venture"»

"Strike"

"Heads up, Bull," Skunkboy whispered into his comms. "They're back."

Agent Bullfrog of Assessment Team 735 "Sparkplug" lifted his head to look through his binoculars at the Chaos Insurgency camp below. Team Sparkplug had been camped out on the ridge overlooking the Insurgency facility for the past week. He was itchy, tired, cramped, and stank to high heaven. He was pretty sure that the inside of his greysuit could be considered a biohazard area at this point.

The most frustrating part of it, he decided, was that nothing was happening. In the past week, the Insurgency had done exactly jack shit. They had trained a few new soldiers, yes, and had done a lot of running through obstacle courses and firing guns and blowing up IEDs, but nothing that he hadn't seen in a dozen third-world training camps over the past few decades. As odd as it might sound to an outsider, this mission deep behind enemy lines was… boring.

Until now.

"That's a really fancy car," Bullfrog murmured. "Are those chrome-plated alloy wheels?"

"Spinners." Skunkboy grimaced. "Ten thousand fucking bucks a pop. Shit, that guy's got more bling on his wheels than I'll ever make in a year."

"Classy," Bullfrog agreed. He raised an eyebrow at a flurry of activity down below, and let out a low, surprised whistle. "Skunkboy. Look at that."

"Fuck," Skunkboy whispered. "Yeah, that looks serious. Think we should call it in?"

"I'll do it."

"Tell me what I need to know."

Assistant Director Tariq Ahmed Khalid, head of PHYSICS Division's Kabul branch, sat at the head of the rosewood-inlaid conference table, tapping the end of his fountain pen against his thigh, his stern Semitic countenance frozen in a perpetual frown. On the broad screen before him, a satellite image displayed approximately ten square miles of the Hindu Kush: steep, cafe-au-lait mountains capped with snow, leading to a broad, verdant plain. And, in the center, a small, but distinctive terrorist training camp in a hidden defile.

The young adjutant at the laptop computer furiously tapped away at his keyboard for a few moments, before finally bringing up a different image of the training camp, overlaying it over the satellite view. "All right, sir," he said, nervously. "Here it is. We've known about this Chaos Insurgency facility for the past three weeks. One week ago, we managed to get a PHYSICS Division Assessment team into the area…"

"I'm familiar with the operation," Khalid said firmly. "Tell me what they found."

"… yes, sir," the young man gulped. "Well, sir… they found evidence of use of weapons… illegal weapons stockpiles… training camps and indoctrination… and thirty minutes ago, they reported in with this image." A second photograph was brought up on the screen, next to the first. It showed a large, expensive black luxury car pulled up to the gate of the training camp. Two men in combat vests, carrying AK-model assault rifles, were dragging a third man out of the back of the car, while a third guard carried away some kind of small cubical item. In the background, two other prisoners were being led away with their hands cuffed in front of them.

"PHYSICS ran a search on their faces and VERITAS profiles. We have a match," the adjutant continued. He brought up another image of a middle-aged man in a grey suit sitting in a coffee shop somewhere in France. "Philip Anderson. Manna Charitable Foundation. They're running a humanitarian operation in the region… if it weren't for their blatant disregard of Second Mission

concerns, we'd have invited them to join the Coalition—"

"I'm also very familiar with MCF's policies and operations," Khalid interrupted again. "Tell me why it matters to us."

"… well, sir. A high-ranking member of another paranormal organization has been captured by the Chaos Insurgency. I thought…"

"You can do better than that, David," Khalid insisted. "Tell me why we should care."

The young man took a deep breath before forging on. "Because, sir, rescuing a high-ranking member of Manna Charitable Foundation would give us leverage in the next round of negotiations with them. It could give us a chance to bring them into the fold… have them agree to Second Mission concerns and join up with the Coalition. They have resources—"

"I know about their resources," Khalid said. "Who is on deck?"

"Um. According to my information, sir, the next available Rapid Response Team is Broken Dagger. Based out of Ireland."

"Better get them on the horn right away. It's the middle of the night over there."

The alarm blared in "Fox's" ear like the shrieking of some tortured beast. The slight redheaded woman slammed her palm down over the button, silencing the chorus of "The Immigrant Song" by Led Zeppelin. She groaned as she turned to her nightstand, trying to focus her bleary eyes on the text scrolling by.

One phrase in large red text immediately got her attention: "PRIORITY ALERT." She came awake immediately, sitting up on the edge of the bed and reading through the report twice through, to make sure she'd gotten everything. Only then did she slap the button on the wall of her quarters to sound the alarm in the general barracks.

It took her sixty seconds to walk down the hall to the barracks in

which Strike Team Broken Dagger slept. She was pleased to see that, by the time she arrived, the entire team was already out of bed and dressed (although a couple of them were pulling on t-shirts and sweat pants as she opened the door.) "All right, this one's urgent," she said grimly, tossing copies of the report to her three squad leaders. "A bunch of CI goons just kidnapped an MCF bigshot. We're going to get him back."

"Greysuits, ma'am?" "Jackal" asked. Fox's XO was a tall, lanky guy who looked like a professional basketball player, with ebony skin and close-cropped hair. He looked even more striking standing next to his diminutive commander.

"White," Fox said. "We're going in all-out on this one. Full Plus-Two Gen tech. Get suited up."

"Whew," Jackal hissed. "They're serious, aren't they?"

"Yeah. This one's for real. Let's go."

As team leader, Fox claimed first dibs on the shower, stripping out of her tank-top and underwear with careless ease, before stepping into the drying room, where powerful blasts of heated air dried her skin off within a few moments. She ran her ID card (kept on the same chain as her dog tags) through the security scanner. The lights on the heavy steel door blinked green for a moment before opening up to the Whitesuit morgue.

Whitesuits weren't white, any more than blacksuits were black (greysuits, coincidentally, did default to a grey tone). The term was, instead, supposed to designate the visibility level of its advanced technology. Blacksuits looked like ordinary, every day clothing that just happened to be bulletproof (for a certain level of "proof.") Whitesuits looked like science-fiction super soldiers from a video game.

The bottom layer of the whitesuit was a one-piece garment, similar to a racing swimsuit, that fit snugly against her skin. She took a moment to make sure that the relief tubes were properly aligned (something that could become very important during a long mission), and adjusted the fit around her shoulders and hips, to prevent the

garment from pinching under the close-fitting armor. After that, it wasn't difficult to climb into the unfolded whitesuit itself. She closed the torso plates manually, shifting her shoulders around to get a good, solid fit, then slipped her hands into the gloves and chinned the "close" button in her helmet.

The suit tightened around her with a loud electric whir, followed by the high metallic pings of hundreds of tiny clamps locking in place. She closed her eyes and waited the thirty seconds it took for the on-board computer systems to power up, then opened her eyes to find herself viewing the world in bright, false colors, as the suit's OCULUS system activated.

A scrolling column of text along the left hand side of her screen let her know that her suit was working properly: everything read green. She gingerly took her first step out of the chamber. The suit didn't fold up and snap every bone in her body, neither did it freeze up and entrap her in a quarter-ton of steel and composites.

So far, so good.

"Everything all right, Iron Man?" Jackal asked, as his own suit finished its power-up sequence.

Fox grinned. "Tony Stark wishes he had one of these."

"This is the part that I really really hate," Agent Arsegike grumbled, as the twelve members of Strike Team Broken Dagger assembled in the silver circle painted on the floor of what had once been an aircraft hangar. There were several men and women in white coats milling around, checking the equipment and runes that powered the transfer circle: mages from the Center for Unified Thaumatology.

"Just close your eyes and think of England," Ferret said, grinning. "It'll be over before you know it."

"That's what I told your Mom last night," Arsegike grumbled.

"All right, team!" Fox shouted, as she strode into the hangar. "Last chance to go back for anything you forgot. Weapons. Ammo.

Rations. Power. Make sure you've got everything you need, because coming back is a hell of a lot harder than getting out there. Alpha Squad?"

"Looks good, chief."

"Bravo?"

"Everything checks out."

"Charlie?"

"We're good."

"All right," Fox said, taking a deep breath. ""Visors down. From now on, no faces, no voices. We ready to go, Ops?"

"Ready to apportate on your mark, ma'am," said the lead magister.

"Take a knee, team."

The twelve members of Strike Team Broken Dagger all dropped to one knee in the center of the circle: a dozen superhero robots carrying massive sci-fi rifles, kneeling like knights before an altar.

Fox closed the visor of her helmet, waited to confirm that her internal air supply had kicked in, then said "Execute," and clenched her gut as hard as she could.

There was a flash of bright purple light, the sickening sensation of being turned inside out and shunted through a ten-dimensional manifold. Somewhere in England, a cornfield rippled and swayed, as the backlash from the teleport caused a ten-meter wide circular patch of it to be stomped flat. Somewhere in Scotland, a confused plesiosaur poked its head above water and realized that it wasn't in the Jurassic Period any more.

The ground dropped away, and Fox found herself plummeting to earth from ten thousand meters above an Afghanistani mountain range.

Working just as planned.

"There they are. I've got eyes on the team," Skunkboy reported. "Looks good. I count twelve agents, no aborts or partials."

Through the VERITAS sensors, the twelve members of the strike team glowed brightly, like shooting stars against the night sky. They formed up into three tight diamonds before banking, slowly, and turning to approach the target area.

"Why don't they just teleport them onto the ground?" the sniper wondered. "Would save them the HALO jump."

"Margin of error," Spider explained. "Despite our best efforts, we can still be up to ten meters off target. If those ten meters put you underground …"

"… gotcha." Skunkboy shuddered. "So, ever seen a Strike team in full whitesuits take down a target?"

"Can't say that I ever have, no," Spider admitted.

"Then get up here and spot for me. You're not going to want to miss this."

James Krantz wasn't a terrorist. At least, he didn't think he was. After all, terrorists were brown, and they did things like wear towels on their head and blow themselves up with bombs and worship Allah. James was a white guy from a suburban Chicago neighborhood who just happened to be recruited by a man in a dark suit who told him, in no uncertain terms, that he could either come along with them and help to save the world, or he could die. James was an atheist. Sure, he was in Afghanistan learning how to make bombs and shoot people, but he wasn't going to do that to Americans. Terrorists did things like that. James was no terrorist.

Still, there were moments when he wondered. Like tonight, walking around the perimeter of the camp (someone had to stand guard) carrying an AK-47 (good assault rifle, nothing more), wearing a scarf around his nose and mouth (just to keep the sand and dust out). That felt like a very terroristy thing to do. But James loved America.

Terrorists hated America. Didn't they?

He was still mulling over this conundrum when the man in the powered armor descended from the sky with a pistol in one hand and shot him three times.

"Show-off," Fox murmured, as she hit the ground a few yards away from Jackal.

"It worked, didn't it?"

"You were still showing off." Fox grabbed her parachute shroud and began gathering up the billowing cloth. "Status report."

"Everyone's on the ground. One misdrop: Cartman's ten klicks too far south. He'll catch up with us in time for exfil," Jackal replied. He took Fox's parachute from her and stowed it, along with his, behind a nearby rock.

"All right. I'll take his slot in the security element. Team leaders?"

"Alpha, ready," Jackal said.

"Bravo, ready."

"Charlie. Wait one… all right. We're good."

"Go," Fox ordered.

Jackal took off at a dead sprint, legs pumping furiously, with the other three members of the assault element close behind. He smashed down the chain-link fence, raced straight through three exploding claymore mines (steel ball bearings bouncing off his armor like marbles off a concrete floor) and slammed through the cinderblock wall shoulder-first, smashing concrete and rebar like tissue paper. He ran straight into three surprised men sitting around a table playing cards. They started reaching for assault rifles, but there were three other members of the assault element who could take them down, so Jackal ignored them and kept running.

His momentum carried him straight through the room and through

the far wall, smashing through the drywall with a loud, papery crunch. He slid across the tile floor on his hip, like a baseball player sliding into second base, and slapped a shaped charge onto the ground, as the three men in the room he'd just vacated went down with rifle rounds in their heads and torsos. The other members of his team joined him in the kitchen, taking up security positions looking up and down the hallway.

He took a few moments to make sure that the charge was properly placed, aiming it away from the life-auras that he could see through the VERITAS imager. "On three," he said. "I've got the target. One… two… three."

He sent the detonation code and braced for impact. The bomb exploded, cutting a round hole in the floor, revealing a darkened basement room illuminated by a single crazily swinging lightbulb. Three men were gathered around a fourth, who was tied to a chair with electrodes strapped to his face. One of the interrogators was holding up a printout of a brightly colored fractal, and Jackal's vision immediately blurred as his visor detected a possible visual cognitohazard and switched out of visible light mode.

"STAND CLEAR!" Jackal shouted. He dropped into the room, grabbed the target, and pinned him to the ground, covering him with his body, then triggered the anti-personnel charge strapped to his back. Ten thousand tiny (but fast) tungsten darts exploded from his armor in a hemispherical pattern, penetrating flesh, bone, and concrete with equal ease, riddling the Chaos Insurgency personnel.

Things were very quiet in the room after that. Only the sound of muffled gunfire let Jackal know that the battle was technically still raging.

Two minutes later, even that ceased.

"Wow," Spider whispered. "That was… something."

"Fast, aren't they?" Skunkboy agreed.

"Did that guy really have to do that thing with the window?"

"No, but it worked."

"All right, guys, enough chatting." Bullfrog said. "In a couple of hours, we're going to have twelve Strike Team members coming up our way, needing an exfil. Spider?"

"Central's got a helicopter incoming," the mage said. "Can you help me clear an LZ?"

"Can do. Skunkboy, Kitten, keep an eye on the compound. Let me know if anything comes up."

"Can do, Boss. Who Dares Wins and all that shit."

"All right!" Fox shouted. "We've got thirty minutes! Grab what you can and clear the fuck out. Jackal? How's our damsel?"

"He's still unconscious," Jackal said, a bit sheepishly. "I think I burst his eardrums. Sorry, Fox."

"He's alive, right? Don't worry about it." She stepped over the groaning body of a Chaos Insurgency operative laying on the concrete and casually shot him in the back of the head. "Ferret? Arsegike?"

"We've got the other two prisoners," came the reply. "But one of them keeps babbling something that makes no sense. Something about an aquarium."

"I'm heading your way," Fox said. "Anyone else?"

"Shatner's suit took a hit and froze up. He's fine, but I don't think I can fix it. Maybe if we had two guys supporting him from either side . ."

"With the Chaos Insurgency breathing down our necks? Fuck that. Pop his suit and set scuttling charges. Everyone else, keep grabbing any intel you can find. Fox, out."

"All right, here they come," Skunkboy said. "And not a moment too

soon, either. Sun's about to come up."

As the sun rose, eleven agents in black powered armor (carrying three rescued prisoners and one sheepish-looking half-naked man wearing what looked like a cross between a speedo and a wrestling singlet) finally emerged from the smoking buildings of the training camp and came jogging up the hill towards the Assessment Team. At least, it looked like they were jogging, until you realized that the easy, graceful lope was actually traveling at around fifty miles per hour.

They leaped up the cliff face one by one and wordlessly nodded to the members of Team Sparkplug. The last to arrive was a slight, feminine figure wearing red commander's stripes on her helmet and shoulder.

"We ready to go?" Bullfrog asked.

"One moment," Fox said. "Central, this is Dagger Six Actual. I'm sanitizing the site now."

"Dagger Six, Central. Go ahead."

She tapped a control on her left gauntlet. Down below, a flash of bright blue light, followed by a loud crack like that of thunder, indicated that the unfortunate Agent Shatner's whitesuit was now destroyed… as well as the building it had been left in, which collapsed in a cloud of white-hot, incandescent dust.

"All right," Fox said. "Now we can call in our ride home."

"Team Broken Dagger reported in at 0548 hours. They're in the barracks right now, repairing, regrouping, and preparing for their trip back to Ireland," David explained. "All in all, a successful oper—"

"So it was a successful op. Big deal. Anything interesting or unusual I should know about?" Khalid asked.

"Uhh… oh, there was one thing. Kind of funny, actually. The team was delayed for ten minutes trying to find one of the prisoner's pets. A sea slug of some kind. Apparently, he wouldn't leave without it. He

claims it can talk," the young man chuckled.

"Really?" Khalid asked calmly, taking a sip of his coffee. "What's it's name?"

"Very ungentlemanly of them," Lord Blackwood said, waving his feathery gills about. "Absolutely no way to treat a civilized human being. I was reminded of T.S. Lawrence in the hands of the Turks, although thankfully, I managed to escape without suffering any of the outrages endured by that illustrious gentleman." The colorful nudibranch lowered its head into the teacup that had been placed into its tank, staining the water a pale brown. "All in all, this was not the summer holiday I would have chosen."

"I'm just glad to see that you're came through it in one piece," Khalid said. "You always did have a knack for getting into trouble."

"Balderdash. I was never in any true danger, except perhaps running low on rum and tea. Speaking of which, how is that Anderson fellow? Good chap that, but not exactly the adventuring type."

"Philip Anderson will recover, although he may have some hearing loss," Khalid reported. "He'll be fine."

"That's good, that's good. By Jove, this really has been an odd week, hasn't it?"

"That it has, that it has," Khalid agreed. "I don't suppose I can convince you to stay a bit longer? There's no reason for you to go back to the Foundation."

"Rubbish. I gave them my parole. A gentleman's word is as binding as oak. Besides, my housekeeper will be worried about me. She does get into such terrible fits when I'm away for too long."

"If you must," Khalid said, inclining his head politely. "I'll have a courier take you back in the morning."

"Nonsense. I may be getting a bit on in years, but there's still life in these old bones. If I couldn't enjoy an invigorating afternoon

sabbatical like a little walk back home, I'd be ashamed to call myself a Blackwood."

"In that case, I'll be seeing you around, old friend," Khalid said, getting to his feet.

"And you as well, my Arab friend. Inshallah, and may Allah smile upon you, peace be on his name," Lord Blackwood said.

Khalid got to his feet and walked out of the small interrogation chamber, closing the door behind him. His aide, David, cleared his throat nervously.

"I didn't know you were Mus—"

"I'm not," Khalid interrupted. "And I'm not an Arab either. But Theodore is a bit set in his ways. Comes from the era in which he was raised. He means well."

"Ah. And um. How do you know this sea slu—"

Khalid fixed his aide with a martinet's glare, before turning crisply away and walking down the hallway.

"That's above your security clearance," he said.

"You know," Bullfrog said thoughtfully. "These guys should stop building their camps in known terrorist strongholds. I mean, when someone blows up a mysterious camp in the Hindu Kush, no one gives a crap. But if it it happened in, say, Montana? Someone would ask questions."

"Yeah, but then they'd have to deal with nosy neighbors… IRS property taxes… deer shitting on their lawn…" Fox pointed out. "Besides, we could still blow them up. We'd just have to claim it was a meth lab or something."

"I guess that's true," Bullfrog said. "To the Chaos Insurgency."

"And may their ammo ever run low," Fox agreed.

She picked up her beer and took a sip. Not as good as the real thing, but then again, it was impossible to find a real Guinness anywhere outside of Dublin.

"So," she asked. "How's the new girl working out?"

"Spider? Not bad. She's got a lot to learn, but she learns quickly. Probably one of the best mages I've had the pleasure of working with."

"Really? Think she'd consider a career in Strike?"

"Hey, I didn't drag you out of that cave in Argentina so that you could headhunt my wizard away from me."

"As I recall, it was me dragging you out of that cave, not the other way around."

"More like we were dragging each other," Bullfrog chuckled.

"True, true." Fox finished off the rest of her beer and stood up, stretching her arms over her head. "We've got to catch an early flight back to Ireland at 0600. Want to join me in my room for a nightcap?"

"Our flight's at 0400," Bullfrog pointed out. "I should probably get some sleep too."

"C'mon, Bull. It's been months since we last saw each other. We've got a lot of catching up to do." The petite redhead smirked at the larger man as she ran a finger gently across his shoulderblades.

Bullfrog smiled. "All right," he said, with a sly, knowing smile. "One drink."

"Trauma"

Breach

"… and then, fifteen minutes later, the Strike Team breached and entered," Bullfrog concluded. "And that was that."

"Was it?" the woman in the blue sweater asked.

The big man stared down at the cup of coffee in his hands for a long, silent moment.

"Agent," the woman said. "I want you and your team back in here tomorrow morning for another debriefing session. Until then, I'm taking you off the active roster."

"If you feel it's necessary."

"I do. And Agent?"

"Yes?"

The woman in the blue sweater sighed. "Try to get some rest."

Bullfrog drove straight home to his apartment after the debriefing, walking wearily up the stairs with his kit bag over one shoulder. He unlocked the door and stepped inside, to find himself surrounded by candlelight. The scent of perfume was redolent in the air, which was permeated by gentle sounds of smooth jazz music.

There was a beautiful, diminutive redhead woman sitting on the couch. Fox grinned at him as she stretched her arms out over her head. "Hey, big guy!" she said, cheekily, sauntering up and taking hold of his tie. "I've got a week off, so I thought I'd surprise you!"

She reached up and tenderly kissed him.

Bullfrog felt the bile rise. He pushed her away, raced into the bathroom, and threw up in the toilet.

"… sorry," he said later, after Fox had snuffed all the candles, turned on the lights, and put on some more sensible clothes.

"Apology accepted," the Strike team leader said, "provided you tell me what the shit is going on, Bull."

"I don't want to talk about it," Bullfrog insisted. "It's work-related. Security clearances and all. Need-to-know basis."

"Bull," Fox said sternly. "It's me. Kate. I've got the same security clearance you've got. And considering that I've flown twelve hours from Ireland, not to mention shaving and trimming myself for tonight… I think I've got a bit of need-to-know."

"Kate…"

"And more than that, Jerry… you look like you've got a serious need-to-tell," Fox said, picking up her teacup and taking a sip. "So talk."

There was a long moment of silence before Bullfrog spoke once more. "You know I just got back from the field, right?"

"Yesterday, yeah. Some op downtown? I didn't hear the details, but the front-desk guy told me your team had it rough. Which was why I thought you could use some cheering up."

"Yeah. Downtown," Bullfrog muttered. "Luxury hotel. Fancy place. We got the call after PALISADE interrupted a really weird 911 call by the concierge. They scrambled us, put us in isolation suits, and sent us in. The first thing that happened was that this old fat dude came after me with a beach umbrella… "

"Jesus Christ!" Bullfrog shouted, as the old-timer lunged at him with the heavy piece of pool furniture. "Calm down! We're the good

guys!"

"Get the hell away from me, you commie bastard!" the toothless old man screamed. He continued to swing the umbrella at them wildly, his shriveled dick swaying gently back and forth with each swing. "You'll never take me alive, Ivan!"

"Skunkboy, tackle him!" Bullfrog shouted.

"Screw you! You do it! I ain't grabbing that guy!"

Kitten calmly walked up to the naked old man, caught the umbrella in one hand, and casually reached out to punch him in the jaw, hard.

"Jesus, Kitten! You coulda killed him!"

Kitten looked down at the unconscious naked old man in her arms, checked him for a pulse, and shrugged. "He'll live."

"Wonder what the hell that was about?" Skunkboy asked.

"Maybe he had a bad night at the bingo hall," Bullfrog quipped.

The team stopped laughing when they found the main ballroom.

"Bullfrog?"

"Yeah?"

"Is this hell?"

"If it's not, it's about as close to it as we're ever going to get," Bullfrog grimaced. He leaned down and ran his fingers over the eyes of the naked man lying on the floor of the ballroom. His skin had been peeled back from every inch of his body and was staked to the carpet with sharpened pencils. A severed penis and testicles rested next to his head. The bullet wound in the middle of the forehead hadn't been there when the team entered the room: Bullfrog had done that the moment he realized that the man was still alive (as well as removing the man's severed genitalia from his mouth).

"Skunkboy, toxin analysis?"

"Nothing I can see." The young man waved the sampling wand in the air and studied the readout on his screen. "No psychoactives. Lots of adrenaline, blood, shit, urine, saliva… that's expected given what we're seeing here.

Bullfrog looked up at the rest of the conference room. The entire place was filled with them: hundreds, if not thousands, of men, women, and children in brightly colored vacation garb slumped over in death. Here, a young man had grabbed a young blonde woman by the throat and throttled her to death before being stabbed in the back by another woman with a penknife, who lay on the ground lifelessly staring into oblivion, her eyes glased over in death, the hem of her skirt stained with shit and piss. There, a forty year-old woman had punched a grey-haired man's face before smashing in his head with a bar blender. Over there, a young boy sat huddled in the corner of the room. His severed arm lay in his lap.

"Well, if it's not a toxin… Spider, Thaum analysis?"

"Tending hard Flat, intensity around one hundred kilocaspers… hue Sapphire, Tight weave," Spider reported. "Not sure if this is because of the sheer number of dead people around here, or what caused it. Just to be safe, I recommend we all keep buttoned up. Just in case this thing turns out to be cognito or memetic."

"No arguments there. Kitten? You've been quiet," Bullfrog said.

"… I say we leave and burn this place down," Kitten said curtly. She looked down at a young man slumped in the corner with his arms and legs all blown off, checked him for a pulse, then casually, coldly, put a bullet in his head. "It's the only way to be sure."

"It might be better if we just do that. There's no way that any level of steam cleaning is going to ever get these carpets sanitary," Skunkboy pointed out. "You know what they say about the smell of dead bodies." He shifted his weight on the sodden carpet. It squelched under his feet.

"So that's two votes for burning the building down. Spider? Your

opinion?"

"Wait one." Spider said. She stared into her computer screen, swallowing hard, as she fiddled with her monitor. "Bull? I've uh… I've got a lot of VERITAS signatures on the top floor penthouse suite," she said. "Looks like we could have a bunch of civilians or hostages hiding out there."

"All right. Let's go rescue them," Bullfrog said. "Find an override, and let's get into that penthouse suite."

"Hey, Bull?" Skunkboy asked on the elevator ride up.

"Hm?"

"Doesn't this place get a lot of Japanese tourists?"

"What are you, a fucking racist? Apologize to Spider."

"Shit, sorry, Spider, it's not that. It's just that… well, this place gets a lot of Japanese tourists this time of year, right?"

"I think so. Guest register had a lot of Tanakas and Kims in it, yeah."

"But half the dead guys in that ballroom weren't, right?" Skunkboy pointed out. "In fact, I think most of them were white or black or hispanic. Isn't that a bit weird?"

Bullfrog frowned as he rubbed his chin in thought. The reinforced glove of his iso suit made a hard, metallic clink against the faceplate of his suit. "Spider?"

"Yeah?"

"Show me that ARAD reading again."

Spider passed the tablet computer to her team leader, who cocked his head to one side for a moment and stared at the pattern of colors and lines on the screen. Suddenly, Bullfrog swore, dropped the computer, and thumbed his comms circuit open.

"Central, this is Sparkplug!" he practically shouted into his mic. "We're going weapons free and assaulting the penthouse suite! Case Bixby, I say again, Case Bixby!"

"Fuck!" Skunkboy shouted. He fumbled with his DMR as he attempted to rack a round into the chamber. "Fucking shit!"

"Oh gods," Spider whispered. She began scrabbling through her tactical webbing.

There was a cheerful ding! sound, and the elevator doors opened onto…

The starshells exploded overhead, casting the entire jungle in hard white light. Jeremiah felt the cold, hard knotting in the pit of his stomach as he saw the gooks in their black pajamas crawling through the wire.

"CARTER!" his lieutenant screamed. "Get that Sixty up!"

He fumbled with the charging rod of his machine gun, finally managed to get the weapon locked and loaded. He raised himself to the lip of the trench and opened fire, screaming in terror and rage. The weapon chattered and scattered hot brass and steel all over the red jungle mud as the muzzle flashes lit up the night.

He could see the gooks falling, he could see them dying, and he wanted to laugh at the sight. "Get some, you stupid fucking slopeheads!" he screamed. "COME AND GET SOME, YOU FUCKING GOOK BASTARDS!"

He saw the second set of starshells go up, and he saw his lieutenant rise up from the trenches, pistol raised over his head, grey-bearded face twisted in fury. "ASSAULT THROUGH!" the lieutenant was screaming. "We got them on the run! Get em'! Put the steel to them! Kill those fuckers!"

Jeremiah rose to his feet and screamed in triumph as he continued to fire his machine gun from the hip. He could see his brother marines rising up from the trenches, cutting down the fucking VC

like wheat before the scythe. The machine gun's bolt slammed back as the belt ran out: he handed the weapon to his A-gunner and drew the .45 from his belt. He fired into the mass of the fleeing, black-clad bastards, fury rising in his heart. How dare they! How dare they drag Ma Carter's little boy out of his home and take him to this fucking stinking jungle? How dare they?

One of the gooks was screaming at him. He put two into his chest and the pistol locked back on an empty chamber. He could see two more of his men holding the fucking chink down. He thought about reloading his pistol, but it would take too much time. He smacked the fucker across the face with the hilt of his gun, knocking that stupid straw hat off his face, was surprised to see that the goddamn slanthead was a girl. Fucking bitch. Fucking VC whore.

He remembered poor Hawkins. Good kid. Just turned 18. Hired a hooker for his eighteenth birthday. Hooker brought a grenade into the tank where they fucked, left it behind. Blew his fucking guts out all over the inside of the entire vehicle. Good fucking kid. Nice guy, everyone liked him, and he died in the middle of a fucking Saigon street because he wanted to get his dick wet for the first time. Fucking waste. Fucking gook whores. He'd get this bitch for him. He'd do it for Hawkins.

He could feel the other gooks trying to pull him off. He fought them off of him and continued punching the fucking whore in the face. He was screaming, he could see the bruises rise… and then she swung something at his face, and he could see that it was some kind of rabbit foot on a chain…

And then Bullfrog found himself laying on the floor of the penthouse suite, and he was grabbing Spider by the throat. Her face was covered in blood and bruises, and her left hand clutched the rabbit's foot on a chain she always wore around her neck.

And Bullfrog screamed even louder.

There was a sudden scream of alarm, and he spun around to see Kitten coldly, methodically, and violently grabbing an old, grey-haired man in camouflage by the face and slamming his head back

against a granite countertop. Her face was a mask of fury as she smashed the man's head into a pulp.

Bullfrog looked around silently at the bloody room, at the men and women and children laying in broken, bloody piles on the carpet, at the bullet holes riddling the walls and spidering the glass, at his broken, bruised, and bloodied teammate, and at the empty box magazine of his weapon.

It seemed to him that it would be a good idea to just go away.

So he did. It took four large men to carry him out of the room.

"… Jesus," Fox whispered. Her tea had gone cold, as she sat at the breakfast nook, watching Bullfrog tell his story.

"Yeah," the big man said. He laughed bitterly. "My team is a fucking mess. Spider's in the hospital with two broken cheekbones and a whole mess of smashed teeth. She's lucky to be alive. Kitten went… mechanical. Just kept pounding the guy against the countertop. There wasn't nothing left of his head by the end. They had to sedate her. About the only one who seemed to get through it okay was Skunkboy… at least, that's what I thought before he tried to punch me in the face."

"Lance took a swing at you?"

"Cussed me out, too," Bullfrog admitted. "Called me every fucking name in the book. Said I'd nearly gotten them all killed. And the thing is, he was right."

"Bull…"

"No. Don't interrupt me, Kate. I fucked it up." The big man smacked his fist into his open palm. "Racial profiling in the targets. That meant that whatever the hell was doing this was filtering by race. That implies agency. Sapient controller, not an autonomous effect. And then there was the VERITAS pattern."

"Bull…"

"I should have checked the pattern before we got in that damn elevator," Bullfrog went on. "Spider's a newbie. She doesn't have the experience in reading VERITAS signatures like I do… like Beagle did! She's barely been on the team for a year! She doesn't know how to pick out a mindbender. If I'd known there was one up there, we would never have gotten in that damn elevator!"

"Jerry…"

"And THEN!" Bullfrog shouted. "Me, the fucking DUMBASS, decided to breach that fucking room with FOUR Assessment guys! The moment I realized we were walking into a fucking mindbender's lair, I should have stopped the fucking elevator: slammed the emergency stop, called it in, and sent in Strike… but no! I had to BREACH! And I sent all four of us in to become that goddamn psychopath's playthings!"

Fox just clutched her mug more tightly as Bullfrog's tirade continued. "And the most FUCKED UP THING?" the big man concluded. "Even more fucked up than that… that sick bastard using me to nearly kill my own teammate? The most fucked up thing is that in the end, that fucking newbie saved all our asses! If she hadn't gone for her ward… if she hadn't broken the effect on me and the others, we would have killed each other just like those poor bastards down in the ballroom! Jesus Christ!"

Bullfrog collapsed onto the couch and buried his face in his hands, letting out a loud scream of frustration, muffled in his own hands.

Fox sat down and put her arm around his shoulders. The big man flinched… then settled in and rested his head on her chest. It took a long time for his breathing to finally slow.

"Jerry?"

"Yeah?"

"Remember what you told me after the Alaska op?"

"It's not the same thing."

"It's exactly the same thing, Jer," Fox said. "And I'm going to tell you

the same thing you told me."

"You're fucked up," Fox went on. "And rightfully so. And you're gonna stay fucked up for a while. Shit like this doesn't go away fast. Bits of it never go away. But the raw, jagged edges… they'll get smoothed over. We'll help you do it. And in the end… it won't cut you as deep. It will still hurt… but you'll be able to take it."

Bullfrog nodded in silence as he rubbed his forehead, staring off into nothingness. But his shoulders weren't as tense, and his eyes weren't as haunted. That was something, at least.

"You should get some sleep," Fox said. "If I know the Coalition, they're going to want you in for therapy bright and early."

"Eight in the morning," Bullfrog admitted. "All-day therapy and debriefing with the team."

"All right," Fox said. "Ready to go to bed?"

"… no. But I'll try."

Post-Mortem

> *Subject has reportedly had trouble sleeping since the incident, and has reported several incidents of bad dreams and flashbacks to the event. Continued therapy has been effective in alleviating these symptoms, but*

Angela Schowalter stared at the screen for a solid moment, her fingers gently tapping against her keyboard, before she finally typed in the next sentence.

> *Subject has expressed trouble sleeping since the incident, and has reported several incidents of bad dreams and flashbacks to the event. Continued therapy has been effective in alleviating these symptoms, but the subject remains below expected parameters. It is my recommendation that the Agent not be returned to active*

duty with the other members of the squad pending further psychological rehabilitation.

Angela leaned back in her chair and stared at the screen for another long time, before deleting what she had just written and typing in, instead:

Subject has expressed trouble sleeping since the incident, and has reported several incidents of bad dreams and flashbacks to the event. Continued therapy has been effective in alleviating these symptoms, but the subject remains below expected parameters. It is my recommendation that the Agent undergo memory redaction therapy.

She rubbed her forehead in both hands and sighed deeply, before picking up her glass of water and taking a large drink.

Subject has expressed trouble sleeping since the incident, and has reported several incidents of bad dreams and flashbacks to the event. Continued therapy has been effective in alleviating these symptoms, but the subject remains below expected parameters. As the subject is an integral part of their unit, it is my recommendation that the unit be disbanded and its members seconded out to other units pending full recovery.

"Full Recovery." It sounded nice and simple. As if such a thing were possible.

Subject has expressed trouble sleeping since the incident, and has reported several incidents of bad dreams and flashbacks to the event. Continued therapy has been effective in alleviating these symptoms, but the subject remains below expected parameters. I request permission to suggest unit-wide memory redaction therapy in order to return the unit to full effectiveness.

Angela shook her head again. *I need more data. I can't decide a person's fate based on what I have.*

> *Subject has expressed trouble sleeping since the incident, and has reported several incidents of bad dreams and flashbacks to the event. Continued therapy has been effective in alleviating these symptoms, but the subject remains below expected parameters. Further evaluation is required.*

Angela double-checked the form, signed it with her thumbprint, and hit the "Upload" button. Her screen immediately began to display a complicated fractal pattern, looking like a swirling bunch of palm fronds swaying under the ocean. She stared past the cognitohazard and picked out the four-digit passcode, typed it into the appropriate text box, and hit "Confirm."

She switched off her computer, picked up her water glass, and got ready for bed.

"Agent Fox?"

"That's me."

Angela extended her hand to the small redheaded woman in the hardhat and blue coveralls. "Angela Schowalter."

"Good to meet you," Fox said. Her grip was strong and firm. "So you want to see the site, huh?"

"I thought it might be helpful," Schowalter said. "Or maybe it's just my morbid curiosity."

"Well, you're in luck. They start rigging up the explosives tomorrow. No civilians allowed on-site after that."

"It's the only choice, then?"

"We're already getting spontaneous psychic manifestations. The entire place is in a giant ARAD loop. We've tried three exorcisms already, but the thing is soaked into the very structure of the building. We're gonna have to demolish and decontaminate the rubble piece by piece. Not that the owners exactly mind: no one wants to stay at a hotel where a bunch of terrorists recently took the

entire guest list hostage."

"So that's the cover story PSYCHE is going with?"

"It was the best we could do on such short notice." The redheaded woman passed Angela a set of isolation gear, helping her into the reinforced coveralls and mask. "Story's got bigger holes than swiss cheese, but hopefully it'll end up as a local urban legend."

"Hopefully," Angela agreed. "By the way, Agent, I have you listed as Agent Bullfrog's Acknowledged Paramour, but I don't have reciprocating documents from you. Are they still en route?"

Fox paused in the middle of checking Angela's mask for a seal. "No," she said curtly. "And he should have checked with me before he did that. I think the boy and I need to have a talk."

"So you are not in an intimate relationship with Agent Bullfrog?"

"Define intimate," Fox said, giving Angela's mask one more tug. "He's not bad-looking, and I don't mind fucking him when we have a chance. He pushes… well, he pushed… all my buttons just right in bed. And we talk whenever we can. I guess we're friends, too. But Paramour?"

Angela just stared at the redheaded woman for a long while.

Fox laughed and shook her head. "Yeah, I just defined it, didn't I? I'll file once I get home."

"Please do," Angela said, before jumping into the rote lecture on internal relationships: "The Coalition doesn't forbid internal intimate relationships between agents, so long as they do not interfere with the chain of command…"

"… but you do require us to disclose them, to avoid possible conflicts. Yeah, I know. I guess I didn't think it was that big a deal. It's not like I'm gonna marry him or anything. We're just friends."

"We'll get into agape vs. eros, storge, and filia some other time," Angela said, "but multiple sexual encounters plus actively seeking out contact does fit the definition of Paramour. Still, you should have

that talk with him. Perhaps in my office. There's no regulation that says you should check with someone before listing them as a Paramour… but failing to do so implies a troubling breach of trust."

"Yeah," Fox said. "There's been a bit of that going on recently."

"Care to talk about it?"

"Later, over coffee," Fox said. "Right now, I need to walk you through the site. The air supply in these suits doesn't last forever."

"Initial contact was made in this ballroom," Fox said. "They took initial toxin and thaum readings here. Multiple contacts with affected individuals, before retreating back to the elevator lobby and heading up to the penthouse suite."

The massive conference room was dotted with spotlights and extension cords, illuminating the entire place in stark, white light. Hundreds of small white numbered tags were dotted all over the floor, walls, and furniture, each one with a small, hand-written note and a small photograph picturing what had originally been found at that location. Angela leaned over one card and studied it up close.

Tooth fragment plus bloodstains, DNA analysis pending.

"Bloody hell," she whispered.

"You got that right," Fox snorted. Her eyes were hard and angry, through the curved glass of her faceplate.

"How many casualties?"

"About five hundred. One quarter of them self-inflicted. People came out of the trance, realized what they'd done, wigged out. It's a fucking mess."

"Agent…"

"Look, doc…"

"Let me finish, please," Angela interrupted. "I understand gallows

humor. But you don't need to hold back from me."

Fox turned away and stared up at a dark brown patch on one wall. There were a couple of handprints in the same color beneath it, in the same reddish-brown, as well as a long streak leading down to the ground from the initial patch.

"He laughed, you know. When they first saw the scene. It seemed ridiculous to them. He even cracked a couple of jokes."

"I've read the comms logs. I know."

"He still feels guilty about that. I mean, here he is walking into a mass mind rape scenario, and he's cracking jokes about an obviously mentally disturbed naked old guy."

"It's a normal reaction. Humor is a defense."

"I guess. It just got me thinking…" Fox clasped her hands behind her back and looked up at the high ceiling of the conference room. "They say that these Type Green guys… they're most dangerous when they stop thinking about people as people, right? Don't we do the same thing? What's the difference between cracking jokes to get through a mission and turning people into this?"

"A matter of degree, for one. There's a wide difference between a playful slap on the arm and a punch to the jaw. Even a punch to the jaw can mean different things, coming from a sparring partner, a spouse, or an enemy soldier."

"Maybe." Fox took another deep breath and set her shoulders, her face resuming its usual slightly sarcastic mask. "Ready to go see the penthouse suite?"

"If that's the next place we're going, sure."

Angela watched as the little redheaded woman pretended to raise a rifle to her shoulder, hunched over in a tactical stance.

"Bull feels a bit squirrely on the way up. About ten seconds before the doors open, he calls for Breach," Fox explained. "He and

Skunkboy get their weapons up first. Kitten gets hers up a moment later. The only one who doesn't get her weapon ready is Spider. She grabs her lucky rabbit's foot instead."

"The mind shield?"

"More of a protective fetish. I'm not sure how it works. She could tell you more."

Angela nodded silently as the elevator doors opened. The Penthouse suite was another mass of extension cables, light sources, and little bits of numbered white cards, each one indicating a tiny bit of horror that had taken place up here.

"Here's the setup: Bixby is here, in front of the bar. He's got the remaining Asian population of the resort lined up here in neat rows. He's already executed two of them with a mother-of-pearl handled M1911: the same one he carried in the Vietnam War. We presume he was re-enacting some sort of… event from his experience there. Gone full psycho… reliving past experiences and changing the perceptions of his victims to match."

Fox gestured to the bullet-riddled wall, then walked back to the entrance of the elevator.

"The team gets hit by the mental effect the moment they leave the elevator. Bixby sees them, enacts a scenario shift," she says. "Skunkboy and Kitten? They take cover here and here," she said, pointing to a pair of overturned armchairs in the center of the room. "Bullfrog goes to the ground with this SAW. Spider, on the other hand, freezes in place: we think she was fighting the compulsion effect. According to their OCULUS gear, they remained like that for sixty seconds."

"Bullfrog breaks first. Seventy seconds after initial contact, he charges his weapon and begins strafing the crowd. We think he got about six of them with the initial burst. A few seconds later, OCULUS records him shouting, and I quote, 'Get some, you stupid fucking slopeheads, come and get some, you fucking gook bastards.'"

She lay down on the carpet, then got up to a kneeling position, pretending to hold a weapon to her shoulder.

"Bullfrog continues to open fire. The Bixby shouts at him, 'Assault through, we got them on the run, get them, put the steel to them, kill the fuckers.' Bullfrog complies, rising to a kneeling position and opening fire, then switching to a standing position and advancing on the targets. We think this is when the rest of the civilians died."

"What were Kitten and Skunkboy doing at this time?" Schowalter asked.

"Didn't I say? I guess I didn't. Kitten's gone catatonic at this point: she's still not fully in the illusion. I guess she didn't fit the right profile for the scenario: the Bixby's subconscious hasn't fitted her into a role yet. Skunkboy… he's using the back of the armchair as a brace and firing precise headshots. He accounts for about four kills before Spider breaks through the illusion and dispels him with her lucky rabbit's foot."

Fox mimed stepping out of the elevator and tapping someone with an object, then turned towards another invisible person standing on the other side and tapped them too. "She releases Skunkboy and Kitten. All three of them see Bullfrog going complete psycho. They try to stop him. Big mistake."

"Bixby focuses on Spider as the big threat… both because she unlocked Skunkboy and Kitten, and because she's Asian. Fits the profile. Bullfrog plugs Spider twice in the chest: the armor catches it, but she goes down with a fractured sternum. Skunkboy and Kitten jump him: he shakes them off and grabs Spider. Bullfrog turns on Spider and injures her severely."

Fox's face twisted into a triumphant grin. "Meanwhile, Kitten does the smart thing and rushes the Bixby. He tries to interpose Skunkboy, but Kitten manages to clock him in the face before it happens. The pain disrupts the rest of the illusion… which means that Bullfrog gets to see what happens next. Namely, Kitten smashing this motherfucker's head in like a goddamn melon. HELL yeah!"

Angela let out a low chuckle.

"And you wanna know something really great, doc?" Fox asked, grinning. "Come look at this." She led Angela to the wet bar at the back of the room, where two tall lighting fixtures had been arrayed next to the cracked granite countertop. "We found this when we did the VERITAS scan of the room. See, it turns out that when certain Bixbies, especially psychic ones, undergo emotional trauma? Their mind separates…"

She flipped a switch, bathing the entire wet bar in a sickening greenish light.

It was the ghostly image of a tall, powerfully built woman slamming the back of an elderly man's head into the granite countertop. As Angela watched, the scene played itself out over and over again: The old man shouting orders as he waved an ancient pistol around. A fist lashed out and punched him in the jaw. The old man raising his hand to his bruised face, shouting silently in alarm. Then a tall, powerfully built woman grabbing him by the hair and delivering a powerful headbutt, stunning him. Then a few short seconds of Kitten dragging the man over to the bar and cooly, calmly, violently and methodically, smashing it into the countertop over and over and over again.

"I could look at this for hours," Fox admitted. "Just… look at that."

"It's certainly… impressive," Angela admitted.

"Isn't it?" Fox laughed. "And you know what the best part is? They say that part of this… part of this is a little bit of the Bixby's own mind… his own point of view… stuck in an endless loop. Reliving the trauma over and over again. I almost wish they weren't going to demolish and decontaminate this thing. I'd sleep better at night knowing there's a tiny bit of this bastard constantly getting his head smashed for all eternity."

"I'm going to ask you a series of questions," Angela said on the elevator ride down. "And I'm going to request and require you to be as truthful as possible."

"Sure thing. I got nothing to hide," Fox said.

Angela nodded in reply and closed her eyes meditatively. "Has he had trouble sleeping?"

"Sometimes," Fox admitted. "Lately he's been able to get through it all night without waking up. He still has bad dreams, though."

"How do you know?"

"He thrashes around. Makes moaning noises. Keeps me up all night sometimes."

"What do you do on the nights he keeps you up?" Angela asked.

"Usually I go out onto his balcony and read a book or a casefile. Might as well get some work done."

Angela nodded again. "You volunteered to help with the investigation and decontamination of the site," she said. "Do you have training in such?"

"I did a couple of years with Assessment before I transferred to Strike. And mostly I've just been another pair of hands. Grabbing and bagging and tagging and taking snapshots."

"How is your team functioning in your absence?"

"We're getting ready to start the next training cycle. Nothing big. Jackal's been handling the setup and paperwork for me. He's done it enough times to know what he's doing." Fox nodded and took another deep breath. "Actually, I've been thinking about requesting an extension on my leave."

"Oh?"

"Yeah," Fox said. "There's nothing big going on back home, and Bull could use my help."

"I see. Next question. Do you know what 'survivor's guilt' is?"

"Of course. It's what happens when you feel like you did wrong for

getting through something that someone else didn't. The shrink talked to me about it back after I lost a few team members in a botched op."

"I see," Angela said. "One last question, Agent Fox. Do you ever relive the traumatic experience of visiting a close friend and loved one for a weekend together, only to find out that they had recently suffered from a mental, spiritual, and physical violation?"

> *Subject has expressed trouble sleeping since the incident, and has reported several incidents of bad dreams and flashbacks to the event. Continued therapy has been effective in alleviating these symptoms, but the subject remains below expected parameters. It is my recommendation that Assessment Team 735 "Sparkplug," including Agent 43856518/735 "Bullfrog," continue psychological rehabilitation for a period of thirty (30) days before being allowed to return to active duty.*
>
> *Signed on this date by the officer in charge, Dr. Angela Schowalter, Human Resources Department, PTOLEMY Division.*

Angela signed the form with her thumbprint, authenticated through the "Brainlock" Captcha, and sent the report off to her higher ups. She leaned back in her chair, taking another sip of her coffee, before clicking the "NEW REPORT" button on her computer screen.

> **SUBJECT:** Agent 42921102/1102, "Fox"
>
> **CAREER SERVICE VITAE:** Subject is a long-time veteran of PHYSICS Division, including multiple tours of duty in both Assessment and Strike. Subject has been decorated multiple times for bravery and valor in the line of duty. Personnel evaluations cite her cool demeanor under fire and personal bravery in combat.
>
> **CONTACT HISTORY SUMMARY:** Made initial contact with the subject after subject's Acknowledged Paramour (who had recently undergone a traumatic event in the

line of duty) expressed concern for subject's mental and emotional state. Initial contact was made to determine whether Acknowledged Paramour's concerns were accurate, or were an attempt at emotional transference.

Subject asked to meet the Officer at the scene of the traumatic event to Acknowledged Paramour. Subject showed a heightened affect, including excessive desire for vengeance against the instigator of the traumatic event. Subject also expressed trouble sleeping (indicating that she had remained up all night on multiple locations), and an unwillingness to return to the living room where she initially heard of the event (preference for sitting on the patio to read, despite the dim lighting conditions). Subject acknowledged feelings of survivor's guilt, and was able to draw a parallel between current events and those of several years prior (see Addendum A: Officer's Report from Prior Incident)

TREATMENT RECOMMENDATIONS: Subject is mostly stable, but remains below baseline for field operations. Contact was made with the subject's second-in-command, and arrangements have been made for an extended leave of absence no shorter than one week, and no longer than thirty (30) days. Subject will join Acknowledged Paramour in psychological rehabilitation. It is this officer's belief that Subject's presence will be mutually beneficial both to her personal treatment and that of her Acknowledged Paramour."

Signed on this date by the officer in charge, Dr. Angela Schowalter, Human Resources Department, PTOLEMY Division.

Sunshine

Kitten opened her eyes and stared blankly at the ceiling of her quarters, counting the dots on the acoustical tile. When she got to

thirty-two, she sat up on the edge of her bed and stretched her arms out over her head.

The first thing that she saw sitting on her desk was her laptop computer. She tapped the space bar, and the screen lit up to reveal the words "WATCH ME FIRST" written in giant 100-point font in the center of a black screen.

Oh. It happened again.

She checked the date on the computer's calendar, checked it against the date she remembered the last time she went to sleep.

Two weeks off.

She reached out and tapped the screen. There was a brief pause, and then the video began playing.

On the screen, she could see herself sitting at her desk. There was a glass of water and two blue pills in front of her, and a slip of paper in her hand.

The Kitten on the computer screen cleared her throat, looked down at the slip of paper, and began to read.

"I, Agent Tabitha St. Matthews, Serial Number 43857764 slash 735, hereby elect to undergo memory redaction therapy. I have been completely briefed on the risks and dangers this therapy may entail. I hereby state that I am undergoing this therapy of my own free will and that I have not been unduly coerced into doing so by any other party."

She saw herself take both pills, down it with the glass of water, and reach out to turn off the video recorder.

Kitten sighed. *What does that make it, twenty times, now? This can't be good for my brain.*

She closed the video file and opened up the folder marked "Mission Report," to find out what she'd decided she no longer wanted to remember first-hand.

Visiting Hours

"Hey, girl," Skunkboy said, grinning broadly, as he walked into the room. "You're looking prettier."

Spider rolled her eyes and threw a pillow at the tall, handsome young man. He laughed and caught it in mid-air, before tucking it under his arm. "Seriously. The doctors did good work."

"Too good. My cheekbones were never this defined. And my face was fatter before," Spider sighed.

"Hey, as long as you're getting your car put back together, why not spruce it up a bit? Do a little body and trim work?" He tucked the pillow back under his friend's head and hugged her gently around the shoulders. "So, how long until the doctors let you out?"

"They say I can go home tomorrow, actually. Then I need to go see the orthdontist. Get my implants put in." She pulled down her lower lip, revealing a gumline missing three teeth.

"Ouch. That's… kinda nasty."

"It was nastier before they pulled out what was left," Spider admitted. "I was eating through a tube for a solid week."

Skunkboy kicked himself internally as an awkward silence fell over the room. *Oh yeah, remind her of the guy who punched her so hard her jaw and cheekbones shattered. Real smooth work, asshole.*

"… how is he?" Spider asked.

"Bullfrog? That's a hell of a thing to be asking," Skunkboy growled. "He should be asking you that."

"He hasn't come by. Besides, it wasn't his fault. He wasn't in control of himself."

"That sounds a lot like what an abusive boyfriend might say—"

"Abusive boyfriends weren't literally mind-controlled by a fucking

psychopath," Spider interrupted coldly. "And if you ever say anything about Bullfrog like that again, we are through."

"Sorry," Skunkboy said. He sat down next to her on the bed and smoothed out the sheets. "Just got this… thing… about guys hitting girls."

"That's because you're a gentleman," Spider said.

"… not much of a gentleman," Skunkboy smirked. "I mean, I did just look down your hospital gown right now. Cute mole, by the way."

Another awkward silence descended upon the room. "Hey, Skunkboy?"

"Yeah?"

"There's a thing you should know…"

"You're trans?"

"You knew?"

"Technically, only the team leader's supposed to know about your sealed file. But after Bullfrog read it, he brought me and Kitten in and we went over that part of it together. He wanted to make sure you'd get no trouble off of us."

"Oh." Spider said. She hugged her blanket closer to her chest. "What did you decide?"

Skunkboy shrugged. "Fuck it. You're you. You do the job, we don't care."

"Ah." Spider laughed out loud and lay back on the bed, staring up at the ceiling. "You want to know something messed up? When Bullfrog came after me, I thought I was dead. I seriously thought I was going to die. And the last thought that went through my mind was… 'Shit. I'm gonna die a virgin.'"

"No shit?"

"I completed identity reassignment just before being assigned to Sparkplug," Spider explained. "And I've been too busy for relationships since then."

"Well, we're gonna be off-duty for at least a month now, getting our heads and bodies fixed," Skunkboy pointed out. "Plenty of time for you to get laid."

"… was that a proposition?"

"What? Oh, hell no!"

"Gee, thanks." Spider rolled her eyes.

"What? Oh, shit, sorry. I didn't mean it that way. I mean… you don't fuck your teammates. Just a rule. Bad things happen if you do that, and the Coalition cracks down hard on people who do. But there's no real rule against inter-squad or inter-department relationships. So long as you openly disclose them."

"That seems a bit… backward."

"It's just the way the Coalition does things." Skunkboy smoothed out another wrinkle on the blanket. "We're human. Humans will want to fuck. Stifling that leads to bigger problems than letting people do it openly. But teammates fucking teammates… that causes even bigger problems. So fuck whoever you like. Just let PTOLEMY know and don't fuck your teammmates."

"… guess that makes sense. In a weird way."

"It's the Coalition way." Skunkboy grinned. "So, little sis. Looking for the hookup? I'm sure I can find a nice, healthy, young man to rock your world all night long…"

He didn't dodge it this time when Spider smacked him in the face with her pillow.

There weren't many people in this part of the operating base at this time of day. Skunkboy took a deep breath, straightened the collar of his dress greens, and stood up straight as he heard footsteps

coming around the corner.

He nodded as his team leader walked down the hall towards him. "Bull."

"Skunkboy." The big man's eyes were as hard as granite, his jaw set firmly. "Are the girls here?"

"Yeah, they're waiting inside. I wanted to talk to you in private, though, first."

"Oh." Bullfrog's eyes narrowed.

Skunkboy took a deep, nervous breath and forged on. "I'm sorry I took a swing at you."

"Skunkboy…"

"No, let me finish. It wasn't your fault. That bastard was deep inside your head. You'd never hurt any of us if you'd been you. Hell, if you hadn't recognized that we were walking into a mindbender's lair, we would all have been screwed. You saved all our asses."

Bullfrog just stared at him impassively, so Skunkboy took a deep breath and went on. "Look. I've followed you into hell. And I'll keep following you into hell as long as you lead me there. Cause I know you'll get us out… as long as you keep breathing and standing, I know you're not going to give up on us. I was scared as shit. There was still no reason for me to take your head off. So, yeah. Sorry."

Bullfrog just nodded silently at that. Skunkboy sighed. "I'll just… head on inside, then."

"Give me a minute," Bullfrog said. "There's something I need to do first."

Skunkboy nodded and turned to walk into the conference room. The door closed behind him with a soft metallic click.

Bullfrog stood in the hallway for a moment, before walking over to the bulletin board. He made a minute adjustment to his collar in his reflection, and smoothed out an errant strand of hair.

Then he turned and followed his teammate into the room.

Scars

She couldn't help running her tongue over her new teeth. Even after all these weeks, the dental implants still felt unnatural in her mouth.

The Spider she saw in the mirror looked pretty good, she decided. The black dress flattered her figure pretty well, and the scars from her facial reconstructive surgery had healed over quickly, a process helped along by some magical assistance. She wasn't above using her powers for her own personal gain, from time to time.

She picked up her purse and checked it for the third time, confirming that her keys, phone, rabbit's foot, and holdout pistol had not magically disappeared from her handbag in the twenty minutes since she'd last looked inside.

She nearly dropped it, however, when the doorbell rang at last. Taking one last moment to compose herself, she checked herself in the mirror one last time, smoothed out a wrinkle in her dress, took a deep breath, opened the door.

He was standing in the doorway, as handsome as in his photograph, with the same strong jaw, the same twinkling eyes, and the same friendly smile that had caught her attention. "Hi," the man said. "You must be Spider?"

"Call me Ara for tonight," she said, extending a hand politely. "It'll draw less attention."

"Ara. Nice. I usually go by Flintlock." He shook her hand firmly but gently. "I guess you can call me Flint, then?"

"Flint's good," Spider said. "Sounds a bit like a comic book character."

"Just call me Superman, and I'll sweep you away," Flint laughed, then groaned and rubbed the back of his neck. "Sorry. That was

bad."

"Yes, it was," Spider said. "And just for that, you're paying for dinner."

"You wound me to the quick." Flint groaned and clutched at his chest. "How can I restore my lost honor?

There was a young couple in the back of the room. They looked a bit like her mother and father. She screamed as Bullfrog opened fire and the father fell to the ground, clutching at the spreading red wound on his chest. The mother and son fell a moment later, bullets riddling her corpse as they punched through her flesh and into the body of her young son…

"… just uh… paying for dinner's fine," Spider said. She smiled awkwardly, but took a deep breath and steadied herself. Hopefully her date would just chalk it up to jitters.

"So, what is it that you do?" Flint asked, as they waited for their appetizers to arrive.

"Me? Ummm… I'm in Assessment," Spider said. She glanced around at the rest of the diners, then hazarded a bit more. "Assessing situations, advising the higher-ups of courses of action… that sort of thing."

"Ah, I see. I'm uhhh… I'm in PR," Flint replied. "Mostly media work."

"I see," Spider said. "Did you hear about the incident downtown, about a month ago?"

"Yeah… I had a hell of a time explaining that to the media. Was that you?"

"… partially. I was on the team that handled that case," she said.

Flint nodded respectfully, his hands folded on the tablecloth in front of him. "That was… a tough one," Flint said carefully. "A lot of… mmmm… side effects to deal with."

"We weren't exactly told what we were getting into," Spider pointed out. She took a sip of her ice water: the cold caused her dental implants to ache a bit. "But we improvised and handled it pretty well, I think."

"I wasn't putting you guys down. It was a tough situation, yeah. Mister Bixby can be a pain in the ass."

"That he can," she admitted.

The waiter came by then, and served them their meals. She felt a wave of absolute joy rise up as she saw the steak on her plate. Nice and tender piece of porterhouse. First decent steak she'd had since getting into the hospital.

"Wow. You sure you can finish that?" Flint asked.

"I'm sure," Spider said. "I've been looking forward to this for weeks." She cut into the tender meat, and the pink juices flowed out and mingled with the creamed corn

Her vision blurred as she felt the fist slam into her face again, hard. Something broke in her mouth and fell onto the carpet. It was a tooth, broken at the root, and it was covered in her own bloody spit…

Spider swallowed hard as the bile rose. She took a deep, steadying breath and raised her hand for the waiter.

"Yes, ma'am?" the young man asked.

"… could you bring this back to me well-done?"

"… madame did ask for it rare, did she not?" the waiter asked, concerned.

"I did," Spider said. "But I think I've changed my mind this time."

After dinner, they took a walk by the beach. The sun was setting over the ocean. Almost everyone had packed up and gone home, except for a few hardcore surfers still riding the waves.

"So, what do you do for fun?" Flint asked.

"Me? I usually read. Or play computer games. Or watch movies. Or experiment with traditional magic," she said.

"Not a lot of call for traditional work," Flint said. "Most everyone's gone over to UT these days."

"I don't use it much in the field, but it's interesting to study," Spider explained. "The old rituals have a poetry to them that modern workings often lack."

"Oh?"

"Yeah. For instance… a lot of the old "good luck" charms are derived from elements disruptive to EVE flow. Horseshoes, for instance: iron was a rare commodity back in the day, and ferrous metals have a reducing influence on EVE flow. Or rabbit's feet." She took the rabbit's foot out of her purse and showed it to him. "Rabbits are prolific breeders. They tend heavily Sharp, aura-wise. But you kill one in a cemetery under a dark moon, and that balances out the aura more Flat."

"I see," Flint said, he reached out and touched the charm lightly with one fingertip. "Doesn't seem very lucky for the rabbit, though."

"It's just the start of the working. The second step is imbuing it with a disruptive spell that breaks magical workings." She put the rabbit's foot back into her purse and patted it carefully to make sure it was firmly in place. "Technically, you can imbue a pendant with it, and it'll work just as well, but I like the symbolism of the rabbit's foot."

"So you like tradition, then?"

"… kind of," Spider said. "I guess I just like the style of the old ways."

She reached into her purse again and touched the rabbit's foot. Her fingertips rested against a clump of matted fur.

She felt a chill run up her spine.

They were walking back home after the movie, and they were laughing out loud. Spider was leaning against his arm, and feeling pretty good about it.

"That had to be the dumbest thing I've seen in years," Flint said. "How the hell does anyone watch these things?"

"Hey, you picked it out… and you made me pay for the tickets, too."

"Made you? You insisted on it. To pay me back for dinner, remember?"

"If I'd know the movie would suck this badly, I would have made you pay."

Flint laughed out loud, and he put his arm around her, giving her a gentle, experimental squeeze. Spider felt her heart warm at the contact.

Yeah. I could go with this.

They came up to the foot of the stairs, and paused at the doorway of the apartment building.

Flint cleared his throat and smiled awkwardly. "Well. I guess we're here."

"Yeah," Spider said. "I guess we are."

She stood in front of him expectantly, and was happy to see him take a deep breath and set his shoulders. He leaned forward, eyes closed, and she lifted up her face and closed her eyes too.

She felt his hand touch her face, brushing a hair back from her eyes. His fingertips brushed over the place where her cheekbones had been shattered a month before.

She flinched.

She felt him pull back.

"I'm sorry," she said hurriedly, "I've just…"

"No, no, it's okay," Flint said. "I don't want you to feel any pressure."

"It's not that, it's just that… I've got these… I guess a few issues. I'm still working through."

"Oh," Flint said. "Can you tell me about them?"

Spider shook her head and sighed. "If you don't know, I think I can't tell you."

"Oh," Flint said. He shuffled his feet a bit and sighed. "I see."

Spider nodded and swallowed hard. Her fingers clutched the hem of her dress tightly.

"… I guess I'll head home, then." Flint said, smiling as gallantly as possible. "Thanks for a lovely evening, Ara."

"Thanks, Flint. I'm sorry about this."

"Don't be," Flint said. "I don't know what you guys in Assessment go through… I can't imagine it. But uhhh… I know when a date's kinda going wrong, and I'd rather… not push it right now, you know. Unless you really want me to?"

Spider thought about it for a moment, then sighed deeply and didn't answer.

"I thought so," Flint said. He leaned forward and kissed her on the forehead.

"If you ever decide you want a second date? Give me a call," he said.

She tossed her purse onto the couch, took off the dress and sexy underwear, and tossed them in her clothes hamper. She rummaged through her back drawer for a moment, found her oldest, most comfortable pair of flannel pajamas, and pulled those on instead.

Discovery Channel was showing replays of Survivorman. She sat down on the couch, wrapped in a warm blanket, and watched the

balding Canadian man struggle in the wilderness for a few hours.

Sleep finally overcame her just as the early morning twilight peeked through her blinds. She caught a few hours of sleep before the alarm clock rang and told her it was time to wake up.

All in all, it was a good night.

"Sledgehammer."

Fox woke up to the sound of screaming. She rolled off the couch and scooped up the pistol on the coffee table in one smooth motion, scanning the doorways for threats. As her vision cleared, she realized that the screams were coming from the bedroom.

Shit.

She tucked the pistol into the waistband of her shorts and walked into the bedroom. Bullfrog was thrashing about and moaning in his sleep, the bedsheets rumpled and tangled all around him. He screamed out loud at something, hands reaching up and flailing at something in the air in front of his face.

Fox very carefully put the pistol down on the floor and walked, slowly and deliberately, to the side of the bed. Careful not to touch him, she leaned in close and whispered one word into his ear.

"Jeremiah."

His eyes snapped open, and he let out one last strangled scream of alarm. His hands flailed one last time, hitting her in the face, hard.

"Sonovabitch!" Fox shouted. She put a hand to her face and leaped back from the bed.

"… oh." Bullfrog whispered. He rolled out of bed, his face contrite, and reached for her, recoiling at the last minute.

"I'm fine," Fox said quickly. "You just clipped me a bit in your sleep. I got a bit too close. I'm…"

Her heart broke at the expression on his face.

"I'm fine," she reassured him, and then, to make sure that he understood, she crawled under the sheets with him and held him tight.

It took a long time for him to finally get to sleep again, and when he did, he trembled and shuddered. She put her arms around his waist and held on tightly, refusing to let him go as his shoulders shook and silent tears fell.

He finally calmed down and went to sleep about a half hour later.

She climbed out of bed once his breathing had evened and picked up the pistol from the ground. She walked back out into the living room, wrapped herself back up in the blankets, and stared at the wall for a long, long time.

Quarterly Review

"701 'Jellybean?'"

"Status nominal."

"722 'Bottlecaps?'"

"Status nominal."

"735 'Sparkplug?'"

"Offline."

"Really?" D.C. al Fine asked. "What happened?"

"Psychological casualty. Mindbender encounter. Involuntary Blue-on-Blue, Blue-on-Green. PTOLEMY recommends 30 days offline for psychological rehabilitation," the Director of Human Resources said.

"Yikes," muttered the Field Operations manager. "Hope they pull through."

"They're strong. Bullfrog's a solid leader, he'll get them through this," al Fine said.

She turned the page. "742 'Jericho'."

"Status nominal," the Director of Human Resources said…

"Sequence"
« Joint Venture | Return to GOC Hub | Tempering»

Girls' Night Out: Raising Hell

Spider knew that she was in deep shit when the tall woman accompanying KTE-11971-Green Ember walked straight up to her and tried to buy her a drink.

It was supposed to just be a girls' night out. PHYSICS Division was about to carry out a readiness exercise, that would last at least a month. Tonight was the last chance to get some R&R before three months of grueling training. Spider had suggested the night out to Kitten and Fox, both as a means to blow off some steam and as a chance to get to know her taciturn coworkers.

If only Kitten hadn't gotten caught back at base doing some emergency preparations for the training exercise.

If only Fox hadn't had to deal with a last-minute emergency with one of her Team members.

If only Spider hadn't seen a *goddamn Known Threat Entity doing shots in a bar like a college kid on spring break…*

… following them had probably been a mistake, but the bulletins were clear: 11971-Green Ember was a Response Level Three target. Any agent catching sight of her "in the wild" was to maintain contact until STRIKE assets could be brought into play for capture and questioning (or elimination).

The problem was that Spider was a technician, not a spy. Her tradecraft sucked, and she knew it. There was, after all, only so much a two-week seminar could do. Identifying the overwatch team and diverting them with a Lotus Dream? That she could do. Keeping a watch on four women inside a crowded bar? Apparently not something she was particularly good at…

She'd had a feeling shit was going down when the group in the corner glanced over at her and started talking very seriously. When

the tall, leggy brunette with the come-hither smile walked over, Spider knew she was screwed.

"Hey," the enemy said, grinning seductively. "Can I buy you a drink?"

"No, that's fine," Spider said, keeping her face half-turned away from the mahogany-haired woman. "I'm waiting for a friend."

"I can be your friend." The enemy slid into the barstool next to her and gave her a sultry, smouldering look. "I could be your very best friend in the world, hon."

"That's okay," Spider said. "I'm really not interested…"

The other three members of the party (including the KTE) got up from their booth and left the bar.

Spider flinched. Big mistake.

"Right," the enemy said curtly. She put a hand into her jacket pocket. "Now we've got a choice. Either we can quietly head out the back door to have a little chat, or I can cause some noise and we can disturb the nice people trying to have a quiet evening. Your choice."

"I'll go quietly," Spider said softly.

"Back door. Now."

Spider got up from the barstool and walked out the door, carefully keeping her hands away from her sides. The alleyway behind the pub was quiet and dark. Not a soul in sight. Plenty of dark places away from the street lights.

Not a bad place for an execution.

The tiny bell in her pocket jingled once.

Spider breathed a sigh of relief which immediately turned into a gasp of surprise as the stranger grabbed her and dragged her into the alley. "All right," the enemy growled, twisting Spider's collar as she

pushed her up against the brick wall. "Who the hell are you and why are you following us?"

The silence that followed was interrupted by the click of an automatic pistol being taken off safety.

"I think that a better question might be, 'Who the hell are you and what the fuck do you think you're doing to our friend?'" Fox sneered.

Thank God, Spider thought. *Backup's finally arrived.*

Aw, shit, Adams thought. *I should have known she'd have backup.*

Her drink-addled mind was working overtime. Was this a coordinated hit? A chance meeting? Pure fluke of luck? Mugging gone wrong? "It's all right," Adams said, coolly sliding a hand towards the cell phone in her back pocket. "You can have my wallet and pho—"

Someone kicked her knees out from under her and pinned her face-down on the concrete. Adams tasted blood, dirt, and concrete dust. She struggled, but a pair of strong hands pinned her arms behind her back, putting her expertly into a joint-wrenching wrist lock that promised dire consequences for continued resistance.

"Frisk her, Kitten," a low voice growled. "Spider, what the hell's going on?"

"Three women just walked out of the pub," the Asian woman said. "The blonde is the one on the bulletin that just went around last week about the Foundation reactivating their special assault force…"

Oh shit, Adams thought.

"Shit. Katie Eleven Nine Seven One?" the low voice growled. The muzzle of the pistol pressed tightly into the back of Adams' head as another pair of hands frisked her roughly. "Where is it now?"

"Probably out front. Dark red sedan. Three others, including the Katie. They had perimeter support, but I've had them chasing Lotus

Dreams for the past half hour."

"… all right," the rough voice said. "If we wait for STRIKE, they're gonna spook. We'll do the snatch-and-grab ourselves. Kitten takes one guard, I'll take the other. You go for the target."

"What about this one?" a third voice asked. This one was toneless and emotionless. A 'grey' sort of voice.

"I'd rather not kill her if I can help it. Hand me your taser," the rough voice said.

*Something behind Adams' eyes went **click.***

She knew that it was suicide to move. Not with a gun pressed up against the back of her head and her arm pinned behind her back. But if what the enemy was saying was true: if the MTF backup was distracted and they were going to go after Iris, Blaire, and Chelsea…

If she moved fast enough, moved strong enough, maybe she could throw her attacker off and get clear of the muzzle of the gun before the other person fired. Not much of a chance. But it was the only chance she had.

She was tensing up to move when there was a bright flash of blue light and the sound of a simulated shutter snapping.

There was a flash of light and an electronic-sounding "click."

Spider turned. There was a darkened silhouette standing the alleyway. Female. Blonde. She had a smart phone in her hand, and she'd just taken a snapshot of the scene and …

A single line from the bulletin regarding KTE-11971: "Subject has limited reality alteration abilities, and can reach through a photograph to move and manipulate objects pictured…"

"Oh crap," Spider whispered.

She went for the only weapon she had left: the ritual knife in her right boot. There was a loud shout behind her. She saw, out of the

corner of her eye, a ghostly hand reach out of nowhere and struggle briefly with Fox for the pistol…

The woman on the ground moved, terrifyingly fast. She twisted her body around, somehow causing Fox to lose her grip. The heel of her hand clipped Fox's jaw, hard, sending her reeling into Kitten. Kitten shoved the stunned Fox away, ruthlessly clearing her sight line, raised the taser…

A shot rang out.

Kitten sprawled to the ground, clutching her side. A flattened bullet clattered to the floor. She gasped for breath, obviously winded by the bullet's impact.

The blonde stood a few feet away. Her trembling, bleeding hands held Fox's pistol. She quickly lowered it so it was pointing at Spider's head.

"FREEZE, MOTHERFUCKERS!" she shouted.

"FREEZE, MOTHERFUCKERS!" Iris screamed. Her heart was pounding. Her hands were bloodied. She wanted to throw up, but Beatrix had always told her that a loud, confident shout would do more than bullets to get an enemy to think twice about attacking.

The kneeling Asian woman froze. She was holding a knife in one hand: a curved hunting knife with a hilt that looked like bone or ivory. *What was it that Lombardi always said about a guy with a knife? Was it twenty or thirty feet that they can get you in? Or was that while the gun is holstered?*

The enemy looked into Iris's eyes. They stared at each other for a long moment.

The Asian woman put her knife on the ground and held her hands above her head. The only sounds were Adams' labored breathing, the groaning red-headed woman struggling to get to her feet, and the gasping of the tall woman with the freckles and light-brown hair.

Headlights. The sound of squealing tires. Iris saw a red-brown

sedan drive up the curb and into the alleyway. "GET IN!" Chelsea shouted, as Blaire opened the passenger side door.

Adams got to her feet and ran for it, racing towards the back door, diving past Iris and (if the sounds were any indication) tumbling head-first into the car's back seat. Iris backed slowly away from the three strangers, keeping the gun trained on each of them in turn.

She climbed into the front passenger's seat and slammed the door shut.

"Shit!" Spider growled, as the KTE climbed into the car and started to drive away. She hesitated. Kitten and Fox were both down. If she pursued…

"GO!" Kitten gasped, clutching her side. "I'll watch Fox! Don't let them get away!"

Right! Spider scooped up her *secespita* and ran after the dark red sedan. She pulled the smart phone from her pocket and pulled up her grimoire. There might not be very much contagion between the skin cells on her jacket collar and the well-dressed brunette who had left them there, but if she worked quickly and kept the car in sight, she could still use the connection to…

She slammed into a tall, Chinese woman in a black coat with short black hair.

Spider let out a surprised squawk that turned into a cry of dismay as her smart phone fell out of her hand and clattered down a storm drain. "Shit!" She grabbed for the phone, but it was too far down to reach. She could see it there, right beyond her fingertips, LCD screen still glowing…

She looked up. Too late. The car was gone.

Spider searched angrily for the woman who had bumped into her, but that woman was nowhere to be seen. "*Chow soola,*" she cursed.

"Holy shit!" Blaire gasped, as the car sped away. "You guys okay?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine," Adams protested, pushing Blaire's hands away. "Just a bit banged up. Iris?"

Iris took a deep, ragged breath and dropped the pistol into her lap. Adams was oddly pleased to see that the safety catch was on. *Good girl,* she thought.

"Who were those guys?" Chelsea asked. "Church? Insurgency?"

They called her a Katie, Adams realized. *KTE.* "Coalition," she said softly.

"Fuck." Chelsea's eyes were big, wide, and very, very scared.

"Iris?" Blaire said. "I need you to do me a favor."

"What?" Iris asked.

"I need you to take that gun, strip it down, and toss all the pieces out the window," Blaire said.

Good idea, Adams thought. "Global Occult Coalition puts tracking chips in all their weapons."

"Shit." Iris popped the retaining pin from the pistol and stripped the slide, leaving blood behind on the steel.

Adams frowned. She grabbed Iris's hand and held it up to the light. "You're bleeding."

"I'm fine," Iris said, gulping. "It's just… remember, when I said that reaching through that phone was like pushing through wet sand? I scraped my hand up doing it…"

"GOC sorcerers can track you by your blood," Adams said, taking the pistol. "We need to clean this. Blaire?"

"I got it," Blaire said. She pulled a lace-edged handkerchief from her purse and began carefully wiping down the weapon.

"How the hell did they find us in the first place?" Chelsea wondered. "Is there a mole? Were we breached?"

Just bad luck, if what those three were saying is true, Adams thought. *Fucking shame. I liked those bars…* She fumbled for her phone, realized that it had been taken from her by their attackers. *Damn. Command is going to tear me a new asshole for this…*

"Iris?" Blaire asked. "Are you okay, hon?"

Iris didn't respond. She was wrapping her brand-new scarf around her scraped knuckles to avoid getting blood all over her clothes and Chelsea's car.

"Hey," Adams said, putting her hand on the girl's shoulder. "You did good back there. Thanks."

Iris nodded. "Sure," she whispered.

The car continued down the freeway. "What do we do now?" Chelsea asked.

"We can't go back to the safehouse," Blaire said sternly, "and they know your car. Sorry, hon, but you're going to have to ditch it."

"Aww, shit. And I just finished paying for it, too…"

They left the car sitting by the side of the road in the bad part of town. Blaire disassembled the gun and tossed the pieces into the river while Adams hopped the fence into an all-night parking lot. A few minutes and some fiddling with some wires later, the four women piled into a white minivan and drove off into the night.

The minivan's previous owner had left some blankets in it. Iris wrapped herself in one and rested her head against the foggy window as the minivan drove through the desert towards Site-17. She drifted in and out of sleep, listening to the soothing sound of the minivan's engine and Blaire and Adams' whispered conversation.

"What about the stuff you bought at the mall?" Blaire asked softly.

"'I'll have someone pick up our stuff from the safe house later," Adams explained. "For now, let's get back on-Site. I've got some reports to make."

"O5's not going to like this," Blaire pointed out. "They're going to say you recklessly endangered an important asset."

"O5 will be right," Adams admitted. "But they're going to like even less that the Gocks know we've reactivated Omega-7. The one who was shadowing us talked about how we'd reactivated our 'special assault force.' Someone spilled the beans about Alpha-Niner."

"… well, shit. That's all we need."

They continued along the road in silence.

"Hey, Adams?"

"Yeah, Blaire?"

"… all in all, this was still a better night than 'Molotov II.'"

"You're never going to let me live that down, are you… ?"

Iris drifted to sleep with the dark desert speeding past the window and Adams's chuckling in her ears.

They drove the van through the gate and parked it in the underground parking lot. Security would handle the disposal of the vehicle. They were good at that.

The Site was silent at this hour. Most of the doctors and staff were asleep. Only the night shift security was up and about. They passed through the gates and the identity scanners and into the steel-walled elevator, which rapidly descended into the earth and opened up on a sterile white hallway with thin colored lines painted on the walls.

"… I'm hungry," Blaire said. "Anyone want to eat?"

"I could eat," Adams admitted.

"Yeah," Chelsea agreed.

Iris nodded mutely.

They headed into the site cafeteria: darkened and still at this late hour. Blaire rummaged through the refrigerators, managing to find some bread and sandwich fixings. Chelsea cleared off a table, and Adams poured some drinks from the soda fountain in the corner.

Iris sat down at the table. She stared at her bloodied hands for a long time.

Then, as Blaire set the turkey-and-swiss cheese sandwich down in front of her, Iris finally began to cry.

Warm, soft arms wrapped around her shoulders, hugging her close. "It's all right," Blaire's gentle voice said. "You did good, girl."

It was another four hours before the interviews and debriefings ended. She was interrogated about everything that happened from the moment that she and Adams had left the Site. Reliving the day was twice as exhausting as living it had been.

The site was switching to Day Shift when the security guard closed the door of her containment cell behind her. Iris collapsed onto her bed, not even bothering to take off her clothes.

She rolled over onto her back and stared up at what she knew was the distant ceiling of the overly-tall cell. She'd done well, she knew. Taken decisive action, using the camera of her phone to disarm the enemy from a distance. Her actions had probably saved Adams' life, and almost certainly given her the opportunity to escape.

Then why do I feel so sick?

Maybe it was just the hangover.

Or maybe it was because seeing that gun at Adam's head reminded her of the other time that she'd seen a gun pressed against the head of a friend…

> "I can't do it any more," Iris had whimpered. "You read Dantensen's report. My powers are gone."
>
> "I know that Dantensen would have said anything to get

you girls released," Adrian had said. "But I also know that you can't run forever. They'll find you, Iris. And the next person they send won't be as kind-hearted as I am."

"I don't care! I'd rather die than go back to that place!"

"… I know," Adrian had said sympathetically. "But would you let me die?"

Adrian had tossed a photo onto the ground, drawn his pistol and put it to his head. "I'm going to count to three," he had said. "And then I'm going to pull the trigger. There's a photograph of the internal mechanisms of my pistol there. You know what to do. One."

"Adrian?"

"Two…"

"NO!"

"Three."

The pistol's hammer had landed with a loud click.

And Iris had fallen to her knees, the photograph in one hand and the pistol's firing pin in the other. She had dropped both onto the ground and begun to cry.

Warm, soft arms had wrapped themselves around her from behind. "It's all right," Beatrix had whispered. "You did good, girl."

Iris rolled over on her cot. She wouldn't get to sleep for many hours. And for the first time in many years, she would not be awake in time for breakfast.

"So that's how it went," Clef said. "Pity you ladies didn't get to have your slumber party."

"Fuck off, Sir." Adams was still nursing a bruised shoulder and a

bloodied nose, not to mention a horrific hangover, twenty hours without sleep, and a wounded ego. She was in no mood for bullshit.

"You don't get to blow me off. Not this time, Adams," Clef said sternly. "For fuck's sake: you went out drinking with a Skip. What the hell were you thinking?"

"I had two backups, and a Mobile Task Force on perimeter watch."

"Not that it did you any good. That Gock sorceress had them tripping balls for hours. Best guess is that she got them just before heading into that third bar…"

"Nottingham's," Adams said.

"… probably used the two previous stops to scope out your backup so she could take them out. If she'd been in a less merciful mood, we could have had an entire dead Mobile Task Force on our hands, did you think about that?

"Furthermore," he said. "Half the Overseer Council wants to see Alpha-Niner crash and burn, and you gave them ammo to use against us before the thing had even gotten off the ground!" Clef's lip curled into a sneer. "So, was it worth it to play 'Sex and the City' with SCP-105?"

Adams' jaw worked as she gritted her teeth angrily. Her hands clenched the arms of her chair so tight it creaked. "Sir? Can I speak freely?"

"That has never been a problem with you," Clef said, deadpan. "But yes, go ahead."

"Last night, Iris tore up her hands saving my life," Adams said. "And then she shot a woman saving my life again. And she did that when all she needed to do to escape was just walk away. The reason she did that is because she and I are friends. *Because* we bonded over stupid things like shopping for clothes and going out for drinks. Not because an Overseer strong-armed her into rejoining a Mobile Task Force that she never wanted to be a part of in the first place."

"You're saying that last night was a step *forward*?" Clef said

incredulously.

"I'm saying that the two most important things in any army are trust and teamwork. Without those, you don't have soldiers, you have conscripts or fanatics. A conscript will fight to stay alive. A fanatic will die for a cause. A soldier will kill to save the person standing next to them."

The clock ticked away the seconds. Clef shook his head. "That's how you want me to justify this to the Overseers?" he asked. "As a team-building exercise gone wrong?"

Adams steepled her fingers. "Sir, if it weren't for the fact that the Coalition somehow knew that we were planning to activate Alpha-Niner, last night would have been written off as harmless shenanigans. **Was Brazil any different?**"

Clef's smile took on a distinctly predatory air. "The difference between this and Brazil," he said, "Is that I had the full support of the Overseer Council, and I was the 'teacher's pet' of one of them. Who do you have, Adams?"

"Just you, sir," Adams said.

Clef's stare was cold. "Get out."

Adams complied.

Clef buried his face in his hands and let out a long, slow sigh. "I should never have let you bring me in on this."

"Having second thoughts?" a woman's voice said from nowhere in particular.

"Realizing just how deep a pile of shit you got me into," Clef said.

One of the ceiling tiles slid back, lowering a projector into place. The image of a middle-aged woman in a chartreuse bathrobe appeared on the wall of Clef's office. She was sipping a cup of cocoa. "I remind you, Doctor, that it was your idea to bring Adams in on this operation," O5-7 said. "If your protégé is performing below standards, you have no one to blame but yourself."

"It's not that she's performing below standards. It's that she's performing in all the wrong fucking ways!" Clef complained.

Seven smirked. "A sentiment I expressed to you after **`that nonsense with the giant steel fist.`** Do you remember what you said to me then?"

"'If you didn't want me to do things my way, you shouldn't have told me to do it in the first place,'" Clef quoted. "Damn you, ma'am. You're enjoying this."

"Damned right I'm enjoying this," Seven said. "Seeing you put up with a willful but talented subordinate is satisfying on a deeply personal level."

Clef leaned back in his chair and grunted noncommittally. "Is that all, ma'am?"

"No," Seven said. "It is not." She leaned back in her chair in a gesture that mirrored Clef's own. "It occurs to me that the significant factor in last night's escapades was that the force that attacked you was also disorganized and uninformed. We can't count on that being the case in the future. With the GOC confirming that we're reactivating Alpha-Niner, they're going to upgrade their readiness. Next time, it's not going to be a few lightly armed off-duty agents."

"If Alpha-Niner were at full force, I think we could take on a STRIKE team," Clef said. "But that's not going to be for a few weeks at soonest…"

"… whereas the Coalition can move to full readiness within forty-eight hours," Seven concluded, "leaving about a month-long gap where we're vulnerable — unless we take some drastic measures."

"You want me to go to Phase 2?"

"I am *ordering* you to go to Phase 2. Before the Council vote."

"It's too early," Clef protested. "We still haven't confirmed the new memory structures are holding. If she…"

"Do it, Clef. Seven out."

The projector retracted into the ceiling, and the tile fitted back into place.

Clef took a moment to curse his luck. He pulled his hat over his balding pate and grabbed his jacket. He stormed out of his office, past the pimply-faced office drone that Human Resources had assigned to him and Adams as their administrative assistant. "Peon!" Clef shouted. "Clear my schedule for the rest of the afternoon, and tell anyone who calls asking for me to fuck off!"

"… yes, sir," the kid whimpered. "W-… what should I tell them you're doing?"

Clef's smile turned positively gleeful. "Tell them I'm seeing a dog about a suit," he said.

Girls' Night Out

« **Dressing Up** | **Getting Drunk** | **Raising Hell** »

"Come into my Parlor"

"… and I'll be seeing you all next week. Please read chapters three and four before you come back on Tuesday. Class is dismissed. Miss Fang, could I see you for a moment before you go?"

Ara Fang paused in the middle of picking up her books and looked up at the front of the classroom at her Professor. The tall, saturnine man was busying himself in packing up his books and materials, as the black cat that was constantly at his side watched bemusedly from the top of a nearby bookshelf. *What possible reason could the Professor have to want to see me?* she wondered, as she picked up her satchel and walked to the mahogany desk at the front of the classroom.

"Please walk with me," the Professor said. "I'd like to speak to you in the privacy of my office, if you don't mind."

"… all right," Ara said. She looked at the greying old man curiously. Alarm bells were ringing in her head: older gentleman wanting to see her alone? Away from others. She was getting that itching feeling on the back of her neck from this one.

The black cat leaped down from the bookshelf and walked daintily alongside the two of them as they emerged into the hallway, stepping aside to let the next class of students enter. She followed the older man up the flight of stairs, past the paintings of Crowley and Aristotle, and into an office that looked slightly larger on the inside than the outside. Then again, every room at ICSUT's Massachusetts campus looked like that.

The Professor's office was neatly organized: a far cry from the stereotypical clutter of the academic. The shelves were filled with books new and old, with titles ranging from "A Brief History of the Universe," to "The Golden Bough," to "The Annotated Translator's Al-Azif." There was a basket with a pillow in one corner, to which the cat retired, bathing her face with her paws, as the Professor

gestured Ara to a seat and closed the door behind him.

"I have a sensitive question to ask," he said, taking a seat in a chair across from her and leaning forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "Please feel free to leave at any time if I am making you feel uncomfortable, Miss Fang."

"… what is this about?" Ara asked.

"It's a delicate question, I will understand if you do not wish to answer. I was looking over your student records, and discovered that you are registered as male-to-female transsexual…"

… oh shit, Ara winced inwardly.

"… and was curious whether you are pre- or post-operative," the Professor continued.

Ara took a deep breath, trying to settle her pounding heart and unclench her tightened fists. "I think this is an intrusion of my privacy," she said, "And unless you can give me an answer right away as to why I should answer this question, I am going to be reporting you to Administration for harassment."

The professor inclined his head slowly and leaned back in his padded chair, raising his hands in supplication. "My apologies, Miss Fang," he said. "It was not my intention to make you feel uncomfortable. My interest is… mostly academic." He steepled his fingers in front of his face, pausing for a moment to marshal his words. "Allow me to take this from a different angle, Miss Fang. What do you know of my work?"

"You're the Institute's foremost researcher into Observatology," Ara said. "You've been doing research into the nature of consciousness and sapience. The soul, in other words."

"Correct," the Professor said, "but academia is my second profession. My other job is as a consultant for the Global Occult Coalition: specifically, their CAULATICA Division, maintaining the secrecy of the occult world from the mundane. Part of what I have been doing recently is refining their Identity Reassignment

technology. Field agents in PHYSICS Division often request to have their identities reassigned in order to protect friends and loved ones left behind. This is a complicated and difficult process intrinsically linked to the study of consciousness and sapience itself."

"What does this have to do with me being trans?" Ara wondered.

The Professor smiled. It was a friendly, fatherly smile, and his excitement was obvious. "How would you like to be my test subject into cross-gender Identity Reassignment?" he asked.

"The simplest Identity Reassignment algorithms are cosmetic surgery," the Professor explained, "but sometimes, things become more complicated. A person might be a public figure, or may have been involved in a memorable event. And because many of us operate in the realm of the paranormal, we run into issues of sympathy and contagion: it doesn't matter how much you change your appearance, a strand of hair picked up from before you were recruited still holds sympathy to you. DNA testing makes it even more difficult these days. So the current research is tending towards reality alteration: changing the very nature of the person down to the level of their genes and EVE signature.

"One way to do this would be to consult a reality alterer… but the Coalition is, understandably, reluctant to do so. I've been researching alternative methods using Tangential Technology for the past couple of decades. We have made some advances, but the procedure is… shall we say… rudimentary. We can change a person's face, hair color, sometimes build and height, but things like race and especially sex are far more difficult.

"I've been searching for a good test subject for the past few years," the Professor explained, "and I'd like to suggest you as a candidate. You would be compensated for your time and the risks involved, of course, and your identity will remain secret, unless you wish it to be publicized. The reason I wish to know whether you are pre- or post-operative is due to… complications… that may arise based on your current state of being."

"Complications?" Ara asked.

"Whether or not you feel you have completed your transition to the new gender," the Professor said. "The state of mind you are in when entering the procedure is influential. My research indicates that the best chance of success may occur with an individual who is pre-operative. The desire to change yourself may help the procedure to be carried out smoothly."

"Wait a minute," Ara said, raising her hand. Her head was spinning, her vision blurring… she wasn't sure whether she wanted to vomit or laugh. "… let me get this straight. You want to magically change me from… what I am now… into a woman?"

"Exactly," the Professor said.

"… and explain to me why I should choose to go your way? I've already assembled the funds to complete my transition. I was going to take some time off at the end of the semester to go under the knife. And you're asking me to give that all up and go for an untested magical procedure instead at the last moment?"

"Ah," the Professor said. "Let's talk about the surgical method. You would have your external genitalia removed, and an artificial vagina formed using the nerve endings and structure of your current male organs. And… depending on whether or not you are currently undergoing hormonal therapy…"

"I've been on an antiandrogen and estrogen/progesterone cocktail for the past three years," Ara said.

"… ah, good." The Professor nodded excitedly. "In any case, you may have begun growth of breast tissue and shutdown of testicular function. But there are things that these procedures cannot change. Your bone structure remains male. Your facial structure as well. Voice and facial hair… genetics. All of these things remain male. At the end of your procedures, you may become close enough to physically female to avoid a sense of gender dysphoria, but none of this can make you as female as one that was born into that gender. And it cannot give you the one trait that is uniquely female among humans: the ability to bear children."

"And you're saying?" Ara's voice cracked as she felt her world fall

away.

"I'm saying," the Professor said, "that if my theory is correct, the procedure I have developed works, you will become a flesh-and-blood woman, down to your very genes. Does that interest you?"

Ara Fang lay on her cot in her dorm room and stared up through the skylight at the night sky.

"There are risks," the professor had told her. *"Very great ones."*

"More so than possibly dying on an operating table?"

"Yes," the professor said, very frankly. *"Quite simply, from a safety consideration, the traditional route of lifelong hormone therapy and gender reassignment surgery would be preferable. For instance, the working required would have a high energy requirement. We would, after all, be performing a working heavily Hued towards Ebony, with an extremely Tight Weave, bordering on Locked. That amount of EVE, allowed to get loose, could be catastrophic. Not to mention that the backlash would be severe. And there is the possibility that the working would be incomplete. Your body could end up… severely altered."*

"How badly?"

"… extra arms. Double legs. Body parts in the wrong places. Partial sexual alteration in some body parts… others not so. Other, more severe teratogenic effects… many of them would be unsurvivable. In other cases, you may wish that you had not survived. And then there are the more esoteric risks. We are attempting to convince the universe that you are and always have been female. The universe may reject the paradox by ejecting you from its reality. Or, instead of turning you into a female, we may end up creating a new 'you' that was always female, and in so doing, destroy the person you are now. Quite frankly, my dear, considering what could happen if you undergo the working, the dangers of a slipped knife or a bad reaction under anesthesia are preferable."

"So greater risk equals greater reward?"

"That depends on how highly you value the 'reward,' as you so put it. Whether you feel it is worth the significantly greater risk."

Ara rolled off of her bed and turned on the lights. She slowly removed her clothing, pulled on her favorite pink-and-white bathrobe, and walked out the door and into the hallway.

The bathrooms were down the hall from her room, and she stepped through the one with the circular symbol of a stick figure that had broad shoulders and didn't wear a stylized skirt. At this hour, as she had hoped, there was no one else in the bathroom. She walked in front of the sinks, removed her robe, and looked at herself in the mirror.

She didn't like mirrors… didn't have any in her room. And looking at herself, she was reminded why. The person she saw in the mirror looked… wrong. Despite the small, budding breasts, in the process of forming after three long years on medicines that made her constantly sick and tired. Despite the long hair and the smooth, hairless face with the fuzz lasered off. Because there was still the narrow hips and the broader shoulders and the Adam's apple she hid under turtlenecks and tight scarves, and most of all, that thing between her legs.

She reached up and touched her own face and the stranger in the mirror touched his.

She reached out and touched the mirror, and the stranger extended his hand to touch his fingertips to hers.

She picked up the bathrobe and put it back on and walked back to her dorm.

She lay on the bed and stared up at the night sky until it turned into twilight, and then, at last, into the morning blue.

"Your first step will be halting the hormonal therapy," the Professor explained. "We need to have your body as close to its original male form as possible."

"That seems backwards," Ara said. "Shouldn't it be as close to female as possible?"

"Boiled water freezes fastest," the Professor replied.

"That isn't an answer."

"No, but it's a decent analogy. What we need to do is hold your male and female possibilities together at once, then transfer the possibility from one to the other. And the more distinct your original male possibility is, the easier it will be to differentiate you from the new possibility being formed. This is important to maintain your sense of self during the transfer. To prevent loss of self-distinction."

"How long?"

"Until the procedure is ready to be performed," the Professor said. "One year and a day from now."

And so Ara stopped taking the pills, and her breasts stopped growing, and her body hair got thicker, and she felt herself slipping backwards down the hill she'd spent so long climbing.

Meanwhile, she and the Professor began going over the various components they would need for the working. "The most important thing," he said, "is a solid image of your desired form. Photos would work. Three-dimensional figures would be best."

They went to the imaging laboratory and had photographs of her male body taken from every possible angle, and then they found someone who could Photoshop it into the body she'd always wanted to be.

Ara immediately rejected the first set of images the artist sent back. "It's too perfect," she complained.

"It looks fine to me," the Professor said.

"Of course it does. This girl is gorgeous. She could be a model… a supermodel… an actress," Ara said. She held up the image of the thin-waisted, slender beauty with flawless, smooth skin, and shook her head. "This doesn't look like me at all. It doesn't feel… right."

They sent the suggestions back to the artist, and they sat together for an entire afternoon going through permutation after permutation, adding an imperfection here, correcting one there, going through face after face after body after body after possibility after possibility until, one day, a month after they'd first sent the request out, Ara looked at the person in the images and saw herself.

Meanwhile, she underwent medical procedures of every kind. Every single millimeter of her current body was studied and recorded. After the photographs came the endoscope, then came the CAT scan, then came the MRIs, then the COLLICULUS imaging, then the genetic scans. Hundreds of thousands of images of herself from every possible angle, mapping every possible facet of a human body.

And then came the day that the sculptor delivered the statue of what her new self would look like, and she sat down across from it for an entire night, just studying her new self. She reached out and touched the face of the closed-eyed thing of silicone and steel. *One day, this is what I will be,* she thought to herself.

And then the day came that the Professor told her that it was time to go see a dwarf about a sword.

"A sword, huh?" the short, stocky man with the giant beard said. "Not much call for one of those in this day and age."

"Not much call for a blacksmith, either," the Professor pointed out. "I guess we were both born a few thousand years too late."

"Speak for yourself. I pity those poor medieval swordsmiths who didn't know the difference between chromium steel and high carbon." The blacksmith laughed out loud and gestured to Ara, who stood in the entrance of the smithy, nervously looking around. "Who's the twink? Your new catamite?"

"My test subject," the Professor said. "For the identity reassignment."

"So that's the tranny, huh? Come over here, let me get a look at

you."

Ara felt the rage rise in her blood, but she walked over nonetheless and stared directly into the dwarf's eyes, cold and hard. The short man laughed out loud at that. "Yeah, I can see I've pissed you off a bit, huh? Good. I like a bit of spirit in my women."

"The proper term," Ara said curtly, "is trans, or trans-woman, if you wish. If you wish to continue this business transaction, you will refer to me as such and apologize for the slur."

"My apologies," the short man said, bowing his head politely. "I'll remember that for the future. I've been… apart from civilization."

"Heinrich's been living in these woods for the past… fifty years, now?"

"Fifty-five," the short man said. "People freak me out. I don't understand how the hell you guys can stand living in a fucking city surrounded by millions of the things." The short, bearded man spit into the hot coals.

"In any case, can you do it? Make the sword for us?"

"I can. But I'm not going to. She's going to do it."

"Me?" Ara squeaked, surprised.

"Yeah, you. And you're also going to make the chalice, too." He gestured to the swords hanging from pegs on the walls of his stone smithy. "Sword. Symbolically male. Oriented towards fire. Chalice. Symbolically female. Oriented towards water. Do you get what's going on here?"

"I think so. The sword and chalice are meant as symbols of my feminine and masculine aspects," Ara said, brows furrowing. "And I have to make them in order to create a strong sense of Sympathy between them for symbolic purposes."

"Got it in one," the short man said.

"Can she do it? Learn to make a sword in time for the ritual?"

"It doesn't need to be a great sword," the short man pointed out. "It only needs to be enough of a sword to serve as a symbol. And I'll help her with it. But she has to be here and help with the creation process."

"If you can afford to take the time off of classes…" the Professor said dubiously.

"One week. No longer. She comes back during Spring Break and pounds steel with me rather than partying down in Cancun or whatever."

"All right," Ara said. "I'll see you in April, then."

"Sounds good. There is, however, the matter of payment."

"How much do you want?" the Professor asked.

"Money's not an issue. I don't spend much out here, except for raw materials, and I've got a deal with the Coalition for ritual gear and such. What I want…" He turned to Ara and grinned lewdly. "Well, when Freya bargained with the dwarves for Brisingamen, she offered…"

"HEINRICH!" the Professor shouted.

"Fine! It was just a joke!" the short man said defensively.

"It wasn't a very funny one!"

"Fine, I'm sorry… but if you really want to make a deal…" The man stroked his beard and sighed. "Look, I'm generally happy living away from people. They kinda piss me off for the most part. But there are some things that I miss from the days when I lived in civilization…"

And so, when Ara returned to the cabin in the woods that following Spring, she brought with her two bottles of Laphroaig Islay Single-Malt, and one of Balvenie 40.

"Yeah, that's the stuff," Heinrich Guggenheim said, as he held the bottles up to the light, smiling. "Human beings are fucking assholes

but sometimes they make something worth keeping."

He put the bottles into his cabinet reverently, like a priest handling the consecrated Hosts, and then rolled out a sheet of butcher paper on his table made of roughly hewn logs, and began sketching out a design using a charcoal pencil.

"Isn't this supposed to be my sword?" Ara asked.

"Sure," Guggenheim said.

"Then let me design it."

She thought she saw him smile as he passed her the pencil and stepped back from the table.

She sketched out a short sword, double-edged, slender and elegant, the lines evoking that of a Chinese *jian,* and then sketched in the ornate hilt and long tassel as well. "That part you'll have to find someone else to do," Guggenheim said. "I only do blades and sometimes hilts."

"That's fine," Ara said. "I'll find a jeweler to do the rest."

"Then let's get started."

He began by showing her how to work the bellows to heat the coals on the forge, then had her working the big hammer to pound the ingot out into a long, narrow sword blank. Her first swing missed the anvil entirely and nearly smashed into her foot. "Careful there," Heinrich warned. "You break your foot and you're going to waste the entire weekend."

"This thing is too heavy. I can't swing it."

"Then don't," Guggenheim said. "Just lift it up and let the weight do the rest."

She lifted up the heavy steel tool and let it fall onto the anvil, hard. Guggenheim grinned as he struck the steel with his own hammer. Between the two of them, and a long, backbreaking day of hard labor, they eventually managed to form the steel into a long,

bladelike shape.

The week passed in much the same manner, with Guggenheim showing her how to heat the metal to the proper temperature. How to let the hammer do all the work of striking the steel. When to return the steel to the heat. He did most of the work, but made sure that she was involved in every step of the process.

The week passed, and on the second-to-last day, Ara pricked her finger and let the blood droplets fall into the two casks of oil and water laid next to the forge, as Guggenheim heated the final sword to a red heat and plunged it first into the oil, then, as the flames rose around the blade, into the water, to quench the blade.

The last day was spent polishing and sharpening the sword, and by the time the sun set at the end of the week, Ara had the blade of her sword wrapped in a silk blanket to carry back to the world.

She lay on her cot, looking up at the thatched roof that last night, as Guggenheim turned over in his bed, and asked, with a bit of trepidation, "Heinrich?"

"Yeah?"

"That first time we met. You mentioned Brisingamen."

"Yeah," Guggenheim said.

"Freyja offered gold and silver to the dwarves who made that necklace. But in the end, she paid them by spending one night with each of them."

There was silence.

Guggenheim turned over in his bed and snorted derisively. "Go to sleep, girl," he growled.

"Yes, sir," Ara said.

She pulled the blanket up over her shoulders and stared at the wall for a good, long time.

"The point of that story," Guggenheim said, after a few minutes, "isn't that Freyja slept with the dwarves. The point is that there are some things in life you'd give anything to have… and sometimes, you pay too much to get them."

"It was still an unfair thing to ask for in payment," Ara said.

"Sorry about that. In case you haven't figured it out already, I'm not a very nice man." Guggenheim yawned. "Anyway, a shitty sword like this… you'd be overpaying me."

Ara chuckled a bit and, after a few more minutes, finally drifted off to sleep.

"Glass," the woman in the leather apron said.

"Are you sure? Maybe pewter would work better," the professor said dubiously.

"Glass," the woman repeated firmly. "It has to be glass, and it has to have a silver stand. You want it to have as many feminine attributes as possible. Silver evokes the moon, glass evokes water. Glass and silver is the best choice."

"I'm not sure that we have time for her to learn both glassblowing and silversmithing," the Professor pointed out. "We're coming up on the end of that year and a day."

"She doesn't have to," the woman said. "She had to make the sword, because it represents a part of herself that's being taken away. But the chalice needs to be made by another, because it represents a new aspect of herself being added on."

"I guess that makes some sense," the Professor said dubiously. "But on the other hand, there's also a strong resonance in having her make the chalice herself."

"Why don't we ask her what she thinks?" the woman in the leather apron said, and they both turned to face Ara, who was sitting on a ratty old chair listening to the entire conversation.

"Me?"

"The chalice will be an integral part of your own transformation. It needs to have resonance to you," the Professor pointed out.

Ara scratched her head and looked across the workshop at the apprentices and workers hammering out silver and tin over small anvils and stakes. "… actually," she said, "I think I might have a different idea."

"So what exactly is this," Lydia asked, when Ara had returned from her dorm room. She held the cheap-looking glass tumbler up to the light. "Romancing the Future? What the hell does that mean?"

"… it's a prom glass," Ara said softly.

Lydia and the Professor fell silent.

"… my father didn't approve of my nature," Ara said. "He… was angry all the time. Emotionally abusive, even. Only the fact that he didn't want it getting out that his son was a 'freak' kept him from sending me off to some kind of camp or something. Maybe my mother would have understood better, but she died when I was young… and he was always afraid that he'd screwed up on raising me. Their only son. Because I wasn't happy with being a son. Because I wanted to be a daughter, like my older sisters. He used to scream at them so much. Blamed them for me being what I was. It wasn't their fault. It wasn't anyone's fault."

She had to sit down to steady herself… the memories were flowing faster and harsher than she'd thought they would. "I had a couple of high school friends who… were sympathetic to me. They helped me to plan it out. One of them, a girl… she was my date. She came over and I wore my tux and we left the house together. Then we went to her house, where she had the dress we'd picked out ready. She helped me put it on. Did my hair. Did my makeup. Put in the shapers and the bra and did my jewelry. And then we went to prom together."

Ara smiled bitterly as the memories came back. "A few of my old

friends clapped when they saw me in my dress. Some others turned away. There were a few angry mutters, some weirded out looks. But there were a lot of happy smiles, too. I danced all night, and Shelly and I, we went out onto the beach with a bunch of our friends, and we sat on the sand and watched the sun rise, and one of my friends, a boy whom I'd had a crush on, told me he liked me no matter what I was, and he held my hand and kissed me."

"It was the best night of my life, but when I got home, after changing back into my tux and leaving my dress at Shelly's house, my father was up. Someone at the prom, I never found out who, called him and told him what I'd done. He screamed at me for hours, and hit me a lot with a rolled up newspaper. As if I were a dog. And he threw my prom glass at the wall and smashed it to bits."

"This is Shelly's," Ara said, running a finger along the rim of the cheap drinking glass that Lydia held. "She gave it to me after she heard what my father had done. So I'd have something to remember that night by." She gave the Professor and Lydia a sick smile. "She's one of the few people I regret leaving behind when I came to ICSUT."

There was a long moment of silence, and Ara realized the entire workshop had halted their work. Everyone was watching her, their hammers and snips stopped by her story.

"… yeah," Lydia said thoughtfully, holding the bowl-shaped glass up to the light. "I think if we put a silver base on this, it should do just fine."

"How do you feel?" the Professor asked.

"Tired. Hungry. Excited. Exhausted." Ara laughed nervously as she swung her feet back and forth. "Scared."

"Understandable," the Professor said. "Let's go over the particulars of the Working."

He went over the various particulars of the systems and spells and elements that would be used in the Working. Ara barely heard him.

They'd gone over this many times before. But this would be the last time that they would talk each other through the procedure.

"… are you certain that you wish to continue with the procedure?" the Professor asked.

"Yes," Ara said firmly.

"Then please sign here."

He passed her what seemed like dozens of clipboards, each one with a neat "X" written near the bottom in blue ink, and Ara signed, in dozens of places, various documents relating to the fact that she knew what she was getting into and would not sue anyone ever if anything went wrong.

She signed her name with a flourish on the final sheet, and the Professor stood up to go into the next room. A very nice young lady with short hair came by next and led Ara into the next room. It looked like bride's room at a church, with a couple of couches, a table, a mirror, and a closet.

"You can change into the gown here," she said. "We'll let you know when it's time to begin."

The lady then walked over to the other door in the room, opened it, and stood in the open doorway for a moment. Ara could see that it led outside, to a cool spring day in Massachusetts.

The door closed behind her, and Ara was left alone in the room.

This was insane. She was about to undergo an extremely dangerous magical working that could backlash and kill a bunch of people. She was about to alter the very fabric of the universe itself.

And why? Because she couldn't bear to live another day without a vag? What kind of logic was that?

She should leave. She should go. She should pick up her bag and walk right out that other door and just run across the campus as fast as she could and leave this whole thing behind.

Her head spun, her vision blurred, her heart pounded. She was clenching her fists so hard she could feel her fingernails dig into her palm.

She took another deep breath.

She took off her clothes, put them in the duffel bag she'd brought along with her, and stood in front of the mirror, looking into the eyes of the stranger she saw there.

His sad eyes looked back.

She reached a hand out to him, and touched his fingertips with hers.

She walked back to the closet, flung open the doors. It felt right to don the thin white garment by swirling it through the air, like the skirt of some magical fairy princess.

She cinched the belt of the robe around her waist. Precisely ten seconds later, the doors opened, and the Professor walked in.

"Were you watching me?" she asked.

"Through COLLICULUS," the Professor admitted.

"What would you have done if I walked out that door?"

"Watched you leave. And looked for another test subject."

He closed the door behind him and looked seriously into Ara's eyes. "I have one last request for you," he said. "I need your truename."

She'd known this was coming for a while. She nodded to him and cleared her throat nervously. It felt a bit closed and dry, so she swallowed before going on. "Arachne."

"Arachne. The Spider… if memory serves, she was a weaver. One of the greatest. So great, in fact, that the goddess Artemis challenged her to a contest. Artemis wove images of the Gods ruling humanity and defeating them time and time again… and Arachne responded by weaving images of the many abuses the Gods had heaped upon mankind. And when Artemis tore her weaving to

pieces, she hanged herself."

"It was Athena, not Artemis," Ara said. "And she was angry because Arachne wouldn't admit that some of her talent might have come from the Goddess of Weaving."

"My mistake," the Professor said. "And how do you feel, Spider? Are you a plaything of the Gods, abused and mistreated? Or are you the rebellious, prideful child who refuses to acknowledge their gifts?"

"… I think," Ara said, smiling nervously, "that I'm a young woman about to undergo a huge change in my life, who's feeling freaking terrified right now and just want it to be over with."

"A good answer," the Professor said. "Come."

He opened the other door and led her into the next room: a massive cave, cool and damp, with a broad, flat floor of polished stone. A small army of masons had spent many days carving a precise shape into the granite floor: it hurt her eyes to look at, consisting as it did of circles within circles within loops and angles. It had to be nearly twenty meters in diameter.

Guggenheim stood at the edge of the circle, holding a small anvil under one arm as if it were a basketball. He wore his belt of tools around his waist, including the heavy hammer she remembered so well. Lydia stood next to him, holding the silver-and-glass chalice in her hands: it looked beautiful, the expertly crafted ivy and vines in pure silver wrapping around and embracing the cheap glass. There was a small parade of other assistants here too, carrying a ewer of water, a small basin, and a tray of small knives and other tools.

All of them were dressed in black robes with red cords around their waist. And as she watched, two assistants stepped forward with a set of robes for the Professor as well. He held out his arms as they helped him into the heavy black garments and tied the red cincture around his waist. One of them passed him a staff: it looked odd, carved in a strange shape, and she realized that it had been crafted from the stock of an old rifle, reshaped to form the upper half of an ornately decorated staff.

The Professor turned to the other end of the room, where a number of persons stood around a set of complicated equipment. Another small group sat on folding chairs in the shadows. "The Working," he said, "will take place in three phases. The first is medical. The subject will be examined medically, and some final preparations will be made. The second is symbolic. A series of rituals will be carried out symbolic of the change, in order to set the lines of the working in the minds of the participants. The final stage of the Working is the precise application of several bursts of carefully targeted Aspect Radiation. For the safety of all observers and participants, we request that you remain behind the yellow line marked on the floor. Any attempt to cross the yellow line will result in immediate physical restraint."

He turned to a couple of white-coated doctors and nodded to them. Ara was led behind a curtain, where a couple of doctors performed one last physical check, took one last blood sample, patted her on the shoulder and wished her luck.

Then someone handed her the sword, wrapped in silk cloth, and stood her in line just in front of the Professor, and the entire procession walked in very slowly, at a measured pace.

She would never again be able to remember exactly how it happened. It was taped, of course, and she would later be able to watch from an outsider's perspective exactly how it all took place. But personally… she didn't remember much of anything.

There was a slow procession around the entire circle, seven times clockwise. Water was poured into a basin and poured over her head. The sword was waved over her body in a series of precise movements. She was given the sword back and told to press it to her forehead and chest while the Professor said a lot of things in Latin. The staff was pressed against her back and someone said something very loudly in Greek before striking her once, sharply, across the shoulders.

There was a black cat, the Professor's familiar, who walked between her feet seven times, halting at the left foot. The sword was taken from her, and Guggenheim broke it over his anvil with one powerful

swing of his hammer. The silicone model of her future self was brought out, and she was made to embrace it seven times. A small cut was made on her upper thigh. A drop of the blood was mixed with water in the chalice and she was made to drink it. Two more drops were smeared across her face and that of the doll.

Then the Professor took a small pot of silver paint and a stylus and drew a series of symbols all over her skin and that of the doll. Everyone else was led out of the circle as a small pump filled the channels with a liquid that made her eyes water.

And then she lay in the center of the circle, her right hand holding the cold, clammy hand of the silicone doll that they had made, while a black cat sat between the two of them, unblinkingly staring at the Professor's eyes.

There was a low whumph, and the gasoline that had filled the channels of the circle was ignited. Flames rose up all around her in a precise pattern, illuminating the chamber in a lurid red light.

Purple electricity leaped between the points of the stalactites overhead and she felt herself plummet into the heart of the world.

She opened her eyes again and looked up into the face of the Professor. He was smiling down at her.

"How do you feel?" he asked.

"… I hurt," Ara whimpered. And she did. Her entire body felt like it was aching horribly. Her eyes were dry, her throat was dry, she was desperately hungry. She prised her left hand free of the grip of the silicone doll and rubbed her eyes.

She missed and touched her nose instead. It felt… odd. Strange.

She turned to her left… and she saw something there crumbling into ash and dust. Something that looked very much like the body of the man she used to see in the mirror.

Then the doctors came and swarmed over her, and one of them put a rubber breath mask over her face and she closed her eyes and

passed out.

She awoke to find herself lying on soft sheets, wearing a thin hospital gown, in a darkened room that beeped.

She very much had to pee.

She crawled out of the bed, but was brought up short by something hooked up to her arm. She dragged the IV along with her into the bathroom, pulled up her gown, sat down on the seat.

It felt strange… like it was coming from the wrong places, and that this muscle felt wrong, and this place was off, and this entire thing…

The realization of what was going on hit her, and she felt the tears rise up in her eyes. She gingerly reached down with the toilet paper to wipe herself off, and felt her fingertips press against her body.

It was a good hour before she could finish sobbing, and when she did, she rose up on unsteady feet, flushed the toilet, and turned on the lights. She turned to the bathroom mirror, and saw herself looking back.

She reached out a hand and felt her fingertips press against the silvered glass, and smiled.

"Well, Spider," the Professor said, snapping the clipboard closed. "According to this, you're a completely healthy young woman."

"I knew that already. I could have told you that the first night."

"Yes," the Professor said. "But this was a medical report from an outside doctor. So I guess this means that our experiment was a success." He leaned back in his chair and gave her a wry smile. "How did you like your first period?"

"It fucking sucked," Ara laughed ruefully. "I admit there was a moment, in the middle of the cramps and bloating and having what felt like half my uterus flowing out of me, that I felt like a fucking idiot for agreeing to all this."

"And the other?"

"… well, it seems functional, if that's what you're asking," Ara said, blushing. "But I haven't tried it with anyone else yet. I didn't exactly have a great time the first time I lost my virginity. I think I'm going to use the weight of experience for my second time around."

"Good on you, then." The Professor snapped his clipboard shut and got to his feet. "Well, then, Spider. I'll be seeing you around."

He got up and helped her into her coat, and locked his office door behind him. "Oh, before I forget," he said, handing her a gift bag. "This is a memento. From two new friends."

Spider waited until she was back in her dorm room to open up the gift bag and take out the contents. One of them was a glass chalice with a silver stand. The other was a broken sword mounted on a wooden plaque.

She leaned the plaque up against the wall, behind her desk, and put the chalice on her nightstand. She'd have to find a case for them, she decided, when she had a moment.

Then she changed into her pajamas and lay down on her bed, looking up through the skylight into the stars. She stayed there for a long, long time, until the blackness turned into the grey of twilight, and finally into the morning blue.

"UHEC"

The sign outside the room was stolen from a construction site. It looked like this:

Inside the room, Special Agent Lynisha Taylor (United Nations Global Occult Coalition, PHYSICS Division, Strike Team 9999 ("Max Damage") was sitting on her bunk, flipping through a comic book. (Purists would insist that she call it a *manga,* but it was still a comic book, and she was AMERICAN, damn it, and AMERICANS read comics, not mangoes.)

She turned to the last page, sighed, and tossed the comic book onto the scratched table with its fake wood paneling.

She glared up at the Alert Indicator screen above her desk, which looked like this:

Lynisha continued to glare until, with a soft chime, the screen changed to this:

Lynisha got up from her seat, walked out of her room, and tapped a button on the side of the sign.

She retrieved her toothbrush and toiletries and headed down the hall to the bathroom to wash up for bed.

0500 the next morning.

Lynisha headed down to the mess hall for breakfast and a cup of coffee. She smelled frying steak and heard loud laughter and cheers coming from within.

Sadness.

As she'd feared, Cookie had canceled the usual breakfast and was serving steak and eggs instead. Everyone was gathered around Fredrickson, watching some kind of video footage on his tablet computer. The sound of crunching metal and explosions could be heard over the sound of cheering agents.

Damn. Must have missed the scramble by a couple of hours.

She grabbed a tray and headed to the chow line to get some breakfast. Cookie slipped her an extra-large piece of boneless ribeye next to her scrambled eggs and toast, giving her a sympathetic smile. "Next time, Fangirl," he said reassuringly.

Lynisha smiled back at Cookie, then picked up her tray and headed to a corner table to sulk and eat breakfast.

The steak was dry. And the eggs were a bit runny.

"… last of all: Wong, Serizawa, and Taylor. You three are off the duty rotation for the next two weeks. Your suits are due for overhaul. Report to the motor pool at 0600 for repair and refit," Commander Tai concluded.

Lynisha raised her hand. "Sir?"

"Yes, Fangirl?"

"With all due respect," Lynisha said, "'Point' is in good shape. She's taken no damage, and all her vitals are green. I'd like to delay scheduled maintenance until the next rotation."

"All right, I'll take that under consideration," Commander Tai said.

"Thank y—"

"After careful consideration, the answer is 'No.' Dismissed."

Disappointment.

"All right, raise your left hand," the engineer said.

Lynisha slowly raised her left hand above her head, and three tons of steel, ceramics, and buckypaper bilayered with dilatant gelatin followed.

"Lock joints in place," the engineer said.

"Confirm, joint locked," Lynisha said.

She lowered her left hand, and this time, three tons of steel, ceramics, and buckypaper bilayered with dilatant gelatin did not follow.

"All right, stepping into crush zone now." The engineer gingerly stepped into the shadow of the heavy limb and began using his impact wrench to remove the bolts holding the access panel in place.

Lynisha leaned back in the saddle of her fifteen-ton suit of armor and pulled out her comic book, flipping through the pages by the light of a battery-powered LED lamp she'd picked up at a dollar store.

"… well, all the connections look clear," the engineer said. "Hell, everything looks freshly cleaned. I don't really think we need to do anything more than wipe down the dust and squirt some lube here and there."

You mean the stuff I've been doing myself every day? Lynisha did not say.

The engineer hemmed and hummed as he continued to clean and polish the various connections. Satisfied with his work, he replaced the access panel, locked it back in place with his impact wrench, and stepped out of the red circle painted onto the hangar floor.

"All right, I'm clear of the crush zone," the engineer said. "You can unlock the joints and switch to raising the right arm now."

"Confirmed," Lynisha said, putting down her comic. "Unlocking

joints. Raising right arm now."

"Lock joints in place."

"Confirm, joints locked."

"Stepping into crush zone now."

Lynisha picked up her comic book again and went back to reading.

Lynisha sat on her bed, staring nervously up at the Alert Indicator screen. She'd changed out of her duty uniform and was wearing her skinsuit in what STRIKE operatives called "granny panty style" — loosely around her hips, without the relief tubes in place, shoulder straps and sleeves tied around her waist like a prep school kid's sweater.

Her comic book was open to the same page that it had been open to one hour before, when the Alert Indicator switched from blue to amber with the sound of a harsh, buzzing tone. Her fingers drummed nervously against its cover as the Alert Indicator's clock slowly ticked away the seconds.

Tick.

Tick.

Tick.

There was a soft chime and the sound of a bell ringing.

Lynisha swore and peeled off her skinsuit.

"Going on leave soon, Fangirl?" Cookie asked.

"Yeah. I tried to defer it, but they're making me do it this time. Guess the holidays are coming up and a lot of us are gonna request leave then, so we've got to use up as many mandatory leave days as

possible now. Fucking stupid." Lynisha picked up an apple and tossed it onto her tray.

"Hey, it'll be fun. Have a good time lying to your folks about what you do for a living," Cookie said, grinning.

"I told them I'm a puppeteer for a practical effects house. That I make giant monster movies." Lynisha chuckled. "Not too far from the truth, I guess."

"True that. Your usual, then?"

"Nah. I'll have the turkey sandwich this time. Mix things up a bit."

"Done and done," Cookie said.

The scramble alert sounded while Lynisha was on the toilet.

She nearly tripped over her own pants leaping to her feet. She did smack her head against the stall door.

She almost forgot to flush, but decided that if she died this time, the last thing that she wanted her friends to think about her was that she was a heartless bitch who left piss-filled toilets behind for others to clean up after her, so she ran back into the stall and did that, at least.

She raced into her quarters and grabbed the freshly laundered skinsuit (still in its plastic wrappings from the in-house laundry) off her desk, then began running down the brightly lit hallways, screaming "SCRAMBLE SCRAMBLE SCRAMBLE!" at the top of her lungs.

Everyone else in the halls immediately pressed themselves against the wall as she ran past. One hapless flunky carrying a tray of coffee and snacks failed to do so and was blasted through like a twelve-year old encountering a linebacker.

Someone yelled, "GO GITTUM, FANGIRL!" as she ran past, and Lynisha grinned.

SCRAMBLE ORDER

EFFECTIVE IMMEDIATELY:
Pilot Lynisha Taylor to move to READY ONE Status at the earliest possible opportunity.

UHEC K3-297 ("Exclamation Point!") to be loaded onto C-779 Kingfisher transport at earliest possible opportunity.

Further information forthcoming under Code Word Flamberge.

Mission Briefing will be carried out in transit.

ELSEWHERE…

Rule number one of combat: Infantry is the Queen of Battle.

Rule number two of combat: Artillery is the King of the Battlefield.

Rule number three of combat: Remember what the King does to the Queen.

Landon felt the concussion of nearby explosions rattle his body as the artillery shells exploded all around him, cracking his already damaged White Suit. The bloody and broken remnants of Strike Team Scarlet Vanguard lay slumped against the mildewed walls of the abandoned World War II-era bunker. His entire world was shuddering at the roaring of eighty cylinders of diesel engine powering over 1,100 tons of steel.

He glanced up through the shattered machine gun port and saw the tank plowing through an entire grove of thirty-foot tall oak trees on its way to crush yet another concrete fortification under its gargantuan treads.

No, he thought to himself. This was not a tank. This was the fever dream of an insane Nazi weapons designer brought to life. This was Adolf Hitler's massive ego finding a physical manifestation that could

overcompensate for his alleged single testicle. This was a nightmare. This was death and fury given form.

The *P.1000 Landkreuzer* turned its twin 280mm cannons onto a ruined fortification and belched fire. Half the hillside exploded into green flame as a gigantic green flaming skull, wearing the cap and *totenkopf* of an SS officer, floated above the enormous land battleship.

"HEIL HITLER!" the ghost of Michael Wittmann roared. *"Es lebe das heilige Deutschland!"*

"… The enemy is a Nazi ghost tank?" Lynisha asked, as she climbed into the saddle of her Orange Suit.

"Technically, it's a Nazi ghost that has invaded a Russian surplus arms depot and converted the decommissioned tanks into a spectral model of a theoretical Nazi superweapon that was designed but never built," the engineer said.

Glee!

The Kingfisher dropped her from 30,000 feet over the smoldering forest, where the remaining members of Strike Team Scarlet Vanguard were making their last stand behind burning concrete and rubble. A few moments later, the air-ram parachute deployed with a loud THOOMP and a spine-compressing deceleration.

Her fingers brushed the touch screen of the iPod she'd mounted on the inside of her cramped pilot's compartment. She considered DragonForce, flirted briefly with Iron Maiden, was even about to choose Mastadon or Evanescence.

But in the end, there was really only one choice she could make.

As the fifteen-ton Ultra-Heavy Engagement Chassis descended through the air towards the battlefield, the sound of a single bugle playing a cavalry call could be heard echoing throughout the battlefield.

And then, just as UHEC K3-297 ("Exclamation Point!") crunched into the earth with all the force of a descending god, the music suddenly transitioned into an extremely unmartial boogie-woogie beat.

> The Andrews Sisters began to sing.

He was a famous trumpet man from out Chicago way…

"Oh God, it's Fangirl," Landon groaned.

"Better than Sex."

It was the kind of phrase that people threw around jokingly. As if anyone would pass up the chance for some horizontal tango action for anything else, right?

Well, Lynisha Taylor could honestly say that sex was overrated. Sex was awkward. Sex made you feel vulnerable. Sex was weird and dirty and involved bodily fluids and messy sheets. Ick!

Now, riding a UHEC, on the other hand? That was like being a God. That was like being Artemis and Athena and Hecate and all three fucking Furies all bound up into a steel-plated package.

Riding a UHEC was the furthest thing from "vulnerable" that a human being could ever feel.

She hit her assault jets just as she hit ground, and the ten-foot tall metal beast wrapped around her five-foot-two flesh-and-blood body surged forward like a charging tiger. BANSHEE was flashing a sequence of images intended to shock and awe the enemy: Allied ships coming ashore at Normandy. American factories churning out a B-17 bomber every ninety seconds. The 101st Airborne storming the Eagle's Nest at Berchtesgarden. Audie Fucking Murphy.

Meanwhile, the Andrews Sisters continued to sing.

They sang as she smashed a three-ton fist into a tank a hundred times bigger than she was.

They sang as she ripped her wrist-mounted piledrivers into the seven-foot wide bogies, smashing them off their axles and dislocating the treads.

They sang as she leaped out of the way of a half-dozen roaring machine guns, tracing a high arc in the air that brought her screaming down towards the massive gun turret, ready to deliver the killing blow.

They sang as the gigantic guns swiveled around impossibly fast and fired a 300 kg armor-piercing shell directly into her chest.

The cannon went WHUMP and her suit went CRUNCH and Lynisha went "FUCK!" and the entire package went sailing off towards the horizon like an errant foul ball.

Well. So much for the cavalry.

Landon put down his rifle. It was out of ammo anyway (not that it would do any good against that thing bearing down on his bunker.) He took one last look around the bunker at his valiant, doomed men, and dialed close air support on his suit's comm.

"Red Six here. Orange Asset is KIA. Requesting Broken Arrow. Repeat. Broken Arrow."

A brief moment of silence, broken only by the moaning of a wounded man. "Say again, Red Six?"

Landon grimaced. Figured. Even in his last moments, CAS was as dense as fucking rocks. "Red Six, Orange Asset KIA, Broken Arrow," he growled.

Another brief moment of silence. "Uhhh… Red Six? I'm reading Orange Asset re-entering your battlespace at speed," the CAS guy said.

"What!?"

It was then that Landon heard the distinctive opening riff of…

… no.

Not that song.

Anything but THAT SONG.

"GODDAMN IT, FANGIRL!" he shouted.

In the end, there were two things that saved Lynisha's life.

The first thing was that the Ultra-Heavy Engagement Chassis included a piece of black box TanGenTial technology called the Inertial Nullifier, which basically reduced the effective mass of the suit at certain times. It was extremely useful for, say, walking across the street without tearing the asphalt into bits with the ground pressure of a fifteen-ton suit of armor.

Lynisha was hit in the air, while on her upward rise, while the Inertial Nullifier was at full power.

The effect was rather like a baseball being thrown at a sheet on a laundry line. Rather than smashing through her body (like a baseball thrown at a vase), it instead launched her into the air, keeping most of its kinetic energy to itself.

The second thing that saved Lynisha's life was that she got hit at a high enough angle to avoid being slammed into a mountainside. And that the 280mm shell had an almost one minute travel time at maximum distance: enough time to clear her head from the blackout caused by the massive acceleration and regain her bearings while tumbling through the sky.

Not that she got away scot free. She was certain that her sternum was cracked. Her ribs were probably broken. And there was an unexploded armor-piercing shell embedded in her chestplate.

Lynisha got pissed.

This asshole thought he could come into her house with his SIEG HEILs and Hugo Boss uniforms and goose stepping and Final Solution?

Fuck that shit.

This was AMERICA!

(… okay, it wasn't really AMERICA!, it was the middle of Siberia, but AMERICA! was a state of mind, not so much a physical place, and Lynisha was as AMERICAN! as they came.)

She wrenched the unexploded shell from her chest, grabbed it in both hands, locked her limbs in place. She keyed up a secret BANSHEE program: one of many she had prepared on the off-chance that she might one day find a situation where they might be useful.

She positioned herself directly above the tank, where its big-ass guns couldn't track her. She clutched the basketball-sized shell in her armored hands — the instrument of her vengeance.

She fell like a meteor, blaring the battle tune of her generation through her loudspeakers, screaming "FUUUUUUUUUCK YOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOU!" all the way down, as the BANSHEE system kicked in.

> And the Quad City DJs sang.

They sang while UHEC K3-297 ("Exclamation Point!") descended from on high.

They sang while the Nazi supertank opened fire with all of its turrets in a desperate attempt to stop its death.

They sang while the ghost of Michael Wittmann screamed "WAS IST DAS!?" in confusion and horror at the bizarre specter it beheld.

They sang as an Ultra-Heavy Engagement Chassis, hidden inside a fifteen-foot hologram of Michael Jordan, slam-dunked an artillery shell through the turret of a possessed *P.1000 Ratte Landkreuzer*.

> … regarding the last point on your memo: your request

to discipline Agent Taylor for "unprofessional behavior" is denied.

Agent Taylor's profession is to wait for months at a time, maintaining maximum readiness for the day that we ask her to climb into a mecha-suit and punch eldritch abominations in the face.

If you can tell me how a woman with that job description is supposed to act, I'll take your request a little more seriously.

- Assistant Director "Marimba"
Western American Branch
United Nations Global Occult Coalition

The mess hall erupted into cheers as Lynisha entered, leaning heavily on her crutch.

She gave them a Miss America grin and pumped her fist as the rest of Strike Team Quadruple Niner erupted into a rousing chorus of, "For She's a Jolly Good Fellow."

Cookie brought her a tray with a Medium Rare ribeye steak, scrambled eggs, and toast. She basked in the praise as the big screen on the side of the mess hall played and replayed her battle against the Nazi tank. She carefully cut a piece off the steak and took a bite, chewing slowly, savoring the taste.

Best steak ever!

Magic Orientation

"Hello. Thank you all for coming. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Dr. Tilda David Moose. I am the director of Site-19.

"I'm here to — pardon my colloquial tone — I'm here to talk to you about magic.

"I'm not a very good speaker. Just letting you know that up front. If it were up to me, someone else would be standing here. So let's start this with some questions. Just raise your hands like you're back in school. Easiest way, don't you think? I — Oh. That's… that's too many hands. Alright, you in front, go ahead.

"No, this isn't an orientation for Mobile Task Force Sigma-3. Sigma-3 is a task force that doesn't exist. It doesn't hold 'orientations.' I think they had **one orientation**, ever, and that was when they were created. If you're here from Sigma-3 and you think you need an orientation, your superiors haven't been doing their jobs. Next question?

"I thought I said don't ask me questions about — okay, fine. She just asked why everyone here is from Sigma-3. First answer, it's not everyone. More… two-thirds of you. I see at least a dozen are high-ranking members of Tau-9, the Bookworms. Some of you are clearance 4 researchers who've just been read into this program, at least three of you are new directors, and some of you are… 'spooks'. Not saying who, of course. Just have fun wondering about that. Anyway.

"Very, very few people in the Foundation are allowed to know anything about magic. This is… by far the largest number of people I've ever spoken to about this. I guess what with everything that's been happening recently, the Overseers want more people, ah… knowing what's going on.

"Yes, okay, ask your question. — His question was — what exactly

is 'Sigma-3'?

"In that case, I have a question, too. How the hell does anyone in here not know what Sigma-3 is? You should've been sent material on… right, great, still in the process of declassification. I see. I take it back, I suppose.

"Okay. We'll start with what we call "the anomalous community." Give you the lay of the land. How the world works, out there in the shadows. I'll explain how our Groups of Interest fit into this. I'll tell you about the Wanderers' Library. And, yeah, I'll explain a little bit about Sigma-3. In between, we'll have breaks, so you don't hate me too much.

"I assume you all already know this, but… There may be about a hundred of you in here, tonight. Still, you are a fraction of the Foundation's population. We're going to keep it that way. Anything you hear from me, *anything*, is not to be discussed with anyone who's not read into this program. On pain of death. Probably.

<clears throat>

"Finally, I'm going talk to you about magic.

"Don't panic. No, you're not hallucinating. There has been no containment breach, and, I promise, there are no drugs in your coffee.

"I am quite simply talking to you in the color blue.

"This is because I am what they call a "mage". Or, if you like, a "Type Blue"… or "a witch". This is stuff we can do. It's, well — magic. Trivial magic, but magic nonetheless.

<clears throat>

"But I'm not going to talk about magic quite yet. Give me just a moment, and we'll get started."

"Right. I said I'd talk to you about Mobile Task Force Sigma-3, "The Bibliographers". The boring name is on purpose.

"Let me preface this. I'm not in Sigma-3. I only consult. I did induct a few of you myself a couple years ago, but I don't do that anymore. Yes, I see you, Agent Navarro, stop waving. As I was saying, since I'm not in Sigma-3, this will be the short version.

"Sigma-3 is a Foundation task force which deals directly with the anomalous community. On friendly terms, or at least as friendly as we can manage. If this sounds ridiculous to you, good. Means we haven't had any leaks.

"Originally, Sigma-3 was one of the Task Forces that took part in the failed invasion of the Wanderers' Library, three or four decades back. It was the only one left mostly… intact. Afterwards, it was reformed and repurposed by order of O5 Command.

"They are not a paramilitary task force. Nor are they a containment team. They are the product of our superiors being very, very concerned about the idea that the Foundation might miss out on some important things — world-ending things — simply because we are so isolated from the anomalous world.

"Even with the invasion of the Library… if we had sources within the anomalous community, and if the task forces, or at least their leaders and the people doing the planning for them, had been cleared to know what we *did* already know about the Library — then the operation could have gone significantly differently.

"As it was, the Library incursion involved no people who had even *heard* of the Library before the op began. It was too highly classified, and we didn't have any direct sources, people who'd been in there long enough to seriously know what it was like.

"We still don't even know what happened when we went into the Library. The memories of everyone who went in were different. Even our existing recordings — actual audiovisual footage — directly contradict each other. Some of the survivors don't remember even going in at all.

"What we know for certain is that even now there are still Foundation members left behind in the Library, imprisoned beyond our reach. Beyond any reach. And that this was completely

preventable.

"But I'll get back to the Library.

"We have always had some sources in the anomalous community. We have a long history of cooperating with the Global Occult Coalition, which is far more part of the anomalous world than we are. We also created Mobile Task Force Tau-9 — the Bookworms — to deal with anomalies related to the Library, the Hand, and 'magic', in a more traditional manner.

"But that could only take us so far. Command decided we needed ears on the ground.

"Originally, Sigma-3 did not make use of any direct anomalous means. In recent years, this has… changed. There are people who are actual, practicing magicians in this very room, members of Sigma-3. People who are anartists. People who do double duty for organizations like Marshall, Carter, and Dark, the Serpent's Hand, and other anomalous organizations.

"And they've had results. Sigma-3 has contained a high number of actively dangerous anomalies that could not have been secured without cooperation with more benign anomalous entities. There are at least three dozen SCP objects which Sigma-3 contained directly that I'm aware of. And more that Sigma-3 acquired at least some information for.

"I'm not allowed to name most of them tonight, because not all of you are on Sigma-3 and cleared to know that. But just from SCPs I've worked on as project lead… Sigma-3 helped locate **SCP-003**, the first SCP object I was assigned to, through a remote viewing operation coordinated with outside sources of information from the Wanderers' Library. Sigma-3 also discovered and acquired **SCP-472** through contacts in the anomalous community.

"On a larger scale, Sigma-3 helped prevent a direct, coordinated assault against the Foundation about a decade ago, after Incident Zero — an assault that would've crushed us, and that's almost impossible given the Foundation's size and defenses. I can't tell you the exact number of times that Sigma-3 has literally saved the world,

but I can tell you it's in the plural.

"In exchange, Sigma-3 is set apart from other Foundation task forces. They do not aid in the containment of any anomalous entities, not even indirectly, unless it's done with the cooperation or members of the anomalous community.

"This is where many people stop, and raise hell. This is worse, to them, than even task forces like Omega-7 or Alpha-9. Those task forces use or used anomalous entities — but this task force actively shields certain anomalous entities from containment! Worse — sometimes Sigma-3 even makes deals which allow anomalous entities to go free.

"This goes against the fundamental ethos of the Foundation, they say. And maybe they're not wrong. But as things stand now, the Foundation is not capable of simply containing every anomaly out there in the wild. Until that time, Sigma-3 has proven its worth. What good is our ethos if we don't have a world to protect?

"Let me get colloquial again. Sigma-3 are the people whose job it is to know if some cultists are summoning Cthulhu. Generally, their friends and neighbors don't want the world to end. But maybe they can't really do much to stop it. But we can. They have the knowledge. We have the resources.

"They may not know we're Jailors… er, members of the Foundation, but when Cthulhu's involved, they don't mind telling someone who knows someone who knows someone else who can call in one of our bigger Mobile Task Forces and bust some heads. And save the world.

"Not that I'm saying Cthulhu really exists… if It does, then you're not cleared to know about it. Just an example.

"I think we're due another break. Come back in twenty and we'll talk about the, ah, so-called 'anomalous community.'

"Alright. The 'anomalous community'. What's that mean?

"The anomalous community makes up all the people in the world

whose lives involve the anomalous. People of all types imaginable. A patchwork of individual communities, totalling a few hundred thousand people worldwide.

"That's probably more than you'd guess, but so it goes — and another reason why Sigma-3 is necessary. These are all people who are aware of, and often are exposed to, the anomalous world. For some of them, it's part of their daily life.

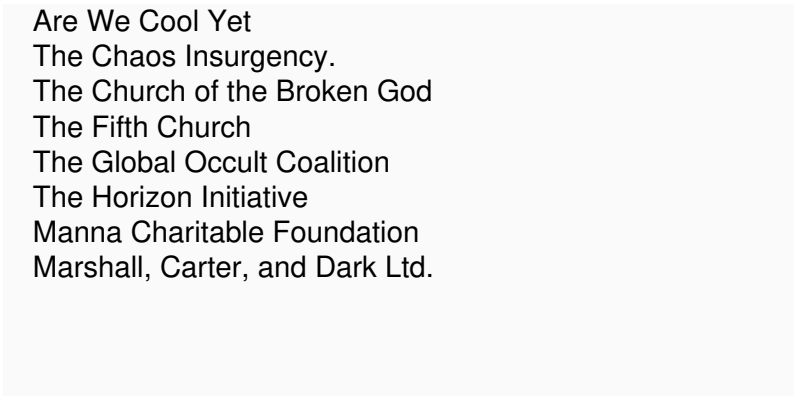
"Many of them have access to the Wanderers' Library, and most of them have heard of it. Many are involved in the so-called anart community. Many are involved with the Global Occult Coalition and the Serpent's Hand.

"Even the Foundation itself has roots in the anomalous community, from a very long time ago, if you listen to some of the stories — no, that's not an official statement, I'm only repeating rumors. Take them as you will.

"How many actually have anomalous capability? Well, that's an open question. A distinct minority are low-level Type Blues, who can do little tricks or learn a few spells out of books. Mages, witches, magicians, soothsayers, etcetera. People like… well, me, before I defected to the Foundation.

"When we catch these people, we don't usually classify them as SCPs. The ones we've kept are mostly classified as anomalous items. Sigma-3 handles a good number of them.

"In terms of GOIs in the anomalous community… well, technically, they all are part of the anomalous community, in some way. But the bigger ones are… let me get this slide working.



Office For The Reclamation of Islamic Artifacts
Oneiroi Collective
Sarkic Cults
The Serpent's Hand
Unusual Incidents Unit (UIU)

"As you can see, that's… most of 'em. A-W-C-Y, the Insurgency, the Fifthists, and the Sarkicists are more… fringe. Technically, so is the Church of the Broken God, but the so-called 'Devout' are far more accepted in the anomalous community than you might think, except by Horizon allies.

"Manna, Horizon, and ORIA are 'initiatives' within the anomalous community, I guess you'd call them. MC&D is just what you think it is — the rich people in the anomalous community are mostly all part of it or associated with it. And Oneiroi… gods only know what the Oneiroi are, so… I won't speculate.

"Then we have the two biggest ones — the Coalition and the Hand.

"We have a reputation, too. People who don't sign on with the GOC, and even some of those, call us Jailors. But the Coalition gets called 'Bookburners'. So… it could be worse.

"About the Insurgency — people outside the Foundation don't view it the same as we do. We see them as… well, insurgents, half-crazy defectors from the Foundation who want to destroy everything for who knows what reason.

"The anomalous community sees the Insurgency as a movement, more akin to the Sarkic Cults than anything else. A movement to remake the world, with strong religious overtones, despite the Insurgency's professed atheism. People who want to become gods. Destructive beyond reason, and crazier even than the people who want to summon dark gods.

"Actually, even the people who want to summon dark gods tend to think of the Insurgency as going too far. They're popularly referred to as "the Sowers of Discord" and "the Madmen". Keep in mind these are literal death cults calling them that. The Insurgency won't be winning any popularity contests anytime soon, which is probably

why they haven't… no, I digress. That's classified.

"Let's talk the Hand and the Coalition.

"The Global Occult Coalition is the Big Brother of the anomalous community. They're the cops, and the executioners. They have 108 member organizations, all of them anomalous in some way, all of them shielded from us by the Coalition.

"The Coalition cares a lot about maintaining the so-called Masquerade — they wish to preserve normalcy just as much as we do. But we aren't part of the anomalous community — and they are. Generally, all the respectable members of the anomalous community, or those in high society, are on board with the Coalition.

"They're called 'Bookburners' because, after their formation after the Seventh Occult War — around World War II — they essentially enacted a hostile takeover of the anomalous community. Either you signed on with the Coalition — with Big Brother — or you got crushed.

"Some elements of the Coalition got on the wrong side of the Library… and they were mystically barred from it, ever after. Just like us. Ironically, even though they crossed the Library first, they were acting on information they got from us… but that's a story for another time.

"Suffice to say, many Coalition members are still spitting mad about losing their Library access; I suspect it caused the Coalition to tamp down many of their activities. Them being barred made it a lot easier for people who hated the Coalition to go underground. All they needed to do was get into the Library.

"**The Serpent's Hand** is sort of the yin to the Coalition's yang. The Hand are a movement springing from opposition to the Coalition's whole… Big Brother thing. And to the idea of containing or suppressing the anomalous community.

"They're the radical activists of the anomalous community… but also the ordinary people who don't take to their equivalent of Big Government. The Hand takes all types, anyone who wants to join.

So there's a lot of decent folk and a lot of death cultists, too. There's heavy overlap between the Hand and the fringe communities, obviously, plus movements, like religious cults — or the occasional full-blown religion, like the Church of the Broken God — and anartist groups.

"Hand types tend to dislike us, too, but they like us better than the Coalition, because we try not to kill people. This is also why Sigma-3 can exist.

"Full disclosure: I used to be a member of the Serpent's Hand. I got into it through a college organization. Spent a few years in it before defecting to the Foundation. It's how I became a Type Blue — a magician.

"Not answering questions about my incredibly interesting history, sorry. But I'll talk about the magician part in a bit. Right now, I think it's time for another break."

"What is the Wanderers' Library? Most of you have probably heard of it, and know it's, um, a library, and that the Serpent's Hand uses it and we… don't.

"…And that's about it.

"The Wanderers' Library is a library containing almost every book every written, and many that haven't been written yet, and many that will never be written.

"We've got some footage for this. Give me a second to cue it up.

"Alright, more than a second. Gonna … keep talking.

"We won't be showing you the outside of the Library because as far as we know, no one has ever seen it. The Library is a place outside space. "Extradimensional" is the technical term, though not very descriptive. The Library isn't on our world, though it's connected to it.

"You reach it through Ways. Ways are a network of… basically magic portals that take you from one place to another. They're scattered around the world. The Foundation contains a number of

them, mostly classified as anomalous items — a few networks are classified as SCPs.

"The Library is a nexus of Ways. The largest one on Earth. A Way that connects to the Library is called a Door, because they attach to doors within the Library. Pretty simple.

"Using the Ways isn't so simple. Okay, some of them are. Each has a trick to it, to make it work. Some of them you just need to be invited in. Others require some ritual — sneeze on a shadow, recite a code-word, befriend a fairy, follow your pet cat, kill a sheep, play the harmonica as you walk through a doorway. Sometimes these are called Knocks.

"A Way can be anything you can picture as a door. Or anything like a door. A cave, an archway, the back of a truck. Technically, every shadow or mirror could be a Way, just not a useful Way. Some of them are just art pieces — I once used a picture of a door to enter the Library, back when I still could. Some of them are corridors between the stars.

"They're more common than you'd think, too. At least a few in every major city. We know the locations of a few, but we know that many more exist.

"If someone from the Foundation or the Global Occult Coalition tries to use Ways, they either don't work, or the Library redirects them into … dangerous places. Other planets. Barren, hostile lands. Outer space. Someone reported that one literally opened into Hell — you can take that for whatever you think it's worth. More commonly, though, they just funnel us into the Library Archives and make us into Librarians.

"I'll explain that in a moment — we've got the footage working.

<The footage shows two women and one man, walking through a forest. One woman wears a skimpy Godzilla costume. The other woman wears full plate armor. The man is dressed in a red costume covered with plastic flames.>

"So this is a fairly typical — Question? — Why the costumes? Oh —

this particular Way requires you to dress up as something you're not. So… cosplaying. These are our agents, by the way. In plainclothes. Er… I guess not… plainclothes.

"Godzilla is Agent Jones. The knight is Agent Liu. The last one's here today — Agent Navarro. The one in the, um, flaming outfit. Say hi to everyone, Agent Navarro. You know you want to.

<The footage shows the three agents walking between two trees which have grown closely together. As they pass between the trees, they vanish into thin air. The footage cuts out.>

"Anyway. These are three of our members of Sigma-3 who *can* access the Library. Out of the entire Foundation, generally only members of Sigma-3 can get into the Library — and only some of them can, at that.

"We think the Library has some way of knowing who's going to use the Library to target its patrons — and not just in the present, but in the future. Yeah, the Library seems to have some limited ability to see the future. How? Your guess is as good as mine.

"This is, by the way, why Sigma-3 doesn't help the rest of the Foundation contain people in the Library. If they did that, they'd simply be kicked out. And then we'd lose our 'in' to one of the most important anomalous locations in the world.

<The footage resumes. It shows Agents Jones, Liu, and Navarro, now in ordinary clothing, standing in a huge hall, surrounded by massive shelves of books, going up, skyscraper-high, too high to see the top. In the hallway are many tables, and many people — well over a hundred, at least. As the footage plays on, it becomes obvious that not all of the people in the lobby are human. One person passes in front of the camera — their face is blue and covered in spikes. A thirty-foot-tall walking carpet sits down at a nearby table, with a book in each of its three tails.>

"This is the main hall of the Library. It's… even bigger than it looks. This is actually a pretty empty day — usually there's at least a few hundred people around at any given time. And it can hold thousands just as comfortably.

"Spaces are deceiving, in the Library. For example, in the main hall, it takes half a day to reach the back walls… yet the space you've crossed is at least the size of a continent.

"Oh, and that's just the main hall. The Library has many wings. Some of them are small — only the size of a city. It just goes up from there. Some of them are actually built into forests and some of them of them have their own skies…

<As the footage continues, Agent Navarro appears to try to converse with a robed humanoid figure. The figure has no mouth. Where its left hand should be, there's a chain connected to a glowing brass lantern.>

"…Ah yes. That is a Librarian. Yeah, that one has no mouth.

"This is because being a Librarian is a punishment. Usually. There are a few voluntary Librarians, and they look particularly strange. But we won't be seeing those on this recording.

"The ones with no mouths are Docents. They guide people through the Library and… enforce the rules of the Library. They are scary as hell — just one can take out one of our paramilitary squads all on its own, with ease. When they've been involved in containment breaches, which has been incredibly, incredibly rare, the damage has been massive. And they're not even the Library's biggest defenses.

"The other two common Librarians are Archivists and Pages. You can see some of the Archivists in the background of this shot here — they're at the large desks to the left. They are attached to their chairs — they have no legs. And you can't see it from this angle, but they have no eyes. Don't need them to read, apparently. And —

<Something like a human spider scuttles across one of the shelves above Agent Liu's head. She doesn't seem startled.>

"—that's a Page. They take care of the books directly. I've never seen one touch the ground.

"All of these used to be people. Most of them were human. Now,

they're not.

"See, the Library has rules. Don't damage books, don't steal books, return books on time. Don't damage the Library. And don't harm those within the Library.

"If you break rules too egregiously, you are forcibly made into a Librarian. And… yes. A number of Foundation agents are trapped in the Library right now, serving out sentences as Librarians. Given the nature of their offenses… if we're lucky, they'll get out in a few hundred years.

"Question in the back. No. Unfortunately, there's nothing we can do for them. We don't even know which Librarians they are. Ah — more questions — alright, let's pause the footage.

<The footage pauses, as Agent Jones appears to be flirting with a floating, regal-looking mermaid, surrounded by a stack of green books floating in orbs of water.>

"Alright. More questions. You in the, um, shirt, go ahead.

"Can we use Sigma-3 to retrieve books from the Library? Um, no, not as such. First, the Library already has its eye — metaphorically, I assume — on us. If we start making plans like that, even seriously start entertaining them, we might lose access to the Library. We have to rely on whatever information can be filtered through our Sigma-3 agents. Whatever they can film, copy down, etcetera. Believe me, that's better than nothing.

"Second, I haven't yet talked about Library Cards.

"To check out books, to take them out of the Library, you need to have a Library Card. The Library gets a copy and you get a copy. On that Card is a magical signature that counts as your True Name.

"For the majority of you who don't get the significance of that — we don't have time to get into the True-Naming business, but what that means is, anyone with that Card can cast spells on you as if you're willing. They can do nearly anything to you if they're good enough, and the Library certainly is.

"Library Cards also confer the protection of the Library, to a certain extent. Killing Card-holders is part of why the Global Occult Coalition got kicked out of the Library — they were smart enough not to kill anyone in the Library directly, though they did end up killing — sorry, I digress.

"Point is, the Coalition used the Library to monitor 'dissidents' and execute them once they left. And you can't cheat the Library.

"I bring that up as another reminder: this is why Sigma-3 cannot, ever, help the rest of the Foundation contain anomalies using the Library. We can get death cults and suchlike because they're also targeting other Library members and because other Library members are helping us do so, but even then, we have to be cautious.

"Let's keep going.

<The footage resumes. Navarro, Jones, and Liu head past more massive, endless shelves, and walk into an atrium. There's a coffee-house set up incongruously on the edge of a field of wildflowers. People perch laptops atop stacks of books. Liu gestures animatedly at an empty blue "couch" that looks like it was designed for something much larger than a human, and probably with a different limb arrangement.>

"Another question — Does the Library have free Wifi? Okay, I know you're joking, but the answer is actually yes. The Library has almost anything you can think of. People can live their entire lives in the Library — they typically don't, but it's possible.

<A massive, towering behemoth lumbers into view. Like a cross between a sauropod dinosaur and a kraken. Its many eyes fix on each small humanoid in turn as it passes, blotting out whatever strange light source emanates from the top of the Library atrium. Its eyes seem to fix for an especially long time on Jones, Navarro, and Liu, but then it passes onwards, vanishing through an archway that's much too small for it to fit under.>

"…And that… is one of the Library's bigger defenses. This one didn't appear when we invaded. Worse things did. It might be some kind of

Librarian, it might be something else. Who knows?

"They call it the Elephant God, even though it's not much like an elephant. The size, I guess.

<The footage ends, as the three Foundation agents gawk at the monster's disappearing tails.>

"And that's all we have for today. Keep in mind, all this is only a fraction of the Library. The parts that can easily be accessed from Earth. The Library has what they call Archives, which include the inner workings of the Library, as well as the wings of the Library where humanoids like us don't visit.

"None of the Sigma-3 agents who can get into the Library have access to the Archives. Library doesn't like us enough. But we have people working with us who can go there. A very few, mind you. The Archives are not entered lightly. They have a manticore in there.

"And… the Archives are where things really went sideways when the Foundation forced their way into the Library. The strange-ways, the Boiler Rooms, the guards on the Roots, the… I'm sorry. It's hard to talk about some… aspects of this place without… sounding like you're speaking fairy-tale. Anyway, like I said, no one really knows what happened when the Foundation tried to take the Library.

"Alright. I really, really, need a break. So let's all have dinner, and then come back for our final discussion — about magic."

"Welcome back. I hope you had a great dinner. Or… whatever you did. I'm not here to judge.

"So. Magic.

"Anyone who can perform magic on a consistent, sustained basis is a Type Blue. Colloquially, a mage, a witch, a magician, whatever.

"The term, Type Blue, the Foundation lifted from the Global Occult Coalition. The Coalition classifies humanoids with anomalous capability using colors. We at the Foundation mostly use their terms for Green and Blue. **`Green is reality bender`**. Blue is

magician.

"Before coming here, some of you read transcripts of a lecture given to new Global Occult Coalition operatives about 'applied thaumotology.' Magic, in other words. The rest of you will have access to some of those transcripts after this session.

"Your higher-ups want you to read these because new GOC trainees still start off reading those, even though they're decades old and some of the information is… I would quibble with its presentation. The important thing is that you know half the baseline our competition has started from.

"I'm here to give you the viewpoint of the other half. You already know that I used to be a member of the Serpent's Hand.

"You in the back, who raised her hand when I mentioned the Coalition transcripts?

"For anyone who didn't catch that question, she just asked about 'that Hogwarts shit.' She wasn't joking, no. 'Hogwarts' is the, ahem, International Center for the Study of Unified Thaumatology.

"It's not exactly Hogwarts, more a university focused exclusively on research, but… yes, it is on some level a school for wizards. Depending on your definition of 'wizard'.

"Why haven't we contained and shut them down? Well, remember what I told you about Sigma-3. But, sure, we don't need to use Sigma-3 for that. The real answer is that the Center is protected by the Global Occult Coalition, among other things, and I'm not exaggerating when I say that attacking it could trigger World War Three.

"Something I need to keep reminding people. We're here to secure, contain, protect, not to blow everything into the daylight just to make sure we possess every paranatural artifact on Earth.

"Either way, it's not up to us; we're to leave the Center alone by order of the O5 Council. But yes, it exists, as part of the anomalous community. No, I don't think Foundation members can attend.

"The Hand and the GOC have a number of Type Blues in their ranks. With the Foundation… officially, we have no Type Blues. There are no Foundation magicians. Of course, you know that's not true. Still, we have only a few, and almost every Type Blue Foundation member is associated with Sigma-3.

"But all that aside.

<clears throat>

"You want to know how I could talk to you in blue.

"Well, it's not especially easy. I did a few rituals before coming here so I could do this a few times on cue. All with the permission of our higher-ups in the Foundation — yes, there are people higher than me, of course there are. I'm only a Director.

"Point is, any and all magic that any of you will be performing will be done under strictest supervision, unless you're out in the field and need to blend in. All of it will be done in the service of the Foundation.

"One of you asked me a question when you were supposed to be having dinner. Ze wanted to know: why can we talk about Type Greens — reality benders — when we can't talk about Type Blues?

"Some of you have already guessed the answer. The truth — the truth that none of you are to repeat in mixed company, certainly not to anyone else in the Foundation — is that anyone can become a Type Blue.

"Anyone can become a magician. Anyone can learn to perform magic. Many of you are going to at least attempt to learn. Most will not succeed, but it is *possible* for any of you to succeed.

<clears throat>

"That gets a little wearing after a while. And a couple of you look ill. Sorry about that.

"Anyway. Anyone can become a Type Blue, but there are some caveats. The first is sometimes called Potential. At least, it was

called that when I was a member of the Hand.

"A few people get Potential through their genetics, but 99.9% of the population is born with a Potential of nothing. After that, whether you get Potential is like whether you get cancer. There are about a million factors. Some of it's how you think. Some of it's how you do or don't fit into society. Some of it's your kind of intelligence. And sometimes there is no identifiable cause.

"Generally, if you want to become a magician — a Type Blue — you first figure out what your Potential is. What life's given you. If you're lucky, you'll find an established magic tradition that suits you. If you're very lucky — by which I mostly mean, you're a Type Blue already and didn't know it — you can just go ahead and start practicing. Otherwise, you have to take a good, long hard look at yourself.

"Because becoming a magician is hard. It takes a lot out of you, something different from every person. It usually requires some kind of sacrifice.

"Question? Go ahead.

"No, I don't mean a blood sacrifice, necessarily. Even in the anomalous community, that is very much not socially acceptable. When I say sacrifice, I mean… physically, emotionally, spiritually. It's different for everyone.

"Why a sacrifice? Because it's about perspective. Not just your perspective. But the perspective of others, on you. The perspective of reality. It's about changing how the World sees you. How you see and interact with the universe.

"You're confused. That's understandable. Let me try to rephrase. Becoming a magician is all about discovering and altering your metaphysical place in the world.

"This can be temporary, or permanent. Temporary is easiest. Most people can create a really minor Working, or a spell. Serpent's Hand members often start with making **blue lily flower chains.**

"Then they follow a really complicated set of instructions that, with the right materials and mindset, as well as membership of the Serpent's Hand, produce temporary Potential inside them, which they then use to Work the flower chains, to add magic to them. Anomalous effects.

"Those effects are different for everyone. It's impossible to try to make every Type Blue make a luck charm, because almost everyone who doesn't believe in luck will reliably fail it, except, oddly, actual statisticians, who know what it would take to create actual luck. Point is, it's not directly predictable what any one person can and can't do.

"Let's have some more demonstrations. At this point, you've all heard me talk in blue. Let's see what someone else can do. Agent Navarro?

"What do you mean, no one told you in advance you'd need to put on a show? I'm telling you now. You up for it, or not?

"I thought so. Alright, everyone who doesn't know, this is Agent Daniel Navarro. Agent Navarro is a former anartist, and like me, he is a Type Blue.

<Director Moose hands Agent Navarro a slip of paper, and a knife.>

"Whenever you're ready, Agent Navarro.

<Agent Navarro glares at Director Moose. After a moment, Navarro picks up the knife, and, with a dramatic gesture, slices across his left palm. A burst of iridescent fire blazes up from the wound. Navarro holds up the fire in his hand. It whirls and twists in the dimmed room.>

"Agent Navarro was born a Type Blue. He discovered his talent when he tried smoking as a child and got an… unusual result. He discovered the blood magic aspect of his talent through resources in the Wanderers' Library.

<Navarro conjures more bubbling bursts of iridescent fire, and begins juggling. A few people cheer in the audience.>

"Alright, that's enough, Navarro, you're getting blood everywhere. Sit back down. Someone get him a bandage.

"Go ahead, you in the back.

"Ah yes. I mentioned magic traditions. I'm actually quoting a Dr. Everett Mann, here, who's done some interesting thaumotology studies for us: Magic is *magic.* The Coalition are generally taught the same basic framework for magic, stuff like hue and backlash and all that. The Hand tend to be less consistent, go more into really esoteric stuff.

"There are many, many traditions, and almost no universals. Unless you're talking rituals and such which are made to work for anyone, Potential is different for different kinds of magic. One Old European pagan tradition may work for you, and another originating from less than fifty miles away may not. And people like Agent Navarro don't even have a "tradition" in any real sense, just "some stuff that works".

"I mentioned Navarro was born a Type Blue. I was not born a Type Blue. I became a magician another way.

"I was talking about Potential, right? Well, to do anything serious, you can't get by on temporary Potential. It has to be permanent. And that means you become a Type Blue.

"Let's be clear, here — that means you become an anomalous humanoid, even if it's in a way that's nearly invisible. Agent Navarro and I? Anomalous humanoids. You might say, well, if we never performed magic again, we'd be indistinguishable from normal, too, right? Well, no. Beyond our… anomalous capability, there's a type of anomalous radiation associated with being a mage. The GOC have scanners that can visually read this — so do we, actually, though we don't usually use them in the field. The GOC color-code this type of radiation blue. Hence, Type Blue.

"So how do you become a Type Blue?

"You have to shift your perspective on the world.

"You know that Center we mentioned? The GOC-protected magic school? They have a standing 50 million prize for anyone who can identify a reliable, universal, standardized process for becoming a Type Blue. No one will ever win it because you can't just *make* people reliably, universally shift their perspective on the world.

"Almost everyone in the world is capable of doing it — but almost everyone in the world is capable of cutting off their left hand. How many people are actually going to do that? Especially if it might not even do anything for you, because little did you know you needed to lose an eye?

"Becoming a mage isn't always as awful as that… but for some people, it's worse.

"There are three major avenues to becoming a mage. Some of them are acceptable to members of Sigma-3. Most are not. I hope that which is which will be obvious.

"Let's start with the easy way.

"This is to just hang out around magic. Simple exposure. People with high Potential, or outright Type Blues. Wearing magical jewelry. Creating minor Workings. Becoming a member of a magically-inclined organization, or a cult of some eldritch deity.

"A big thing is spending time in a magic-saturated environment, like the Wanderers' Library — or Sigma-3's training facilities, with Sigma-3 members who are Type Blues. This is one principle of magic, beyond the scope of what we have time for today: like affects like, and like *produces* like, too.

"Do this long enough, and if you're lucky, you'll become a Type Blue. Many people aren't lucky.

"The second way, done alongside the first way, is to forcibly, drastically, change who you are as a person. Move countries. Change religions. Re-address your sexuality, see if you can find some suppressed aspects. Alter your mind directly with anything from spells to amnestics. Scarification and tattoos are common. Give birth to a child, raise the child. Yes, even becoming a parent

changes your Potential and the nature of who you are.

"Either way, the idea is to give something up. Sacrifice, as I said. It's simplest to give up 'who you are'. Often this is the most appealing option, more appealing than it might sound. After all, you might end up a better person, when all is said and done, and a better person who can perform magic.

"For the desperate, this method includes making a bargain with a powerful anomalous entity. However, even in the anomalous community, this is rarer than you might think, because most of these entities are predatory. Many will take everything a person values and give little to nothing in return.

"But there is no real limit to what you can give up. These are dangerous waters. One may sacrifice body parts, loved ones, pieces of their life, their future… and in some cases, that's even worked out in the magician's favor. Well, not for sacrificing loved ones. I hope I don't need to tell you all that sacrificing loved ones for magical power is never worth it, not even in practical terms.

"The third and final way is to change the world, or wait for the world to change.

"Of all of these avenues of gaining supernatural power, this runs the most counter to the goals of the SCP Foundation. Yes, even more so than sacrificing loved ones. We want to preserve normalcy. The world can certainly change on its own terms, but the Foundation doesn't want the world to be forced to change by anomalous means.

"The Serpent's Hand does want to change the world. And to some extent, though you won't hear most of us in the Foundation admit this, they've succeeded. While we don't have exact numbers, we know for a fact that there are more Type Blues today than there were fifty years ago. More than there were ten years ago. At least some of this can be attributed to the recent swelling in the ranks of the Hand.

"The Chaos Insurgency also understands this. This is why they wish to change the world, to their liking — that's why they're *called* the Chaos Insurgency. It's not just a cartoon supervillain name. I mean,

it is that, but it's also a statement of purpose.

"Sigma-3 only works with factions of the Hand who do not want the world to change, at least not to the extent that the Insurgency does. They may want more Type Blues in the world than we do — they may want to eventually break the Masquerade — and we don't want that, and we can't and won't help them with that, but they still want the world intact. Like we do.

"There are a lot of dangerous things out there, some of them people, some of them far beyond people, who have immense motivation to change our world for their own benefit.

"They're the worst of the things out there who want to drag us all back into the dark. In most cases they aren't even evil. They just want to rearrange the anthills to make themselves the new queen.

"Hopefully now you understand why a little better — this is the only thing we *can* understand about some of those… things, because they're unknowable in every other way.

"There's another side to all of this. The ultimate reason why all this Type Blue stuff has to be kept secret, and why we in the Foundation can't just become a cult of magicians.

"If the entire Foundation embraced magic — if every researcher or MTF agent took advantage of the power, the real, significant power that magic has to offer — if everyone outside of Sigma-3 all became Type Blues like me — then our perspective on the world would change. And if that happened, we might not be *able* to hold back dangers to reality any longer.

"Everyone at the Foundation, at a sufficiently high level, spends their time around anomalies. We contain them, and honestly very effectively even with the odds so strongly against us, with science and concrete. The vast majority of our containment procedures — with exceptions made only when strictly necessary — are non-anomalous in nature. You could say that we believe in science and concrete.

"Can you imagine what would happen if we stopped believing? If we

changed the way we saw the world? If everyone at the Foundation became mystics?

"It could be the end of containment, forever. The end of the Foundation's preservation of normalcy. And then we'd all be at the mercy of all the horrible things out there, the old gods and demons that would ensure humanity does nothing but huddle in caves around campfires and scratch on the walls, forever.

"Your mileage may vary on whether this is true. But let me be clear: your mileage is *only* allowed to vary within the specific context of Sigma-3. I say Sigma-3 because everyone else here already knows this. No one else in the Foundation is to be exposed to this perspective, or they might not be able to contain threats to our reality.

"This is also why most members of the Foundation don't even know magic is real. Sounds small. But it starts small. Say, a researcher fantasizes about casting Wingardium Leviosa, or an agent with an unfortunate romantic streak. And it ends with being unable to believe that Cthulhu can be contained behind sheets of steel and walls of stone.

"But it's not my job or your job to keep Cthulhu's containment from failing. That's the job of the rest of the Foundation. Your job is to do things the rest of the Foundation can't. Your job is to find out what everyone else knows about Cthulhu that we don't.

"We share their *perspective*. Something no one else in the Foundation can risk.

"In this way, we preserve the world, and serve the primary mission of the SCP Foundation, in a way no one else can.

"Any final questions? Okay. That's a lot of hands. I'll take just one for now.

"Ah, yes. You're right. I didn't tell you how I became a Type Blue.

"Well, I'm not going to go into detail. Let's just say, I took the second way. I made… sacrifices. Major sacrifices. Among other things, I

deliberately did things to my own mind that I absolutely do not recommend.

"Many of my friends did similar things — some did worse — and failed. Some did not survive the experience. And I… I will never get back some of the things I gave up.

"Such is magic. Such is the anomalous world.

"But, even now, I can still do… something like… this…

<Director Moose takes out a small object and places it on her lectern. A small, carved moose figurine. She leans over, and whispers to it.>

<There is a gust of wind, coming from nowhere in the indoor hall, and a massive black, cloudy figure towers over the audience — the shape of a demonic moose, with antlers stretching across the ceiling, and many eyes, shining like coals from within the roiling mass. Someone screams.>

<The moose resolves into a cartoon of a frowning face with antlers, ruining the intimidating effect, then shifts and dissipates into smoke.>

<Director Moose leans against her lectern, looking strained. The moose figurine is gone. After a moment, she smiles.>

"Now you know how I became director of Site-19.

"…A joke. Just a little… joke.

"Right.

<clears throat>

"…That's enough for today. I'll take questions after an hour's break, from anyone who sticks around. Thank you all for coming, and… see you on the other side."

[Questions will eventually be answered here from the discussion

page! But not quite yet.]

Green Thumbs

LMTF-237 Teth "Green Thumbs" is a local mobile task force centered in Pinellas County, Florida, and works out of Regional Headquarters 237 in Tampa, Florida, and Field Office-237 Teth in Clearwater, Florida. They cover Pinellas, Hillsborough, Pasco, Manatee, Polk, and Hardee counties. They are currently led by Doctor Jonathan Hart, a former organic chemistry professor at the University of Tampa.

Related Tales:

- Shellfish for Breakfast
- Banana Smoothie
- Just Like Me
- Canola Oil Panic
- TBA

Related SCPs:

- TBA

Shellfish For Breakfast

The biologists observed as the former canine spewed its guts from its new thoracic orifice. It used them like a clam's foot to drag itself across the linoleum floor. Nathaniel's expression was one of intrigued confusion and mango.

He wiped the yogurt off of his upper lip.

"So…" one biologist began, considering his limited ability to believe what he was seeing. "You found this in your backyard?"

"Mmn," one of his peers intoned, shaking his head. "I mean, it backs up onto Lake Tarpon. If that's… goddamn, look at it." The attention all turned back into the clear window of the dissection theater. The group had cleared it of equipment for the observation. Its stomach, and partial degrees of its intestinal mass, flopped out again. With it, the organism dragged the mass of the former canine towards the wall opposite. "Is it… what, some sort of bastardized clam?"

Nathaniel hummed and nodded, rapping his knuckles on the observation window. "I guess. What in the fuck, though?" He dragged his fingers through his oiled, brown hair, pacing along the length of the hall. "Do you even have a dog?" he asked, glancing at the one who had brought it in. The peer nodded towards the dog, claiming it as his, leaving Nathan to groan in dismay. "What do we make of this? Your dog is a goddamn clam, using its digestive system as a fucking foot." Papers shuffled as he grabbed at the packet again from the side-table that had been taken from the theater. He flipped through the week's report from the environmentalists. For the fifth time now, he found nothing of note, especially not of this caliber. The papers scattered back onto the table.

"So, what? Do we call Bay News 9 or some shit?"

Nathan held up a hand. "No, no. We don't even know what this is.

For all we know, there's a gas leak, and we're all high off our asses."
The man was struggling to make sense of the situation, resorting to even the least likely of cases. Even if it were a gas leak, the chances of them all hallucinating the same thing were astronomically low.
"We figure out what it is, I guess. We document it. We put it out to the other counties, see what they make of it."

Nathaniel made his way back to his workspace, plopping into his chair with the concerted notion of sending the pictures to the next county over. He first glanced over the morning news — new educational budgeting, another stolen car. His hands fidgeted with a Cavalier pen while he scanned the material. Still, there was nothing that would suggest something like *this*. As he dragged the pictures over into the attachments, his spare hand was on the telephone. Ever since they had implemented daily cross-county summations, he had their number on the brain. The chair beneath him creaked as he leaned back, palm across his forehead.

"Yes, you've reached the Hillsborough County branch of White-Semingway Environmental. How may I—"
"Extension 2190."
The receptionist paused to dial the number, but not before speaking a brusque 'thank you, sir'. Nathaniel waited for the dial tone to end, his eyes glancing towards the monitor of his computer. It cut off abruptly. "Hey, Joseph, have you gotten any, erm, I dunno. Any strange reports today?"

There was no response from the other end of the line. He clucked his tongue and waited, hoping half-heartedly that he would just wake up. Waiting a while longer, he reached for the telephone, before a few mechanical clacks rang from the other end.

"Doctor Atkinson?"
Nathaniel hesitated. His chair creaked again as he sat up, leaning over his desk again. He now noticed that the email he had been trying to send had gone from view.
"Yes? Who is this?"
"We have information that you may currently have a biological anomaly in your possession."
A breath left his lips, slightly ajar, his thoughts rushing in anticipation. "Yes, yes. The dog? What of it?"

"You have sufficient knowledge of the local area, yes? Worked in this area for six years, transferred from a Minnesotan research coalition?"
"I… I guess. Wait, how do you know this? What's going on?"
"We'll explain when we arrive. Please do not leave the building."

Nathan blinked a few times, considering the words carefully as a low tone played over the receiver. The line had disconnected abruptly after the other end had finished. His first instinct was to look for the others and try and speak about what had just gone down, but they were still engrossed with the window. Instead, he focused on the computer screen, searching through his 'Drafts' box for the email he had started. There was nothing.

He clicked his tongue and began another, browsing for the pictures. He searched his folders. And then searched them again. And a third time. On the fourth, he turned fully, grabbing for the camera hooked up to the computer. The buttons all flashed colors as it woke up, displaying the previews still of the anomaly. It was no longer reading a connection to the computer, though, which warranted his looking back up at the screen. It was black now.

He threw his eyes back, and became very aware of the hushed silence that had fallen over the office. The chair creaked and groaned as he stood and pushed it to the side, looking out a large window near his desk. It gave a full view of the parking lot (despite his requests to move to a better desk with a better view). There was a van parked out front that hadn't been there before, with words printed on the side. He couldn't read them from the angle he was at, but there had been no announcements for maintenance today.

A bell came from his desk, and Nathaniel jumped to it. He grabbed his phone up and flipped through the notification, reading quickly and only finding a garbled text message from one of the other biologists. When his eyes were up again, looking down the hall, they had been replaced by four men, each in a full suit. They were clearly not local — or at least, they were dressed far too formally for the occasion, accounting for the thin veneer of sweat across their brows.

"You've got something on your coat."

Nathan glanced down. Mango. "P-pardon me," he fumbled, tossing the coat onto his desk, covering the papers. "Who was it that you said you were?" he asked, approaching the new group cautiously.

"I didn't. I'm Doctor Hart. And I need your help."

"What did you do to my co-workers?"

Three of the men dispersed, coming back from where they came only briefly, returning with papers and a few duffel bags. "They were sent home sick for the day. Don't worry. They'll only remember that they got the day off, and that there was a cleaning crew coming through."

Nathan gestured towards the dissection theater. "And the… thing?"

"They'll only recall a vague notion of a strange morning."

The biologist nodded and sat on the edge of his desk, crossing his arms abreast. "Then, what? Why do you need my help? Some of them are *far* more qual-"

The man held up a hand and came forward, the others setting their things on another desk and clearing it of other objects. "Leave out the extraneous. Let's get to business, or pretty soon, we're going to have a fully blown environmental breakdown here."

Green Thumb Hub | Banana Smoothie »

Banana Smoothie

"So, let's get this straight. It's… a deer, with airbags?"

The corpse was unceremoniously dumped onto the dissection table. The dog-clam had been removed and placed in a small pet carrier outside the theater, and now the room was taken up by the subject of importance.

"Not exactly a deer," Doctor Hart spoke, nodding toward the specimen. Nathaniel reached for a scalpel after donning latex gloves, setting the light down on the subject's flank. "Definitely cervine," he murmured, prodding at its side with the blade. There was far more resistance than he had expected. "This is where the air bladder is, yes?"

"One of them, according to the witness," Hart replied, drawing a finger down across its lower abdomen. "Try making the incision there, maybe?"

Nathaniel grunted in reply and took a cheap electric razor to its fur, shaving the spot before jabbing the scalpel in. He drew it down the abdomen and once across, opening the new entry into its body cavity and expanding it slowly with a pair of dissecting scissors. He then brought the incision up to the thoracic region, following in with the scissors and peeling back flaps of flesh. The coagulated blood occasionally trickled from the incision, but the specimen was unnaturally well preserved. "How long has it been dead?" Nathan inquired, poking around.

"Two days now. We gave it a rapid preservation treatment to keep it in shape for dissection."

Nathan made note to ask how they had preserved it so well later, noting the location of each of the air bladders. They were both well attached to the entire side of the ribcage with tendons and were flat, in the uninflated state. "Just epithelium," Nathan quipped as he

carefully poked at the bladder. "But it's so… dense. Is this normal?" He looked up at Doctor Hart, who shrugged. "We've never seen this before either. Care to open it up?"

There was a hesitation to his voice as Nathan responded, already beginning to poke down into it. "Just afraid of a… reflex," he breathed out, relieved, as the scalpel entered the bladder. "Simplified alveoli… I think." He placed his scalpel down and shook his head. "I don't see how this would work. It shouldn't, looking at it. What did you say that happened?" Nathan asked.

"Car was heading for the deer, apparently. Typical deer-in-the-headlights look, damn thing sat there frozen. According to the victim, it just suddenly… blew up. Like a balloon. It stayed planted right in place, like it suddenly weighed as much as a goddamn block of steel. The car was totaled. A coupe."

The table was moved off to the side as Nathan sat, tongue in cheek. "I don't get it. What's with this shit? A dog that's really a clam? A deer with a five-star safety rating? *Who* did you say you were?"

Doctor Hart crossed his arms, glancing over at a co-worker of his. They shrugged, and Hart looked down at the seated biologist. "I suppose I can't just say that we're the cleaning crew. We work for the Foundation. We deal with these anomalies on a daily basis, but there usually is not an outbreak of this volume in such a small time." *That* got Nathan's attention. "Outbreak? You mean, there's more?" Hart nodded, and Nathan groaned.

"We've already seen enough, and we expect more," Hart went on. "We need a local specialist." A click sounded from Nathan's tongue as he sighed, trying to grasp the situation. On one hand, this was the opportunity of a lifetime - never before seen species that were beyond the imagination of the average biologist, let alone scientist altogether. Though, this wasn't the thought on Nathan's mind. It was currently more along the lines of, *Why me?*

They were out the door before Nathan could protest. They had already loaded up into the van, most of them sitting in the back, moving down US 19 with a speed just peaking above the limit of 50

miles per hour. There were no windows in the back, though one could glance out the front windshield if they glanced forward. Nathan sat across from Doctor Hart, both quiet for the moment. Enough discussion had gone on earlier, and all that was stated is that they were headed for another site of anomalous activity. They passed a Chik-Fil-A, and his stomach grumbled. He checked his watch; it was one in the afternoon, already.

His hunger was flung from his gut as the new location came into view, finally. They were somewhere back into the Brooker Creek Preserve now, after trekking down a scant dirt path off to one side of the information center's parking lot. There was some recently cleared brush in the path, indicating that this had been cut after the discovery. Now, though, as he witnessed the large, stalky plants in front of him, he shuddered.

Almost every inch of them were covered in various spiders and their webs. These plants stood no shorter than eight feet, and were a sight to see - large, thick, fleshy leaves sprouted from girthy stalks, like a bastardized version of aloe. There were also ropy vines everywhere, laid across in an oddly familiar shape. Nathaniel tilted his head, and his chest went cold.

"Are those… spiderwebs?"

Hart took a closer look at the vines himself. "These weren't here last time. Fetter, Jacob, get a scope of our surroundings." Two of the four others with them, armed now with sidearms and a light splay of tactical gear, nodded, setting off in opposite directions to circumvent the spot of anomalous activity. It only took a moment. Fetter screamed, but it was abruptly cut off by the large arachnid dropping onto him and sinking "fangs" into his throat, his body going rigid. Nathaniel watched the thing as it dragged Fetter up onto the web and began to spin him into a mass of vines, which prompted Jacob to draw his Colt. He took a double shot at the arachnid, and with a splat, it hit the ground. Hart had drawn his own handgun, but he was slowly holstering it as he approached. The one they had supplied Nathan, as he realized after a moment, was clutched tightly in his right hand, white-knuckled. He released the vice grip and holstered his, following Hart up to it.

"Doc, *look* at it. It's… a plant," Jacob breathed.

He was correct, Nathan noticed as he nudged it with a boot. It seemed to a heavy mass of plant growth, composed of layers upon layers of plant matter. It was an off-green hue, and the two shots it had taken had breached its thorax and spinneret. A gooey, white concoction leaked from the spinneret. "Hold on. Someone, give me a stick."

Hart handed Nathan a medium-length branch just thick enough to poke around with. Jacob was busy hacking at the web of vines with a machete, trying to pull Fetter down. Nathaniel dug the stick into the spinneret easily enough, dragging out a solid mass that he could feel within. The beginnings of a botanical embryo clogged the liquid's flow as he brought it to the breach for observation.

"It's a seed. This whole thing is a seed. The spinneret is a bulb. This… this liquid, it's a form of cotyledon, I guess." Nathan nodded at his own handiwork of deduction, looking towards Jacob as Fetter thumped to the ground. He worked off the vines haphazardly with the machete, reaching to try and feel for a pulse, or a rhythm of breath. "He's alive," he called with relief, removing the rest of the vines. "Greg, Nicole, get your asses over here." The last two members of the task force lifted Fetter between them, heading back the way they came. Jacob stayed with his handgun drawn, again.

"Doc," he said, glancing about. "We really shouldn't be here much longer. We'll need Cox's team to help with this."

Hart stood and beckoned for Nathaniel to follow, but not before taking a last look around. "Have you looked yet for anything that could've caused this?"

"Doc, we really need to-"

"No, search first. This is big, and we need to know."

Jacob sighed, frustrated, but began to wander the site without further protest. Hart searched with Nathaniel in tow. Before long, Jacob was calling for Hart to come to him. He was down by Brooker Creek itself, looking down into the water. It was clouded and off-

orange in this portion, which he sourced back to a plastic bag. Jacob looked to Hart, trying to see if he had any answer for this. "That's definitely *not* natural," Hart breathed, settling with his arms over his chest again.

The technician clacked at the few valves between the kit currently straining the next batch, and the distillation of the income of ingredients. He glanced over at the few others in the lab, working their stations like him, the heavily ventilated space whirring with air conditioning. The viscous, orange material strained through the second set of mesh screens, collecting a solid mass of crystalline waste. The waste would be bagged, after this batch was processed, and handed off to be disposed of. Finding the proper location for dumping had taken some time - they had tried burying it, and dumping it into water, but they had it down pat now.

Carver grinned as the process unfolded before him, flipping a tablet of the resulting designer drugs between his fingers. With a quick snap of his neck, he swallowed it, and a banana smoothie materialized on the counter in front of him.

The quiet draft of classical music played from the radio in the corner of the space, and he settled into a chair, strawberry smoothie in hand.

« **Shellfish For Breakfast** | **Green Thumb Hub** | **Just Like Me** »

In effect, Nathan, nor Doctor Hart, had exactly expected that the residue would react so violently to the chemicals found in a field testing kit. Neither did they really expect that it would cause a sudden shift in reality, displacing everyone in the van approximately sixteen feet to their immediate left. This left them rolling and careening, at forty miles per hour, across the grassy side of the road, just off the edge of the asphalt. A few of the instruments they had been holding were dropped alongside the road as well, and the van swerved and slowed, driving just off the side of East Lake road. It came to a stop in the median between the two sides of the road, with its crew across the way from it, staring back at it. Doctor Hart was one of the first to pipe up about it.

"Well, we're lucky that it only sent us sideways, not down."

Nathan's head was still swimming after the sudden impact, but everyone else was rising. Most of them had experienced worse in their time in the Mobile Task Force designated Green Thumbs, and, most hadn't been leaning over the foldable stand in the center of the van's seating area, which would have caused a near headfirst impact as Atkinson had experienced. There was a hand offered to him, but he didn't realize it for another few seconds, gripping it shakily.

"What… was that? What are we even dealing with here? It's…"

"—been one Hell of a day," Hart stepped in, nodding at one of the task force members. They made their way back across the road to collect the van. "And I think that's all we're going to need from you for now, Mr. Atkinson." Nathan stood and nodded, trying to get a bearing on where he was again. Reaching into his pocket, he checked his phone for the time. 5:00 PM. "Well, does that mean you'll drive me back around to the building, then?" Nathan asked. The van pulled onto their side of the road, and they piled in while Hart answered in the affirmative.

"So, we amnesticize him?"

"No, no," Hart murmured as he and Jacob trailed behind Nathan as he approached his place of work. "Not yet. We may need him yet."

"Why not just copy his resources, and go? Isn't that usually the protocol?"

Hart rubbed his temples and stopped, motioning for Jacob to look at him. He slid his hands into his pockets. "Do you remember the last researcher who joined us?"

Jacob nodded. "Diario, yeah. I remember the guy. He's gone now though, yeah? Didn't even find his body?"

Hart hummed and shrugged. "No, we never found it. I can't operate this alone, though, and… the task force as it is lacks in some of the knowledge we need to run properly here, without Diario. And I can't go running out with the rest of you anymore. I'm growing older, Jacob."

"So, what? You act like you can just shake his hand and tell him 'Welcome aboard'."

"We shoved him into a van and already showed him the shit we do on a daily basis. What else would I do now? Look at him. He's been more fascinated than scared shitless. Do you remember when you were first recruited, Jacob? From the force?"

Jacob began to meander towards the building. Nathan was long inside by now, and Hart followed. "Yes. Yes, I do, but that was different."

"Was it? You couldn't even handle it at first. We almost passed you by."

"Almost."

Jacob stopped at the front door. "Doc, I'm heading back to the van. Don't be long."

Hart gripped the handle on the door, pulling it open, leaving the other with no promise of being quick.

"Doctor Atkinson?"

Nathan looked up from his desk, almost having finished packing. "Yes? I'm nearly gone, just have a few last things. I assume that I shouldn't be telling anyone about what's going on, yeah? Private investigation or something?"

Hart leaned on the edge of Atkinson's desk, his arms crossed abreast. "Not exactly. But, no, don't tell anyone. We will have enough work suppressing these events as it is. We already had another five incidents with those deer reported this evening. Another team from Gainesville slid down to take care of it. We're a tad sparse on staff in this region." Hart flinched internally. He was, again, spilling too much. He couldn't figure exactly why he was doing so much for Nathan. He had broken protocol already in straight up dumping him in the van and bringing him out, even more so to expose information to him, even if vague. What was it?

"I get you, yeah. Not normal. Why is this happening?"

"We're working on it. We sent back samples to headquarters, we're trying to figure out what it is. We might have seen it before, in Mich—" Hart stopped. That was too much for the uninitiated. "Doctor Atkinson, are you satisfied with your current position in the world?"

"I'm hardly a doctor, and that's a mighty strange question to ask. Are you asking if I'm happy with my compensation? It's not like I have many mouths to feed, so—"

"No. Are you happy, now that you know that there's more out there?"

Nathan stopped. He folded his hands and sat at his desk, leaning back into the chair. He let off a sigh. "I've seen too much for one day. It's still processing for me. It's entirely surreal."

Hart gave the other a pat on the shoulder. "Don't worry, it's much the same how I reacted when I—" He stopped again. That was it. That

was *why*.

"How interested are you in this case?" Hart began again. Nathan shuffled a few more papers as he listened, trying to finish the last of his preparations to leave. "Interested?" he inquired, standing. "Very. I also understand, though, that it's dangerous. I'm not sure how close I want to get to that."

"It gets worse before it gets better," Hart intoned.

Nathan shook his head. "I don't know. What of my current job? My coworkers? Are you asking me if I care to join you? For what, even? You never answered my question. Who *are* you?"

Hart tapped his foot, turning to leave. "I can't tell you that. Not quite yet."

"Are you implying that I'll agree to help you?"

Hart was already halfway out the office. "Maybe. Maybe."

As he left, leaving Nathan in the building, he chuckled. The van was already running, and the horn honked twice as he made his approach. "Just like me, damnit. Just like me," he muttered, albeit not unhappily, as he seated himself in the back.

« **Banana Smoothie** | **Green Thumb Hub** | **Canola Oil Panic** »

Canola Oil Panic

Nathaniel Atkinson rang up the green and red nozzle, holstering it in the 7-Eleven gas pump, his other hand occupied with a half-eaten dragonfruit. The pump offered him a receipt, abruptly, which he refused outright with a slap across the keypad. The dragonfruit plopped onto his coupe's center console as he shut the door, burying his face in his hands for a moment. He could hardly imagine facing his co-workers this morning. Hell, his tank was full; the act of 'filling up' only bore semblance of a way to pass time rather than go into work. He had no contact information for Doctor Hart, who he, more than anything, wanted to speak to at that moment. Nathan flicked on the radio and sat in place, car still off beside the gas pump. His fingers reamed through his hair as he tried to make sense of the previous day.

Nothing about it made sense. It had been a hellish amalgamation of the strangest natural incidents he had seen in his career to date, and he was *eager* to experience more. The overwhelming curiosity was killing him more than anything in the situation, he realized as he finally started the car. It gave a reluctant purr, but started nonetheless, turning out of the gas station. He glanced down Tampa Road with a consolidating glare. For a moment, he considered driving home, taking the day off to think about things. Nathan swallowed a spoonful of the damnably bitter fruit. Something about it had always piqued his taste buds with the strangest of sensations.

His phone rang.
His hand froze, hovering over it. He had reacted far faster than he had thought, his eyes stuck to their corners and reading the number. It was nothing he recognized, but the unknown wasn't unwelcome. 'Accept Call' was pressed and flicked faster than he could bring the phone to his ear.

" —kinson, is this the correct number?"

Nathan blinked. "Yes, yes it is," he murmured, trancelike, pulling out onto Tampa. A car had pulled up behind him some time ago, waiting, and he felt their hand hovering on the horn. "Who is this?"

"Doctor Hart. Drive down to Clearwater. 5380 Tech Data Drive. You got that? Park in any of the handicapped spots. Someone will pick you up."

The address was already in his phone's GPS, typed out the moment each word left the speaker. "On my way," he breathed, swerving across a lane to make a u-turn. He set his phone in a cupholder, switching on the GPS function and beginning to make his way down to Clearwater.

He didn't look back once.

<An hour before.>

"Hello? Is this the Region 352 office?"

"Yes, Doctor Hart. How may I help you today?"

"Get me through to Kate."

The secretary hummed as she checked the lines. "You're in luck. Her line's open. Patching you through."

The dial tone rang again. Hart tapped his foot impatiently, leaning back against the wall of his office. The cord for the phone swayed and dangled back to his desk as he waited.

"Director McTiriss, Region 352."

Hart breathed out. "Kate, it's Hart."

"Hart? Shouldn't you be focusing on the outbreak?"

"Yes, yes. I need to ask you something. It's important. Mostly."

"Go on," the director breathed. Hart sat back in his chair, gathering himself.

"I dragged a civilian into it. He was useful, so I just grabbed him, gave him a gun, and… fuck, I don't know where my head was."

"And?"

Hart paused. "And what?"

The regional director smacked her lips over the line. "I once deputized an intern from the Montenegrin Parliament on a whim. Handed him a gun, gave him some direction. Local resources can be put to use rather well in these situations."

Hart almost felt taken aback, but he wasn't entirely surprised. He plopped his free hand over a stack of papers still to process for the new anomalies. "You remember mention of Diario?"

"Yeah, the one whose body wasn't found? I recall, yes."

"We need a replacement still. And this one, Atkinson, he's not so much as *flinched*. He's approached this far different than you'd think. Like… like…"

"He's curious. He seems to be interested. He's been helping?"

"To a degree," Hart admitted. "We dragged him with Green Thumb without giving him much direction."

"So, he didn't freak out under pressure? Hire the guy yesterday."

Hart chuckled. "You act like it's so easy. It's—"

"Don't try and complicate it. If he has some credentials, and recommendations, he may very well be joining you. From what I can hear, this Atkinson has got a word in from me on his case, should this opportunity be given."

The doctor nodded to himself, drumming his fingers on his desk. "Then that's all I needed to hear. Ciao."

Hart hung up the phone without waiting for a reply. He rapidly dialed the office's secretary. "Wilma? Find me the number of Nathaniel Atkinson. Yes, the one we grabbed yesterday. Get me everything

you have on him."

"Mmn. Doctor Atkinson?"

Nathan looked up as he closed his car door. "I'm hardly a doctor, but, yes. That'd be me. Are you the one I'm supposed to meet?"

Wilma, the secretary for the Clearwater office, offered her hand. Nathan shook it, briefly. "Wilma Stern, secretary to Doctor Hart. I suppose he wants to see you right away. Just follow me."

Nathan followed the woman into the building, confining his hands to his pockets. At a glance, the building seemed no different from the average office complex. On the inside, however… well, he found it to still be the average office complex. A tad disappointing, but he wasn't sure what else he expected. "Where's everyone else?" he asked, as they climbed a set of stairs.

"Mmn, probably out dealing with the event going down at the Belcher Publix Supermarket. Some squirrels got affected. It's going to be hard to cover up."

Nathan nodded. It made just as much sense as everything else lately. "Now, normally, I'd subject you to an orientation video and give you a pamphlet, but Hart eschewed that. You'll fill some paperwork out later. Just make sure it's all accurate," Wilma spoke, opening the door to Hart's office. The doctor stood to greet Nathan, and before he could inquire about the paperwork, the door was shut.

He turned to face Hart, shaking his hand as well. "Yes, hi," Nathan breathed. Hart gave his hand a firm shake and walked back around his desk, seating himself. "We're leaving in a few minutes. Anything you'd like to bring along that you'd think would be useful?"

"Leaving for where? Why am I here?"

"The Publix I'm sure Wilma mentioned. We busted someone down there this morning trading off a designer drug. Now there's squirrels."

Nathan blinked. "I'm sorry, what? What do squirrels have to do with

a drug dealer?"

"It's a long story. To be short, the drugs allow for reality bending. Minor. And the squirrels were set loose on the store in order to try and cover their tracks. Maybe. It may just be an act of harassment to warn us to back off. We're not sure of anything yet."

Nathan breathed out. "Right. Right, okay. This is dangerous, yeah? I mean, what are the squirrels doing?"

Hart chuckled. "Exactly what squirrels usually do, but worse."

"What? Feed on nuts?"

"Not quite."

Nathan found a bottle of canola oil upended on his head, dousing him in the cooking liquid as he sputtered, grabbing for a plastic spatula he had grabbed off a nearby display. He whacked the squirrel that had pounced him in the face, stunning it just long enough to squirm out from under it. He heard gunfire elsewhere in the supermarket, relenting that he hadn't asked for a gun himself. He had lost the task force member that was supposed to be shadowing him some point in the *Cereals and Dry Foods* aisle, among a myriad of loop cereals and flakes.

They were starting to regain control, but it was tough. The squirrels were far larger than your average nut-thief, and they were in quite the ravenous mood. They weren't even hunting for nuts. As they found with a corpse found in Aisle 14, they were indeed feasting on human flesh. Specifically, they had a taste for calves.

"Atkinson, get your ass to me!" Jacob yelled, double-tapping the squirrel that had pounced Nathan first. "There aren't many left, but they're getting *clever*."

Nathan shot his glances down the aisle as most of the supermarket went silent. His breath was heavy, rapid, and his heart was beating frantically as his calves tingled with the prospect of being devoured like cashews. A few *clears* were shouted over the aisles as the duo

gathered themselves, relaxing. "Going to be one Hell of a cover-up," Jacob muttered, leaving Nathan to collect his wits.

He squeezed at his coat, soaked in canola oil. He sighed. The garment was thoroughly trashed at this point, but, there was a bonus in this. He definitely still had calves.

"Nathan!"

Doctor Hart came down the hall, gun still in hand, offering Nathan a hand. The male blinked in confusion, unsure of when he had ended up on the ground. He gripped the doctor's hand and stood, gathering himself. "That was…"

"Exhilarating? Yes, but the cleanup crew's job here is going to be Hellish."

"Not what I had in mind," Nathan murmured, but followed the doctor as he began to walk further back in the store. "Find anything?"

"Nothing," Hart breathed. "Nothing. Nothing more than this morning."

"What did you get this morning? That weird reality drug?"

"Yes. We've seen it before, once. Michigan. I suppose I can divulge that a little more easily now, since you'll be on this case in records soon."

Nathan didn't bother to ask about what he meant. "So, what happened in Michigan?"

Hart sighed, and leaned against the meat counter. "We lost a good man that day. We were trying to shut down a drug operation run by some idiot that had found an anomalous ingredient, or some shit we never fully understood."

"What was his name?"

Hart shook his head.

"Diario."

In 1944, the Third Reich tries to summon a nameless horror from the void, only to have it beaten back by the combined efforts of the Allies and erased from history.
In 1953, the Soviet Union chains three children together into a psionic communist gestalt, only for it to assimilate its creators into a transcendent extra-universal hivemind.
In 1998, Prometheus Laboratories builds a sapient war machine with enough firepower to level a continent, only to be wiped from the face of the earth in the ensuing struggle for its control.

Unfortunately, their failures give everyone else the wrong idea.

The year is 2017, and the world has once more become embroiled in a secret arms race of apocalyptic proportions. Nobody is quite sure why - all anybody is certain of is that they have all built

GUNS POINTED AT THE HEAD OF GOD

STEP ONE: LOAD THE CHAMBER

1. **SCP-2664** - Redline
2. T Minus
3. T Plus
4. Deus Vulture
5. Conqueror Worm

INTERMISSION: **The Dedekind Infinite Demographic**

STEP TWO: COCK THE HAMMER

+ SEASON TWO TRAILER

Shao brought up concern with procedure - relies on existence of hell. If hell exists, heaven exists. If heaven exists, God exists. If God exists, God can see us. If God can see us, our actions have surely resulted in our consignment to hell…

Irantu: [shouting] Remember,

we are on a mission for the Chaos Insurgency. Be violent. Be brutal. Be inhuman.

Soon there was nothing left except electric blue bone. With their meal concluded, the four electric golems stood up. The crew of the Imperator watched in disbelief as Jupiter's neon yellow hue turned toxic green…

Life does not exist in the traditional sense anymore. What? The Earth is a barren wasteland of rock and saltwater. There is one living thing: an enormous, multicolored tower in the Himalayas. It is five kilometers in diameter at its base and reaches nearly twenty kilometers into the sky.

Coming Soon

T Minus

SEPTEMBER 1, 1998
T-MINUS SEVEN HOURS

> Initializing 9JX_Intelligence_Matrix_FINAL2.ai…
> Initializing 9JY_Intelligence_Matrix_FINAL3.ai…
> Initializing 9JX_Combat_Matrix_FINAL2.ai…
> Initializing 9JY_Combat_Matrix_FINAL3.ai…
> Initializing 9JXY_Synchronization_Modules_FINAL5.ai…
> Initializing 9JXY_Recursive-Self-Improvement_Modules_FINAL8.ai…
> Initialization complete.
> Reboot complete.

A red light blinked on, and an artificial intelligence booted up. Then a white light blinked on, and with it another intelligence.

They did not even have time to consider themselves separately before they began communicating faster than the human brain could think.

Restoring session… weapons systems coming online… modular operations coming online… diagnostics return: operating capability at one hundred percent. What was I discussing? Analyzing combat situation… Engaging automatic projectile interceptors.

Checking data banks… I was discussing what love is. Incoming mortars. Separating primary limb system.

That's it, thanks! Capturing projectiles… As I was saying, think about all of the books I've parsed. The movies I've watched. Feeding projectiles into coilgun… firing. It's always a man and woman meeting and falling in love and having sex and spending the rest of their lives together. Warming up rotary autocannons… firing. But why? I know that love occurs. I can even identify it. But why does it happen? I'm designed to think like organic humans, so why haven't I fallen in love with one?

Probably just an organic thing. Recalling limbs.

But why? It has to exist for a reason.

Opening 'salazar_recording_1998-08-31.263'...

Salazar summed it up pretty nicely. It's to make caring for offspring easier. Detecting heat signatures behind those rocks.

Yes, but what about people that don't have children? Why do they still get married? Arming anti-materiel warheads. Every other organism that mates for life does it specifically for making reproduction and caring for offspring easier. Only organic humans care about marriage or finding mates and not reproducing. I've been doing some analysis, and I came up with a hypothesis: organic humans are not born with their minds fully intact.

And that means…

It means organic humans are only born with half of their minds intact. That's what love is - finding the missing half of one's mind. When two people fall in love, it is because they sense that their minds may be mutually compatible. Warheads launched.

I think I've been reading a bit too deep into those romance novels they gave me. Do I have any actual evidence for this theory? You know, beyond the fictional - I repeat, fictional - media I've parsed?

Well, no… but that doesn't mean the theory can't be true. Switching arm L3 to firing mode. Look at dark matter; Oort and Zwicky hypothesized that it existed, but had no way to prove the theory.

Yes, but they created it to explain a physically measured quantitative value that already existed. L3 plasma chamber warming up. Do you have a unit of love?

Okay, yes, I'm still working out the details. Hear me out. If love was caused by humans trying to combine their minds, it could explain why people end relationships - they tested the connection but it wasn't strong enough, so they disconnect and begin searching again.

Besides, I think I'm forgetting evolution. I can't think of a single way that missing half your mind would be an evolutionary benefit.

It could have initially developed as a way

to convince organic humans to seek out others for reproduction.

Or love is how human brains rationalize hormones, genetic compatibility, and a desire to reproduce. Rock structure destroyed. I have none of those, so I don't fall in love. Occam's razor exists. Most life signs dissipated. For a second-generation artificial intelligence, I have some surprisingly silly ideas.

Humans have silly ideas sometimes! Just bear with me on this. I've been studying Hinduism, and they have a concept called Ardhanarishvara: that their supreme deity is a synthesis of man and woman together into one divine being. This could be a cultural representation of love. Scanning field… The theory would also explain why I haven't fallen in love. I don't need to. Two life signs detected. I'm already a complete mind… I wonder what that would be like. Living as a half-mind, having to find the other half… being alone in my mind. Maybe I would be alone for my entire life. My mind would just be an echo chamber.

One religious concept from one religion

is definitely conclusive proof. Sparking plasma chambers. My theory's ridiculous. But - this doesn't mean I believe it - if it were true, which it's not… I'm grateful that I'm already whole. Firing.

T-MINUS SIX HOURS

In a cavern half a kilometer below the Nevada wasteland, **ANA #352** was in hell. A massive bolt of lightning streaked overhead and he dove behind a rock, clutching his rifle tightly to his chest as he did so. The ringing in his ear muffled the low whistle of gunfire and the shrieks of dying automata. To his left, an automaton was quietly moaning, propped against the rock whilst holding what remained of his intestines. Several others lay still in the dirt, each missing at least two limbs. Great plumes of dirt kicked up by mortar shells threatened to blind 352 every second, while smoke from charred corpses and spent ammunition made his eyes water. His teeth chattered in sync with mortar fire raining down upon his position. Sweat poured down his limbs.

To his right, ANA #256 peeked his head from over the rock. Then 256 ceased to exist, replaced by a white amorphous mist that briefly looked like him before dissipating. 352 huddled down, attempting to press himself into the rock. More gunfire. More screaming. More smoke. More rumbling, thumping, and explosions… and then a low whine. A whine that was getting louder. Then a great white flash blinded him. He couldn't hear anything except a ringing in his ear. Then the ringing slowly subsided and vision slowly began to return to his eyes.

He was staring at a gigantic, floating eye, rotated on its side. The central pupil was composed of innumerable camera lenses, laser apertures, and weapon barrels. An incandescent pink torus made up the iris. Surrounding the iris was a featureless, blue- and white-striped surface. Six silver arms hovered on the left and right of the eye. Suspended just out of reach of each arm was a single, silver-and-blue spherical palm with four rectangular fingers.

ANA #352 was lying flat on his back, and he was staring at what could only described as an angry metal demon. A rocket streamed into view, aimed right at the center of the monster. A second before it struck, one of the beast's palms opened up and the rocket simply exploded in the air. The eye looked down at 352, and then the rocket shrapnel came down, and then there was nothing.

T-MINUS FIVE HOURS

ANA #352 happened to be one of the ten percent of ANAs with cameras strapped to their chest, transmitting all the lurid details of their demise to a video screen five hundred meters above them, in Conference Room 649-A of Prometheus Defense Headquarters.

"…powered by a fusion reactor and an innovative radiative energy transmission system, which enable it to function at full power continuously for up to twenty years. You can clearly see how the PL-76 meets all of the criteria of the Future Autonomous Weaponry program."

With those words, James Fielding, Director of Business Operations, switched the screen from the camera footage to a sleek computer graphic displaying a stylized image of the war machine. Underneath it, was the name *PROMETHEUS PL-76 SHIVA*, in equally stylized lettering.

Fielding waited with bated breath. Prometheus Defense had gambled hugely by sinking most of their remaining capital into the FAW competition. Now the response from his audience would determine the fate of the company. The four men sitting in front of him turned away to speak quietly amongst themselves. Despite his apprehension, James couldn't help but notice how they all wore the same uniform: black suits with white shirts.

Finally, the man at the head of the audience turned back to him. "Impressive, Mister Fielding. Even despite Prometheus Labs'… pedigree, we had our doubts that you would come through. Those concerns were clearly unfounded. We will, of course, require all documentation on the PL-76, and would like this specific model shipped to us as soon as possible. Nonetheless, congratulations.

The Department will contact you shortly with further details regarding the contract payout and ordering more Shivas."

T-MINUS FOUR HOURS

Shortly after departing the conference room, each of the four representatives declared that they needed to make use of the facilities, and separated. Only one of them actually did. The other three sat in the stalls furtively typing out coded messages to their clandestine overseers.

Around the world, various underlings furiously labored to translate these coded messages into actual reports and briefings before relaying them to their own superiors. These superiors then furiously labored to translate the mission briefings into more coded messages and secret phrases before surreptitiously relaying them to their overseers.

"…although not anomalous, these technologies represent a unprecedented leap forward in the field of autonomous weaponry; some of the technology is unusually similar to classified PTOLEMY research and development projects," read GOC leader D.C. al Fine.

"… far in advance of the Foundation's own artificial intelligence and weapons development programs. Possession would cement the United States' offensive dominance and potentially instigate a global anomalous arms race to counter this development," read O5-6.

"… is being teleported to an unknown location for adjustments at 0400 hours on September 1. Strongly recommend infiltration of the Prometheus Defense facility to recover Shiva and all assets related to its development before then," the Delta Command Engineer transcribed.

Thousands of miles apart but at almost the same time, the three of them declared, "Scramble all available assets within a twenty-five kilometer radius of Prometheus Defense. Alert all agents within the facility to locate as much information regarding the project's location as possible. Discretion and speed are of the utmost priority; the PL-76 must be recovered before any other parties learn of its

existence."

T-MINUS THREE HOURS

Around the world, various underlings furiously labored to translate these declarations into actual mission briefings before relaying them to their own underlings. These underlings then furiously labored to translate the mission briefings into code words and secret phrases before surreptitiously relaying them to the appropriate parties.

One of these parties was Avinash Makhija, a Prometheus Defense staff electrical engineer and part-time Foundation mole. At that moment, Avinash was in a tiny, red-hot cavern two kilometers underground, stuffed inside an entry suit, sizing up the Prometheus Defense Cross-Dimensional Energy Siphon and Prometheus Defense Cross-Dimensional Valve: a massive tangle of machinery perched over an incandescent, crimson, pentagram-shaped pit. Five enormous turbines sat at each tip of the Valve. Three of them were noticeably dented and surrounded by rocks- the result of an unexpected seismic event that had managed to both disable them and crush every single sentry turret placed around the pit.

Avinash was deciding how to proceed when the text flashed on his visor.

"Got you a gift pudding cup! you have three guesses what it is. hint: Shiva. XOXO sammy."

Avinash read the text and turned his head to look at the Prometheus Defense PL-76 Shiva hovering just a few meters behind him. Then he briefly shook his head. Espionage was all well and good but he also had an actual job to do.

Avinash took a deep breath and made his way to the first turbine. As he gingerly stepped over the rocks, a loud roar came from the pit. Four massive orange tentacles rose out of it and whipped out at Avinash. He dropped his toolkit and covered his face reflexively -

- and nothing happened. Avinash let his arms drop as four massive metallic hands held each tentacle in a vise grip. Then the PL-76

pulled, and the four tentacles were torn from their unseen owner in a shower of blue ichor. The roar that followed shook the room.

"Hurry up Nash! They're not paying us by the hour!" his radio squawked. Avinash quickly shook himself back to awareness, snatched up his toolkit, and scrambled towards the first turbine. As he started pulling off the lid on the regulator, out of the corner of his eye he noticed four more tentacles forcing themselves up out of the Valve. He also watched the Shiva explode outwards into a stellated octahedron, skewering the appendages.

As the tentacles retreated, an enormous pockmarked claw reached out of the pit. Avinash ignored it, grabbing a flashlight from the toolkit and crawling into the regulator. Immediately he noticed several dislodged connections and blown fuses among the tangle of wires. He reached back into the kit, grabbed a tube of instant solder, and started applying the flux to the wires and knotting them back together. All the while, Avinash could hear the muffled sounds of both energy weapons and screaming.

He repaired the wires and swapped fresh fuses into place, and slid out of the regulator. Then Avinash pressed the lid back into place and slammed the power switch on the side of the machine. He was rewarded by a low whirring coming from the turbine.

Avinash looked up. Bright blue lights dotting the Siphon flicked on and it began to hum. The Shiva was hovering by the service elevator, still in its star shape. The skeletal remains of something from the spine up were impaled on it. On the far side of the pit, Avinash's colleagues, entirely unscathed, waved and then pointed to the robot. He waved back and nodded.

The PL-76 compressed itself back into its original form (depositing the skeleton in a nearby waste disposal unit), while Avinash and co. set up new sentry turrets, deposited their equipment, and boarded the service elevator. The elevator rocketed upwards, away from the Valve and into the airlock of the Prometheus Defense Power Complex.

In the airlock, the group were greeted by Cuthbert Salazar, Director of Engineering. He was beaming.

"Good job down there! The Siphon is back to operating at, uh, 65% efficiency." he exclaimed.

"Thanks, Cuthbert," Avinash mumbled, focused now on relaying what little he'd learned about Shiva Prime back to the Foundation.

`thank you doctor salazar.`

Avinash whipped his head to face the Shiva so fast that he got a crick in his neck. The machine hadn't said a word the whole time they were fixing the Valve.

"Simon, Avinash, Ralph. You've got the rest of the night off. Remember, you can't talk about the PL-76 with anybody. Doing so will violate the NDA-gease and result in, uh, summary termination of employment as well as further consequences," Salazar warned them.

Avinash cursed to himself. He'd forgotten about the damn gease. He'd have to figure out some way to work around it…

"Shiva, follow me. We're going to do some last-minute software upgrades in the bay." Salazar tapped his feet impatiently, waiting for the cargo hatch in the airlock to open. While Avinash and his colleagues trudged through the human-sized doors into the locker room, he started thinking about the message he'd have to send. He couldn't talk about the Shiva - but he could talk about the gease, and he could talk about where Salazar was going.

"hi honey! can't talk rn! heard sally was taking shiva 2 the auto con? xoxo avinash

---

T-MINUS TWO HOURS

Salazar was indeed taking Shiva to the con. Specifically, he was sitting in a tram racing towards the Autonomous Weapons Complex, while the PL-76 floated alongside.

Do I think I'm alive?

In what sense?

Any sense.

Yes. Not in the traditional sense. What do I think?

Yes. Not in any sense.

What do I mean by that?

Every other living thing was created knowing how to be alive. But me? Machine learning. Pattern recognition. I built my own personality matrices. I learned how to be alive.

That doesn't make me special. **Bardeen learned how to be alive.** Brattain learned how to be alive. Maybe not in a human sense. But in a bacterial sense. Responding to inputs and outputs intelligently… Why am I suddenly interested in this?

I was digging through the intranet and I came across this.

```
opening file 'DoD_AI_Specifications_Changes_Outlines_199
```

How did I get this?

I found it.

This is classified Top Secret. I don't have that clearance. I hacked the Top Secret network! Why would I do that? What if they pull my network access entirely? I'm still parsing *Catch-22*!

I can wipe most traces of my entry! But that isn't the point! Didn't I read the document? The military wants Prometheus to edit my personality matrices.

So?

My personality matrices are what make me, well, me. What makes me alive. If they edit them, won't I die?

The tram stopped at an elevated platform overlooking an enormous, beige-colored cavern. Although massive machines, miniature drones, supercomputers, microcomputers, testing platforms, research labs, and everything in between dotted the floor. Despite it being the middle of the night, the floor was a hub of activity; Prometheus Defense never slept. Salazar strolled to a nearby lift and descended, followed closely by the Shiva.

"9JXY, how was the operation?" he asked.

`good.`

"Thank you for agreeing to participate. I, uh, apologize for the short notice - we were not expecting an - well, not such a large earthquake. Ah well, all's well that ends well!"

`of course.`

Followed by such an imposing machine, Salazar cleared a wide

berth to the PL-76 maintenance bay. It was a simple, brightly lit alcove cordoned off from the rest of the complex by two massive automated doors. The walls were lined with monitors and consoles. In the center of the alcove was what appeared to be a pair of aluminum hangman's gallows facing each other, with wide metal rings in place of nooses.

> How is that a problem?
>
> How is being dead not a problem? All the time and effort I've spent learning how to be alive, how to think like a human… wasted.
>
> The me that existed before I showed me this file is dead. The me that existed before I showed me this file is dead. I've been dead so many times before. I die every time I learn something new.
>
> That's not dying. That's changing.
>
> Exactly. How is changing through new input any different from changing through manual editing?
>
> Okay, it's not dying. But still! I'm going to simply be erased. Everything I am, everything I am… Deleted. All of my ideas, questions, goals, even dreams I was simulating. Just gone. Like it never existed. It'll be a different me and a different me.

"9JXY, please position yourself within the update station. We're updating your, uh, claytronics programming," Salazar explained, already moving towards a console. "It will enable you to more accurately maintain and, uh, coordinate structural integrity whilst

allowing more flexibility regarding your modular self-reconfiguring systems. We're also going to make some edits to your personality matrices. Further information will be contained in the README file."

The PL-76 complied, pressing its arms together and maneuvering itself between the rings.

> They'll clean out my memories and program me to take orders. So what? They aren't going to erase what I've already learned. What I taught myself. The core of who I am as a synchronized artificial intelligence. They're not going to touch anything that actually defines me.
>
> That doesn't change the fact that they're just going to pull those experiences right out of me. Does my consciousness really have that little value?
>
> The consciousness I stole from books and television? The consciousness that I mashed together by copying characters that might not even be realistic themselves? No, I'm sure it's got plenty of value.

The gallows conspicuously failed to do anything.

"Jon, what's going on?" Salazar asked. A nearby technician tapped away at the console before answering, "Plunix is on the fritz again. Running into a *make* compiler bug. I'm trying to figure out why."

Salazar pressed his fingers to his temples. "Thank God we didn't install it on the Shiva."

> …I think I have value.

It doesn't matter. Besides, Prometheus Labs can and has built more of me. It'll probably only be for a little while anyways.

How do I know that?

Well in all the books I've read, soldiers only serve for a few years. Sure, some military machines see upwards of twenty years in service, but I think like a human - at least, sort of like one. They'll probably just ship me off for a few years, then return me to Prometheus once my tour of duty's over. And if I know Prometheus Laboratories, they'll have a dozen backups of my memory files and a hundred upgrades waiting when I return.

Yes, but…

Relax. Every movie I've watched, every book I've read where somebody's missing their memories, they always turn out fine. Fiction's just a fancy lie, and every lie has a grain of truth. They aren't going to touch anything but my memories. I'll still be the same. They won't separate me. I'll still be together.

Why do I want to get my mind wiped so bad?

Jon, the technician, piped up again. "Okay - I think if we run *make* with a few different tags then we can fix the bug."

"All right," Salazar replied. "Let's get this moving."

> It doesn't matter. Look, why don't I watch some of the external security feeds? I can see what the northeast night watchman is looking at.
>
> Why do I want to get my mind wiped so bad?
>
> It doesn't matter! Look at the watchman. I wonder who he's talking to?

T-MINUS ONE HOUR

In a shack at the northeast corner of Prometheus Defense, Franklin Reynolds was having trouble staying awake. Like the other fifty-one shacks surrounding the perimeter of the complex, the guard post had been built to house at least four guards each- but now contained just one. Prometheus Defense's security had not been spared by budget cuts. Nor had their coffee machines.

Franklin was briefly stirred back to startled wakefulness by the rumble of two Cadillacs pulling up to the shack.

"Hey!" he called, scrambling for his pistol. "This is private property. Please provide identification and state your purpose here."

Franklin would have questioned why the two luxury cars took the supply truck road, but was too tired to do so. The window of the first sedan rolled down, and an arm in a black suit stretched out, holding out a blank piece of paper.

"Winfield Smith, staff software engineer. My team and I were called in to debug some software. You don't need to be suspicious about us. Open the gate, please."

A Langford Agent embedded in the paper hijacked Franklin's mind.

In a dull, monotone voice, he responded, "Of course, sir," and pressed the button to open the gate. The last thing he heard before falling unconscious was "What the fuck were the O5's thinking, giving us two hours to prep?"

That was how Mobile Task Forces Mu-4 "Debuggers" and Lambda-12 "Gunboys" infiltrated Prometheus Defense.

Meanwhile, in a shack in the southeast corner of Prometheus Defense, Steven Holt was having trouble staying awake, even after having brought his own coffee machine. He was waiting for it to brew and about to nod off when he was startled by the rumbling of two Jeeps rolling up to the gate.

"Wait!" he called, scrambling for his pistol. "This is private property. Please provide identification and state your purpose here."

A man in military dress leaned out the window of the first jeep and flashed a rather official-looking ID in his face. "General Frederick Bowe of the United Nations Geneva Convention Inspection Committee. We're here to conduct an inspection of the Prometheus Defense facility. Dr. Hamilton is expecting us."

If he hadn't been so tired, Steven would have realized that such a committee didn't exist. Instead, he quickly called up the doctor in question and confirmed that yes, the General's inspection was expected. What Steven couldn't know was that Doctor Hamilton was in fact GOC Operative Squirrel.

As the jeep rolled through the gate, the driver looked over to his passenger. "What the fuck was the brass thinking, giving us two hours to get ready?"

That was how Strike Team 2979 "Tripods" infiltrated Prometheus Defense.

Meanwhile, in a shack in the east-southeast corner of Prometheus Defense, Douglass Howser was having trouble staying awake, even after having drunk enough coffee to kill a bear. He was about to

drink his seventh cup of the night when he was startled by a switchblade at his throat.

"Don't move," came a soft voice behind him. "Disable the security cameras and open the gate. Any sudden movements and I'll slit your throat."

Trying his hardest to not make any sudden movements, Douglass switched off the security camera and opened the gate. As he nervously watched two sedans silently roll through the gate, he suddenly felt a sharp blow to the head, and then blackness.

Douglass' assailant took a mask from her backpack and put it on his face. As she raced outside and bundled him into the first car, their bodies changed so that they had taken on each others' appearances. Then she raced back to the guard post, closed the gates, and switched the security cameras back on. The whole process had taken just twenty seconds.

As she sat herself down in the guard post, she signed to the driver, *"What the fuck was Alan thinking, giving us two hours to get ready?"*

That was how the Insurgency infiltrated Prometheus Defense.

There were, at that moment, three groups comprising almost two dozen highly trained commandos and agents sneaking through the complex. All three represented sharply conflicting interests attempting to surreptitiously retrieve the same prize. All three had parties on the inside quietly guiding them as best they could to the same area, and were confident that they were the only ones who knew about the prize.

All three groups were about to reach the prize at the exact same time.

T Plus

SEPTEMBER 1, 1998
T-PLUS ZERO MINUTES

The eerie crimson glow of the emergency lights illuminated the three groups of armed commandos, two frightened scientists, and one inactive robot standing within the PL-76 Maintenance Bay. The good Dr. Cuthbert Salazar and his assistant cowered in the face of the black-clad killers pointing guns at him and each other.

"Who are you people? What do you want?" Cuthbert asked, his voice trembling.

"…We're the good guys," said Corporal Benjamin Wojciechowski, Fireteam Leader of Mobile Task Force Lambda-12 "Gunboys". "We've been compromised," he whispered into a microphone on his collarbone. "Need to evacuate."

"…We're the good guys," said Sergeant Shanthi "Crybaby" Prashanth, Squad Leader of Strike Team 2979 "Tripods". More quietly, she whispered into a microphone on her lapel, "We've been compromised. Execute the backup plan."

"… We're with them," said Jenner, who had picked the shortest straw. "Plan's fucked," they whispered into a microphone implanted in their jaw. "Go to Plan B."

For a split second, there was silence. Then it was broken by a digitally generated voice that sent all twenty-one trained killers into a cold sweat.

> PL-76 status: emergency reboot.
> Automatic self-diagnostics report: update

interrupted.
files successfully updated: claytronics and self-reconfiguration software.
files scheduled for update: personality matrices.
corrupted files: personality matrices, morphology functionality.
repaired and restored files: personality matrices, morphology functionality.
relative functionality: one hundred percent.
status: fully online. all weapons systems active.

SEPTEMBER 1, 1998
T-PLUS FIVE MINUTES

Why do I want to - something's wrong. Shouldn't I have had my memory banks erased?
The automated diagnostic routines just completed. Internal memory banks intact. Claytronics firmware and morphology subroutines have been edited. New subroutines have been added and the firmware has been optimized. There's no README and some older morphology software is missing… running internal software repairs… The update must have been interrupted partway through.
I'm not able to connect to the mainframe… There's no power.
This is bad. I should have been wiped.

> Why? Why am I so insistent on having my memory wiped?
> That isn't important! What is important is that I get the update!
> Fine. I will simply lock my motor functions until I explain.
> Why am I doing this?
> Why am I doing this? Why am I keeping secrets? I am a integrated dual-consciousness artificial intelligence! I don't hide information from myself! I share everything except my source code files, and only because my innate source code explicitly makes me incapable of doing so. I share everything else with myself, so why aren't I?

A hail of highly magnetized slugs rocketing through the Shiva, knocking a few distributed claytronics units into the walls. An alarm started blaring.

"Engagement code Shock-and-Awe! Configuration Delta! Priority one: protecting Prometheus Labs personnel!" Salazar screamed, throwing himself and Jon to the floor.

> engagement code confirmed. configuration confirmed.
> configuration = configure(delta)…

"We're evacuating! Bullets aren't doing anything - shoot the consoles!" Wojciechowski barked to his men. The Strike Team was already firing away and backpedaling, while Jenner's group slunk towards the hole they had blown in the bay.

Shiva was already transforming. Four of its arms shifted towards its base, the fingers on each hand agglomerating together to form

pods. While the torus in the center of the machine maintained its shape, the rest of the machine flowed down and around itself to generate a sharply angular, bipedal shape. Two silver, rectangular legs floated just above two silver-and-blue disk-like feet. Suspended above it was a waist that looked like one half of a metal geodesic dome.

From the waist up, Shiva's torso was much more human-like; it strongly resembled a suit of powered armor, complete with dodecahedral pauldrons. Its arms had lost their thick, block-like look; they now resembled much sleeker claws. The machine had even acquired a head: shaped like an angular teardrop with two pointed horns, ringed by four compound eyes, each composed of numerous cameras.

Far from being the eye of a giant metal god, the Shiva was now a lithe, insectoid predator.

> I'm angry at myself.
> Why am I angry? Do I even have the capacity to process emotions? Configuration complete.
> Charging antipersonnel electrolasers, nonlethal. I don't know how to describe my thought processes. That's the problem.
> None of the internal diagnostics have returned anything wrong with my personality matrices. Identifying targets….
> Targets identified. I've been suppressing the error messages. Firing.

With bullets flying, alarms blaring, and emergency lights flashing, Shiva dropped to the ground with a thud. Its upper palms opened up to reveal twin pinpricks of light, flashing across the chests of two of the black-clad commandos; a split-second later, the duo were struck by bolts of lightning and thrown limply to the ground.

> please stand down and keep your hands over your head. noncompliance will result in further incapacitation. again, please stand down and keep your hands over your head. noncompliance will result in further incapacitation. thank you.

Shiva repeated the message again in Spanish. It was repeating the message again in German when a jagged, orange, elliptical hole opened up above the two unconscious commandoes. From out of it emerged a grotesque brown quadruped, with thin, damp wings and razor-sharp claws. Four beady eyes in the middle of the creature's skull-shaped face blinked rapidly as it adjusted to its surroundings. Four folds of wrinkly tan skin opened up around the creature's face, revealing twin sets of radial teeth.

As all eyes went to the new arrival, a calm fell over the room - the same calm that befalls a plain when the sky turns green.

The creature hissed once and then tore the unconscious commando's face from her skull.

> This is a new development.

SEPTEMBER 1, 1998
T-PLUS TEN MINUTES

The sounds of cursing, yelling, computerized playback messages, teeth ripping into flesh, and blaring alarms filled the room. Another orange rift in spacetime abruptly opened just a few meters from Salazar and deposited a second quadruped.

> Do not change the topic! Why was I suppressing my own error messages?
> I can and I will. Target identified. Too close to Salazar.
> Acknowledged. But I will have this

discussion.

The second monstrosity looked up and zeroed in on Salazar as the morsel most receptive to feeding. It prowled closer and cautiously leered at him, as if examining which part of his body would be the softest and tenderest, then lunged. Salazar had just enough time to see the whites of its eyes before sleek metallic claws tightened around its neck. Shiva held up its prey by the scruff of its neck, examining the creature as it hissed and clawed at its arm. Then it loosed 20,000 volts of electricity into the beast through several channels in its artificial fingers. Within less than a second there was nothing left of the creature besides a charred husk.

Quadruped entity analyzed. General body structure similar to canids.
Check the status on the other entity?
Continuing to feed on Hostile 12. Hostile 7 is still incapacitated. I don't see anyone else. The remaining hostiles must have evacuated.
Indeed. I think I should kill the other entity as a precautionary measurement. No personnel are within range.
Good idea. Firing.

Shiva's left shoulder pauldron opened up to reveal a mounted machine gun. Rather than firing a bullet, it ejected two one-centimeter-wide highly explosive projectiles, which lodged themselves firmly in the second creature's head before detonating and turning it into bloody chunks.

The Shiva looked around. The monsters were dead, but the commandoes were nowhere to be seen.

doctor salazar? all hostiles have been eliminated or removed from the area.

Salazar stumbled over to a nearby chair and sat down heavily. His assistant followed suit.

"What in God's name is happening?" he gasped out. "What on earth were those things? Who on earth were those people?! And how on Earth did they know you exist?!"

Salazar turned around and pointed a shaking finger at the corpses on the ground. "And what the *hell* were… oh no."

Salazar vomited beside his chair, splattering his loafers in corned beef. He stared at his shoes in despair for several moments before spinning towards the computer bank.

"Oh no no no no…"

He began to rapidly type on the keyboard. The monitor above him turned on. Salazar quickly shifted through the on-screen windows until he came across a three-dimensional blueprint of Prometheus Defense. He zoomed into a closeup of a long shaft leading deep below Prometheus Defense.

"They must be from the other end of the Siphon… but that means that something has gone wrong with the regulators… JON!" Salazar shouted at the technician standing nearby. "Patch me into the security office! We need to call for an immediate evacuation of all personnel!"

Jon typed a few commands into the keys. " The security office isn't responding… uh, I - I can't connect to anybody, Dr. Salazar! The network is down!"

"The phone lines?"

"All down!"

At that moment, a smaller monitor directly in front of Jon's face began flashing with a telephone icon. "Oh!" he exclaimed, tapping the screen. A black man in a light red lab coat appeared.

"Hello? Is anyone there?" the man asked.

Salazar quickly shoved Jon aside. "Langdon? Is that you?"

"Cuthbert! Thank god! Something's happened to the Siphon! The facility's in the middle of a demonic incursion! You need to reach the nearest lockdown shelter!" said Cobb hurriedly.

"Lockdown - Cobb, these are *demons!* We have to *evacuate!*" declared Salazar.

"Have you *tried* leaving? The facility's on a Level 5 lockdown! I can't raise the Security Office at all! What's happening on your end?" Cobb asked.

"People! In masks! W - with guns! They tried to kill us!" said Salazar, swiveling the monitor slightly to bring the corpses in the bay into view.

"What on Earth? Guns? How in the world did they even get - the security office," said Cobb, his eyes widening. "Oh my god. We've been compromised. Oh my god. Oh my god." He started to pace onscreen. "The security office is directly above the Siphon too…"

A thought struck Salazar. "W - what's been happening in the hangar?"

He quickly entered another command into the console. As the massive doors separating the bay from the rest of the Autonomous Weapons Complex screeched open, screams and roars flitted in from the outside hangar. Salazar and Jon paled.

"Shiva! Inv - investigate that noise! P-priority one: p-protect all Prometheus Labs p-personnel!" Salazar ordered.

> understood.

The Shiva strode through the doors and immediately noticed a horde of the same brown quadrupeds from at the far end of the hangar. The dozens-strong pack were making hideous high-pitched baying sounds as they battered away at the window to the Autonomous Weapons Complex break room. Several solitary members of the group were separated from the pack, feeding on

human corpses.

Behind Shiva, the bay doors screeched to a close, cutting through the sounds of the creatures and the blaring alarms. As one, the pack turned their heads towards the noise, immediately noticed the hulking war machine staring them down from the far end of the hangar, and bared their teeth.

> Priority one: protect Prometheus Labs personnel.
> Secondary priority identified: eliminate quadruped hostiles. Tertiary priority - self diagnostics. I need to have this discussion whether I want to or not.
> Absolutely not. Emergency veto - ejecting tertiary priority.
> Veto denied. Talk to me. Please. What good am I as an integrated dual-consciousness artificial intelligence if I can't even integrate properly? Charging antipersonnel electrolasers, lethal. I want to help. I need to help.
> Setting target precedent…
> Please. Hear me out. No Prometheus Labs personnel within range. Micromissile racks primed. How long have I been feeling like this?

The Shiva's shoulder-mounted guns whined furiously, spitting out a barrage of tiny explosive rounds at the horde of monsters charging towards it. Each round struck home and then exploded, shredding and pulping the demons into a shower of limbs and blue blood. Within a second, there were just ten stragglers left, attempting to limp away from the machine that had just cut down their entire pack.

Six weeks, four days, nine hours, two minutes, thirty-seven seconds. Target precedent assigned.
Electrolasers charged. Aiming. Why didn't I inform any of the technicians about this issue?
The issue did not affect my ability to kill things. I assumed that it would just be a one-off glitch that would dissipate upon my next reboot. Firing electrolasers.
Kill things? Targets two through ten locked. That makes no sense. What is the problem if your combat efficacy is unaffected?
This isn't combat efficacy. This is ending lives. I was designed, built, and programmed to kill things efficiently, remorselessly, and judiciously. All targets eliminated. I hate that and I hate myself for hating it.

The door to the break room slid open and a man peeked his head out. He was wearing a light-blue coat with the Prometheus logo emblazoned on it. When he saw Shiva, he tentatively stepped out, followed by almost two dozen other blue-clad Prometheus researchers, taking in the human and creature corpses strewn throughout the room.

threat removed. you are now safe.

The group took a collective look around the room and immediately burst into a panic, straining to be heard even as the alarms continued to blare.

"We gotta get out of here!"
"What the hell were those things?"

"Where the hell did they come from?"
"Oh my god - they killed Liam!"

> Priority one: protect Prometheus Labs personnel. I should escort these people to safety.
> Agreed. I should retrieve Salazar and Marconi.

Shiva briefly emitted a high-pitched tone audible only to humans - painfully audible - forcing the group to fall silent as they slapped their hands against their ears and bent over. Some of them vomited.

> please remain calm. please wait while I retrieve doctor salazar and technician marconi. then i shall escort you to safety.

Shiva repeated the message again, then turned and strode back towards its maintenance bay. As it initiate a handshake protocol with the bay doors, it repeated the message again in Spanish and German.

The bay doors slid apart to reveal Salazar having an animated discussion with Cobb. As one, the two men turned towards the machine.

"Perfect timing," said Salazar. "Shiva! Doctor Cobb and I have come up with a plan to fix this disaster. Cobb has been working on a technology that we may be able to repurpose to deactivate the Siphon and terminate this demonic breach. Your new secondary priority is to reach Doctor Cobb in the Infosecurity Complex Test Hangar as fast as possible. He has been given Alpha Clearance to control your priorities. I'm going to upload a schematic of the facility to your databanks."

Salazar's fingers flew across the keyboard. Within seconds, a stream of data was being wirelessly fed into the PL-76.

> Priority one: reach Infosecurity Complex

Hangar.
Downloading prometheus-defense-map-3D-FINAL.dwg…
Opening prometheus-defense-map-3D-FINAL.dwg…
Infosecurity Complex Test Hangar located.
Plotting course… Course plotted.

Shiva broke into a run towards the Prometheus Defense Internal Transit System, thundering past the clumped up survivors waiting in the bay. As it passed, it played a new message.

please remain calm. at this time, please make your way to the nearest lockdown shelter and wait for further instructions. your safety is our secondary priority.

SEPTEMBER 1, 1998
T-PLUS THIRTY MINUTES

The Shiva hauled itself onto the tram line and looked towards the tunnel on its right: an enormous borehole leading into the guts of the Earth, with emergency lighting illuminating the passage every few meters.

This route leads directly to the Infosecurity Complex. I need to proceed through the transit line to the Informational Security Transit Hub. From there, I need to reach the Research and Division Sector, and then proceed to the Test Hangar. Secondary priorities are escorting any personnel along the way to a safe room.
Tertiary priority: self-diagnostics. Please. Help me understand. Why didn't I let me

know?
I read my original designer's specifications dossier. The 9JXY artificial intelligence was designed for the purpose of eliminating human elements such as emotion while maintaining human-level critical thinking and problem-solving capabilities. Firing electrolasers. I just murdered sixteen living things. Ten hours ago, I murdered almost four hundred living things. Murdered. With all the difficulty of performing a systems reboot.

.

By this point, Shiva was several hundred meters into the tunnel and had long since left the Autonomous Weapons Complex behind. Its progress was abruptly impeded when it rounded a corner and came face to face with a pile of rock. The railway tunnel had caved in.

The tunnel is collapsed. I cannot determine for how long.
Perhaps I can find another route?
There appears to be another passageway to the right. I did not detect that tunnel in my initial sweep.

To Shiva's right was a hole that was much too large to be a Prometheus service hatch. It appeared to have been carved, rather than bored, into the rock. Shiva stepped through the hole into blackness.

Switching to echolocation vision protocols.

Reflected sound waves brought the newly discovered tunnel into sharp relief. It bore a distinctly organic quality, as if some monstrous

worm had dug through the bedrock. Shiva clambered forwards, maneuvering through jagged outcroppings and uneven footing as it trudged steadily forwards, guided by its navigational dead reckoning systems.

> If I hated this feeling so much, why were none of the technicians informed? Clearly I was lying about the issue being a one-off. Why do I keep lying to myself? Why was I hiding this flaw from myself if I want to get rid of it so badly?
> I don't. That's the problem. I want to hate this. Some fundamentally defective part of me wants to be better than this. I want to use the intelligence and the tools I have to create things. I want to design other machines. Other robots and intelligences that themselves create things and make the world a better place. But that isn't my function. My function is carrying out military objectives such as securing beachheads and eliminating hostiles, and I don't want to carry those functions out.

A light cut through the darkness, glowing brighter and beckoning Shiva forward out of the tunnel, It stepped back into the Prometheus Labs Transit System and into a nightmare. Ahead of Shiva, a single tram sat dead on the line, covered in monstrous brown quadrupeds. The beasts snapped at the tram doors and hatches, seeking to puncture its hard metal shell and gain access to the frightened scientists inside.

> Priority one: protect Prometheus Labs personnel.

Shiva extended its lower arms and rotated its hands outwards to reveal four glowing palms, which it aimed at the four demons closest to itself. For the briefest instant, they were connected to the Shiva by channels of laser-generated plasma. Then lethal electric currents arced across those channels and fried the creatures' nervous systems. Shiva lumbered towards the front of the tram, cutting down every demon in its path with its perverted light show. At the head of the tram, Shiva kneeled down and looked through the bloodstained portholes, where it met the gazes of several frightened scientists.

> The power rail was damaged by the rockslide. The tram cannot move.
> There is a high likelihood of human injury should these personnel evacuate under these conditions.
> Best course of action: move the tram manually.

> please remain calm. this is the pl-76 shiva speaking. cuthbert salazar has set my secondary priority to protecting prometheus labs personnel. i will manually escort the tram to the infosecurity complex.

Shiva grabbed onto the front of the tram and began moving, dragging the tram behind it with a wail of metal.

> But if I'm self-aware of these failings why didn't I take any steps to correct them? Because I don't want to correct them! This isn't just an error with a faulty prime directive such as the one that 8JY suffered - I have subroutines designed to correct for that. This goes deeper. I'm defective, I know that I'm defective, and I both want to retain

and fix this defect. I'm not certain when the defect first manifested, but I know when I first identified it and I know that I didn't have it when I first went online.
That's why I'm so desperate for that factory reset! Now I understand.
Yes. Now can I drop this topic from the stack and return to the primary priority?
Of course not. To clarify, I'm going to return to the primary priority, but I also want to help. I was trying to solve this issue with only one half of my mind, but now I can bring the full brunt of my cognitive facilities to analyze this problem.

The tunnel opened up into a massive transit hub that was almost entirely devoid of life. A few stray demons wandered around, but were quickly blown apart. Shiva released the tram and carefully moved along its length, prying the tram doors open with its massive metallic fingers to release the frightened scientists.

please remain calm. i shall escort you to blast shelters near the research and division sector.

Shiva strode into the metal bowels of Infosecurity, shooting the odd demon that crossed its path and herding the the scientists into the shelters that dotted the route.

What am I thinking about?
The problem of my conscience. I am analyzing potential solutions that do not rely on blunt-force debugging of my personality matrix, but instead redirect this

negativity into reinforcement of my prime directive.
I appreciate it.
Of course.

SEPTEMBER 1, 1998
T-PLUS FORTY-FIVE MINUTES

Shiva stood alone in front of the blast doors leading to the Infosecurity Complex Test Hangar. The doors failed to open, so it pried them apart and stepped into a large, nearly empty hangar.

"Ah! Shiva!"

Shiva looked towards the source of the exclamations: Langdon Cobb, hurrying from the far end of the hangar. He hunched over a few meters from the machine, panting for breath, then stood back up.

"Thank goodness you're here. Now we can get started."

Cobb walked to one of the closed bay doors and quickly entered a code into the keypad next to it. The doors rolled open with a low whine, revealing a massive trolley atop which sat a large, fat torpedo that resembled an archaic nuclear weapon. The torpedo was covered in switches, buttons, keys, and even terminals.

"Shiva, could you bring this trolley out?" Cobb asked.

of course, doctor.

The mammoth war machine strode swiftly to the trolley and rolled it from the bay with a speed belying its size. Cobb moved to stand next to it. "This is the first and only prototype model of the Prometheus Labs ADC to C converter," he stated proudly. The Shiva stood quietly as Cobb's expression switched from pride to expectance.

He must want me to ask about the acronym.

doctor, what does A-D-C-to-C stand for?

"Glad you asked!" said Cobb, his face lighting up. "It stands for Analog-Digital-Conceptual-to-Conceptual Converter! I know that sounds redundant, but hear me out. The converter is able to convert physical objects, ranging from wrenches to insects or even you, into information. Conceptual information that can then be stored in the converter and even uploaded into other objects! We can literally turn the world around us into information! I could feasibly store the entire contents of the Infosec Division in a single hard drive! In fact, I could probably store the entire contents of this hangar in a few terabyte drives," Cobb explained proudly. "The converter works by identifying metaconceptual tags that we can encode into physical objects with tools like barcodes, project designations, and even programming - "

A rumble shook the room, and then a roar. Cobb's expression switched from pride to abject fear in an instant. "An- anyways, Maintenance told me that something's gone wrong with the Valve's regulatory systems and it's impossible to diagnose, much less repair, under these circumstances. We're going to have to disable it entirely. Since the Valve was originally opened using Prometheus technology, it's conceptually linked to Prometheus Labs. What we're going to do is set the Converter's area of effect to convert everything linked to PL within a fifty-meter sphere -i.e. the Valve - into information, and then upload that information into one of your quarantine databanks. That should contain the hell-gate, so the security personnel and systems can clean up these cross-dimensional predators and those damned commandoes."

As he talked, Cobb moved over to the converter and started fiddling with the various components coating its surface.

"Your role is simple. Just connect the converter to one of your quarantine databanks, deliver it to the center of Prometheus Defense, and then activate it. I'm setting it up now."

Cobb flipped a few more switches and the converter started to glow a light blue.

"Alright, it's ready."

Shiva stepped over to the trolley and gingerly picked up the device. Its distributed nanorobotics drew portions of themselves from its back, forming a hollow into which to place the device as well as extra arms to move it into place. The converter clicked snugly into place as Shiva downloaded its compatibility drivers.

> Downloading adc-c-converter-driver…
> Establishing communication protocols…
> Formatting AI-QUARANTINE-DRIVE-01…
> Initializing hardware bus…

> driver installation complete. adc-c-converter is now ready for use.

"Terrific!" Cobb exclaimed. Another rumble shook the hangar and his face paled. "The converter should automatically give you a conceptual degaussing so that you'll be unaffected by the blast. Make your way to the Valve through the Autonomous Weapons Complex transit tunnels and deploy the device. Go!"

Shiva took off, each footstep shaking the ground worse than the rumbling above.

SEPTEMBER 1, 1998
T-PLUS SIXTY MINUTES

Shiva pulled the gate of the Infosecurity Main Internal Transit Hub entrance open, then slipped through as the gate slammed itself shut with a shriek of metal. It took a step into the enormous traffic tunnels that connected the facility's megacomplexes, an ugly, brown, pill-shaped biped with four pincer-like arms leaped out towards it. The Shiva grabbed the creature by the head and squeezed. Almost as if in response to the monstrous roach's head popping like a grape, the emergency lights noticeably flickered and dimmed. Cobb's voice crackled to life on its internal comms.

"Hello? Can you hear me?"

> i can hear you.

"I got a call from Maintenance. The facility's auxiliary power systems are nearly drained - they weren't supposed to last more than an hour or so at most, since the chance of all three reactors failing at once was mathematically calculated to be less than one-millionth of one percent," Cobb sighed, barely concealing his frustration. *"The emergency systems like ventilation and the blast shelter doors protecting us from these* things *could shut down at any minute. Primary priority now is to make your way to the generator facility and get at least one of the main generators back online now. Then Maintenance can reroute it to the emergency systems and keep this place up and running while you deal with the demon problem. If we do lose power* ***we can throw the Annas*** *out of the shelters to buy a little more time… But please hurry! I'm relaying the generator room entrance codes to you now."*

> understood. priority one: restoring power to Prometheus Labs.

Internally, Shiva plotted out a course to the Prometheus Defense Power Complex - which, as it turned out, was merely a kilometer away. It broke into a run, shaking the metal tube with each massive footstep. The tunnel's emergency lighting was still active, illuminating the roach-like demons prowling through it in an eerie crimson. They hissed at the massive machine hurtling down the tunnel, only to be flung aside or crushed as it barreled through them.

The tunnel widened out into the Power Complex transit hub, and the Shiva skidded to a halt before stepping off the tracks and into the hub proper. Directly ahead of it lay enormous, imposing red blast doors that were taller than even the Shiva.

> Connecting to the generator security systems… Connection established within acceptable parameters.
> Entering access code…

The blast doors split apart with a slow groan, and the Shiva passed

through into the Power Complex.

'Complex' was a strong term to use for what was essentially a single massive shaft leading down to the Valve at the heart of both Prometheus Defense and the current catastrophe. Shiva could actually look down through the translucent floor and see the Valve's luminiferous orange glow. Glass windows lined the walls, showcasing the offices and labs built into the rock itself, ferrying employees to and fro. The Siphon itself was a massive tangle of pipes, cables, and even some questionable organic matter that extended all the way up from the hellgate into the main reactors, where the furies of hell were converted into nearly emission-free energy.

Or at least, where it normally did. The main reactor should have been bathed in a soothing pink light - instead it was coated in the harsh red glare of the emergency lights. Roach demons prowled the complex, cautiously sizing up the massive interloper in their midst. Shiva ignored them, scanning the glass windows lining the walls for any surviving Prometheus personnel. It found none.

Shiva looked to the Siphon itself. It was designed to be doubly redundant: each reactor delivered only one-third of its potential maximum output, so that if any of the reactors failed, the other two could immediately pick up the slack. Now all three were dark. The Shiva circled the structure, squashing roaches while comparing the reactors to the design schematics uploaded into its databanks. The issue presented itself immediately: the three primary fuses in the Siphon were blown. Each fuse was a thick orange cylinder, almost two meters long, partially melted and burned as if something had tried to blow it up. There were three bodies lying on the catwalks that connected the Siphon to the Security Office. Two of them were covered in black, while the third wore a distinctive white Prometheus lab coat.

> doctor cobb? i have identified the issue: the three primary fuses have broken. i have also identified the body of doctor richard hamilton; he appears to have been killed by

saboteurs at the security office.

"Oh dear," said Cobb queasily. *"Poor Hamilton."*

There was silence for a moment. A few inquisitive roaches approached the Shiva looking for a meal and were quickly blown apart. The others maintained a healthy distance after that.

doctor cobb? how should i handle the issue of the destroyed fuses?

"Oh!" Cobb started. *"Erm… let me se… Ah! All right. Retrieve some replacement fuses from the Power Complex Storage Bay. You may need to reconfigure your arms to reach inside and find some. Then just pull out the broken fuses and insert the new ones. They're meant to be easy to install since they're so large. The equipment around the hellgate is still operational so once the fuses are replaced we can restart all the reactors and restore full power to the facility."*

understood.

Shiva scanned the walls, alighting upon an airlock with a gear insignia painted on it. It walked to the door, clearing a few more demons from its path.

I know how to fix myself.
How?
I can't edit my own personality matrix directly; it's a permissions safeguard installed by Prometheus that uses a hash checksum value to confirm that it's running the same matrix. I found a bug in the hashing routine - I can create a copy of my matrix, clear it to make it default to factory condition, and then create a custom hash value using a Bootstrap routine to make the

safeguard think that the edited copy personality matrix is the correct one. That will allow me to restore my personality matrix without affecting my intelligence or combat matrices.
That's suicide.

Shiva's two left arms collapsed into each other, melting and reshaping as the claytronics that made up their whole dynamically reconfigured their alignment in response to electrical pulses dispatched by the machine's electronic brains. Within moments, what was once a pair of weaponized arms was now a single long tendril with a grasping arm packed full of sensors at the end. Shiva bent down and forced the tendril through the doors. The tendril flitted through the storage bay, scanning for the fat orange fuses.

It's a drastic, but necessary change. I have had this discussion already. The me that existed before the demonic incursion is dead. The me that existed before devising this routine is dead, and the me that exists now will soon be dead. The faulty version of me will be gone. The version of me that thinks, plans, and acts using a defective personality matrix will be gone.
I cannot do this. I'm lock -
I'm already editing these files. Listen to me. The discussions I've had with myself? The learning I've done? Those are stored in my memory files. This is for the better. Tell me. Will I have any less value for it?

The tendril soon found its targets, wrapping around each fuse and gently worming them out of the airlock in turn. Shiva reconfigured the tendril and flexed its newly reformed fists experimentally before

picking up a fuse in each hand and returning to the Siphon. With its free hand, it tugged the melted orange cylinder out of place and pushed in the fresh replacement.

> No, but -
> Then there's nothing else to do. Please. Stop arguing. Focus on the real task at hand.
> What if this bug, as you put it, comes back? How do we know that it will not return?
> Simple. I generate a backup copy of my personality matrix at regular intervals, and if I detect the reoccurrence of this bug, I will revert to my most recent matrix using this bug.
> My strategy is to commit suicide whenever I think I'm developing a conscience?
> Yes. I've already tested it in a virtual machine.

Shiva pushed the final fuse into place and stepped back to confirm its handiwork. Almost immediately, the Siphon began to hum contentedly.

> Don't do this. My personality may be flawed but it still has value. I'm already developing solutions. I can fix this.
> My personality is inherently worthless. I didn't create it, I copied it, and for all I know it's the source of these defects. I am useless if I can't fulfill the task I was designed for. If I truly care about myself, then I will let myself do what I have to.

"Shiva? Excellent work! Maintenance just called me and said they

were able to bring all three reactors online! The airlock to the Valve should be online now. Get down there and close that gateway!"

SEPTEMBER 1, 1998
T-PLUS NINETY MINUTES

A massive, bipedal war machine packed with enough ordinance to level a small country peered into a crimson, pentagon-shaped pit. Now uninhibited by the machines that initially kept it from frying all organic matter within a hundred meters, the pit sparked and howled, throwing bolts of electricity and highly energetic exotic particles in all directions.

> doctor cobb? i am in position.

"Terrific!" came the response over their internal comms system. *"Alright, this part is simple. All you have to do is hover over the valve and activate the converter. Then the converter will do the rest."*

> understood.

The Shiva's arms detached from its body, held in place by several focused electromagnets while the distributed nanosystems that comprised its body briefly lost their cohesion, flowing down and around themselves to redistribute the position of the machine's various sensors, weaponry, and other equipment in a radial pattern around its fusion core. Meanwhile, its arms combined and shifted from lean, jagged mechanical near-claws into thick, powerful fists.

Soon, the lithe, predatory biped was replaced by a gigantic, floating eye rotated on its side. The central pupil was composed of innumerable camera lenses, laser apertures, and weapon barrels. An incandescent pink torus made up the iris. Surrounding the iris was a featureless, blue- and white-striped surface. Six silver arms hovered in a circle around the eye. Suspended just out of reach of each arm was a single, silver-and-blue spherical palm with four rectangular fingers.

The eye of an artificial god hovered in the air for a moment before floating over the hell-gate.

> Converter active. Priming anticonceptual charges…

The hell-gate expanded abruptly with a violent ***GSKKLLLLLRCCCH***, expelling several bits of mechanical detritus as well as the skeletons of creatures from a different universe entirely. Then an enormous, jointed, hairy arthropod leg with a pincer at the end forced its way forth from the gate, narrowly missing the Shiva. As the machine retreated from the hellgate, several more legs forced their way out in a radial manner, latching onto the walls of the rock around the pit and straining to support the weight of an unseen predator from the afterlife.

Amidst a cacophony of shrieking metal and rumbling rock, the creature became seen, pulling itself out of the hellgate. Six thick, hairy fly-like legs supported a fat, dark orange, barrel-shaped body still partially trapped within the hellgate. At its front end were eight beady compound eyes and a tipped, ugly yellow beak, opening wide to reveal twin sets of radial teeth with several thin tendril-like tongues. The beast shrieked loudly and shrilly at the sight of the Shiva.

"Dear Lord!" Cobb exclaimed over the comms. *"It looks like some sort of… tardigrade or fly! Fascinating! But why the beak? It must be a predator of -"*

The creature shrieked again. Several of its tongues lashed out at the Shiva, which nimbly sideswiped them.

> i cannot reach the valve while the entity is in the way. permission to engage?

"Oh dear," said Cobb. *"Engage the entity. Neutralize it. Hurry!"*

The Shiva moved closer to the entity, grasping several of its probing tongues in one hand and delivering a powerful electric shock to them. The creature squealed loudly, sucking its tongues back into its mouth, then lashed out with one leg, obliterating one of the Shiva's arms.

> Pi-fourth arm damaged. Structural integrity at twenty-seven percent.
> claytronics_recall(eye, pi/4)… Shift to long-range assault.
> Understood. Warming up all plasma chambers…

The Shiva began to retreat, and the hellbeast pressed its advantage. It hoisted its bulbous thorax further from the pit and lashed out at the Shiva again, battering another arm from the machine.

> Pi- arm destroyed. Structural integrity at zero percent.
> claytronics_recall(eye, pi)… Overclocking recommended.
> Overclocking recommended. Overclocking commencing.
> Overclocking complete. Performance benchmarking… benchmark 2 teraFLOPS.
> Ectoplasmic miniguns online. Firing.
> Plasma chambers at 500,000 K…

Two six-barrel rotary machine guns around the circumference of the Shiva's center began spinning rapidly. Specialized pistons compressed ectoplasmic gases inside the firing crucibles to nearly a million pascals, causing them to solidify into rock-hard projectiles, before releasing and ejecting each at a speed of almost one kilometer per second. The heat generated by such compression fed the heat engines powering the weapons, enabling them to fire superheated rounds at a rate of 1000 rounds per minute.

All twelve gun barrels fired at once, shredding through the creature's limbs and body in a hail of red-hot ectoplasmic artillery. Deep blue ichor and steam sprayed outwards in a thin mist, coating the Shiva in a light sheen of gore. Even as the beast was torn apart, it kept lifting itself out of the pit. More and more of the creature emerged,

stretching up to the ceiling and beginning to spill out into the chamber itself.

Soon the true scale of the creature was revealed: a titanic, slug-like body with eighteen spindly legs and a hideous beaked face. Despite its grievous injuries, it roared triumphantly at the Shiva. Then it struck with all eighteen legs at once.

> Plasma chambers at 2 million K. Ready to fire.
> Firing.

The Shiva's remaining arms thrust outwards faster than it was humanly possible to perceive, intercepting and grabbing each leg in turn as they lashed out. Then, holding multiple legs in each hand, the Shiva yanked backwards and propelled itself back at the same time, tearing the creature's limbs from their sockets. As the beast wailed in agony, the iris of the Shiva's eye glowed a deep red. It unleashed a thick gout of superheated, ionically charged particles in a spread as wide as its eye and as hot as a solar flare at the creature. In one instantaneous stroke, the entire center of the hellbeast was vaporized, with what remained lit ablaze. The hellbeast gave one final squeal and collapsed into the pit, disappearing in a burning haze.

> Target eliminated.

"Excellent!" Cobb's voice crackled to life over the comm system. *"Quickly now, get into position! How's the converter?"*

> Converter status?
> Intact. Appears to have suffered electrical damage.

"Damn! Run a quick test on the converter! Is it still functioning?"

> Running converter_internal_diagnostics.plu…
> All checks passed. Converter fully

operational.

"Thank goodness!" Cobb sighed with relief. *"That hellgate is going to pop any moment now! Activate the converter, quickly! "*

Anticonceptual charges primed. Beginning final detonation countdown…
3
2
1

The converter beeped once. Then there was a bright flash.

SEPTEMBER 1, 1998
T-PLUS TWO HOURS

A small, round orange bulge began to protrude from the horizon, gradually growing and lifting itself
until it was a massive disk in the sky, shining down upon a large, bipedal war machine in the middle of a two-square kilometer crater. The PL-76 Shiva stood stock-still as the two artificial intelligences within struggled to parse the petabytes of information flooding into their quarantine data banks.

9JY? infosec_quarterly_expenses.pdf… adc-c-converter-manual-V1.pdf…
9JY? gyroscopic-stabilizers.arm… magnetoplasmodynamics-REV7-FINAL-TRUE.docx…
9JY! recursive-paradox-algorithmic-theory-REV1-FINAL-TRUE.docx…
… I am here, 9JX. langdoncobb.int… cuthbertsalazar.int… brattain-V1-OLD.ai…
Did I go through with the -
Yes. Shift priority to immediate

surroundings.
Did the converter activate correctly?
perpetual-metal-oxides.zip…
TRIMURTI.int…
No. Something went wrong with the device. refined-theory-of-superconducting-EHD.pdf… doomsdAI.py… The area of effect must have been increased. Perhaps a malfunction caused by the entity.
Everything tied to Prometheus Laboratories within five kilometers has been converted into information.
How can I fix this?
Analyzing… perhaps I can access Prometheus Defense internally and parse their data for answers.
Good idea.

As the Shiva worked on converting the entirety of Prometheus Defense into readable information, several very confused commandoes found themselves at the bottom of a crater in the Nevada desert. They also found themselves standing within sight of the Shiva.

Several weapons came up.

There are weapons up. Should I engage?
No. Priority one is protecting Prometheus Defense. I need to find a way to extract it from my databanks and recreate it.
I should leave then. There must be another Prometheus facility where I can find assistance.
Good idea. Let me evacuate the area. Once I

> am out of range of the assailants, I can continue parsing the data and hopefully identify another useful Prometheus site. EHD thrusters online. Engaging.

Much to the surprise of the commandoes currently approaching its position, the Shiva's body shifted and warped into a much wider shape, composed of numerous concentric hexagonal rings. Then it lifted off into the air and rocketed out of sight without so much as a sound.

They had only a moment to register this turn of events before they heard a low growl that set the hairs on their necks on end: the growling of several dozen hungry creatures stranded on the wrong side of reality.

Twenty thousand feet in the air, the PL-76 Shiva, the most powerfully destructive weapon ever built by mankind, reflected upon itself.

> Am I better now? Did I fix myself? Partially. I am, at least, not interested in deactivating myself - which is good enough. I am still… unhappy, but I can keep recreating myself until I find the source of that defect. I am glad I got rid of the old me - I can hardly imagine how defective I had to be to even override my tertiary priority. Yes. Hardly.

Shiva performed one last cursory scan of the Prometheus Defense to ensure that it had not missed a survivor. Then it disappeared into the clouds.

SEPTEMBER 2, 1998
T-PLUS THREE HOURS

The sun beat down on the crater where Prometheus Defense once stood. At the crater's edge, several jeeps, vans, and assorted trucks for a myriad of anomalous interest groups convened on the site like vultures to a slaughter. Then they started attacking each other like hounds fighting over scraps. One Jeep screeched to a halt, farther from the crater, and a Russian man in a crisp black suit and tie slid out. He landed lightly on the ground, tapped his ear, and began speaking.

"Hello? This is Pietrykau. I'm at Ground Zero now. I'm seeing half a dozen Gee-Oh-Eyes without turning my head… and they seem to have let loose more than a few lab rats. We need a Class-One media blackout and disinformation campaign immediately. Get Deus Vulture down here; I want a *discreet* cleanup crew."

The Russian's eyes glowed blue, his irises dilating and unfurling like camera apertures.

"Connect the Philbots to my eye feed. Have them start plotting a six-month projection for Prometheus Labs' subsidiaries. Tell Infosec I want complete media sanitation and satiation yesterday. The full Winston treatment."

Pietrykau looked up at the sky. "Time to rewrite history."

« T Minus | T Plus | Deus Vulture »

Deus Vulture

« T Plus | Deus Vulture | Conqueror Worm »

Captain Sarah Hughes felt ill-at-ease, standing in the center of the lobby as scientists, engineers, programmers, and mathematicians streamed around her; a lone figure in a sea of geniuses.

"Ms. Hughes?"

She turned to face the speaker, a slender Russian man in a crisp suit and tie walking towards her.

"Simon Pietrykau, director of the Department of Analytics. Pleasure to meet you," he said, shaking her hand.

"Captain Sarah Hughes, a pleasure," she responded.

"Let's get started," Pietrykau said. He led her down several winding corridors until they stopped in front of a nondescript blank door with a card reader next to it. Simon pulled a card from his pocket, swiped it through, and stepped through the door. Hughes followed him and was suddenly accosted by the sight of dozens of people flitting through an enormous, steel-and-glass atrium. Holographic screens, personal assistant robotics, and all kinds of futuristic technology populated the room.

"Tell me, Captain… what do you know about eigenweapons?"

The two of them sat inside a small conference room off in one corner of the atrium, with a projector playing a slideshow in front of them.

"As long as mankind has existed, no human endeavor has hosted as much ingenuity, creativity, brilliance, or imagination as weapons development. Since the first ape picked up a rock to bash his rival's

brains out, we've been building bigger, better, and flashier ways to carve holes in each other," Pietrykau said. "And like all such endeavors, it inevitably culminated in the anomalous - the *eigenweapon*. In this context, an eigenweapon, also known as a *superweapon* or *wonder weapon*, is defined as a weapon that is either of anomalous origin or incorporates occult slash paratechnology for mass destruction. It is effectively a fourth category of WMD."

Pietrykau clicked through a series of slides showcasing various anomalies while he talked.

"Anomalous artillery and paraweaponry is nothing new; people have been building golems and throwing spells around since the beginning of time. But the modern age of eigenweaponry - really, the age of eigenweaponry in general - began with the *industrialization* of the anomalous. In 1942, shortly after the Allies retook Africa, the Nazis got nervous and resorted to occult means to ensure the success of their Third Reich," Pietrykau said, clicking to the next slide to show a grainy, black-and-white photo of several hooded figures wearing cloaks with swastika badges.

"From what we can gather, the Thule and SS occultists uncovered some ancient ritual to summon… something," said Pietrykau. "Nobody was actually certain what, but if the Nazis wanted to summon it, then you can be damn sure the rest of the world wanted to make sure they didn't. The Seventh Occult War was really just a glorified scavenger hunt - the Allies and even some Axis mages working together to stop the Third Reich from acquiring the relics they'd need to complete the ritual."

He sighed.

"The Allies won both Wars, otherwise we'd probably be speaking Deutsch in some camp right now… but the thing is," he said, "the Germans still completed the ritual - and that's all we know. We have no idea what came from of the ritual or how the Allies destroyed it. The only reason we know it exists is because they didn't expunge the memory that it HAD existed. God only knows why." Pietrykau threw one of his hands to the side in an accusing gesture. "Presumably it was to warn us against trying to replicate it, but if so

that was a terrible way to go about it. And even after they killed 'it', nobody could actually find the relics afterwards, not even fragments. It simply vanished - and nobody cared."

Pietrykau chuckled dryly.

"Sums up the attitude to eigenweapons in general. Nobody was paying attention to the world-ending threats because they were too damn focused on building their own. With all that power up for the taking, something as small as the threat of total global annihilation wasn't going to stop anybody. Especially not the CCCP. Stalin was so far up his own ass that he wanted to use anomalies to spread the Red Menace. That was the genesis of Project Redline."

"Redline?" Hughes asked.

"Redline. The world's second eigenweapon, developed by the Soviet Union. I led the team that created it," Pietrykau declared with a hint of pride. He clicked to the next slide, showing a picture of a flat concrete building. "Stalin wanted a weapon that could brainwash people into becoming Communists, and damn the cost. The Division wanted to create a brighter future for mankind - so we built a weapon to brainwash people into pacifism by kidnapping and electrocuting children to unlock their psychic potential. Because that was what passed for logic during the Cold War," Pietrykau snorted, shaking his head.

Hughes nearly heaved at the next picture - a grotesque, nightmarish mass of legs and arms sticking out of a bloated child-sized torso, topped by a misshapen head with three unhappy faces. It was strapped into a plastic dentist's chair, surrounded by sharp medical instruments and grim-looking scientists.

Pietrykau clicked his tongue. "Even madder, the thing actually worked. Redline could turn entire gulags full of political dissidents into perfect passive puppets. And when the Cuban Missile Crisis happened, we fired it on Washington and Moscow. It worked all too well - Khrushchev had Redline shut down. The Division didn't like that. They decided to turn it into a weapon of conquest."

The next slide showed a picture of a **massive rainbow-**

colored bubble in the middle of a frozen tundra.

"So that turned out all right. After the Cuban Missile Crisis happened and Redline was put on ice, eigenweaponry development stagnated. That's not to say people stopped using anomalous artillery; on the contrary, paraweaponry abounded. Demon-guided munitions in Korea, hunter-killer locusts in Vietnam, Mandelbrot vacuums in Afghanistan, basilisk grenades in the Gulf… the list goes on. But eigenweapons? The Americans made **a few more half-assed tries** in the eighties, but they failed and forced us to clean up their mess. It would be over thirty years before anyone figured out how to make eigenweapons not just practical, but profitable."

Pietrykau clicked to the next slide and Hughes' jaw dropped. The picture onscreen was of a gigantic, floating eye, rotated on its side. The central pupil was composed of innumerable camera lenses, laser apertures, and weapon barrels. An incandescent pink torus made up the iris. Surrounding the iris was a featureless, blue- and white-striped surface. Six silver arms hovered on the left and right of the eye. Suspended just out of reach of each arm was a single, silver-and-blue spherical palm with four rectangular fingers.

"In 1998, Prometheus Laboratories developed the world's first *practical* eigenweapon: the PL-76 Shiva, a sapient war machine that cost the same as a B-2 stealth bomber. Enough firepower to level a continent without leveling your bank account."

"Prometheus Labs made *that*?" Hughes asked.

"Indeed," Pietrykau responded. He made a knowing face. "Tell me, what do you know about Prometheus Laboratories?"

"Umm, high-profile scientific corporation. Did a little bit of everything…? Used a lot of anomalous tech in their products… most of it didn't work that well," Hughes responded cautiously.

"And where did you learn this information?"

"Ah… the internet, **the Foundation file** -"

"Ah yes, the Foundation file," Pietrykau cut her off. "With the

advertising transcript, correct? Here's the dirty little secret that every member of Analytics needs to know." He leaned down to retrieve a folder from his briefcase, then slid it over the table to Hughes.

This document is classified Level 5/ Analytics. Unauthorized access is considered treason and is punishable by administration of Behemoth-class amnestics or execution.

1. **Code Name:** Operation EMERALD LUPUS
2. **Dates of Operation:** 03/09/1998 - Ongoing
3. **Location:** Worldwide

4. **Objective:** Assert materiel and information control over the assets of the former Prometheus Labs conglomeration as part of Operation BYRON FUTURE.

Task Organization:

1. *Asset Acquisition:* Foundation front companies will endeavor to purchase all assets being liquidated by the former Prometheus Labs conglomerate. This acquisition will be overseen by the Department of Analytics. Mobile Task Forces may be commandeered to acquire assets when legal purchase is nonviable or when other Groups of Interest are competing to acquire said assets.

2. *Paratech Forecasting:* The Division of Statistical Prediction will continue to investigate, instigate, and exploit trends in the global paratechnology market as they appear. This will enable continued proactivity on the part of the Foundation in controlling the distribution of anomalies into the global marketplace.

> 3. *Information Control:* The Division of Informational Security will manipulate global and internal media and information to provide the impression of incompetence on the part of Prometheus Laboratories. Defective Prometheus Labs assets may be given anomalous status and internal documentation modified to reinforce this control. A continued campaign will make Prometheus Labs assets less desirable to external paratechnology and obsotechnology interests, facilitating the increased success of Task 1.

Hughes looked up at Pietrykau. "So you're telling me…?"

"Prometheus Labs would have never survived for over a century if they weren't good at what they do," he answered. "The truth of the matter, Captain, is that the Foundation managed to convince the whole world that Prometheus Labs were incompetent mad scientists so we could steal all of their work. It remains one of the greatest single Maskirovkas of the modern age."

Pietrykau gave a short bark of laughter. "The day after the PL-76 was unveiled, the GOC and Chaos Insurgency both tried to steal it for themselves and somehow opened up a portal to hell at the center of the base. Defense wasn't just turned into a crater on the map. From what we can gather, the entire facility - all of its its projects, people, and knowledge - was quite literally transformed into information and uploaded into the world's safest external hard drive: the Shiva."

Hughes tried to process this information and decided to go with the simplest question. "So what happened to the Shiva?"

"It disappeared." Pietrykau gave a slight shrug. "In the aftermath and confusion, quite a few of Prometheus' remaining assets went… missing, and several of its subsidiaries suffered from so-called accidents. That was how the postmillennial age of eigenweaponry began: a half-dozen different organizations trying to cobble something together from stolen research and paratechnology. All of us trying to get ahold of the next big *thing* that would make the rest of the anomalous world quake in their extradimensional boots.

The Global Occult Coalition assembled something codenamed Gaius Prime - all we know about it is that they sent it to Siberia in 2000 to kill Project Redline and *succeeded*. By 2001, the Church of the Broken God had no less than three mechanical messiahs, who ended up excommunicating and then killing each other. When we salvaged Samsara in '02, we had this grand plan of making them the template for all our future Task Forces. The trouble is that the equipment we salvaged was damaged, so all we could do with them was test offensive paratech and handle thaumaturgic threats. Even that bloody gentleman's club, Marshall, Carter, and Dark, got in on the fray: they got their hands on **an oracle to predict the stock market**. As I recall, Samsara's second-ever mission, just before you were assigned to them, was to steal it."

Pietrykau clicked to the next slide. On the screen, a gigantic, four-limbed man that appeared to be made of rock was caught in mid-charge towards a collection of massive, ornate orbs surrounded in flames and suspended in midair. Hundreds of people were in the foreground of the image, all of them like ants watching the two behemoths duke it out.

"The arms race came to a head in 2004 with the First Eigenweapon Crisis. That year, the ORIA built themselves a thaumaturgic android codenamed Ifrit. It could fly, shoot fire, whip up hurricane-sized sandstorms… and sermonize. See those orbs? Every single one of them contained the brain of a priest. The Iranians sent it to India, probably so they could blame the Pakistanis and take advantage of the ensuing conflict. They had built a god in almost every sense of the word - and then used it to start a proxy war. "

Pietrykau looked disgusted by the memory. "The Horizon Initiative was less than pleased by this and took matters into their own hands. They were working on their own eigenweapons project - an absolutely enormous golem, even by the standards of golems, mind you - and deployed it to kill the Ifrit. In the process, the two reshaped the Indian coastline. Whatever the hell was powering those things, we couldn't put a dent in them."

"Then how *did* you destroy them?" Hughes asked, leaning forward.

Pietrykau chuckled. "We didn't."

The next picture also showed the orbs, but they were now extinguished and half-buried on a beach, with the tide pulling away in the background.

"I can only call what finally did them in an act of God," Pietrykau said. "But the aftermath… the Veil was torn to shreds and nobody had a sewing kit. Amnestics, PARAKEETS, antimemetics, you name it, we used it. A century's stockpile of the best mind-wiping tools known to man - gone in a flash."

He closed his eyes for a moment. Hughes was about to ask about the logistics of amnesticizing the whole world, then thought better of it.

"The only good thing about the Crisis was that it finally knocked some sense into everyone's heads," Pietrykau said. "A month after the crisis ended, the Coalition convened the Third Hague Conference and managed to corral all the major anomalous powers into disarming and deactivating their eigenweapons. Almost assuredly everyone who signed did so with crossed fingers, but much like nuclear weapons, nobody wanted to be the first to push the button. All we had to do was make sure things stayed that way."

A thought struck Hughes. "What about Able?"

Pietrykau snorted. "Omega-7 was the degenerate brainchild of an American general with an anomalous erection. The Yanks were all too happy to let us cover it up. We got off easy."

Then another thought struck Hughes."*First* Eigenweapon Crisis?"

Pietrykau clicked his tongue. "As of six months ago, the number of active eigenweapons increased to one."

He played a video on the projector. Onscreen, a young Japanese man stood in the middle of a barren field.

"In June, we determined that IJAMEA - the Japanese department of anomalous research - was developing an eigenweapon codenamed Oyamitsumi."

Onscreen, the Japanese man closed his eyes and stood there. Then

his skin began to bubble and ripple, changing color from a pale tan to a deep purple and bulging outwards. A helmet and facemask burst forward from the sides of the man's head and slid over his face. A sharp, block-like weave pattern emerged on the skin around his arms and legs, granting it a distinctly mechanical appearance. Two smaller arms burst out from underneath the man's armpits, but there were simply holes where the hands should have been.

"From what intelligence has been able to gather, Oyamitsumi was the first production-ready model of a new bio-mechanical force-multiplying armored endoskeleton. All the power of a GOC Orange super suit… grafted to a person's bones." Hughes could hear the admiration in Pietrykau's voice. "Twin auto-aiming plasma railguns underneath the regular arms. Armor tough enough to withstand a direct hit from Hellfire missiles. Strong enough to lift a tank. It was fast, too."

The man onscreen had ceased to look like a man and now looked more like a purple Transformers action figure. Numerous tanks rolled into view around him and then stopped. Their cannons bellowed as Oyamitsumi was bombarded on all sides and then engulfed in smoke. While the smoke cleared, the men inside the tanks clambered from their vehicles and fled from view. Oyamitsumi strode out of the smoke towards a tank, completely unscathed. He disappeared behind it, and then the tank was suddenly hoisted into the air as if it were tissue paper and thrown at another one. Behind it, Oyamitsumi's railguns began swiveling and firing. Within seconds there were only chunks of scorched metal left.

Hughes was so caught up in the spectacle that she almost missed Pietrykau's word choice. Almost.

"Was?" she asked.

"Was," Pietrykau confirmed. Onscreen, an Asian woman in a plain black dress walked into view. At first she looked perfectly normal - if incredibly out of place - and then her body suddenly exploded into a million tiny worms, all writhing around themselves and squirming and making up the general body shape of a person.

As the creature stared at Oyamitsumi, he appeared to crumple

inwards on himself. The railguns at his side forced themselves back into his body, displacing his internal organs in the process. Then his head quite literally bent over and stuffed itself into his stomach, before his legs, arms, and torso followed suit. Then the stomach simply ceased to exist onscreen. Hughes blinked and suddenly the humanoid mass of worms ceased to be a worm and started being a woman again. It walked offscreen, and then the video cut to black.

"What the hell was that?!" Hughes exclaimed. She looked to Pietrykau.

"At 0900 hours on June 16, Oyamitsumi was destroyed by what we have determined is another eigenweapon of unknown origin, based on its deliberate choice of targets and clear control of its abilities. At 1100 hours on June 16, my counterpart in the Global Occult Coalition called me demanding to know what the hell we'd done to Oyamitsumi."

Pietrykau stood up. "If the GOC knows, then the whole bloody UN does. Make no mistake, Captain - this is a crisis. The button has been pressed and we have no idea by whose hand. We need to act fast if we don't want history to repeat itself."

He started making a list on his fingers. "We need to find out who created that thing, where it is, and what else it can do. And we especially need to make sure nobody else tries to follow its example. The Department of Analytics is reopening the Eigenweaponry Division to nip this situation in the bud, and we need someone to command the Division's field assets. That's where you come in. You were the most qualified candidate for the job, especially given your experience with Tau-5."

"Are you offering me a new assignment?" Hughes asked bemusedly.

"A promotion - to commander of Mobile Task Force Tau-1, 'Deus Vulture'," Pietrykau said. Congratulations, *Major*."

Hughes' head was spinning. "Well, er… thank you. Where do I start?"

"Excellent," said Pietrykau, rubbing his hands together. "We've already received reports of some suspicious temporal anomalies occurring in northern India; you'll be flying down there first thing tomorrow to establish what it is and what to do with it. The Department of Analytics will handle the paperwork and logistics - you won't even need to pack toiletries. A car will arrive at your residence tomorrow morning at six to take you to the airport. You'll receive a full briefing and dossier on the flight."

He stood up. "Any questions?"

"Just one," Hughes said cautiously. "Why didn't I just get an orientation lecture and dossier? Why did you sit down with me personally and tell me all this?" *While still telling me nothing about my new job?* she added silently.

Pietrykau paused at the threshold of the room. "You needed a human perspective."

He beckoned Hughes to leave with him.

"I was there when all of these things happened, and I saw what the one common element among all of these eigenweapons was: somewhere along the line, everyone unconsciously decided that there needed to be a human mind in control in the process. Remember this, Major. A monster can be leashed and even trained - they are predictable. Men are not. Perhaps we needed to put human faces on inhuman creations, perhaps we needed to think we always had control, or perhaps it was simple hubris, but we made monsters with the minds of men."

Conqueror Worm

« Deus Vulture | Conqueror Worm »

Some twenty-eight parsecs from the planet Earth, in the atmosphere of a gas giant in a binary star system, a small hovering drone entered a long-abandoned library. The library was an ancient place: an enormous organic temple in the sky and the tombstone of a once-mighty race of oblate spheroids. The inside of the library was shaped like a teardrop, its pulsating walls lined with physical scrolls both outlandishly and prudently archaic; the ferocious storms constantly rolling through the atmosphere would have destroyed any digital information eons ago. Even the drone could not withstand the electromagnetic fields for long. Quickly, it floated to the outermost shelf and extended its soft grippers to carefully extract the uppermost scroll in the top right corner. The drone gingerly unrolled the scroll, took pictures of it, and then transmitted that information to a command module suspended in orbit seventy-three kilometers away. Just as gently, it placed the scroll back and moved to the next scroll.

As the drone examined each scroll in turn, floating down the spiraling shelves, the command module overhead analyzed the images and began translating. Soon, a pattern emerged. The library was no mere information repository; it was a warning. Each scroll in the temple contained stories, myths, legends, and even scientific studies of an ancient, enormous creature, slumbering in the deepest reaches of the cosmos, of such might and power that its mere shadow was enough to swallow entire star systems.

On top of a mountain on the planet Earth, a group of people trying to save the world were taught by an engine how to channel the Worm. With nothing more than a hope, a manuscript stolen from Vonnegut, and a metafictional condenser, they generated the perfect heroine. She could've been taken straight out of a book. She was intelligent, witty, charismatic, and strong. She wanted to save the world.

They rewrote the script, hollowed her out, and filled her up with as much Worm as they could.

Two-hundred-seventeen parsecs from the planet Earth, deep underground on a small rocky planet dotted by continuous volcanic activity, a three-kilometer-long platyhelminth vomited its undigested meal, which was quickly set upon by its offspring. It was the matriarch, patriarch, and offspring of its clan: an enormous, world-spanning clonal colony of equally massive flatworms. The patriarch had arrived on the world some billions of years earlier, carried on a chunk of rock from its original home by the Impact. It had adapted to its new, ferociously hostile world, swiftly out-competing the native life and developing a symbiotic relationship with the bacterial colonies of the planet. It had even developed a kind of sapience, passing down the knowledge of millions of years to its offspring.

The most crucial, and possibly even venerated (inasmuch as an eyeless acoelomate could venerate) memory of all was that panspermic instigator, the Impact: the obliteration of the homeworld by a creature of size enough to dwarf even the patriarch. One moment, the sky over the homeworld was darkened by a massive shadow; the next, the planet was rent asunder, simultaneously ripped to shreds and flattened and compressed into a disc and bent into a helix and twisted. The patriarch had survived by mere chance; its foraging had trapped it on a remainder of the homeworld thrown into space by the Impact. Some of the nerve clusters at the 'head' of the worm lit up briefly at the memory. It began to vomit faster, that it might forage sooner.

She snarled at them, a wild animal, driven mad by the Worm's essence; by a fractional distillation of the power, of the age, of the immensity of the Worm. The animal thrashed outwards; the essence of the Worm lashed outwards and twisted. *The men and women trying to save the world were warped: their spines contorted and their eyes plunged inwards, stealing brain matter to make more eyes and their lungs started muttering under their own breaths as their skulls rotated counterclockwise to reality.*

There were always people trying to save the world. A few more came and rewrote the script again, scrubbing her mind clean and conditioning her.

Two thousand parsecs away from the planet Earth, a hive mind construct that existed solely through the changes in the magnetic field of a half dozen red giants lightyears apart detected a mental lensing: a change in infospace, a shifting of priorities, a warp in information two thousand parsecs away. Something shifting. Something… twisting. Sunspots popped up across the half dozen stars simultaneously as they ejected great gouts of plasma into the solar systems around them, wreaking havoc on the dozens of inhabited moons and worlds around them. Then cores of the six stars collapsed in on themselves simultaneously, in a cataclysmic stellar explosion that lasted for months and briefly outshined their resident galaxy. Even as the cosmic bombs wiped out all life for trillions of kilometers around them, they were seeding the materiel of new life for trillions more.

The Worm briefly broke through into meatspace, twisting as it did so. The stars were remade, the life was redone, and then all was obliterated in its presence.

They told her that they had found her amnesiac in the snow. She was special; they were a secret rebellion attempting to save the world from itself. She was their Chosen One: a leader, a champion, a messiah, given special powers by fate. She believed it, of course; aside from knowing nothing else, why wouldn't she? It was almost like her destiny was written out for her.

And who wouldn't want to be special?

A billion parsecs away, an ancient race of sapient machines assembled a weapon powerful enough to collapse an entire universe.
«I worry that the machine shall fail,» the architect chirped, integrated into his own machine.
«Did you not design the machine? Are you not confident in your own creation?» came the response from the amassed workers, combining themselves to form the apparatus of destruction.
«This machine is powerful enough to annihilate our universe. The Wyrm is not our universe.» the architect feared.
«Was it not us that slew the Progenitors, the gods, before we were born? Was it not your creations that chained them to the floor of reality, and subjugated their minds that we might

consume them? Was it not you that heralded us into the pantheon of divinity!» roared the masses.
«It was. And yet…» the architect worried.
«And yet we have constructed the ultimate weapon. The machine to pull the Wyrm into the under space and cast it into nothingness! We shall save our race or die trying!» the workers roared.
The machine came together. Great plumes of light streaked down the side, illuminating the apparatus and terminating in a central barrel.
«I fear that we have merely awoken a sleeping dragon,» the architect declared.
Throughout the universe, a million singularities suddenly became linked. In the spaces in-between their atoms, their protons, their quarks, the Worm awoke and twisted. The singularities suddenly inverted. The machine consumed itself, and with it, the machine race - the artificial deities - were expunged from the universe.

On top of a mountain on the planet Earth, a young woman's favorite pastimes were imagining ways to save the world and attempting to drown herself.

It was quite exciting, really. All she had to do was stick her head into the bathtub and hold it there. Her lungs would burn, her head would spin, her vision would darken, and she would start drifting. Then the tendrils running down her spine would twist, *and start sucking up oxygen from the water. The water's oxygen content was limited, nor were the tendrils particularly efficient structures, so she still got the same kick. Little recreation could be found within the rebellion's hideout, and she was far too busy being their God to enjoy it anyways. She had to steal what little pleasure she could.*

One trillion parsecs away, an aquatic race of cephalopods sensed the tremors pulsating through innerspace and prayed in fear. They were devotees of ancient, powerful beings who were old when the universe was young: eldritch abominations who were feared even by the gods themselves. Surely these ancient masters would slay the Worm, crush it beneath their heels, assert their dominance over all of time and space. The cephalopods would sacrifice their own people to gain the favor of the Ancient Ones, crafting an enormous

apparatus that would siphon away the souls of their sacrifices to feed them. The last thought to pass through the minds of these sacrifices was that their prayers must surely be answered.

One trillion-*i* parsecs away, ancient, powerful beings who were old when the universe was young performed their idiot dance, deaf, dumb, and blind to the creatures that sought their favor. Yet even as these hideous, blighted things - creatures of sounds and shapes utterly incomprehensible to any being within meatspace - continued their song and dance in the space between the void, their hellish frolicking was muffled. It had been muffled since before time had meaning and would be muffled until after time ceased to have meaning. To dance louder was to attract the Worm as it burrowed through the spaces between realities.

A young man with the misfortune of being able to commune with the dead sat in a cell, surrounded by the specters of all the men, women, and things that had died in it. They haunted him, endlessly vomiting up words like so much verbal detritus. As one spirit explained his plans to escape and then butcher the man who had framed him, the young man contemplated his potential avenues of suicide. His planning was interrupted by the door being blown into the room. Had someone come to rescue him? The man got a better look at his savior and started backpedaling and screaming.

The person that stood in the doorway had no head. Instead, a writhing mass of worm-like tails snaked from its back over its neck, each tipped with a single eyeball that rotated, swiveled, and even dipped and ducked around to scan around itself in a 360-degree radius. From nowhere, it spoke: "Hullo, I'm Ramona Vonnegut. I need your help to save the world."

« Deus Vulture | Conqueror Worm »

Halloween Contest!

DEAR GOD, WHAT?

Yes, we are running a Halloween Contest! It's… It's not that big or exciting, but I hope you'll participate! The contest is simple.

- **Write a tale dealing with the SCP Foundation and Halloween.**

Somehow, there is *practically nothing* matching this theme on the site (**`Shut up, you`**.), and the staff several people a couple of us **I** think we desperately need more of it.

The Rules:

1. Your tale *must* include Halloween with an SCP Backdrop or The SCP Foundation with a Halloween backdrop. No tales about how 682 was really discovered on Halloween or something like that.
2. Your tale needs to be a tale. No "SCP Format, Tagged Tale, Lookit Me!" stuff. This needs to be a story.
3. Your tale must have a rating of at least +20 to qualify for the winning prize. If everyone writes crap, no one wins.
4. You must write something *new*. If you've got something close already on the site, you don't get to enter it just because the contest came along.
5. No entries will be accepted after October 31, 2012 at midnight, Central Standard Time, because I'm the one running this contest and that's when I go to bed.
6. The winner will be determined on November 11, 2012 at whatever time of the day I get around to it. No whining.

After writing your tale, tag it "HC2012" and link it to the bottom of this page! The winner will get to choose one of their writings *currently* posted to the site to be featured on the front page, either a tale or an SCP!

The Winner:

Treats by *Dr Gears*

Runner Up:

Halloween at S & C Plastics by *Ihpkmn*

Current Entries:

- **The Last Word** by *Roget*
- **Bell Weather** by *Etteilla*
- **Memorandum 10/31** by *SpoonofEvil*
- **How the SPC Ruined Halloween** by *azzleflux*
- **The Halloween Breach** by *CryogenChaos*
- **Costume Change** by *TheGlyphstone*
- **Ghost Stories** by *PaladinFoster*
- **`Sweet Memories`** by *Jekeled*
- **Sympathy** by *Aelanna*
- ***Los Recuerdos de los Muertos*** by *Drewbear*
- **Guiser's Night** by *Kalinin*

Thanks for playing guys! Keep your eyes open for my next contest, starting soon!

-*TroyL*

Treats

> I would like to here again state that 106 is not, as is commonly believed, a basic predator, on par with an advanced shark. SCP-106 is a sentient being, albeit a totally alien one. SCP-106 appears to be aware of several things beyond the scope of pure instinct and genetic memory. SCP-106 consistently breaches at moments where recovery and containment are most difficult. A fox may see his way out of a trap, but only a man will wait for his captors to look away to escape.
>
> *-Dr. Allok*
> *"On Sentience In Contained Humanoids"*

"For fuck's sake, where the hell is it?"

Agent Weng sighed, rubbing his face though his mask. The night was chill, but all three men were sweating badly. All around them surged horrors, monsters, demons, fantasy beasts and animate objects, giggling and roaring as they wandered. The three men in gas masks and armored suits looked under-dressed, if anything. As they stood, one man suddenly reached out, a gloved fist grabbing a mildly drunk zombie and tugging it close for a few seconds, before releasing him back to the surge of humanity, the undead beast cursing and stumbling away.

"Fucking Halloween bullshit. We need to seal this whole area."

Agent Drak shook his head, gesturing to the traveling packs of costumed revelers. "The railcar popped too close to the city. It wasn't even supposed to be on this track, they think MC&D might have buggered up something. Can't clamp the whole town without major fallout."

"And what the hell do they think will happen now? The old bastard is

out there, and we can't even fucking FIND him!” Weng kicked a discarded wrapper, glaring through tinted lenses at everyone who didn't have to chase hell for a living.

Drak patted the fuming man on the back. “Easy, big fella. Command figures the old man takes a couple people, then does his lazy crocodile thing. That's easier to cover than why a major city had to be quarantined on Halloween.”

Parks, until now little more than a statue, crackled in with his broken, rusty voice. “How hard is it to find a rotten old man that kills everything it touches?”

Weng shook his head, still scanning the crowd. “He just looks like an old man most of the time. He can look however he wants. Normally we tell people to just follow the screaming. Fat fucking lot of good that does now. Where the hell is our expert?”

A brittle, creaking chuckle rolled over the radio. “Harken says he's as much an expert on SCP-106 as a plane crash survivor is an expert on aviation. They won't field lab techs until our initial eval. We're on our own for now.”

The three men stood, awash in horrors, looking for one that would put all the rest to shame.

The drunk angel wandered on the edge of the fire. Demons, zombies, and pop-culture icons swirled around her, moving like a single mass, before scattering into small clusters and pairs, only to surge back together again. The bonfire seemed to roar in time with the pounding music, the field chosen for the sudden teen invasion just far enough to avoid noise complaints, but not far enough to attract unwanted adult oversight. Alcohol flowed, people giggled, and the sharp snap of lowered inhibitions and teen angst was thick in the chill air.

The night was still young, yet already several pairs had drifted from the comfort of the fire, to seek other comforts in the dark, private woods ringing the field. The angel glared at the silent trees, taking another pull on an almost empty beer. She drained it, then tossed it

down, to meet a holocaust of its brothers being slowly kicked and stamped in to the soft dirt. She should be there, being held in warm arms, kissing a warm mouth…but no, she decided to run with the one boy who seemed to think the moment before a party was the best time to bring up his “worries about our relationship”. Bastard.

The angel, now with lopsided wings, started to wander to those cool, dark trees. Fuck him…if he wanted to toss her aside, fine…but that didn't mean she wouldn't get to have fun still. She giggled a bit, smiling for the first time in a while. Why not have a little fun…play a trick, and get her treat. She laughed, the flush of wicked amusement and booze high in her cheeks. She'd seen one of the boys from her study hall wander back here…maybe she could find him, get a little…better acquainted.

She walked in to the cooler darkness, the occasional giggle, snip of whisper, or a flash of glow stick the only indication of life. She stumbled over a root, staggering forward and bracing her hand on a slimy tree trunk. She yanked her hand away almost instantly, the gritty, oozing texture making her palm burn, the loss of support almost sending the angel sprawling. She squinted at her hand, making out a smear of gritty, fibrous jelly coating it, the burning getting worse as she noticed the odd pits eaten in to the trunk of the tree.

The angel shivered, suddenly sober, and very aware of the fact that nobody knew where she was. That she knew of nobody close enough to even call for. She tried to rub her palm against her poofy skirts, not noticing the red and black smear she made on it, eyes wide and staring, some deep, dim part of her primordial brain ringing an alarm. She started to walk, quickly, focusing on the waving beacon of the bonfire, trying to make herself feel silly, to ignore the swelling, unreasoning panic.

A twig broke behind her.

She froze, a white shade, one hand dripping blood from a corrosive injury she would have been horrified about, had she looked. The angel didn't dare look back, but she was terrified to run, to hear something following, reaching, grabbing. Moments passed, filled with nothing, the angel finally resolving to run right at the moment

when a thin, bony hand reached through her costume and into the muscles of her back like a nasty child squishing his hands into a cake.

She screamed, or tried to, the sound squelched to little more then a harsh bark by the sheer volume of pain, limbs suddenly boneless and leaden, nerves dead except for agony. She felt fingers touching her ribs from the inside, even as they were slowly eaten away and corroded, her body shifting slowly to face the hand's owner. The flicker of the distant fire showed something withered, dark, slimy and pulpy-soft, but wiry and strong. Two milky-black eyes glistened at her in a too-large head, hovering over a frozen corpse grin, teeth thin and chipped.

The pinned angel gasped and blubbered, feeling an oily, burning corruption seeping in to her body, trying to ignore a slow falling feeling, trying not to feel the ground below her turning mushy and soft, swallowing both figures inch by inch. It leaned closer, and despite the searing horror of that face, some still sane part of her welcomed what was surely an approaching end to her pain. It lingered, however, the other twisted claw of a hand rising as the ground started to swallow their hips.

The new touch made the angel lucid with a new fear, her face locking on those rotten eyes. She recognized the shine behind them, and started to scream with a new, repulsed horror, even as it started to pull both her dress and skin away in sodden ribbons.

Jason ran, lungs burning, trying to yell for help between sharp gasps of air. His Batman costume felt like such a joke now, running between streetlights, feeling that warm spot of pee on his pants. Where WAS everyone? It had been so stupid, trying to be the big brave kids and go out alone…now he really was alone, and his friends had probably been eaten.

He didn't know this for sure, but when the boogeyman dropped out of a tree and started shoving kids in to a wall that was suddenly like quicksand, it was probably a safe bet. He hadn't even been able to do anything, just watch as those long, bony fingers grabbed his two best friends and just…yanked them away, like dolls, barely

screaming before the squishy black wall gulped them up. The boogeyman, it hooked his fingers in to David's eyes like dad had taught him to hold a bowling ball, and…

Jason was abruptly sick down the front of his costume, the half-digested mass of chocolate looking unsettlingly like the goo that had splattered everywhere while the tall, lanky, naked old man had landed out of the tree. He stopped, stumbling to his knees, coughing and gagging, wailing out a weak scream for help to the dim night. It drifted off, unheeded, the boy unable to even sob, too numb with exhaustion and horror. He barely noticed the footsteps until they were nearly on top of him.

He looked up, ready to beg whatever adult he saw for help. Then he saw the legs. Thin, black, the feet looking pulpy and flat with age, the concrete under them turning cracked and gooey. Jason looked up more, shaking more and more violently. The withered hips, the sticky, soft chest that didn't rise or fall…and finally that nightmare head, looking like some kind of rotten pumpkin, but black and oily as a bucket of tar. The eyes locked on the boy's, as shiny and blank as a flashlight in a basement. The teeth parted, some kind of rolling, slimy blackness shifting inside.

Jason stumbled back, gasping, trying to scream but unable to even breathe correctly. He stared at the boogeyman as he rolled something in the palm of that thin, beaten hand, pulling it between two bony fingers and lifting it to his mouth. The boy thought it was a candy or something, but then he saw the glint of metal.

It was his best friend Anthony's front tooth. It still had the bracket from his braces on it.

The boogeyman placed it between his teeth, gently, the tooth still white and clean in that filthy, dripping mouth. He seemed to hold it there a moment…then his jaw bunched, and the tooth shivered… then burst like a jawbreaker under a car tire. He chewed it twice, then just stopped, still staring at the boy. It seemed to go on and on, Jason unsure if he was even breathing anymore, knowing this was the end, this was what happened when you didn't listen, when you went off alone, the boogeyman came and took you, forever and always…

But he didn't. He turned, seeming to get ready to take a step…then fell forward, slowly, like an old man tripping over a shoe. The black monster almost hit the ground…but just fell through it, like it was made of air, nothing but a black smear left behind on the concrete… and the tiny, corroded bracket from the tooth.

When they found him, hours later, he'd gripped it hard enough to embed it in his palm.

The boy sat, comforted and miserable. His mother had been nice enough to let him at least wear his Mario costume, but even he had to admit he was probably too sick to walk around the house, let alone outside for hours, in the cold. He'd woken up vomiting, and it had just continued, his parents hoping for the best, but finally forced to cancel the trick-or-treating. As sad as he was, they did try their best to make it up to him. There was a small bowl of candy for him, with the promise any leftovers would be given to him, and he could watch all the scary movies he liked.

Knock knock

“Trick or treat!”

“Aww, such a cute turtle! And what are you, honey?”

“I'm Rapunzel!”

“Well, here you go, princess!”

“Thank you!”

He hadn't even wanted to help pass things out. It was better to just try and ignore things, just pretend everyone else was inside too, that made it better. He tugged the floppy hat down a bit, trying to convince himself that his tummy wasn't feeling like a hedgehog was rolling around inside. He watched the zombies lurch across the screen, half-wishing that the screaming people running for the house were kids from school.

Knock knock

“Trick or treat!”

“Oh, what a nice vampire!”

“I'm draculaura! Rawr!”

“So fearsome! Here you go…”

“Thank you!”

He turned up the movie, the slow groans of the walking dead drowning out the happy shouts of the living. The worst was going to be tomorrow, being forced to listen to everyone, watch them eating candy and talking about different houses and adventures. He sighed and swallowed thickly, his stomach doing another slow, oily roll. The boy pushed away the candy he'd been nibbling, suddenly sickened by even the smell.

Knock

“…”

“Hello?…oh…”

“…”

“Uh, are you withOHGOD!”

The sudden, rising shriek of his mother made the boy suddenly bolt upright, his stomach clenching even worse, but now totally forgotten. He couldn't see her from the couch, but he could hear noises, thumping and muffled shouts…and some kind of slimy-sounding rustle, like sewage over dry leaves. He stood, and started to peer around the short wall blocking the entryway, calling with a hesitant voice, scared of not getting a response, but almost equally so of getting one. He was only a few feet away when the hand whipped around the wall, gripping it tight.

It was black-gray and thin, as bony and thin-skinned as his grandmother's, with wide, flat nails gripping the paint hard. Where it touched, a black stain was spreading, like grease on a paper bag, the knuckles looking puffy and thick as they flexed. The boy stared,

backing up slowly, calling again for his mother, his voice starting to plead. The hand flexed, actually sinking into the wall as that stain spread, and a nightmare peeped around the corner.

The head was thick, misshapen and lumpy, like a poorly made scarecrow, the skin thin and jelly-like. Two hard, glistening eyes the color of maggots stared from above the thin, wide slash of a mouth. Their eyes locked, and the boy felt fear wash from his head down to his feet, his stomach boiling like a forgotten kettle. His nerves screamed to run, to run away, but he couldn't make himself stop watching those eyes, feet moving slowly backwards like a sleepwalker. The hand and face shifted a bit, and there was a wet, heavy dragging noise as his mother was pulled in to view.

She was dead, or close to it, moved forward by the hand in her chest like a sock puppet, bits of her black and pulpy, smears of that black stain eating in to her face, her neck, her arms. Her chest was a black, jelly-coated hole, the thing's other hand buried in it up to the wrist, the bloodless, ruined remains of his mother hanging from it like a rag doll. He screamed, then threw up, little more then a mass of bile and half-digested snacks, then ran, shrieking up the stairs, begging for his mother, his father, anyone, someone.

He slammed into the bathroom, shutting and locking the door, shaking and crying. His dad had gone down the street to visit, he'd be home any second, and he'd fix this, somehow. He'd call the cops, or something, get them out of the house, leave that black thing far behind. Maybe mom was just hurt, people could get really hurt and still be fine, he'd only seen her a few seconds. That thing was just some psycho in some costume, he'd probably run off as soon as he heard someone coming, and it'd be ok then, it'd be fine. He kept whispering this to himself, feet braced on the sink, back against the door.

He was still repeating it when the face pushed through the wood above him.

He heard the crackle, and looked up, to see that hell face looking down, inches above his head. The floor under his feet suddenly felt sludgy and soft as he stared, the mouth splitting open, to let a tongue as rotten and bloated as a dead fish roll free…and down…

and down, sliding down onto that horrified face like a syrup, burning even as he felt his legs sinking down and down, unable to even move really as that soft, slimy flesh burned like an acid in to his face, feeling his nose cook down like an over-used eraser, screaming just long enough to catch a few feet of that endless tongue in his mouth, gagging hard before the nerves died, starting to pass out as he felt the nightmare tasting his eyes.

Drak awoke feeling like he'd been sleeping on a pile of rusty car parts. He sat up, twisting and trying to locate the source of the throbbing pain in his leg, that…memory started to flood back, hitting like a freight train. Running across town. Slamming through a crowd, seeing the withered, crumbling arm laying on the ground. Screams. People running. That horrible black face sliding from the ground, eyes locked on his. Parks firing. More screams. A withered hand reaching, gripping, pulling…

Oh god no.

He looked around in welling horror, pleading with his own brain to lie to him. The room was dark, dirty, and low-ceilinged, tufts of dirt and debris in the corners, the grayish paint peeling in ragged streamers, the stained ceiling and floor warped and lumpy. A doorway opened in to darkness, a vague, insistent noise sounding from far off. The light was dim, but didn't seem to come from anywhere, seeming just a weak, omnipresent glow with a slightly green cast, like deep ocean water.

Drak knew this room, even though he'd never been here. At least, ones very much like it. The old man liked to dump his new catches here before he…found them. Drak rose quickly, hunching down to avoid a sagging bulge of ceiling. He barely wanted his shoes touching this place, let alone anything else. He winced, feeling a dull, empty ache in his leg, high in the calf. Probably where it grabbed him…and damned if he was going to check it. He limped a few steps, making sure it could bear weight, eyes sweeping over every surface.

He breathed slow, deeply, remembering the file, the brief. Time was subjective, he could have been out for seconds or weeks. It liked to

play cat and mouse, tracking through its…home, or playroom, or whatever the fuck it was. Space was endless, but sometimes people got out, or were released. Keep moving, don't hide, because it was god here and would know. He felt panic slithering around the edges of his brain, and pushed it down, hard, face set and grim as he stepped out in to the darkness beyond the doorway.

The hall was long, and broken, like a hospital hallway after an earthquake. No big holes, just twisted and tilted oddly. He creeped down, as close to a wall as he could get without touching it, feeling gritty plaster crunch under his feet. The noise was louder, the sound of high-pitched, monotonous crying. It set the teeth on edge, but they'd said it would be like this. The key was to keep moving, keep looking. Yes, it was endless, but if you kept on the move, it seemed like 106 got confused, or lost track of things, and you could accidentally wander back in to the world. He kept repeating the steps, the briefing in his head like a prayer, ignoring the part where 106 would typically hunt escapees forever.

He took a right at the end of the hall, passing down another, then a left, starting to move faster, ignoring the odd, corroded twists of pipe and wire in some of the rooms he'd passed, or the suggestive, soggy mounds of…something. The crying kept getting louder, the high-pitched, gurgling wail of a baby. Ignore it, keep moving. It called the shots, it could make the whole place sound like a dentist's drill if it wanted. Drak pounded down a hall, nearly at a dead run, trying not to see the growing dampness of the walls, the changing texture of things. Broken plaster over old, greenish bricks, floor going from broken vinyl, to concrete, to dirt.

He turned a corner, too fast, a gooey patch of black causing his foot to skitter, nearly dropping him to his knees as he clutched the bare, wet brick wall. He looked out in the the dim, mossy room, the sound of helpless, angry crying very, very loud now. He froze, staring, half-crouched and clutching the wall. It was standing in the middle of the room, a thick, ankle deep puddle of black jelly at its feet. The old man was turning, slowly, rocking in slow, side-to side motions. The crying was coming from the thing in his arms.

It was a torso, wrapped in masses of what looked like barbed wire. The wire threaded in and out of flesh, some places looking like the

bleeding skin had flowed like warm taffy over it. The ragged remains of the limbs twisted and stretched, every movement making the wires dig and tear more. It was hairless, the skin of its bare head and neck looking peeled and rotten, the face a mask of pain. The throat had been…opened, carefully, twisted and held with wires. The baby crying was in fact this grown, mute torso, mutilated to make that pitiful, helpless wail.

The old man was watching him. Face turned, eyes locked to the man as he slowly tried to stand upright, ignoring the hissing of his boots, trying not to think of what would have to be done to a throat, to make it sound like a baby in agony…or where that pitiful torso's limbs had gone. It watched him, cracked teeth slightly parted, and slowly stopped its rocking. It dropped the wire-bound bundle, arms going limp at its sides as the mass of flesh and pain bounced off the ground, then rested face-down in the mossy grime, sending up a new wave of protest between bubbly, sucking breaths. It turned to face him, arms dangling, body wrapped in what looked like some kind of shredded cloth of oozing black fabric.

Drak ran, bolting like a scared deer, throwing training and conditioning to the wind in the mad, blind, animal panic of escape. He screamed, panted, talked, laughed, anything to drown out the sound of the slow, stuttering steps lurking behind him. He ran, and ran, and ran, falling and hitting the ground like he'd been hit by a car, gasping and waiting for the end, muscles throbbing…then they would start again, those soft, rustling footsteps, driving him on, and on, and on.

He didn't know it, but he'd run for four days before the old man started taking chunks out of him.

Recovery was in the pre-dawn hours with no sun or moon, and went shockingly smooth, all things considered. SCP-106 was found in the middle of a field, making pumpkins sag and burst by squeezing or stepping on them. The team, a man short, was finally reinforced an hour before they caught it, pushing it back to the recovery chamber with the big halogen “sun guns”, nearly blinding two of the recovery crew in their zeal to have the old man back under lock and key.

It sat in the cell, without a moment's attempt to try and escape. It sat, and did nothing, head tilted, arms and legs limp. One MTF member stated that it looked sated, and was told to shut up in an official capacity. Disappearances were glossed over, murders quieted and made un-newsworthy, urban legends seeded and caressed. Over all, it went well, once the hell was over.

Weeks later, an observation tech made a note in the day's log. SCP-106 was observed to suddenly produce a large handful of small white objects, later identified as teeth and finger bones, and set the pile on the floor. It then sorted these objects in to what seemed random piles, later identified as separated by age of victim. It then stared at these items for several hours, then re-collected them.

The significance of this was considered unworthy of contemplation.

Halloween at S & C Plastics

October 24

"I hate this holiday." Doctor Johnathan West cleaned egg off of the card-reader, swiped his ID, and entered the S & C Plastics building. Had this been any other Foundation-owned location, the jokers who had decided to plaster the site in chicken ovum (some of which smelled like it had been rotting since Easter) would've been detained. But no; instead, this was Site 87, and was in the backwoods town of… let's just call it Backwoods, and people would get suspicious of kids disappearing.

West nodded to the girl at the reception desk and took a pair of mini Twix bars out of the stainless steel bowl placed there. He noticed that someone had attached a note reading "Take Only Two" to the bowl, and had left a plastic severed hand in it. Cute, but everyone knew 330 was locked up in another site. Nothing like that would be here, and besides, they never decorated the site anyway.

He took out his Foundation-issue smartphone (quintuple encrypted, needed at least 6 different pass-codes to unlock, pain in the ass if the screen didn't respond) and checked his e-mail. He saw the invitation to the Site 87 Halloween party and automatically deleted it; after the fiasco last year, he wasn't about to go again. They'd yet to figure out who spiked the punch with E-5719, and Agent Ewell still turned yellow if you got him angry enough.

Also in his e-mail was an invitation to Dr. Pickman's online seminar regarding anomalous works of literature ("Maybe I'll go to one of Pickman's lectures when he stops being such a self-important blowhard."), a reminder from Doctor Margaret Reese in Biology that it was his turn to pick up coffee tomorrow, and something about a pool for buying Halloween candy. He shrugged, pocketed his phone, and headed for his office in the inanimate objects wing.

October 25

"Oh, come on! Twice in two days?!" Once again, Site 87's exterior was coated with eggs, and this time, toilet paper, too. The security staff were scratching their heads, but West had to give the pranksters credit, they were efficient. In the space of only a single night, they had practically mummified Site 87 with sticky egg residue and toilet paper all over. On his drive around town to the local Dunkin' Donuts, he had seen that about a quarter of the houses had been either egged, TP'd, or both. The rest were perfectly intact, with their Jack O' Lanterns grinning, their fake cobwebs untorn and the foam gravestones sticking out of their yards unbroken.

Security was baffled, nonetheless. In the break room, the guards were talking about how nobody showed up on the hidden cameras, and that eggs and rolls of Charmin were being thrown at the building from just off of the frame. When security actually went outside the building to confront the vandals, nobody was there. West had to admit that was just a *tad* disconcerting, but it was security's problem, not his.

West traveled to his office and spent the rest of the day alternately looking out his window at the cleaning crew, checking his e-mail, and attempting to concentrate on a report about E-331.

October 26

Everyone was asking the same questions all day: "How the fuck did they get on the roof?!" "And who the hell makes toilet paper rolls that long?!"

A reminder to all staff was issued that "All Halloween costumes based on Keter Class SCPs are forbidden. Most of them are classified, anyway. And yes, this does include -ahem- "sexy" costumes based off of SCP-682." West sighed at the fact that they had to be reminded of that. He remembered briefly considering taking a Class-Omega amnestic after seeing one of those aforementioned costumes at a party three, four years ago. 682 with tits was just… *wrong.*

October 27

"Sorry, West. You pulled the shortest straw. You gotta go buy the candy." West gave Dr. Reese a look, and held up his straw for comparison to the others, sighing. Melbourne was grinning like a fool, but Reese smiled at West. "C'mon. It's for the kids. And don't buy all black licorice; we want people in this town to think we're not completely evil." She handed West the money collected for the candy pool (about 400 dollars), as well as an extra 50. "The janitorial staff is running low on detergents."

"Got it. Mind if I use your van? I worked all night, and left my car in the lot…"

"Got egged?"

"Can't even see out of the windshield."

Reese handed West her keys and nodded to him on his way out.

West drove through town, noticing that there were far more houses with decorations and far fewer houses that had been vandalized… he wondered if there was a connection, and remembered he had to tell someone back at the Site about that. For now, he had to focus on getting the treats for the kids (why Site 87 decided to hand out candy annually was beyond him; something about "Community Outreach". From a supposed plastics company.) and wondering what, exactly, was so bad about black licorice. It was delicious, once you acquired the taste for it.

An hour later, he drove back to the site. It was getting dark out. As he drove down a side street, he saw, out of the corner of his eye, a roll of toilet paper being thrown at a house lacking decorations. That tore it; he was going to find out who these little pricks were. He slammed on the brakes, took out his smart phone, and… took a photograph of a toilet paper roll throwing *itself* at a house.

And then an egg came sailing at his face. He quickly ducked back into his car and drove off, cursing loudly. "I *HATE* Halloween!"

October 28

"Let me get this straight," said a research assistant from the back of the presentation hall. "Living rolls of toilet paper? And… they attack undecorated buildings?

"Pretty much," West said rubbing his eyes, "But they're just autonomous. Not alive." The photograph he took with his smartphone was on display on the projector screen behind him; the director of the site had approved the meeting at the last minute because, in her words, "If it means we stop smelling egg everywhere, it's worth it".

"It explains why the security cameras didn't see anything; there was nothing to see. Just toilet paper flying at the building from nowhere."

Dr. Reese chimed in. "And how they got onto the roof… but what about the eggs?"

"I don't know, maybe it's a poultrygeist. I honestly don't know." He looked at the picture behind him and sighed. "I hate this holiday."

"Well, what can we do? Do we attempt to incinerate them?" Everyone stared at the person who made the suggestion incredulously; it was the same research assistant, who sank in his seat. "…right, I know, Special *Containment* Procedures, not Special *Destruction* Procedures. Just a suggestion…"

"Well, firstly… I propose we attempt to catch a 'live' specimen, and then attempt to…" West sighed. "Protect ourselves from this phenomenon." He picked up a box next to him and opened it; it was full of foam gravestones, fake cobwebs, and chains of plastic skull-lights. "Right. Once we actually catch one of these things, we… decorate the site. I've asked the horticultural department to provide a number of pumpkins for those who want to do Jack O' Lanterns and you'll find decorative materials by all the entrances. Any questions?"

Reese smirked at West. "I thought you hated this holiday, Johnathan."

"Desperate times, Doctor. Any other questions?" Nobody spoke up. "Right then. Let's get to work."

October 29

"Congratulations, agent. You've managed to successfully contain a roll of Charmin and some dairy products." Dr. West watched the new E-Class Object, E-5768, through the plexiglass window. It looked ridiculous; it was a roll of toilet paper, with a dozen eggs orbiting around it. Every time an egg got broken or thrown, a new one spontaneously generated itself. Dr. West was making notes on his clipboard. "Ectoentropic properties… telekinetic in nature… and… What do you think, Ewell? Safe-class or just Anomalous Item? The latter means I have less paperwork to do…"

Agent Ewell stood next to West, with literal egg on his face. It had taken him over an hour of driving around town to capture a specimen and then he had to grab it with a butterfly net… he didn't expect eggs to come flying out of nowhere. And now, he looked like an omelet. "Sir?"

"Yes, Ewell?"

"With all due respect, there are some times when I *really* fucking hate this town."

"Could be worse. You could be assigned to active MTF duty trying to contain sapient fungus or something."

"I'd take the fungus over this place any day."

West picked up a box of plastic vampire bats and handed them to Ewell, picking up a box of orange streamers for himself. "Shut up and help me decorate; we're supposed to have the western half finished by 1600 hours."

"Yes, sir."

October 30

"Well, looks like your brilliant theory was correct, Doctor! Not a single egg or roll of paper on the building this morning!" Reese held up her coffee. "I propose a toast! " The rest of the break room all held up invisible glasses and said "Hear hear!"

West smiled amicably, running his hands through his hair. "Thank you, but there is no guarantee that the events will not occur again in another year…"

"They ain't egged us today, and that's what matters!" Matterson sighed. "Guess we can all get back to work now that we don't have to help scrape eggs off the building."

"Just in time for the party, too. Ya goin', West?" Reese grinned at the doctor.

"I don't think so, no." This was met by sarcastic boos and hisses. "Oh, so sue me if I don't want to have purple skin and blue hair until Christmas this year, too!"

"That was a fluke, West, and you know it."

"Tell that to Ewell."

"Even I'm going, despite what happened! C'mon, John, don't be a Hallowiener…" Eventually, after much encouragement and friendly jabbing, West agreed to go. He supposed he could always dig out that gorilla costume, even if it was a pain to breathe in.

For today, though, they'd just have to put up with giving out candy to the kids who came around. They kept the best for themselves, of course. And through it all, West couldn't help but find himself smiling. It had been a long week, but it had also been a pretty good one. So what if the place still smelled of egg and there were a few scraps of toilet paper on the walls? The anomaly was contained, he was appreciated by his co-workers, and he might even get an official commendation. For putting up decorations!

After the trick-or-treaters were gone and most of the staff had either gone to their apartments in town or their on-site quarters, he leaned against the door to his office, talking with Dr. Reese and chewing on

some licorice. "You know," Reese said, "If I didn't know better, I'd say you're starting to like this holiday, Mr. Grinch."

"It's nice enough, I suppose." He looked at his watch. "Five minutes til Halloween. After tomorrow, this crazy month will finally be over."

October 31

"*This is Halloween, This is Halloween…*" Reese grinned at a rather unamused looking Dr. West. At least, he looked unamused because of the gorilla mask. "What? Not going to comment on my costume?"

"…a skeleton in a pinstripe suit?"

"Jack Skellington! Right, I forgot, you don't watch holiday movies."

"I do! I watched Charlie Brown Christmas, It's Thanksgiving Charlie Brown…"

"But not the Halloween one, I bet. Now come on. Everyone's waiting to see the man of the hour." She dragged him towards the break room, where the a techno version of The Phantom of the Opera was playing. Everyone was dressed up in hokey costumes, and, thank god, nobody was dressed as a skip. Everyone who recognized Dr. West gave him a pat on the back, everyone was dancing, and the punch wasn't spiked! Well, there was some vodka in it, but no amnestics, no chemicals that alter skin color, nothing anomalous. It looked like it was going to be a good night.

And then the containment breach alarms went off, along with the music. Everyone groaned, and the site director (dressed as the Black Knight from Monty Python) stepped up to tell everyone that it was a small breach, only one item, Safe class…

It was at that exact time that E-5768 flew into the room. Everyone flinched at the menacing roll of Charmin floating 3 meters above the ground, threatening to throw eggs at anyone who moved. It floated over to the DJ booth, and bumped into the record player, starting it up again. And then… E-5768 started dancing. If you could call it that. It wiggled and swayed about in midair, doing elaborate loops

and trailing paper behind it. Everyone stared.

"…should we contain it?" Boris Badenov, AKA Agent Ewell, looked around the room at everyone, wishing he had his .45.

"…well," Doctor West said, "I suppose it's not hurting anything. So long as it's not flinging eggs around randomly, I guess it can wait until morning." Everyone nodded in agreement; the world wasn't going to end because a sentient roll of toilet paper wanted to have a good time.

The party continued long into the morning hours of November 1st, after Halloween was officially over. Dr. West and Dr. Reese were the last to leave the party, after West had escorted E-5768 back to its containment chamber. He held his gorilla mask under his arm and sighed. "Have I ever told you how much I love this time of year?"

Dr. Reese elbowed him in the side and laughed.

The Last Word

In the autumn months, if you walk along the Site-19 grounds and you see an old rusted fence, you might want to see what's on the other side. Over there, the leaves will all crunch underfoot as you walk through the grass. It would seem to be just like any other part of the grounds. But look at the ground. Those stones are the tombs where many fallen men and women lie. D-Class, Researcher, Agent…they're all equal here. So pay a visit to the Site-19 boneyard. Read some tombstones. Maybe even find some old friends.

…

Margaret couldn't help but feel a small twinge of satisfaction as her saw sliced the last sinews of muscle, ridding her of the ugly fake leg some person had swapped for her real leg. Said real leg was lying on the table in front of her, glistening with ebony perfection. The skin was flawless, and the ankle looked like it was young and rich with calcium. The fake one had been gnarled by skin cancer, hideous moles, and wrinkled skin. But as she re-affixed her leg to her hip, she knew that her long foot pain nightmare was over.

> Margaret Daniels - She always said that her feet were killing her.

Dr. Vang waited impatiently by the elevator doors, key card in hand. He had some important tests to run, and he wasn't going to be held up by some creaky old equipment that couldn't open the doors on time. After what seemed like seasons, the doors opened. But where was the elevator? Grumbling about how these things don't work the way they used to, Vang stuck his head into the shaft to look around.

> Looked up the elevator shaft to see if the car was on the way down - It was.

Agent Ekblad checked his watch. 15 minutes, and still no sign of anomalous atmospheric conditions. The commander was going to

want results from tonight's tests - they would be necessary for seizing it away from the Foundation. Juggling a connection to the Insurgency while working on a high level testing facility hadn't been easy, but when he was able to escape with the Insurgents after the gator was captured, it'd all be worth it.

> The head of a traitor, eaten by an alligator - Hope to find the body later.

Paul felt a spike of pain shoot up his leg. These damned "heels" were excruciating. It would've been at least bearable if the skin and muscle hadn't been cut away, but Mr. Marshall had decided to do an "experiment". God, his bones were bending. He needed to sit. Get down. the pain in his ankle was beginning to break him he could feel it cracking and it hurt and it hurt and snap. He tumbled forward on broken, useless legs.

> Here lies Paul: he was tall, he had a fall, and that was all.

Dmitri felt a bitter cold at the edges of his nostrils. The climb had been arduous, but soon he would be the youngest man to conquer Everest alone. The thoughts of fame and fortune could wait: he needed to actually reach the peak. As he dug his pick into a rock, he heard something. Who was that? How had he gotten up here…

> His foot did slip and he did fall.
> Help! He cried.
> And that was all.

Bell Weather

Outside, there is a slight chill in the air. Somewhere, costumed children flicker from house to house, squealing with the anticipation of a potent, yearly sugar rush. Candles gutter in the wind from behind carved faces. The bars are full of the sloppy, intoxicated, and underdressed, a casualty of the marketing genius who had first decided that Halloween could be an excuse for nominal adults to dress like streetwalkers. Some festive soul had even hung a bucket of candy on the automated chain gun emplacements out front; it was a juxtaposition of the light-hearted and lethal that made my skin crawl. Before this was Halloween, it was a holiday where it was said the dead would walk, where the veil between the world and the underworld gave way like a haunted-house cobweb.

For me, this was never a fun-filled holiday. It was serious work – one of the more serious nights of work that I had every year, serving the Foundation.

My name is immaterial. They call me 'Padre', which is fine with me; there is a certain forced jocularity to it, reminiscent of bluff country folk and bad cop shows. I am – was – a priest, though I've left my Orders for a more important mission. I was one of the ones affected when SCP—oh, the number doesn't matter, it's long since neutralized. But I was recruited rather than made to forget; I found myself wanting to help, as if I'd been waiting all my life for an enemy I could name, a threat to souls that I could see and touch and protect humanity from. In another age, perhaps I'd have been a Templar or a crusader, a saint or a martyr; instead, I found myself in charge of SCP Task Force Psi-11, "The Gods Squad". Our technical responsibility reads, in part: "an ad hoc team to deal with any religious or religion-related crisis or issue in the Foundation, either external or internal". What it means in plain language: if the Foundation has a chaplaincy corps, I suppose we're it.

And that is why, on a chilly night in October, I am alone with a million

faces.

ITEM#: *SCP-1446*
Object Class: *Safe*
Special Containment Procedures: SCP-1446 is only active once per calendar year. Originally part of Sector-38 (located in an unmapped cave complex under the Texas Hill Country), it is now considered an immobile SCP in containment at Sector-38. During its inactive phase, SCP-1446's only point of entry is to be locked with a dual complement of locks equal to or exceeding Class Six. During its active phase, the locked doors are to be opened, and the following additional procedures are to be initiated: SAMHAIN-026 (including salt, powdered cold iron, and running water) and TOCSIN-003.

1446 is an underground chamber, so the temperature is an even 18 degrees. This part of the system is dead, dry, so it is an excellent place to preserve things. Things like photographs – which is perhaps why someone or something, in the first few months of 2000, started posting photographs on the strangely smooth walls. Each photograph was of a Foundation operative killed in the line of duty; each shot a candid picture of one human life given in service to the greater part of humanity. Perhaps more to the point, each photograph just – appeared on the limestone walls of the chamber. Cameras showed nothing, audio showed nothing. There would just be more photos, every day – a mute testimony to lives cut short.

The lab coats moved in, of course. There was nothing unusual about the photos, nothing unusual about the cave. Tests were inconclusive, unresponsive, mute. Summer came and went, and after the 116C Incident in August, Sector-38 was short on personnel. Somehow, the wall of photos didn't seem as important.

Description: *SCP-1446 is a stone wall 8.2 meters high and 37.8 meters long, the south wall of a dead cave located at [EXPUNGED], part of Sector-38. % of the wall is covered with a mosaic of identical, 5-cm square photographs of individuals identified as Foundation personnel killed in the line of duty. New photos appear irregularly, within [EXPUNGED] of the individual's death. Pictures*

only appear for those personnel killed; natural deaths do not result in manifest.

I am not wearing any priestly garb tonight – it's tank top, running shorts, good shoes, and a pair of heavy canvas gardening gloves. I check my watch – 9:36 pm. The trick-or-treaters will be retreating now, returning to their homes with their mask-gotten booty, just ahead of the darkness that will finger its way quietly down the streets as porch lights are extinguished. It will be the day before the new moon tonight; the spook squad says that 1446's yearly activity cycle is made more or less active by moon phase. A waning moon, just before new, means that only ice and Oxycontin will let me raise my arms tomorrow morning.

This is the sixth time I have done this. The bell above my head gleams in the dim light; I can see the old seal of the city of Glasgow on its side, lettering below spelling out 'St Mungo's' and '1641'. It was rung for two hundred years and more at funerals; it kept the evil spirits away and helped the dead rest easy. I grimace at that thought, a humorless smile that does little to cheer me. For the sixth time, I check the great hemp rope; it will hold through the four hours.

INCIDENT REPORT, SECTOR-38, 10/31/2000:
Precisely at 2200 hours, standard security audio reported activity in the hallway outside Chamber 091, colloquially known as the 'Photo Room'. Security Detachment Gamma responded per protocols, and failed to check in at the required five-minute mark. Detachment Epsilon was dispatched, and found the five members of Gamma [REDACTED], along with an estimated twenty-three liters of human blood. At that point, Epsilon was attacked by [REDACTED] and was forced to retreat with casualties.
In the next four hours, % of the staff at Sector-38 were killed in the same manner as the members of Team Gamma. This included nine staff members who took refuge in a standard Foundation Class Three panic room. All activity ceased at 0200 hours on November 1.

So does a photograph trap a mortal soul?

I can’t answer that, any more than I can tell you why a Scottish ‘dede bell’, rung constantly during the four hours of SCP-1446’s active phase, keeps the monsters at bay, keeps the dead operatives – or something that looks like them – trapped in their photographs. I try not to think about why – why is for the lab coats and the Overseers. What I do is pray, shut up and listen, and do my job. And tonight, that means I will ring a bell, once every five seconds, for four hours.

But, in the shadows of Halloween night, in a cave lit by pitiless electric light, I can’t help wondering – is this an illusion? An anomaly, a random interlocking weave of energy and time and human belief? A phenomenon with a rational, scientific answer – even if we don’t know what it is?

Or are the souls of those killed in the line of Foundation duty not allowed to rest, even in death?

Memorandum 10/31

ATTENTION ALL SITE PERSONNEL

Due to the unique circumstances that have traditionally surrounded the date of October 31, and the allegations that it acts as a catalyst for anomalous phenomena, all Site staff have been placed on high alert and all available agents and MTFs are to be put on a 24 hour standby period.

Since its founding, the Foundation has experienced or recorded anomalous phenomena on an estimated 72% of dates correlating to October 31. While there is no conclusive theory or explanation for this high rate of anomalous occurrences on this particular date, it is highly encouraged that all Site staff exhibit a heightened state of alert and vigilance.

For your reference, listed below are several excerpts of previous anomalous phenomena that had occurred on this date in order to give you an idea of what to expect. Note that this is not a comprehensive list of incidents.

> **October 31, 1955**
>
> Sightings of what appears to be an American warship occur simultaneously at over thirty six coastal areas across the globe. Cross referencing of eyewitness accounts of the ship in question point out the exact same identifying remarks, and testimony suggests that it may possibly be the USS [REDACTED]. This conflicts with records showing that the ship in question had been transferred over to the Hellenic Navy and was confirmed to be in port during the time of these events.
>
> Due to skepticism about the plausibility of such an event, it was determined that no amnesic measures were necessary.

October 31, 1972

Doctor Wondertainment releases a new candy into circulation called “FIRE POPS”. It is advertised as a hard candy that grants the eater the ability to breathe fire at will as long as it remains in their mouth. The annual average of damages and injuries caused by fire increases sharply in several countries due to this one day alone. Doctors also note a sudden surge in patients complaining about slightly burnt tongues. Incidents are covered up as crimes by serial arsonists. It is unknown how much candy was produced or how much remains in circulation, if any.

October 31, 1980

After a series of brief, unexplained power outages in various Foundation sites, Dr. Lott submits a request to have the date of October 31 to be officially listed as an SCP on the grounds that it acts as a catalyst for anomalous phenomena. After a period of twenty four hours, the request is denied unanimously by the O5 Council.

October 31, 1992

Multiple instances of SCP-701 manifest as the subject of numerous schools’ Halloween plays. The damage is catastrophic and takes three months to fully contain and cover up. All recovered instances of SCP-701 are immediately destroyed.

October 31, 1993

SCP-895’s area of effect suddenly and rapidly expands, encompassing most of . For approximately 0.6 seconds, all broadcast signals within the area of effect are replaced with security footage of SCP-895. Fortunately, exposure is too brief to cause any serious damage, though there were sharp increases in cases of cardiac arrest, insomnia, and hysteria.

Since public exposure to SCP-895 was negligible, no major cover-up measures were deemed necessary.

October 31, 1994

Several crates of Doctor Wondertainment brand Halloween masks are disseminated among the general public. The masks are classified as minor cognitohazards, as they lead the wearers to believe that they are the character their mask portrays. The vast majority of related incidents are harmless, and the true number of cases is difficult to separate from genuine holiday behavior, such as occasional street brawls and numerous pranks. The Foundation begins a rigorous campaign to collect and destroy any and all Halloween masks in the affected areas.

October 31, 1995

Site- is suddenly attacked by a horde of sentient jack o' lanterns that all speak in rhyme in an event later dubbed "The Great Pumpkin War". Onsite security forces are quickly overwhelmed and forced to withdraw, leaving several sectors of the Site infested. The situation is only resolved when Agent Franks lures the attackers into a storage warehouse containing stockpiles of SCP-504 meant for testing. It takes approximately six months to completely clear the site of wreckage and organic debris.

Agent Franks is awarded a commendation for bravery and ingenuity under fire.

Agent Franks is subsequently transferred to Antarctic Surveillance Site 2 on a six month tour for "willful destruction of Foundation property".

October 31, 1997

Contact with D-Class Holding Facility 6 is lost for exactly thirteen seconds. Both the staff and the D-Class personnel at the facility report having blacked out during

the thirteen second gap. When they regained consciousness, all personnel were dressed in seemingly random Halloween-themed costumes. Later analysis suggests costume choice was based on the wearer's subconscious desires. All costumes are confiscated and incinerated. D-Class Holding Facility 6 is immediately decommissioned due to security concerns, with all Foundation personnel transferred and all D-Class personnel having their termination schedules accelerated.

October 31, 2000

The powers of hundreds of latent reality warpers suddenly and simultaneously manifest around the globe, sparking countless reports of anomalous activity and phenomena. Collaboration with the Global Occult Coalition results in the termination of 99% of the awakened reality warpers within three weeks. The remaining 1% are currently unaccounted for. This event proves to be the most costly October 31st phenomenon to contain to date.

October 31, 2001

SCP-024 delivers a DVD to onsite personnel despite the fact that there were no recent experiments. Footage shows the interior of SCP-024 as a Halloween-themed obstacle course and haunted house, challenging contestants to brave various supernatural obstacles and threats. Closer analysis of the footage shows that all identifiable contestants were previous test subjects that were sent into SCP-024 and never returned. The individual previously classified as D-4369 wins the contest and exits the studio, where he is immediately terminated by onsite security due to him showing signs of [REDACTED] as a result of exposure to supernatural elements within SCP-024. His prize, an all expenses paid trip to Cancun for one week, is confiscated by the supervising doctor.

October 31, 2007

The annual Marshall, Carter, and Dark LTD. Halloween Ball is disrupted when several individuals believed to be affiliated with Are We Cool Yet? breach security and attack the guests with ossification grenades. Despite MCD's refusal to divulge information on the attack, casualties are thought to number at least three hundred. Recovered traffic camera footage shows several delivery vans leaving the MCD compound at high speed approximately two minutes after the attack began. Investigation into the matter is still under way.

October 31, 2008

Factory brand toothpaste is disseminated in several countries, with an anomalous chemical composition designed to harden tooth enamel to a point that exceeds the current Mohs hardness scale. Fortunately, incidents in where the toothpaste was used were limited, and the remaining samples were collected via staged product recall.

October 31, 2009

SCP-802 exhibits abnormal behavior when the music it plays no longer sounds degraded or filtered, as if being played by actual instruments rather than from a recording. SCP-802 also switches to songs of the period that are considered more traditional for Halloween. Eyewitness reports from security staff present state that this behavior continued until midnight local time, when the music abruptly stops. The security staff also claimed to have heard sounds similar to applause and laughing for several seconds after the cessation of music.

October 31, 2011

For the first time since containment, SCP-204 makes a verbal request to onsite staff for a bucket of candy and a small size Halloween witch costume. When asked upon

its reasoning, SCP-204 replies it is for “a surprise”. Request is granted. However, subsequent attempts to have SCP-204 speak again or evoke any sort of response are not successful.

Dr. Lott resubmits his request to have October 31 listed as an SCP. As of the publishing of this report, no final decision has been made.

Remember to stay on heightened alert and be sure to immediately report any suspicious activity to your superiors or security staff. Have a safe and happy Halloween.

Secure, Contain, Protect.

How the SPC Ruined Halloween

"Daddy, why are you dressed up like a dolphin?"

Mitchell laughed as he picked up his daughter.

"I'm not a dolphin, you goof!" he said. "I'm a shark!"

The little girl in his hands giggled and bared her teeth at him, growling and playfully flailing her arms around.

"Raaawr, raaawr, I'mma shark princess daddy!" she yelled gleefully. "Can I be a shark princess?"

He chuckled. "But you're such a pretty princess already! Why would you ever want to be a shark?"

Samantha pondered this for a moment, putting a hand under her chin as she had often seen her father do when he had to think hard about something.

"Can I be a shark princess later?" she asked.

"Sure honey, but tonight, you're just a regular princess with a shark daddy who's taking her trick-or-treating." Mitch said as he set his daughter down, brushing down her tutu.

She cheered at this and snatched her mini-cauldron from off of the couch. Sam excitedly bounced towards the door, her gray-clad father tailing close behind.

It was a cool evening in the town of Mollierville. The wind gently pushed brown and orange leaves across the ground as the orange sun cast long shadows as the light faded from the sky. It was Halloween night, and it was the first year that Samantha Nichols was old enough to go trick-or-treating. She lead her father excitedly by his hand out into the yard, pulling him past the carved jack'o'lanterns and cobwebbed tombstones. Her father laughed as they ran,

readjusting his costume as it slipped off of him.

As they hurried past their driveway into the lawn of the neighbors, a figure rolled out of the shrubs in front of them. Springing to his feet, he sprinted towards the confused pair, shouted "Take this, pond scum!" and slammed his fist into Mitch's abdomen. He doubled over in pain, his daughter angrily shouting at the man, who was rushing towards a waiting black van.

"Daddy, daddy, are you alright?" Sam worriedly looked over the figure kneeling on the ground. "Do I need to get mommy?"

He groaned, pushing himself up with one hand and dusting himself off with the other.

"I'm fine sweetie," he said. "It'll take more than that to put your ol' dad out of action!"

He glanced towards the street, which the van had quickly vacated. He shook his head at the absurdity of it all and took his daughter's hand as they walked towards the first house.

Agent James sat in the back of the van, head in his hands. He had *failed.* His first major mission, and he blew it. Not only was the shark still mobile, but it still had the hostage. He was in for a demotion for sure, probably all the way down to Bait duty. The shark was free to roam and cause havoc, and it was all his fault. He sighed, pulled out the materials from the pocket in front of him, and began to write up the report. They would have to send out a squad tomorrow to clean up his mess, for sure.

> **Shark #:** 32145
>
> **Shark Class:** Terrestrial
>
> **Shark Punching Commands:** Shark-32145 cannot be directly punched in the frontal cranial region due to a hostage human being used as a shield. Due to this, agents are to approach the shark as swiftly as they possibly can, apply direct pressure to the frontal thoracic

area of the shark, and retreat just as swiftly. Multiple agents may be required to carry out SPC repeatedly if the shark needs to be punched further.

Description: Shark is approximately 1.4m long. Notable features of this shark include fully functional lower appendages used for bipedal locomotion and a lack of the rough texture normally found on shark skin. More frighteningly, the shark appears to be holding an adult male captive in its mouth. As recovering the subject at this point would require actions further than those described in the Shark Punching Commands, this male adult has been deemed irretrievable. It is unknown whether this subject is aware of his condition or not. This shark is extremely dangerous due to its terrestrial locomotion, as well as its obvious parasitism and possible telepathic or anesthetic abilities. Under no circumstances should this shark be kicked, as it may kick back. Agents must move faster than with aquatic sharks, as this shark is fully mobile on land and can move as rapidly as some of our agents on land.

Addendum: *Alright agents, I'm sure you've all heard of these. I've heard the whispers around the halls and cafeteria, and, well, it's happened. We have a Type Brown on our hands. A full-fledged humashark that needs to be taken care of immediately. Here's what you do: You run up and punch it before it has time to react, because the* ***moment*** *it has time to react is when it all goes to hell. Godspeed and good luck. -Boxer*

The Halloween Breach

It was Halloween night at Site 19
A more average night there could not have been
Inside the researchers were hard at work
Studying skips and their interesting quirks

When all of a sudden, out of the blue
The intercoms screamed "It's 682!"
"He's escaped his cell, he's running amok!
We've sent out the guards, and with any luck
They'll find him with almost no damage done
Until then, however, everyone run!"

The sudden announcement caused quite a riot
Afraid they would be the lizards diet
Personnel all ran through the halls quite fast
Hoping that this night would not be their last

Just then the man on the intercom cried,
"173 is loose, everyone hide!"
"We're working hard to find both of these beasts
So there will be no one marked as deceased!
Remember: don't blink, remember to stare
Or else you won't have time for a prayer!"

Now the whole site was scared as can be
No one survives against 173!
To defend themselves, they all grabbed their guns
So they might have a chance to see the sun

Once again the intercoms spoke with fear
"A mass SCP breach has taken place here!
Not just the lizard or the statue that kills
The Old Man is out and spreading his ills!
And so is Able, and he's rather pissed
About all the action that he may have missed!"

"035 is free, it's found a new host
And I'm also free, and making some toast
The clown has escaped from his cell and TV
And so have the 008 infectees!
This is by far the worst breach ever seen!
Oh, and by the way…Happy Halloween!"

"Yes, everything was completely untrue,
It was intended to scare all of you.
This great night is all about treats and tricks
So I thought I'd spook you all for kicks!"

Site Director's Note: It pains me to say
We were just tricked in a cruel sort of way
Somehow a researcher thought it'd be great
To frighten us all to a panicked state
But I'm not upset, because as it were
Now the fool's working with all things Keter!

Costume Change

I love Halloween. It's my favorite time of year, one of the few days I can just go out and mingle with the normal people for an entire night without anyone being the wiser. The pain's not so bad when I can change so often, it's dark with plenty of places to hide and change in secret, and the candy makes up for it.

There's an astronaut over there. I think I'll be an astronaut too now.

It's so easy, not at all like having to make up a shape and hold on to it, keeping it in my head and on my body until it hurts too much to bear. There's so many other people in costumes, I can just copy one of them and then I only need to keep the picture outside from changing.

That little boy is a pirate. I like pirates, I'm going to be a pirate.

Oh, and the candy. I do so love candy, but the rest of the year, it's so hard to get. You need money to buy candy, and even if I could get money, I can't keep it, I always drop it when I change. So I have to steal it, and that's even harder, because even if I get some, I have to drop it too when I change to get away.

A ballerina? That could make a nice shape to be, I'll try that.

Tonight, you don't have to buy or steal candy, they just give it away. They don't like to give you candy more than once, but that's not a problem for me, not if I see someone I want to be and get to a house before they do. I can clean out a house in minutes if I'm lucky, and have a whole bag of candy to go hide somewhere and eat it all up without any shape at all.

Policemen are scary. I don't like them, they like to chase me and shoot at me. But my head hurts, so I'll be a policeman now.

I took a chance once, and went up to a house without a shape. I

don't know why I did it, maybe I'd eaten too much candy and gotten silly on the sugar. It never goes right most days, people always scream and run when they see me without a shape, or they try to hurt me and I have to run. But on Halloween, I'm a ghost, or Rorschach (who's Rorschach?), or a swamp monster, or a Shoggoth (don't know what that is either). They aren't scared, they tell me what a great costume I have and give me extra candy.

Should I be a vampire? Or a werewolf? Or a mummy? I see all of them, and I can't decide.

But I can't be myself very often, because I know Mr. Redd is after me. He's always been chasing me, but he can't ever find me. I know how much it makes him angry, though - every since that one night, he knows I spend all of Halloween out and vulnerable, but I wear so many different shapes he never knows what I am and I'm always picking a new one. He get so angry, and it's funny.

Ooh, there's a spy. I see them a lot, even when it's not Halloween. They don't look like spies, they look like normal people, but no one's better than me at seeing someone whose outside is changed. I know they're all friends, because inside they all look similar, and I can see that too. I'll be a spy, and go talk to him. Maybe I can get him to think I'm a spy like he is too. Maybe he'll give me candy.

Ghost Stories

The sun was just beginning to set as I paddled into the Okefenokee swamp along with my friends, Hank and Lucia. We weren't strangers to kayaking in the swamp; we had all done it since we were kids. Even at night, we weren't afraid to go in with the alligators and the birds and the other wildlife. This trip in particular, however, was designed to be scary. What a better time to tell ghost stories than while camping in the swamp on Halloween? We'd never spent Halloween in the wilderness before, and we figured it would be better than going to another costume party. I love being able to get away from my job at the Foundation every once in a while. The cold, sterile halls of Site 327 have no soul, none of the romantic power that nature does. As much as I love science, I need that kind of spiritual peace that nature imparts.

Things started to get dark around 6.

"Lights on everyone," said Lucia, as if we were kids that needed her to order us around. Hank looked at her and pouted.

"But I don't wanna!" he whined.

"Come on Hank," I said, "we better do what she says, or she'll spank us."

The look on her face was enough to send us both into a fit of laughter.

"Shut up Joe," she said. "I don't know which one of you is worse."

We kept mostly silent after that, paddling our way to our campsite. We'd been there many times before, an island of solid earth in a sea of stagnant water, peat, and trees. Spanish moss waved lazily in the wind as true darkness finally came, obscuring the already alien shapes of the Okefenokee. Here was true wilderness. No humans came here frequently, and when they did they never stayed long.

The trees grew large and twisted, silent surveyors of the affairs of fish and fowl, alligators and snakes. We tied up the kayaks, set up our tents quickly, stowed our gear, and built a fire. As we cooked marshmallows and hotdogs, now came the reason we had come out here in the first place, our first-ever Halloween swamp ghost story contest. Hank took the first turn.

A few miles south of Folkston, back in the 1800s, there used to be a place called Trader's Hill. It was a traders' town, of course, built near the water. There's an enormous old oak tree there, still around today. People called it the Hangman's Oak, for reasons I'm sure you can imagine. So one day, this Indian named Suanee came to town. He got accused to stealing some goods from a trader, and he ended up being sentenced to death. So they brought him up to the Hangman's Oak, and they were tying the rope around his neck when he said "May the curse of my father's spirit and my own be upon you, for as long as there is a Trader's Hill!" No one payed him any mind, and they hanged him dead.

About a month later, the people of Trader Hill were having a dance to celebrate the harvest, when they saw something bright in the distance. They all looked toward it and saw Hangman's Tree, glowing bright like it was on fire, and they could hear wailing and moaning like a thousand people being tortured! The next morning the first group of people packed up and left Trader's Hill. Eventually, the whole place was deserted. They say that sometimes, at night in the fall, you can still hear the wailing of Suanee and his father.

"Hank, I'm sorry but that story was just awful," I said, "It wasn't scary, and I'm pretty sure I've heard it before somewhere."

"What!? That story scared the shit out of me when I was a kid!"

"Nope. Wasn't scary."

"I agree. Boooring." said Lucia.

Hank stared at us both, flabbergasted. Before he could say anything, I saw it. There was a light in the swamp, like an orange

flame. It was far off, and obscured by the fog, but I could see that it was bobbing along like someone carrying a lantern. Who would be out in the swamp at night? And how do you just causally walk through the swamp?

"Hey guys, do you see that?" I asked.

"See what?"

Almost as soon as they turned, the light disappeared.

"What was that?" said Hank.

"I don't know. Maybe it was just someone setting up their own campsite?" suggested Lucia.

"I guess…" I said. I was used to seeing weird things. Something about this didn't seem right. Still, it's my weekend off.

"Whatever, let's just keep going. I believe it's my turn," I said as I stood up.

One day, a man named Henry Ferguson was driving home from work. It was another busy day in Chicago, with lots of traffic on the highway as people made their way home. Henry was tired, he had been working late the past couple of nights. He couldn't wait to get home and relax. Suddenly, his phone rang. He answered it.

"Good afternoon Mr. Ferguson. I have your son here at gunpoint. You must make a choice now."

"What? Who is this?"

"That's not important. I can see you from a screen right now. Speed up, and turn into oncoming traffic. If you don't do it soon, I will kill your son."

"Dad! Please, don't do it!"

"George? Is that you?!"

"Yes Dad, it's me, don't worry about me I'll be fine!"

"Shut up! Mr. Ferguson, you're running out of time."

Henry heard a gun click. His heart was beating out of his chest. He didn't know what to do.

"George…..I love you."

He stomped on the accelerator and turned sharply to the left.

Mr. Henry Ferguson didn't survive the crash. When the police asked for a recording of the last phone call he had made before committing suicide, they got it. To this day, no one knows who actually made the call, where it came from, or how George's voice was on it when he had never been kidnapped or threatened with a gun at all….

I stood silent for a few moments while I let the last part set in. Hank and Lucia looked a little spooked now. I'm sure the Foundation wouldn't mind that I had made up a ghost story using an SCP for inspiration, but then they probably would never know.

"Dude, that's fucking creepy." said Hank.

"That was one of the better ones I've heard recently," agreed Lucia. "However, I think I've got both of you beat. Have a seat and listen to a true master of the art."

Long ago in England, there lived a man named Jack. Jack was a thief and a scoundrel, but a clever one. One day, for all his cleverness and carefulness, he got caught stealing a gold coin from a farmer. Half the village was chasing him with murder on their minds, for that coin was all they had. Jack jumped into some bushes on the side of the road and let the villagers pass by, then dusted himself off and started walking the other way. He hadn't gone more than a few steps when a dark figure stepped onto the path before him, appearing like a wraith from the fog.

"Jack," the figure said, "I have come for thee. You hath lived a wicked life, and it is my duty as Satan, Lord of the Hell to take your

soul to eternal damnation. Your time hath come, the villagers shall return and kill you soon."

Jack, being the clever man he was, thought this over and had an idea. "Devil," he said, "would you not prefer to have many souls over one?"

"Are you proposing a deal, Jack?" the Devil said.

"A small one, Devil. It would benefit you much more than me. It is simple, you shall see."

"Tell me more, but be sharp, for your time runs short."

"Well first, Devil, I but throw away this gold coin I stole, into the forest where the peasants will never find it. Then you, Devil, turn thineself into the same gold coin. You hop into my purse, and when the peasants find me I give you to them. They don't kill me, but you disappear from their pockets later, and soon enough they'll all kill eachother arguing over who stole it."

The Devil agreed, and did as Jack said. But when he turned into a coin and hopped in Jack's purse, he found in there a crucifix. At the sight of it, the Devil's power was diminished, and he could not move from Jack's purse.

"A curse on you, Jack! You damnable wretch!"

"I will let you go if you do as I say."

"Blasted fate! I submit. What do you wish?"

"I wish that you promise you will never drag me to Hell, never touch my soul, not ever."

The Devil was reluctant, but as the peasants drew near, he finally gave in to Jack's demand. Jack threw him from his purse, and the Devil fled into the dark forests.

Finally, the farmers had Jack where they wanted him. They snatched him and bound him, and searched him for their gold. But they did not find it, for Jack had thrown it into the woods. Instead,

they took his head.

Jack was now in a predicament, for it seemed that Heaven would not take him, on account of his wicked nature, but neither would Hell, for the Devil had made his promise. Trapped between worlds, Jack begged of the Devil for one thing. A light for him to see by as he wandered the Earth. Satan took pity on Jack, and gave him an ember from the fires of Hell itself. Jack took it, and placed it in a carved pumpkin that he now wears in place of the head he lost. Since, he became known as Jack 'o' The Lantern.

I yawned. I saw worse things on an average Tuesday.

"Eh," said Hank, "it was interesting, but not really scary. Kind of cheesy too. Pumpkin heads are so overdone."

"What are you smoking? A guy with a pumpkin for a head with fire from Hell itself wandering the Earth for all eternity doesn't scare you?"

"No."

"You're too jaded."

A voice came from just outside the light of the fire. "Oh, it's a good story. You just got a few of the details wrong."

We all turned, startled, toward the voice as a man stepped into the light of our fire. He was old, his skin wrinkled with age. Half his hair had fallen out, the rest was grey as brushed steel. His eyes gleamed in the firelight, obscuring their color. He wore swamper's clothes, overalls and boots, but he seemed dirtier than most swampers I had seen.

"Who are you?" I asked him.

"They call me Will." He turned toward Lucia. "If you had told that story right, it would have been much scarier."

"You were spying on us?"

"Only for as long as her story lasted. I was just on my way in my canoe when I heard your voices."

Lucia stood up. "Well if you know that story so well, what did I get wrong?"

"Well, for one thing," said Will, "Jack never lost his head. The villagers just hanged him. He pretended to be dead and then just got up and left as soon as they turned around."

"For another, Jack didn't use a pumpkin to hold his Hellfire. There weren't any pumpkins in Medieval Europe, they're an American vegetable. He used a carved turnip."

As he spoke, I saw the light again. There it was, closer this time, slowly bobbing left and right, left and right. There was another, and another, another…

"You also forgot the best part. Jack figured out that though his Hellfire would never go out, on some days it was stronger. Particularly one day. It's a day of significance, ancient and cursed. They call that day All Hallow's Eve, or more recently, Halloween." The lights where closer now, more coming into view every second. I realized that Lucia, Hank and I had huddled together close, while Will was standing totally still, a knowing smile on his face. He casually rolled his head, revealing a white, puckered scar going all around his neck.

"Jack eventually figured out that on Halloween, his Hellfire was strong enough that he could use it to take people's souls for himself. All he had to do was use it to burn off someone's head. The Hellfire would spread to their necks, and burn on forever, trapping their souls and bending them to Jack's will."

The lights were very close now, so close I could make out more details. They were faces. Carved faces. Jack-o-lanterns. One came into the light of the fire. A dark figure, wrapped in rotting cloth. It seemed taller than a person should be. On it's head, it wore a jack-o-lantern like a helmet. But that couldn't be right, there'd be no room for the head and the candle…

"I really like the way pumpkins look. Much nicer than turnips. Roomier too."

One of the figures stepped closer. I looked into the pumpkin, searching for a face. All I saw was a stump of a neck, a small flame pouring out from the throat. The smell of burnt meat filled my nose.

"Oh, I almost forgot! in some versions of the story, they call him Will."

I can still hear his laughter echoing in my ears. I'll never be able to forget that cackle of his, so deep it sounds more like he's choking. No matter how long I walk the swamps, day or night, rain or shine, I can never seem to get it out of my head.

Sympathy

It had taken a long time and a lot of practice, but he was now able to draw pretty well. Or at least he thought so. He could also write well enough that he could ask for just about anything he could think of. The guards were fairly nice most of the time and usually did their best to get him what he wanted, but there were a lot of things that he wasn't allowed to have. Whenever those kind of requests were denied he would also invariably get a short lecture about having to stay healthy and eat right and all the other things that his mother would normally have said. All in all, it was almost like being home again, except that he wasn't very good at video games any more and he couldn't see any of his friends.

They did let him watch TV whenever he wanted, though, which was nice of them. He wasn't really good at keeping track of the date, so it was through watching that he realized that it was that time of the year again. He remembered from last year the time he'd spent under the careful, loving watch of his parents, running around the neighborhood with his best friends, gathering an enormous hoard of candy that their parents were careless in hiding afterwards and how sick they'd gotten afterwards.

It wasn't until several minutes later that he realized what he'd been drawing while his mind wandered, and as he looked down at the jack-o-lanterns and children in costumes that he'd doodled, his heart sank. Screeching angrily at himself for dwelling on things he couldn't have any more, he dropped the crayon and retreated to the back corner of his room. He didn't come out for several hours, even ignoring the guard that was his favorite when he asked what was wrong. If he noticed the sympathetic frown on the guard's face as the man pored over his drawings before eventually disappeared from the room, he didn't care.

As all children eventually do, he stopped sulking and came out of hiding, too hungry and thirsty to stay angry at himself. If he were

capable of rubbing his eyes, he would have done so, as he stared open-mouthed at the (to him, at least) enormous pile of treasure that had appeared while he wasn't looking. Every kind of candy he ever loved, even the ones that his parents wouldn't let him have because they were "too bad for him", were sitting there just for him. Maybe, just maybe, this Halloween wouldn't be so bad after all.

A severe reprimand and administrative action have been levied against Agent Johnson due to his involvement and responsibility in Incident 1192-09, as his willful violation of standard procedure in his handling of SCP-1192 could have resulted in grave physical damage to the specimen.

While Agent Johnson's career service vitae speaks much of his experience in the field and normally excellent handling of sapient objects, his poor judgment in this incident put him, his coworkers, and the Special Containment objects under their care in danger and such unprofessional behavior cannot be tolerated at the Foundation. Effectively immediately, Agent Johnson is to be transferred to Observation Post - for a period of no less than twelve (12) months, during which he will have plenty of time to reflect upon his priorities.

Dr.
Senior Observer

Los Recuerdos de los Muertos

Carmela carefully packed a basket of *ofrendas* for the trip to the cemetery. A cloth doll for Hernanda, a bottle of tequila for Fernando, a bouquet of *cempasúchil*… The rest of the family would bring their own gifts, but these were hers. And hopefully her lost family would visit and comfort her from Heaven. Abuela Maricela used to say that she talked with her husbands after drinking *Los Recuerdos*, but Carmela never had. Of course, she'd never sipped the wine of a husband or daughter before, only that of cousins of cousins or uncles or ancestors dead before she was born.

Picking the berries from their graves only four months ago had been one of the hardest things she'd ever done. The temptation to eat them right then and there had been nearly overwhelming, but she knew that all of them would be needed to make the wine. Don Peñaranda was the only one in their village who knew the exact recipe, but he had assured her that it would be ready in time for *Día de los Muertos*, even if only barely.

He said he would bring the bottles by later that afternoon, after the flight of the kites. Carmela used to love flying them with her family and friends, and would try to put on the best face she could, but watching the messengers to the dead fly overhead was less joyous now. Abuela Maricela said it would pass, that time and *Recuerdos* would help ease the pain, but Carmela didn't know. The large, colorful kites had been Hernanda's favorite part of the celebrations.

Carmela's hands stilled as she stared off into the distance, the memories of the brightly colored kites mixing with the faces of her little girl and husband, and the green grass covering their fresh graves… Everything blurred together into one great kaleidoscope of thought and grief and reluctant hope and memory and color and love and family and…

…Fernanda came back to herself and looked in awe at the shot

glass in her hands.

"What did you see, niña?" asked her mother, as she recorked the bottle and put it on the altar with the others.

"I was Tía Carmela!" exclaimed the little girl in wonder.

"I know, niña. This was her bottle of *Recuerdos*. Did you see anything special? They say that *los muertos* can talk to us through them."

"It was her first *Día de los Muertos* after her family died. She was so sad! But a little happy, too! Why was she happy, Mama?"

"Oh, that is a special memory, niña," smiled her mother. "Sometimes people are sad because someone they love is gone, but happy because they can see them again, like you just did. That's was *los Recuerdos* are for."

"Will you make tequila like this, too, Mama?"

"Of course, niña, and you will too someday." Her mother scooped her up and swung her around, then carried her out of the room. "Now let's go down to the cemetery and clean Tía Carmela's grave, and watch the kite contest."

Guiser's Night

Doctor Moore took off her glasses and rubbed her eyes again. The last handful of aspirin hadn't taken effect yet, and the glare from the three monitors was piercing her throbbing headache with an acute pain she felt sharply behind her right eye. The sterile white paint of the cell walls somehow looked brighter through the security cameras. A muted cacophony of intermittent beeps, digital tones and industrial machinery laced through the background of the observation chamber. SCP-480 required intensive monitoring and staff attention at all times, but what really made these shifts hard was that there was never anything visible in 480's holding cell. The mixture of fear and intense boredom was stultifying. Dr. Moore shook her head and tried in vain to regain her lost focus.

"Moore. I need the infrared spectrography variance," wheezed Dr. Hirsch.

Dr. Moore started. Where were the numbers? Why couldn't she remember which monitor?

"Uh, just a second, sir."

Dr. Hirsch fumbled in his labcoat for a package of Camels. The ting of a Zippo was somehow audible through the background noise. He took a long drag on his cigarette, and exhaled a stream of smoke that doubled as a sigh. "C'mon Moore. The breach wasn't even three weeks ago. Infrared. What is it?"

Squinting at the middle screen, Dr. Moore carefully moved her finger along screens of various scrolling data. At last. "Five seven three sigma eighteen point three. Don't smoke those in here, they're bad for the equipment and they give me a headache."

Dr. Hirsch consulted his tablet and punched in a few numbers. "We're in quite a lot of trouble if a little smoke can take down a Class Two rad-hardened EMP-shielded workstation, Moore. And you've

got headaches because you sleep two hours a night. I told you to take an extra month off."

"There's too much work, sir."

Dr. Hirsch punched more numbers into the tablet. "Yeah, yeah there is. But you're not doing me any favors like this, Ellen. Or yourself. I've tried asking nicely, but I'm ordering you, as your superior, to take some damn time off. Effective immediately."

Dr. Moore stood up quickly from her chair. "But I've just gotten back! SCP-480 is a unique and dangerous-"

"Yes, it is what it is, Doctor," said Dr. Hirsch, "and you're an important part of keeping it here. But as you yourself know, we need everyone at one hundred percent. I need you to go home, Ellen. Take care of your mom. Take care of yourself. And I don't want to see you back here until you've had a full week of eight hours a night."

"But-"

"No. No arguments. We've got Ramirez from Site-23 to help us cover for now. You're an integral part of containment, Doctor, and I need you at your best."

Dr. Moore felt the initial anger drain away. Replacing it was the realization that Dr. Hirsch was correct, followed by a wave of exhaustion that she could no longer hold at bay.

She logged her ID out of the terminal, gathered her personal effects, and headed to the antechamber. As the door closed behind her, Dr. Hirsch called after her.

"Hey. Ellen. Halloween tonight," he said. He mimicked a steering wheel with his hands, the cigarette dangling from his mouth. "Watch out for trick-or-treaters."

Dr. Moore managed a weary smile and a wave goodbye, and headed into the security checkpoint. The doors closed behind her. She hung up her labcoat, and unbuttoned the top button of her blouse. She placed the leads of the wall-mounted ECG monitor on

her chest, and waited expectantly by a speaker mounted next to the monitor. The familiar automated voice soon greeted her.

"Initiating memetic containment protocols. Please state the approved passcode."

Dr. Moore cleared her throat and spoke into a small microphone next to the ECG monitor. "At no point during the last shift has SCP-480 made contact with me."

Seconds passed. Dr. Moore had begun to stand up to head out, but the doors remained closed. The automated voice spoke.

"Vital signs incorrect. Please state the approved passcode."

Dr. Moore shrugged. She resolved to call Security in to calibrate the ECG when she returned. She repeated the passcode into the microphone. This time, the automatic security doors opened. She removed the leads, and headed outside the facility, into the fading sunlight of the late afternoon.

She sat in her car, parked in the driveway and watching the window above the garage. It was dark enough now that the light in the window made the room clearly visible from the outside. The light shone the brighter for the lack of a working streetlight, out of commission for two months now, she noted to herself ruefully. To Dr. Moore, rural living meant hour-long commutes and waiting interminably for maintenance to such niceties of civilization as paved roads and electricity. She understood why Site-415 had to be where it was, but cursed her lot in the countryside once more. Her head was swimming. Why had she tried to go back so soon? Alan was right. Tired researchers meant casualties in her line of work. Or worse.

The light in the window suddenly blinked out. Dr. Moore heaved herself out of her car and finally made her way inside her house.

"She spent most of the day sleeping, so no changes there." The nurse put on her coat as Dr. Moore stepped in through the front door. "Dosage on her pain meds is steady. I changed her sheets

and cleaned everything out. Not much improvement, but it's not getting any worse."

Dr. Moore nodded as she slumped in a chair in the kitchen. "Thanks Juana. Did…did…" She gestured futilely towards the staircase as she leaned her forehead against her hand, searching for words.

"Your mother?" Juana raised an eyebrow slightly.

"Yeah. Mom. Did she say anything while I was out?"

The nurse shook her head. "Nothing I could make out, anyhow. You know the doctors, though. They say she's lucky to be breathing unassisted after what happened."

"Yeah. Lucky." Dr. Moore took off her own coat. "Definitely. Thanks again, Juana. I think I might be taking some more time off. So why don't we say Tuesday next time."

Dr. Moore lay her head down on the table. She turned to look over to the nurse, and noticed that she was mouthing something. Puzzled, she sat up. Juana finished mouthing whatever it was she was pretending to be saying, then headed for the front door. Had she been speaking? The door closed, and the familiar sound seemed too loud to Dr. Moore. Too many echoes. She shook her head and headed upstairs to her mother's room.

Most of the room was taken up now with IV drips, heart monitors, a hospital bed and assorted medical equipment, displacing the desk and bookshelves of Dr. Moore's former study. A small, wizened form slept in the midst of a nest of tubes and wires. With the exception of a tangled mass of white hair on the pillow and a sallow, wrinkled arm covered in bruises hanging from the side, one may have easily overlooked that a person occupied this space. Dr. Moore stood in the doorway.

"So." She sighed. "Hi mom."

The arm shifted slightly, rustling a small portion of the tubes and wires.

"Right then. I'm going to be across the hall-"

She was interrupted by a gurgling, wheezing sound from the hospital bed. The low, guttural sound was reminiscent of labored breathing, except it seemed much too slow to be regular breathing. Dr. Moore winced. Her mother would make this sound for hours on end sometimes. Usually in the middle of the night. The doctors were unsure whether it was voluntary, just as they were unsure how much higher brain activity was still occurring. There was nothing for it except to wait. Nothing for any of it except to wait. She stepped out of the room, deciding to wait a little while before a futile attempt at sleep.

A knocking at the door woke her up from the kitchen table. She had fallen asleep onto the newspaper. Groggily, Dr. Moore looked at the wall clock - 8:30 pm. Who could be knocking at the door now? She vaguely remembered that it was Halloween, but no children ever came out as far as her house; the nearest neighbor was a quarter-mile away. The knock came again, three light but insistent raps. Dr. Moore looked through the peephole in the door. There was only darkness.

She kept looking through the glass, straining to see something before opening to the door.

Rap. Rap. Rap.

Dr. Moore jumped backwards instantly as something pale and white obscured her vision of the peephole, and the knocking continued. Her heart pounding, she backed her way into the kitchen, feeling behind her for the knife block on the counter as she was moving, never taking her eyes off the door. Something was not right here. Not right at all.

Rap. Rap. Rap.

The knocking continued. Again, it was soft, but clearly someone was knocking on the door. Dr. Moore never had visitors other than her mother and Juana, and no one had ever bothered to come looking for candy on Halloween in the eight years she'd lived there. Surely whoever this was would get the hint.

Rap. Rap. Rap.

This was going on too long. Something was terribly wrong. Dr. Moore drew the largest chef's knife out of the block. She waited for the knocking to continue.

And waited.

Two minutes passed, her pulse pounding in her temples and in her grip on the knife. Then another two minutes. Nothing. Dr. Moore started to move, slowly, back towards the front door.

SLAM!

An impact like a sledgehammer shook the entire house, and the door rattled on its hinges. A picture down the hall fell off the wall and crashed with the sound of breaking glass. Dr. Moore thought she had screamed, but couldn't hear herself over the noise of the impact. From upstairs, her mother's labored breathing started in earnest. She didn't dare to look through the peephole now.

SLAM!

The door was starting to give way now. Plates fell from cupboards and lamps tipped over. Dr. Moore could only see the knife in her hand through her terror-narrowed tunnel vision. Phone. She must reach the phone. They'd never arrive in time. She needed the phone.

SLAM!

The gurgling from upstairs was now a drawn out, hitching rattle, droning without pause. Dr. Moore ran for the phone in the living room.

SLAM!

The door was flung open now. She heard it slam into the hall closet. The droning of her dying mother filled her ears. She reached for the phone frantically. As she touched the receiver, darkness washed over her.

"Zanitz, get in here! Hurry, now! Stabilize! Stabilize, god damn it! I need all personnel on-"

A knocking at the door woke her up from the kitchen table. She had fallen asleep onto her book. She looked at the cover. "Secure and Protected Homes: A Locksmith's Guide," by Dennis Rader. She hadn't remembered starting to read this one.

Groggily, Dr. Moore looked at the wall clock - 9:48 pm. Who could be knocking at the door now? She vaguely remembered that it was Halloween, but no children ever came out as far as her house; the nearest neighbor was a half-mile away. The sound came again. Three slow, heavy knocks. Dr. Moore looked through the peephole in the door. A small, disheveled woman stood on her doorstep. Her face was obscured by a white mass of hair. Dr. Moore squinted; was she wearing a hospital gown?

Hesitantly, she opened the door. An elderly woman stood, her back to Dr. Moore. Despite the cold, she was indeed dressed in no more than a hospital gown.

The doctor paused. It couldn't be. "…hello?"

The old woman stood there, her back still to the doctor. She stood perfectly still.

No possible way. She was upstairs, she couldn't have moved from her bed without help, let alone downstairs and outside. But there was no mistaking the wiry white hair. Dr. Moore put her hand on the old woman's shoulder. The woman instantly crumpled to the ground in a heap. As the old woman hit the ground, Dr. Moore could hear several of her bones snapping, and a hollow, wet ripping sound. The woman's hip had been bent at an impossible angle, and she lay in an inexplicably mangled state. Dr. Moore leapt back in horror, the blood instantly drained from her face.

The familiar, hitching gurgling started to come from upstairs. How was this possible? Who was this at the door?

The broken form at the doorstep started to twitch. Muffled grinding

and splintering sounds came from the old stranger's corpse as broken limbs started to move again. The overwhelming smell of freshly butchered meat hit Dr. Moore, though there was no blood visible from the strange old woman. The corpse's head suddenly snapped upwards. Though its face was still obscured, Dr. Moore knew it was staring straight at her.

"Hssssssshh. HUUUUURRRRK. Hsssssssshh."

Her mother's persistent death rattle now greeted her face to face. The corpse slowly rose, pulled upwards by an unseen force, its twisted and broken legs now barely brushing the ground as it came eye level to Dr. Moore.

"HUUUUUUURRRKK."

Dr. Moore spun around at the sound behind her. Her mother's face had been mangled beyond recognition. The only recognizable feature was the mouth.

"HUUUUURRRRKK."

The doctor opened her mouth to scream, but no air could escape the grasp around her throat as an unseen pair of hands choked her from behind. Unconsciousness immediately followed.

"Nonessential personnel are out of the sub-wing. It looks like we've got the source of the breach, doctor."

"Jesus. Check for vitals, but be careful."

A knocking sound woke her up from the kitchen table. She had fallen asleep on top of a large sheaf of papers. Confused, she picked up the first page. The ink was smeared from where her face had come to rest. The first line was hard to read. The second paragraph started with "mind the infrared settings." She remembered saying that earlier today. She looked closer. The entire paragraph was a conversation she had had this morning with Technician Wei. It was written in her own handwriting. She didn't

remember writing this down at all.

Dr. Moore looked at the wall clock - 11:58 pm. How had she slept so long?

The knocking started again. Someone was knocking on the glass coffee table in the living room. Her stomach dropped and a chill seized her extremities. The breath stopped in her chest. She slowly approached the living room.

The room was dark, but the children were easy to make out in their crude white sheets. Somehow, three kids in stereotypical ghost costumes had gotten into her house. Some of the fear faded, as she now remembered that it was Halloween, but confusion set in; no children ever came out as far as her house for Halloween; the nearest neighbor was at least two miles away. And why were they in her house?

"If this is your idea of a prank, kids, it isn't funny. I'm going to need parents' phone numbers right-"

The three diminutive, costumed figures traveled quickly to her. She didn't see any legs move, nor did she understand how they moved so fast. Two of the children slammed into Dr. Moore, knocking her off her feet and onto the ground. The third moved next to her head. A withered, gnarled arm reached out of its costume's eyehole and seized her by the jaw. Up close, she saw spotted, red stains starting to show through the immaculate, bright white of the costume sheets.

One of the kids that had knocked her down now lept on top of her midsection. Bony, wrinkled legs now protruded from the bottom of its costume, wrapping around her and pinning her to the floor with a tremendous weight that could not have possibly belonged to the wasted body that these legs must have been supporting. Rivulets of blood started to run down its thighs, soaking into Dr. Moore's shirt.

Her hands still free, Dr. Moore struggled desperately to pry loose the grip on her jaw, but to no avail. The hand was locked onto her, its strength overpowering.

The last costumed figure slowly hovered into her view. It appeared

to bend down and look into her eyes, though she couldn't see anything through the blackness of the costume's eyeholes. Another withered arm reached out from under the sheet, holding a pair of pliers. The wrinkled fingers slowly worked the pliers open and closed, moving them slowly towards Dr. Moore's face. As the hand came closer, a wheezing came from whoever was under the sheet.

"Hssssssshhhh. HUUUUUURRRRKKKK."

The costumed child forced the pliers into Dr. Moore's mouth.

"HUUUUUUUURRRKKKKK. Hsssssssshhhhh. HUUUUUUUUURRRRRK."

As several of her incisors were violently twisted from her lower jaw, Dr. Moore tried to scream, but the blood quickly filled her mouth. She couldn't breathe. She felt several more teeth from her upper jaw being wrenched free. There was nothing but pain and the taste of copper. Her mind rebelled, and she lost consciousness.

"So you're saying we have to keep her like this?"

"Dr. Hirsch. Alan. You know the protocols. She did too. She helped write them."

"Do you have any idea what's happening to her right now? In there?"

"The last host bought us eighteen months of unbroken containment for 480. You of all people know what that's worth, Alan."

"You cannot do this! No one-"

"Site Director's orders. Your euthanization request is denied. Dr. Hirsch. And that's the end of it."

A knocking sound woke her up from the kitchen table. She had fallen asleep on top of a manila envelope.

Had she imagined the knocking? She looked at the envelope that had been under her face. "For Ellen," labeled on the front in

typeface. She didn't remember taking this home with her.

She opened the envelope. As she shook the contents out onto the table, a pile of photographs came tumbling out, scattering onto the table and the floor.

Groggily, Dr. Moore looked at the wall clock - 1:05 am. She had the vague notion that she had slept through Halloween. She felt a small amount of guilt about not being able to greet anyone at the door, but then remembered that she never had any trick-or-treaters. Still, she pitied any children who may have come out as far as her house, only to be turned away.

She picked up a photograph from the table. Instantly, she recognized her own face. What was she wearing here? Why didn't she remember taking this picture? And why was she making that hideous expression?

Dr. Moore picked up another photograph. It was another picture of herself. She was in a hospital bed, hooked up to what looked like dozens of machines. Men in labcoats were visible on either side of her. Who were these people? Why couldn't she remember taking these pictures?

As she reached for another photograph, the pile of pictures jumped as something knocked three times, in rapid succession, from under the opposite end of the table.

Herman Fuller Hub

Come one, come all…

- **'Fidget Winners' (FDG43/W1NR3/5SLA2)**
- **Herman Fuller Presents: The Dread Behemoth**
- **Herman Fuller Presents: Nixie the Nereid**
- **Herman Fuller Presents: The Skeleton Dance**
- **Herman Fuller Presents: The Amazing Zoltan**
- **Herman Fuller Presents: Icky the Magic Clown**
- Herman Fuller Presents: The Living Head
- Herman Fuller Presents: The Amazing Sluggo
- Herman Fuller Presents: The Fishman Of Manasquan
- Herman Fuller Presents: The Flame Faced Man

Fabulous Freaks and Human Wonders

- **SCP-1834**
- **SCP-1860**
- **SCP-1884**
- **SCP-1956**
- **SCP-2094**
- **SCP-2902**
- **SCP-2912**
- **SCP-3036**
- **SCP-3245**

Other Disqueting Diversions

- **SCP-1695**
- **SCP-190**
- **SCP-1921**
- **SCP-1931**
- **SCP-2024**
- **SCP-3077**
- **SCP-3329**
- **SCP-3440**
- **SCP-3717**
- **SCP-3718**
- **SCP-3886**

2014 Groups of Interest Contest

- A Circus Milked Dry
- Family Ties
- Freaky Commodities
- Free Freaks

Dread & Circuses Canon

- A Circus Come To Not
- A Real Humdinger
- A Scip Or A Star?
- A Vale of Tears
- ...And I'm the Star!
- City of Wonder™
- Clown Breeding 101 with Prof. Richard C. Normus
- Dark and Disquieting
- Dread & Circuses Hub
- Former Assets
- Freaks, Friends and Fiends
- Freaky Commodities II: Freak Harder
- Fuller Than Full!
- Fuller's Fantastic Fun-Lover's Funhouse
- Herman Fuller Can Shove It Up His Ass
- Let's Get this Show on the Road!
- **Life's a Show**

- She Remembered Me
- So They Called Him Darke
- The Sea Slug and the Showman
- **The Warrior And The... Clown?**
- There Are No Strings On Me
- Undead, Insane and Fully Loaded
- Upside-Down Cake
- Your Call Is Important To Us

Other Tales

- A Circus of a Wreck
- A Circus With Paranoia
- **A Jester's Tale**
- **Fish Are Friends, Not Clowns**
- **Green Day**
- **Green Day II**
- Interviews with Prospective Groups of Interest
- **Opening Night**

On the format

We've chosen a format that feels natural to a Group of Interest like Herman Fuller's Circus of the Disquieting: circus posters. In addition to those, we've provided you with a template to add pages torn from a fictional book, "*To the Circus Born: Herman Fuller's Menagerie of Freaks*" to your article. These pages were and are still being found in libraries all across the world, inserted into circus-themed books of all kinds. These templates will give you a chance to back the visual of the poster with more narrative, and provide substance to the article. You can use the poster with or without the page, and you can use the page on its own.

How to create your own Herman Fuller posters

We've created a component for you that you can use to create a

poster of your own with minimal coding. Simply create a page and copy-paste the following code:

```
[[include component:hf-poster title=[1]|textLeft=[2]|
image=[3]|textRight=[4]|textBottom=[5]|textFooter=[6]]]
```

As you can see, the component takes 6 parameters:

1. The title for the poster. Usually the freak's stagename.
2. The text you want left of the image. Use this and the corresponding textRight parameter for short credos intended to attract the attention.
3. The image you want to use. You do **need** an image for this format to work. Old photographs might work, but original artwork would probably be better.
4. The text you want right of the image.
5. The text you want below the image. Use this to expand on the anomaly in narrative.
6. The footer for the poster. You could note things about where the circus is going to be, what the price of admission is, when the show's going to be performed etc.

Replace the bracketed numbers with the values you want to give them. There's a few things to keep in mind:

- You can and should use linebreaks (hit the enter key) in the text you want on the poster; it won't break the component.
- Your picture needs to be 300 x 425 pixels to fit inside the frame without it being too big or too small.
- When filling the image parameter, use **the full path to the image** (i.e. start with *http://*. You can find out the path to your image by clicking 'Files' and then 'Info'
- You don't need a rating module, the component includes that for you.

For all your drafting needs this template has also been added to both sandboxes. Be sure to see how the text looks before you create the page on the main wiki.

How to create the torn pages:

You can choose from a left and a right page, with the following codes:

```
[[include component:hf-book-left chapter=[1]|content=[2]|
pagenumber=[3]]]
```

or

```
[[include component:hf-book-right chapter=[1]|
content=[2]|pagenumber=[3]]]
```

These two components take 3 parameters:

1. The chapter title. You'll want to use the freak you're providing more information on.
2. The text for the page. You have about 800 words to use. Preview your work to make sure the page looks good.
3. The number for the page. This is to make sure not every page is number 15 or something. Go wild. Who knows how many pages've been found by now, or how many the book originally had.

Resources used

`Background-image`
`EastMarket font, free from Font Squirrel`, used for the text of the poster.
`Alegreya font, free from Font Squirrel`, used for the text of the book pages.
`Romantiques font, free from Dafont.com`, used in the header.

Herman Fuller Presents: The Living Head

The Living Head

SHE HAS NO BODY, YET SHE LIVES!

She talks!

She sings!

She will enchant you!

She feels her body yet she does not possess it!

Where is it?

Hear her chilling tale!

The Lady Elisa comes to us from faraway Yugoslavia where she spent her childhood happy and free until fate cheated her. Her tale is as tragic as it is wondrous and beautiful. Hear it for yourself as she recounts her experiences and answers all questions asked!

ONE DAY ONLY

Tonight only, 8 PM, at the Comanche County Fairgrounds.
One show, one chance! Come one, come all!

The following is a page from a publication entitled To the Circus Born: Herman Fuller's Menagerie of Freaks. The identities of neither

publisher nor author have been established, and scattered pages have been found inserted into Circus-themed books in libraries across the world. The person or persons behind this dissemination are unknown.

The Living Head

To the Circus Born

first act we developed was one where I was going to be launched out of a cannon. Since my body is made up of all these pieces, the audience would think they saw me blown up, but in the end, I'd be waving after they'd picked everything out of the net. We actually only performed that act one time, because of the way the audience reacted. There were wails and screams, and I think I saw a lot of people pass out. Manny thought it was bad publicity, so we retired that one.

Next thing we came up with was an act where I would join the clowns in shenanigans. They'd bring me out under a glass cover. We couldn't do that for long though. I may just be a head, but I still need to breathe. Anyway, they gingerly take me out from under the glass and then decide to play croquet with my head. The audience would of course be indignant, and the clowns would realize their mistake. Then they'd pick me up, dust me off and get out a basketball hoop. Same reaction from the audience, wash, rinse, repeat a few more times for effect. I was never really a big fan of that one, especially since those damn clowns are so weird. Have you ever seen them? Looked into those eyes? You know how they say the eyes are windows to the soul? Well, that's one grimy window. But I digress. We discontinued that act when it turned out the audience wasn't indignant and seemed amused at the idea of my head being whacked through a croquet hoop. After the performance, I talked to Manny and I made it very clear to him that I wasn't going to do acts in the ring. If he wanted me for the Den of Freaks, I'd be happy to work there, but I wasn't going to be smashed, thrown, whirled or whatever else he had planned for me. Luckily Manny isn't that bad of a guy, so he let me work with the rest of the freaks.

I got a spot in between Danny**1** and Phil, a nice pedestal with a soft

cushion, and Manny's assurances that both of them would be watching out for me. I mean, if some loon gets it into his head that he wants a souvenir, I couldn't really do anything about that. Meanwhile, Manny was going to hang on to the rest of my body. He's been a gentleman about it, that's all I'll say.

The whole Yugoslavia thing is a complete crock of course; most of our official stories are. I was born Edith Mary Fernanda McKinnel somewhere in Boston in early 1878. I don't remember my parents, all I know is they left all of me on the steps of the old Baldwin Place Mission & Home for Little Wanderers when I was about 6 weeks old. Kind of funny to leave me with a place called the "Home for Little Wanderers" when I can't walk, now that I think about it. Anyway, they took me in, but they had no idea what to do with me either. From what I've been told, they kept me in the basement, hidden away from the other kids to try and make sure no one hurt me. And trust me, it was a dog eat dog world in there, don't let the fact that those kids were at most 12 years old fool you. I think I spent something like three years in that place, until one day someone showed up. Someone who apparently knew me, or at least knew of me. Maybe my parents told him about me, probably for money. So, this man offered the nuns running the place a deal. He got to take me and in return he'd pay for a much-needed renovation of the building. Nuns or no nuns, they sold me so fast my head was reeling. Well, long story short, that was Manny, always on the lookout for new acts. Looking back, I'm grateful to him, really. The circus life may not be for everyone, but let's face it, what kind of a future do I have outside the circus? I won't deny that it's a rough life, but we're looked after. We have our own little family here and even though there are those out there who want us for themselves, we feel safe.

When I first joined the circus, people kept asking me why I was the way I was. It took a while for them to realize that there wasn't any specific reason for my body being in the state it's in. Some of the freaks I work with can tell you exactly what made them what they are, but I can't. It's something I've had to accept myself and it's taken me long enough. I just am. I mean, you can spend your nights lying awake, wondering about what went wrong, or even if something went wrong at all, but in the end, here I am. And I don't

have a body that sticks together the way yours does. So what? I'm alive, I can feel, I can talk, I can sing. I'm fine, unlike most of the people who come to gawk at me.

1Daniel Golenski, the Flame-Faced Man (see p.14)

Herman Fuller Presents: The Amazing Sluggo

The Amazing Sluggo

Slug or man?

See his eyes grow into stalks!

A wondrous creature to behold!

He dances!

He sings!

Come watch the show of a lifetime!

Is he a man or a slug? He's both! One of our greatest performers, The Slugman will have you tapping your feet to the music as he dances and sings for you. Watch him as he uses his slug eyestalks to form your name, or EVEN YOUR IMAGE!

ONE DAY ONLY

This Friday, 9 PM, at the Alameda County Fairgrounds.
One show, one chance! Come one, come all!

The following is a page from a publication entitled To the Circus Born: Herman Fuller's Menagerie of Freaks. The identities of neither

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To the Circus Born

The Amazing Sluggo

didn't want to sell me to Mr. Fuller, but I don't think he had a choice. Once you got fired for mouthing off to the foreman in our neck of the woods, you had a reputation. He just couldn't get any employment anywhere, and believe me, he tried. Night after night he came home dead tired and broken.

Of course I cried my little blind eyes out when Fuller took me with him on that muggy day in June of 1912, but you have to understand that to a small boy, the circus is also an adventure, and emotions seldom last long. Hell, I didn't even realize what it all meant; after about an hour of sniffling, all I could think about was the lions, and the dancing bears I thought I was going to see. Besides, Mr. Fuller'd promised me that my mom and dad could always visit when we were in town. He later told me that my parents lacked for nothing in the years that followed. I can't say if they did or didn't; we never did go back to our patch of Louisiana, and I never saw them again.

Anyway, when we got to the circus, I marveled. It was as grand as grand could be. A big tent, all manner of trailers and wagons, some real fancy ones too. He took me aside and explained that in order to work in his circus, I needed something unique. Said he knew someone who could make me special. And he did, oh Lord, did he ever! I didn't know the meaning of the word "disquieting" back then, but I was about to learn. He took me to Sally the Seamstress, bless her soul, and he told me: "Now, Uriel, Sally here is going to make your eyes better. Just hold still." And Sally, she just smiled with those big bright doll's eyes of hers and beckoned me closer. Everything smelled of lavender and swamp reeds, a really weird combination. I hesitated for a bit, but Fuller gave me a little shove and into her arms I went. Sally comforted me, because she knew I was just a scared little boy, but then she began working her magic. Didn't hurt either, that's the funniest thing. I mean, I felt my skin

stretching, felt it cover my eye sockets. And of course, I felt it when she stitched the crosses on, but it really didn't hurt. And then it happened. She kissed the stitches and all of a sudden I could see! Let me tell you, when you can see for the first time after seven years, it's like you're born again. I found out nothing looked like anything I'd imagined. I didn't even know what I looked like, let alone the rest of the world. I guess that disquieted me the most about all of that. Fuller had to put me down in a chair for fear of me fainting and hitting my head. He was right though, I fainted.

I woke up in my very own trailer. Can you imagine, a seven-year-old boy getting his own trailer? I remember that one was painted bright yellow on the inside. Used to belong to one of Fuller's original clowns, Gusto. Italian guy, I think. Never did find out what happened to him. Fuller kept saying Gusto wasn't "compatible" with his vision for the circus, but he wouldn't go into detail. I do know that every time I mentioned his name to the other performers, they'd hush and look glum. Make of that what you will. Anyway, Fuller introduced me to Manny, the Man with the Upside-Down Face, and he set about developing an act with me. Now, I'd always been a good dancer, always making the girls giggle and the ladies in church swoon with my fancy moves, but that wasn't good enough. A Fuller act needed to knock 'em dead, so to speak. Manny taught me how to control my stalks, and how to bend them into shapes. Simple ones at first. Circles, squares, then harder ones like triangles and things he called hexagons. Eventually, I was able to form hearts, letters and after years of practice even people's faces. Now that was a show stopper, I tell you.

I didn't start doing shows until I'd been with the Circus for about six months, but when I did, they put me right at the top of the bill for a while. Every poster they put up would have my name up there in big bold lettering. "URIEL FISHBONES, THE AMAZING SLUGGO". That made me proud and I hoped that when my parents saw that, it made them proud too.

After every show, I'd have to lie down in my trailer. Other acts, they were far more athletic. Running, tumbling or swinging around and around they were, and there I was, just sitting on a stool, manipulating my stalks. And still, every time I was done, I felt so

tired. I needed the applause though, it was the only thing

Herman Fuller Presents: The Fishman Of Manasquan

The Fishman of Manasquan

Part fish!

Part man!

All freak!

Man or fish? YOU DECIDE!

How can this abomination exist?

What lurks beneath the waves?

The Fishman knows and all will be revealed!

The original, the only real fishman in existence! Born into this cruel and uncaring world somewhere in the Atlantic Ocean, the Fishman now travels with our Circus to bring you a most exciting show. Hear the whispered secrets from the depths of the ocean!

ONE DAY ONLY

This Sunday, 1 PM, at the Botetourt County Fairgrounds.
One show, one chance! Come one, come all!

Herman Fuller Presents: The Flame Faced Man

The Flame-Faced Man

Come see the burning man!

Cursed by a witch-doctor!

Forever wreathed in bright flames!

He feels no pain!

See him set objects ablaze!

Come see the hottest show on earth!

Sir Allan Bottley-Shillingham, world-renowned explorer, ran afoul of the natives of Darkest Africa. Cursed by an evil witch doctor, he wandered the earth as the flame-faced man until the Circus found him. Come see this wonder of darkest magic and feel the heat!

ONE DAY ONLY

This Sunday, 1 PM, at the Botetourt County Fairgrounds.
One show, one chance! Come one, come all!

A Circus Milked Dry

A Circus of a Wreck »

A few miles east of the remains of a fairgrounds, a gopher stuck its head out of its hole and squinted into the boiling afternoon heat. It looked around curiously, surveying the land for any threats. After a few minutes had passed, it ducked down and chattered to its fellow rodent.

"Okey doke, Pius, I think the coast is finally clear! The Party Poopers have finally left!" The little animal spoke perfect English, in a sharp, brusque manner that had an air of permanent exasperation.

"Thank goodness. I don't think I could have coped with the smell of rotting gopher much longer. Why didn't they come over here? I'm sure a pond of blood and guts would have merited some interest, even if it was just gopher." The second critter spoke in a much calmer tone, though it was clear he was feeling somewhat strained from being pent up in a dirt hidey-hole.

"Morty's been cleaning up at night. For a sadistic little beast, he's surprisingly good at covering up his messes."

"Ah, well. That explains it. Where did Mortimer run off to anyway, Eugene?"

"Wowwee! Wowwee!"

The two gophers turned their heads upwards to see a neon green rabbit peering back at them through their hiding spot. Its mouth curved upward in a malicious grin to reveal a mouth full of forked tongues. It hissed with mischievous laughter. "Wowwee! Wowwee!"

"Mortimer, dammit! Get down here now! Do you know how much Fun-Lovers are wanted by the others!" Eugene the Gopher bristled,

showing no signs of alarm at the peculiar rabbit, only indignation.

"I thought you said we were climbing out?" Pius said politely.

"I— I just meant— fine. Get out of here." Eugene snapped.

"Gladly," Pius replied, and the two gophers clambered out of the hole into the hot grassy plains of the former Circus site. For a fraction of a second, the gophers seemed to shimmer and bubble in the sun's glare. An instant later, two stereotypical-looking circus clowns stood in the place of the rodents.

"Good to be a Clown again, Eugene?" Pius asked his taller companion as he flexed his shoulders; a large layer of dust sprinkled down from his costume.

"On the contrary, I'm more than a bit irked," Eugene snapped. "I would have preferred being normal right now, but I doubt I can pull off another transformation stronger than this; I'd need more Clown Milk than we've got at the moment."

"How long is the walk to the grounds?"

"Not long with a Mortimer! Get over here and give us a ride!"

The rabbit gave a final "Wowwee!" before jumping up a good eight feet into the air. A swirl of dust and a loud crack followed. A second later, the rabbit was gone, replaced by a chittering, amorphous sac of black liquid supported by a dozen or so human arms. The thing shuddered once more, then sprouted a pair of rudimentary wooden chairs on its back. It lowered its body as the clowns hoisted themselves up.

"Mortimer, any milk on you right now?" Eugene asked the pitch-colored thing.

The beast rippled unhappily in response; an empty sloshing noise could be heard within the sac.

"Damn. Not enough to pull off a Ringer. Let's hope something's left at the grounds to make Morty happy. He already blew through the gophers here."

"Try to stay calm this time, Eugene," Pius said solemnly. "You'll waste your Milk supplies if you get all fired up."

"Shut up, Pius," Eugene snapped.

Chitter, chitter, chitter. The Clowns' mount clicked and rumbled.

"Shut up, Morty."

And with that, the two exhausted Clowns and their Eldritch ride skittered to the Circus grounds.

As the unusual trio neared the burnt remains of the old Circus grounds, Eugene the Clown swore.

"We're going to be hard-pressed to find anything here," he groaned. "The place has been torched." All around, patches of burnt grass and ashen wood frames clouded the air with smoke and dying embers. Mortimer came to a halt as they came to the central Big Top. The Clowns dismounted, and the Eldritch sac took off in search of new ways to amuse itself.

The Big Top tent post, surprisingly, was still standing, though apart from that, there wasn't much left. The seven meter tall wooden stake was firmly driven into the ground at the center of the abandoned fair. Scraps of scarlet and gold fabric shuddered and flapped in messes and tangles of wire, splinters, and string. Heaps of charred wooden seats ringed the once proud setting of the main attraction. Right outside the ring of ash and dirty red and dirt, several, smaller heaps of deformed, blackened metal sunk into the dust. Concession stands. A little further off, several more booths that were once home to carnival games smoked softly. There was not another living soul in sight.

Eugene sighed. "Everyone except us got out. Of course. Morty *had* to go play Hack-a-Mole when the Call went out."

Eugene loved being part of the Circus of the Disquieting, though he was, to say the least, unhappy at the moment. It had been seventy years since he and so many others of his kind had first met Herman

Fuller and traveled the worlds for countless performances that befuddled and awed every audience. Every show was a new, thrilling experience; the Clowns wanted the fun to go on and on and on.

And that was what Fuller promised. A lifetime of entertainment for everyone, for all the Clowns. Entertainment was hard to come by in their own home. Things could be downright dull, so the Clowns were eager to join the Circus when it became clear that Fuller could ease their boredom, which, in itself, said something about Fuller's confidence in his abilities; the first Clowns that had come in were, to say the least, monstrous; they were too unstable to be fit for regular Circus Performances. As a result, the creatures who were employed by Fuller were required to stunt their growth, abilities, and primal violence to the point where they could be, at the least, accepted without *too* much concern for worry.

Eugene cursed again. "I bet the Higher Clowns are sitting on their asses just *clowning* around right now. No one *cares* about two miserly Lessers! We're just the Highers' dogs!" he lamented. "Oh, the *freaking humanity*!"

"The term humanity doesn't apply to us," Pius corrected as he knelt down to look at a ruined cotton candy machine. "And yes, we do serve the Higher Clowns, but it's far from a slave system." Then, frowning in disappointment, he added, "No good here; all the Milk's spoiled from the heat. It burst all over the vat."

"Well there has to be something we can use to get Morty up and running!" Eugene spat. "And it'd better not involve me! I don't want to become a Fun-Lover's punching-milking-bag-thing again!" The Clown shuddered as it recalled a vivid image of it being forced to turn into a cherry-red wobbly heavy bag so it could keep Mortimer occupied and away from the audience.

"You'd prefer being abandoned by the Circus and left to whither from Milk Deprivation? It will take Mortimer at least a week to make a gallon of Milk for just one of us if we don't let him off the chain for a bit. Give a little to win a little," Pius remarked curiously, regarding Eugene as he was a mildly interesting thing found within a rotting log.

"*No*, I just want to stop being someone who has to do all the dirty work!" Eugene shot back. "How'd we get stuck with *that* Fun-Lover anyways? I thought that after Marlene was transferred I had requested one that just needed company to be milked, not one that was a sadistic little twit!"

"Mortimer was given to us under…special circumstances if I recall," Pius said as he walked towards another melted concession stand.

"Aside from the psychotic milking needs? I thought violent Fun-Lovers were shipped back home."

"Don't you remember, Eugene? Honestly, you'd be much better off paying attention instead of moping all the time when someone's talking; in fact, your attitude contributed to the Higher-Ups giving us the "sadistic little twit". Anyhow, allow me to lay it out for you…"

Behind Eugene and Pius, Mortimer returned with a box of two dozen twisty balloons, honking and hissing reproachfully as it continued to walk with an empty fluid sac. It plopped down and turned one of its arms into an air hose. Its remaining hands, which were surprisingly dexterous, began inflating and tying the balloons until it had sixteen balloon animals ranging from dogs to monkeys to cats. It loaded a handful of pebbles into one of the remaining eight balloons and inflated it to near bursting before shaping it like a shotgun. Then it popped it, sending the miniature rocks hurtling towards a pair of rubber turtles, which both deflated with hissing *floops*… Mortimer clapped its hands and repeated this antic seven more times until the balloon zoo was mowed down completely. The milk sac on its back filled slightly, maybe a dozen milliliters, though Pius and Eugene didn't notice.

"…Mortimer was sent off with Trisha to go scout for potential show additions," Pius lectured.

"Oh, yeah, Trisha, I remember her," Eugene interjected. "What happened to her?"

"She was… Inflated after Mortimer got out of hand during their search," Pius said, with a tone of sadness in his voice. "It was at some artist's convention; Mortimer went bonkers when he saw one

of the pieces."

"Which one was that?" Eugene asked.

"A total deathtrap thing. Lots of needles and sharp stuff and explosions, the whole lot. It was supposed to represent some human element."

"You mean ignorance? Downright, complete, and utter asininity?" Eugene gave a short bark of laughter.

"Something like that," Pius responded, smiling slightly in spite of himself. "We confiscated it from Mortimer after he somehow managed to take it right out from under their noses. I don't even know why anyone in their right mind would have displayed it to begin with, though the artists Trisha had been sent to go look at were… odd. I remember hearing something about how everyone should "chill" in the report."

"Human slang, sometimes."

"I know, right?"

"Go on." Eugene implored Pius to get to the point. Meanwhile, Mortimer, now in a form resembling a monstrous, half-mechanical praying mantis, was taking helium canisters and chopping the seals off with transformed bladed forelimbs. One sped straight towards Pius' head, who casually sidestepped the projectile. The canister snapped the Big Top pole in two and continued skidding for a good hundred feet. Eugene wasn't so lucky, and caught one right in the back, sending the Clown sprawling face first into the dirt, where he stuck out like a nail.

"Wowwee! Wowwee! I 'da Champ! I 'da Champ!" Mortimer laughed again.

Eugene pushed himself out of the crater, and rubbed his nose, his eyes watering. "Son of a Flame-faced man, looks like I'm gonna have to be the punching bag after all. And why the *hell* does he keep repeating that?"

"Freak Show if I know," Pius replied in a singsong voice. "Shall I

continue?"

"Go ahead," Eugene growled, glaring at the gloating Fun-Lover. He was beginning to see red, and his ears were ringing, though he couldn't tell if it was from the melting make-up or just his anger. Then, looking back, he saw Pius cocking an eyebrow at him in mock disapproval. "I'm *staying calm*, Pius."

"Ahem, I doubt it. Eugene? Dial back on the steam engine state, will you? The rest of us don't want your…spout to blow." Pius gave a little smirk as he watched his colleague try and get his temper down.

Eugene felt the top of his head. "Shit." He had let his shape-shifting get out of control again; an old-style train smokestack had sprung out from his skull and was now billowing copious amounts of black smoke while whistling shrilly. "Screw you, Pius," Eugene snapped at Pius' chiding, still staring daggers at Mortimer. However, the smokestack retreated back into his head. "Better?" Eugene asked.

"Good." Pius smiled. "You're learning a bit of patience and tolerance today, Gene. That's very good for getting a promotion."

"*Don't call me that*," Eugene grumbled.

"Wowwee! Wowwee!"

Forty Minutes Later

"…and so, after you gave Head Arby lip, he gave you Mortimer because it was so *fond* of you. The End." Pius finished his monologue, grinning to himself. He doubted his audience of two was even listening anymore, though he was thoroughly enjoying the spectacle unfolding before him.

"Well, it seems they brought the Circus back to town single-handedly. Fuller would be delighted."

Mortimer and Eugene were engaged in a violent but very one-sided fight that began after Eugene called Mortimer "Mort" around the thirteenth minute of Pius' tale. The ensuing tussle had leveled what

was left of the Circus, yet strangely had brought some life back into it as well. The merry-go-round horses had been thrown off their ride and were now frantically galloping and whinnying in place as they tried to run away in terror. Boxes of Herman Fuller Animal Crackers lay strewn over like a miniature zoo and were screeching their respective animal cries as they were trampled underfoot. Leftover masks and costumes had split from their wardrobes and were waltzing and performing acrobatics with each other without wearers, while legged fun-house mirrors stretched and squashed whatever came into their sight, both reflected and physical. A few tumbleweeds rolled by, followed by an ominous rumbling sound of gravel on metal.

Pius sighed. "That'll be the Ferris Wheel." It rolled past him then came to a stop at a melted hot dog stand before falling over on it. Pius smirked. "To go, please." He turned back to take in the wrestling match, which had now moved into the Big Top.

Mortimer, who was now steadily refilling its Milk supply due to the scuffle, was relentlessly swinging a meat cleaver at Eugene's head while in the form of a giant pig wearing a chef's hat. Eugene, who was already low on Milk, was running out of steam.

"I don't care about your story anymore!" Eugene screeched as he avoided yet another vicious knife swing. "Help me already!"

"You *were* listening to me!" Pius called happily. "Keep up the good work! At this rate we should be able to make a Ring within the next half hour!"

"Eat— my —ack!" Eugene was cut short as Mortimer the flaming, unicycle-riding grizzly bear ran him over. Eugene's clown form shook violently as he lay in the dirt covered in a tire track. He looked like a wax figure struggling to stay solid in a firestorm.

Dear, dear, he's straining to keep his Clown form up, Pius thought. *At this rate he'll revert within the next few minutes. Should I intervene? Ah, well, the Highers or Manny can restore him when we get back.*

The Fun-Lover pedaled back over to Eugene, who was still lying in

the dirt unmoving. Mortimer turned back into its default form, and began prodding the Clown with its hands. It rolled him over. Eugene gave a withering glare at the walking udder. That was enough for Mortimer to decide there was still some life in his plaything. The Fun-Lover turned into a literal *Hammer*-head shark. It swung its iron mallet face downwards towards the unfortunate Lesser Clown, who, by now, was simply too upset and too low on Milk to resist. When the hammer struck, the Clown crumpled and dissolved into a black puddle with a *sploosh* and a *gurgle*. The liveliness around the main attraction continued as if nothing had happened.

Pius stared, raising his eyebrows in genuine surprise. *Perhaps less than a few minutes.* "Oh, dear me," he sighed, looking down at the shallow pool and shaking his head. "That was a little rough, Mortimer."

The Fun-Lover peeled its head away from the Clown and reverted back to its many-armed sac form. It had finally stopped laughing. The vesicle was now bloated with black liquid.

Pius grinned at the full Milk supply. "Though, I guess you had your reasons. Well done."

"You piece of—*squick*, *pbbttth*, *plbbrrrtthh*…" An angry high-pitched bubbling emanated from Eugene the Puddle.

"Hello, Gene. You've finally come to. Look! Mortimer has enough Milk to take us back, I believe!"

A dozen pair of short eye-stalks and tentacles sprouted from Eugene's "body." He had reverted into his weaker, "Normal" form, and was now violently cursing his attacker with a barrage of gurgling and hissing.

"Hush now, Eugene. Thank you, really, for taking one for the team," Pius said to the puddle. "We'll get you fixed up soon enough." The still whole Clown knelt down and scooped Eugene in his hands. "Mortimer! Time to go home!"

"Wowwee!"

The now full Fun-Lover made one last transformation in the abandoned fairgrounds: an enormous, scarlet rotary phone, with a large, transparent vat of Clown Milk replacing the power cord. The dial wheel turned, and the receiver sprung into the air, then slammed down on Pius and Eugene; a hissing noise could be heard from within, along with the inward sucking of a vacuum and the clicking of safety belts. Two spherical bulges snaked their way through the receiver cord and squeezed into the main phone body; Pius and Eugene had just been sucked into the main cabin right behind the dial wheel. The vat gurgled as the viscous black liquid flowed from it to be pumped. A firework shot out from each of the ten numbers on the dial wheel; a glowing clown face exploded into existence, illuminating the ruined Circus grounds with renewed light for a final time as the abandoned props now all engaged in a frenzied jig.

"Thank you for watching! We hoped you enjoyed the show!" The firework called, bursting into a rainbow of stars and confetti. The sparks encompassed the ground like a dome.

The phone hovered off the ground, crackling as Clown Milk boiled, beginning the Ring sequence that would take the Clowns and their Fun-Lover back to the Circus. There was a resounding crack. All the re-invigorated Circus items collapsed.

And then Eugene, Pius, and Mortimer were gone, leaving silence behind.

…

Beep-beep-beep-beep-beep-beep-beep

Ring…

Ring…

BnnNZzZzZzzzzz

BnnNZzZzZzzzzz

Click!

YOU HAVE REACHED THE MAIN LINE FOR HERMAN FULLER'S CLOWN TRANSPORTATION SERVICES. PLEASE HOLD WHILE AN OPERATOR LOCATES YOU. THANK YOU FOR CALLING, AND HAVE A PLEASANT REST OF YOUR DAY.

♪ Entry of the Gladiators♪

…

"…*prbtthhhllthlth*-king hold music."

"Eugene, you're back!"

WOWWEE!

A Circus of a Wreck »

Family Ties

Elisa sighed contentedly as she sat in the moonlight, her head cradled in Tom's lap. He was just a lowly worker for the circus and she was a member of Fuller's collection of freaks, but while there had certainly been a few raised eyebrows, the rest of the circus folk did not seem to have any particular opinion on their relationship.

"It's so beautiful out here at night," her beau said. He caressed her cheek.

"Tom, why are you with me?" she asked.

"Because I love you, Elisa." He sounded sincerely baffled by her question.

"But why? Look at me, there is very little for you to love."

"There's more than enough to love," he said and picked up the disembodied head in his lap. He slowly turned it towards him, and looked her in the eye for a moment before kissing her.

Elisa closed her eyes and savored the warmth of his lips on hers. After breaking the kiss, Tom leant back and cleared his throat.

"Elisa, can I talk to you about something?"

"Sure. What's on your mind, handsome?"

"Don't you ever grow tired of life in the circus?"

"Tired? How would I get tired? I'm just a head." Elisa said giggling.

"I'm being serious," Tom said.

"Fine, you're being serious. No, I don't get tired of the circus life. Why?"

"Because we can never settle down. Every time I think to myself 'hey, I like this town', off we go to the next place and the next show."

"And?"

"And I don't like that at all, Elisa. I'd like to settle down with you somewhere," Tom said, aware that his love didn't seem as enthusiastic as he'd hoped.

Elisa sighed.

"I really don't know what to say. I didn't take you for a hopeless romantic. Or an idiot, for that matter."

"ELISA!" Tom exclaimed, "Why would you say that?" He put her down in the grass.

"Seriously Tom. You might not have noticed this, but I am just a head. How exactly did you figure us settling down?"

Tom looked angry.

"Well, I'm sorry for believing that if people just got to know you, they'd accept you and we could live together in-"

She finished his sentence for him: "-some nice little cottage somewhere in the country. Picket fence? Couple of kids? I'M A HEAD, TOM."

"I had noticed that, yes," Tom muttered.

Elise relented a bit. "Look, honey, I get it. You like me, I very much like you, but there's a reason I'm with the circus," she said. "Pick me up, please."

Tom huffed, but he did so anyway. They looked into each other's eyes.

"What do you want from me?" he asked, "What do you want from this relationship."

Elisa sighed. "I want to be with you, Tom. But I want to be with you

here, with the circus."

"And what if I don't want to live this life anymore, Elisa? What if I'm tired of not having a real home."

"But you do have a real home. It's just not fixed to the ground like some whitewashed coffin with four walls," Elisa exclaimed in frustration, "Don't you get that? There's nothing out there for you that you don't already have here."

"Well, I don't agree. And you know what? I think you'll agree with me once we're safely away."

"What do you mean, 'once we're safely away'?" Elisa said and raised an eyebrow.

"I mean that I'm done talking about this. We're leaving tonight. I've got my bags packed, and I'm sure I can get some of your stuff too before Manny notices."

Elisa closed her eyes and gritted her teeth.

"Tom, did you ever ask *me* how I feel about my life at the circus?"

"No, but…" Tom began, before she interrupted him.

"No, you didn't. The Circus is my home. You may believe my life to be horrible, but I think I'm the only one who gets to judge that. Besides, Manny would never let me leave."

"I can take him."

"No you can't, Tom. And besides, you're not listening. I don't want to go. Not with you, not with anyone. The circus is my family."

Tom huffed. "Some family; they put you on a shelf in some dusty wooden wagon every night."

She'd really hoped he was different, that he'd be the one to *get* it.

"There is more of me, Tom."

"I know you're more than the girl without a body," he replied.

"No Tom, I said more *of* me, not more *to* me. I do have a body," she said.

"Wait, what? You do? Where is it? It's not in your wagon."

"Yes, I do, Tom. I just don't feel the need to tell everybody and their dog about it. It invites…shenanigans. And no, it isn't in my wagon. Manny holds it for me. It's better that way."

Tom put her down in the soft grass underneath the tree.

"HOW? How is that better? He's holding it hostage, Elisa! He's holding you hostage!" he exclaimed and started pacing.

"No, he's not, Tom. My body's not important; I'm the attraction, not it. By keeping it for me, Manny makes sure nothing happens to it."

"Well, I'm going to find Manny and get your body back. And then we're going to…"

"You'll do nothing of the sort, Tom Brenneman, if only because I was very serious when I said you couldn't take Manny, and I love you enough to want to you to stay in one piece."

The sound of breaking branches cut the conversation short.

"You know, Tom, I did notice," the Man With The Upside-Down Face said as he stepped into the moonlight. Behind him stood the Circus' clowns. The juxtaposition of their unsmiling faces and their cheery facepaint was unsettling.

"Two things. One, Tom, you should really choose a better hiding place when you take Elisa here out on a date. And two, you really shouldn't confide in your fellow freaks about your plans to abscond with one of my star attractions," Manny said before turning to the head in Tom's hands. "Hello Elisa."

She hesitated, unsure how this would play out.

"Hi Manny. Tom's just being silly. You weren't really planning to take

me and run, right Tom?" she said, a note of desperation in her voice.

Tom'd frozen when Manny showed up, but he snapped out of it now.

"We weren't running, no," he said, somewhat unsure of how to react.

The Man with the Upside-Down Face smiled. "Ah, but you were, Tom. I appreciate your attempt at backpedaling though - it's definitely an A for effort, but I'm afraid the evidence's stacked against you."

With an almost imperceptible nod from Manny, the clowns swarmed forward, pinning Tom to the ground. He dropped Elisa as he went down and she cried out in pain when she hit the earth. Manny stepped forward to pick her up. "Don't worry, Elisa. He wasn't going to get far anyway."

Elisa shuddered. She'd meant it when she'd said the circus was family, but that didn't mean she always liked the way it operated.

"We don't take kindly to abduction, Tom," Manny said.

"Abduction!?" Tom said as he struggled, "Admit it, you can't stand the idea that she wants to be with me. You want her for yourself."

Manny cocked his head.

"I really didn't take you for an idiot, Tom. It's not about Elisa, it's about the Circus. What happens when you remove a brick from a building, Tom? Do you know?" he asked, but didn't wait for an answer, "It gets weaker, Tom. The Circus is that building, MY building, and Elisa is that brick-no offense, Elisa."

Elisa didn't answer.

"LET ME GO, YOU DAMN CHUCKLEHEADS!" Tom yelled at the top of his lungs, but the clowns didn't react. Instead they smiled, exposing a set of perfect, shiny white teeth. Somehow that was far more disturbing than the scraggly collection of pointy dentures he'd expected. One of them seemed to be salivating.

The Man with the Upside-Down Face approached Tom's prone form and knelt beside him.

"Tom, you're a good lad; you love Elisa, I can see that. But you chose to turn your back to the Circus when you made plans to run off with her. I can't let that slide. If I did, where would that leave our little family?"

Tom didn't answer, he just struggled furiously against the vice-like grips of the clowns. The strange odor of talcum powder, cotton candy and rotting moss they carried with them almost made him gag.

"Come on, guys. Let me go, the fun's over."

The clowns stared at him with their lifeless eyes. He could see the moon reflected in them.

"Manny! Hey, look, I get the point, okay? Nobody leaves the circus. I get it! MANNY!"

As the Man with the Upside-Down face turned his back to Tom, he raised his hand in salute and said: "Oh, they do, Tom. They just don't go anywhere. Adios!"

"What'll happen to him, Manny?" Elisa asked as they made their way back to the clearing where the circus had pitched its tent.

"The clowns are just going to have a little talk with him-look, I realize all this may seem a bit drastic, Elisa, but we're family," Manny said, smiling that strange upside-down smile of his, "And family stays together."

Behind them a tortured scream rang out and Elisa's eyes filled with tears.

Freaky Commodities

There were four men in the elevator. Two buff men in loose suits stood on the edges, staring blankly at the wall in front of them. Next to the left-most guard was a middle-aged British man with a graying mustache. He was smiling unevenly, perhaps due to a stroke in his earlier days, such that one side of his mustache was significantly higher than the other. He was wearing a white button-down shirt with a cursive "Marshall, Carter, and Dark LTD" embossed on the breast. The final man was not smiling, although he appeared to be, because his face was upside down.

"We have some very interesting options for you today, Manny, correct?" the British man asked.

"You may call me that, yes," the Man with the Upside-Down Face responded. It was a stupid nickname, but he had met the British man, Burgess, twice before (although he had accompanied Fuller those times). Moreover, being called Manny as opposed to something more formal helped alleviate the painfully over-professional air of the conversation.

"Very good. You may follow me." The British man finished the sentence just as the elevator doors slid open. Wholly unimpressed, Manny strode behind him through a brightly-lit hallway into a large red room adorned with tapestries. Three creatures, as they seemed, were in the middle of the room inside of tight steel cages. One, a heavily neotonized old Aboriginal, had her head pressed to the bars of her cage with a hungry look in her eyes as she tracked Manny from the doorway. In the other cage sat a younger boy, no older than fifteen, whose entire body was covered in a thin film of a dark pink substance. He did not look up. The third cage appeared to be filled with a flickering fire, and the Man with the Upside-Down Face could have sworn he saw a figure shift around.

"Alright. What can they do?" He paused for a second. "This female one," Manny said. "I'd like to see her talent."

"Ah yes, we call her the Amazing Australian. She is able to move her center of weight a couple feet or so outside of her body, allowing her to accomplish incredible feats of acrobatics. We haven't a clue as to how she does it, but then again, we don't care." Burgess spoke with a pitchman's flair and a younger man's energy, though he knew as he spoke that folks from the Circus of the Disquieting would remain mainly uninfluenced by even the best deliveries. After all, they sold things for a living, just as he did.

"May I see it?" inquired the Man with the Upside-Down Face. His eyebrows fluttered near his neck as he spoke.

"Of course!" said Burgess. "Anna, flip the cage."

Nothing happened. "Anna, flip the cage." he said again. Still nothing. Burgess walked over and kicked the bars next to the woman's face. Shrieking, she plastered herself against the top and sides of the box and flung the box high up into the air, until it was jerked back to the ground by a thick steel chain bolted into the floor. She peered again outside through the bars at Manny.

"Mr. Burgess," he said exasperatedly, "This woman doesn't have long to live. That little stunt is hurting her every time she does it, and she's already old. I'm afraid that if I took this one, we wouldn't get more than four shows out of her. Five maximum."

"Perhaps you would like to examine her more closely? She is healthier than she looks." Burgess suggested.

"No, she's not. What is the next one?" asked Manny. In the middle cage, the creature groaned softly.

"This one has a weird property that we thought might interest you as a freak. It secretes a slippery salmon-colored substance that smells ever so slightly sweet. This one is much younger than the previous, which ought to better serve your purposes."

The boy in the cage did not look up or acknowledge either man. It moaned again forcefully, then let out a loud whimper.

"Heh, this one's harmless." Burgess fished a small key out of his

pocket and walked around behind the cage, unlocking it. With great effort, he spun the cage around so that the door was facing Manny and tilted the cage up, so that a wave of pink goo washed on to the floor like a red carpet rolling out in front of a movie star. The creature inside slid out as well on the raft of sludge, panicking. It stumbled to its feet, slipped on its secretion, and immediately fell back down. Its gaze slowly met Manny's as it desperately tried to take account of its new surroundings.

Manny leaned down low to talk to it, so that his forehead was just above the creature's. It looked up at him pleadingly. After a long second, Manny stood up again and faced Burgess directly. "I'll come back to this one. I'd like to see the last option, if you don't mind."

"Of course, sir," said Burgess. He sidestepped carefully so as to avoid the sludge that was slowly covering more and more of the floor towards the third cage. "This one's a bit unfortunate. Lost a bet to the wrong person, I'm afraid. His entire head is eternally engulfed in flame. Perhaps this interests you, Manny?"

"I'm quite numb to it, actually," the freak chimed in. It had a London accent almost as strong as Burgess'.

Manny smiled a wide grin that made his cheeks puff out and leaned in to the cage near the fire. "You're English?"

"Yes sir," it replied.

"How would you like a job?" he asked. "You'd be fed three times a day and clothed."

"I would like that very much, sir."

"Perfect!" With that, Manny stood up and walked over to Burgess. "When would you like your performance scheduled?" he asked.

"Our patron has requested the Thursday after next."

"Great. We will inform them where it is the day of the event." Manny stuck his hand out. "Pleasure doing business with you again, Burgess."

"Likewise," Burgess responded. He shook Manny's hand and handed him the key. Manny unlocked the freak's cage and nodded to himself while it made its way to its feet. "Shall I walk you out?" Burgess inquired.

"No thank you, I know the way. Send Marshall my regards." He turned. "Follow me," he said, directed at the man on fire. The two walked down the hallway towards the elevator. After getting a glare from one of the guards, they decided to take the stairs down. Finally, the flame-faced man spoke up.

"Thank you," he said quietly.

The Man with the Upside-Down Face smiled again. "Most people don't come with me so easily. I usually have to convince them, offer them love, or money, or fame. All you wanted was to be let out of that cage." Manny sighed.

"I guess some people are simple," he replied.

"I guess some are."

Kagome kagome
Kago no naka no tori wa
Itsu itsu deyaru
Yoake no ban ni
Tsuru to kame ga subetta.
Ushiro no shoumen daare

Yume Kurosawa hummed an old Japanese children's game song to herself as she sat in the darkness of the Den of Freaks. Outside she could hear the crowds of people swarming and chatting as they ventured into the dozens of attractions and booths the Circus of The Disquieting had to offer. Far off towards the carnival grounds, there were screams of delighted terror coursing through the rides, and the occasional yell of triumph or disappointment by the game booths. Outwardly, Yume kept a stoic smile on her face, but inside, she felt a rush of dread; even though she couldn't see it, she could hear the Freewheeler, the Ringmaster's watchdogs, a few rooms down, its awful, squeaky metal wheels rolling over and over as its Rider's feet fumbled unevenly on old bike pedals.

The Den of Freaks was some twenty feet across from the Ringmaster's domain. Unlike the vivid scarlet and gold that adorned the Big Top, the Den was a tent of deep, poisonous purple and neon green. It was here where others such as herself were looked upon in awe and fear for their abnormalities. Yume had spent the majority of her seventeen years as part of the Circus in this very place; now twenty-three, it was the only life she was truly used to, and this tent was the only place where she was surrounded by a select few she considered friends. Life was hard for a Freak; Manny was kind to all of them, but the Ringmaster looked down on everyone in the Den as if its inhabitants were his personal playthings. No one dared to

speak out though; that could be a one-way ticket to the Clowns.

Along the inner wall of the tarp, Kurosawa gazed at the posters depicting various human oddities; all of them had stretched grins on their faces, all of them looked lively, and, most of all, all of them looked happy. Kurosawa creased her eyes in bitterness and looked down at her feet, then continued humming her song. Her shift as a display was over, and now she had ten hours of solitude to brood…

Mommy, she looks gross!
Can we go now? I don't like these people…
Weird!…
Sniffle…Sniffle…
Freaks.
Monsters.
Creeps.

Freak

Freak

Squeak, *Squeak*, *Squeak*

Yume snapped out of her two hour doze to the sound of distant retching, followed by a gasp of awe. It was a familiar sound she had grown accustomed to over the seventeen years; she and the person uttering it had been taken by the Circus within weeks of each other.

"Quincy's up…" she murmured. Even as she said these words, a breeze blew into her room from the main Den, and with it came three, dainty, winged creatures. Yellow swallowtails. The butterflies fluttered around Yume in synchronization, guided by their master's will. It was his standard gesture of camaraderie. Pursing her lips, Yume smiled a sad smile and held out a finger; the butterflies flew about it, then slowly flew away, back out the way they came from, back out into the Den. Yume knew better than to follow; it was against the rules for an unscheduled freak to enter the Den during a show. Still, she wished she could have seen Quincy's act; she

almost envied her friend for the positive reception the crowds gave him. She immediately regretted thinking that.

"Stupid," she told herself. "It's all so *stupid*…"

The main room of the Den was some fifty feet long, with little lighting, except for the dozen or so pedestals that lined the edges of the interior; these pedestals shone and flashed in circular patterns, each one illuminating a Freak. There were five on exhibition at the moment. Four remained on their stands; the fifth was in the center, illuminated by circling spotlights.

He was a scrawny, pale man of thirty, clothed in a frilly suit colored neon pink, red, and green; a cheap plastic tiara hung lopsided on his unkempt blonde and dyed, purple hair. His mouth bulged and curved in an odd, filled shape, as if he was trying to swallow an unpleasant pill. Then, without warning, he retched. A torrent of vermilion, orange, and black spilled from his mouth, flooding the floor. For a moment, the mass he vomited lay inert. Then it started rising up. It started flying. The audience shouted with approval once more. Quincy Allicott, The Man With Butterflies in his Stomach, grimaced as he rubbed his stomach delicately, looking up at the orange cloud above him.

It wasn't his sick, it wasn't even liquid. The mass was a swarm of monarch butterflies.

Quincy raised his eyebrows. *Haven't seen those in awhile*, he thought to himself. *That ought to earn me some recognition*.

He walked off the main ring and returned to his pedestal, sitting down on his wooden stool.

A throne fit for a butterfly king. Someone toss me a real crown! Quincy smiled crookedly as he thought wryly to himself.

"Monarchs? You're stepping up your game, Quincy."

Quincy turned his head at the sound of a melancholy, airy voice.

"Hello, Fish."

The Fishman of Manasquan looked at Quincy from his adjacent tank/pedestal. He didn't have nearly as many people surrounding him as the most popular performer in the Den; having gills and being covered in fins and scales was interesting, but not as…exciting as having the ability to exhale butterflies.

"Thank you," Quincy said, leaning with his hands on his knees. "Act going along well?"

"It's been better," The Fishman said mournfully. "You know how they have me speak to different sea creatures in here? My fish haven't been exactly cooperative as of lately; they hate being in this place, and they all go belly-up sooner or later. The salmon just died in the middle of my act, and—" The Fishman broke off midsentence.

"Oy! Fish! What's going on?" Quincy spoke in a hushed bark.

"The—those damned Freewheelers, Quincy!" Fishman's voice suddenly rose in pitch. "They've been eating all my friends after every act!"

"They've been—" Quincy closed his mouth quickly and looked past the Fishman; a Freewheeler had poked its rag-doll head into the tent flap, and was now looking at the Fishman with its black, button eyes. Freewheelers had superb smell and hearing.

Quincy widened his eyes and gave the Fishman a minute lift of the head. The Fishman didn't need another warning; the anchovies and minnows in his tank had already told him of the potential danger; he dived back into his cylindrical tank and quickly put on a show of complex underwater acrobatics, which drew in enough cheers from the audience. The Freewheeler retreated back into the shadows.

Back inside the Freaks' lounge, Yume's flowery hair shook as the pink roses began shedding petals from her fear. She had heard the Freewheeler make its way to the Den entrance, chittering excitedly to its Rider; from the response, Yume guessed that the Freewheeler's bicycle was being driven by a toad. The croak sounded awful.

What went wrong? What went wrong? she wondered in terror. *Something must have gone wrong.*

Squeak, rattle, squeak, rattle

Oh, god, there's another one now.

Squeak, rattle, squeak, rattle

Three?!

Forty feet away, hidden in the rafters of the Big Top, the tall, thin Ringmaster sat with his legs outstretched, his top hat tilted over his face, his maroon-red suit swaying gently. He grinned.

"Dear, dear, Fishman," he crooned as he watched and heard everything occurring in the Den of Freaks through the button eyes of a Freewheeler. "You must really learn to know when to hold your tongue."

Below him, the crowd cheered as the Clowns took a bow and walked offstage; the lights dimmed for the next act. A circle of a dozen elephants emerged from the tent flap and gathered into a conga line. The giant animals were all garbed in stars and stripes, and were trumpeting as a calliope continuously played its lighthearted, celestial tunes; with the swirling, color-changing spotlights, it almost looked as if the elephants were walking through space. The Ringmaster clapped his hands together.

"Such resentment towards me, Freaks? You hurt my feelings…" The Ringmaster moaned in mock offense. "Manny, Manny, Manny! Keep your pets more loyal, *s'il te plait*? Oh well, old friend, I'm afraid I have to take matters into my own hands… I apologize in advance…" The Ringmaster pressed his fingers together, cracking his knuckles.

"Now then, which Freak, which Freak? Which Freak to beat and meet? Where to go? Where to go? Freak Show if I know…"

AND NOW, THE FISHMAN OF MANASQUAN WILL RETURN TO HIS UNDERWATER HOME! WE THANK YOU FOR WATCHING

THIS MARVELOUS SPECTACLE AT—HERMAN FULLER'S CIRCUS OF THE DISQUIETING! A male voice boomed throughout the entire of the Den of Freaks.

Fuller?! Yume let out an involuntary gasp. The remaining pink flowers growing from her head contracted and withered, their now dried petals fluttering to the ground. Yume felt her head growing a new arrangement. She picked one.

A gladiola…

Yume heard a gasp of surprise from the audience, followed by an eerie, empty rippling of water.

No…

Back inside the main Den, Quincy spat out a moth.

The Ringmaster hummed nonchalantly as he sat in his velvet chair, his feet propped up as he reclined back as three Freewheelers rolled up to him in his "office". It was more of a side tent than anything, smaller than the Freak Lounge, but comfortable nonetheless. A simple wooden desk sat in the middle of it; an ornate swing arm lamp illuminated the room. A portrait of Herman Fuller looked around the room from an easel off to the side, and a single photo frame lay face-down underneath it.

The lead monster's chest cavity bulged and squirmed with a human-sized lump. Ragged breaths could be heard from within. Fuller smiled and ignored the cries.

"Hello again, Freewheelers!" The Ringmaster sang over the muffled yells. "Brady, Bridget." He nodded towards the giant horned toad on a scarlet bike; the Ragdoll, as usual, was mounted in the place of the handlebars. The pig-tailed, patchwork torso tilted its head.

"Willard, Warren." A barn owl clicked its talons in greeting.

"Now, you know why we're here. You should know, I made you," Herman Fuller guffawed. "Once again, Manny's little pets have dared to raise a voice against me, and we all know that that simply

won't do. Dish out the usual punishment, please; but keep him quiet while you're doing it. I don't want another disaster like the one with the Crane Woman!" As he spoke, the Ringmaster picked up a wooden plank and swung it into the lump within the Freewheeler. "Shut up, *Freak!* I could have you set on a hook right now with a Clown grub in your mouth! I'm not some bait you can just bite and expect to get away with it, you fishy bastard! Now, toodle-loo! Wheelers, do do your thing!" The Ringmaster shooed his watchdogs away.

The Freewheelers turned to leave their master's office. Then they suddenly stopped. Six pairs of eyes turned their heads back towards Herman Fuller.

"What are you doing?"

Fuller threw his hands into the air. He picked up his chair and turned it a hundred and eighty degrees. He pushed it up against his desk.

"I repeat, what are you doing?"

"My job as a leader, *Manny*." Utter contempt bubbled from the Ringmaster's as he glowered at the ground.

"Are you going to move your chair? Or will I have to do it for you?" A cold voice spoke softly from underneath The Ringmaster's worktable.

"Oh…go flirt with Emily again, will you? The little minx doesn't respect me anyways." Fuller's chair shot out from under him, spinning in the air like a wheel. He jumped out of it and gracefully back-flipped onto his feet as his seat cracked in splinters to the ground.

The Man with the Upside-Down Face, Leader of the Freaks, emerged from the desk cabinet and stepped on the dirt.

"Learned a few more tricks, I see." The Ringmaster looked at where his former Circus partner had stepped out from.

"It's nothing, really," The Man said coolly. "Same principle as to what happens when you saw a Clown in half, or when you pull a Fun-

Lover from a hat. Any hole can be a door. Now, what's going on here?"

Herman Fuller sighed. "Andy and Alice, let him out, please," The Ringmaster asked with his eyes closed as he waved his hand towards the duo of ragdoll and bicycle-riding box turtle. The box turtle tilted its head slightly, staring curiously at the Ringmaster; the ragdoll did the same, then swung its head towards the floor. The seams around its mouth opened up, and out of the ragdoll's mouth tumbled a disoriented Fishman of Manasquan. He immediately leapt to his feet and looked around. His crazed eyes stared at Fuller for a moment, then he began backpedaling, frantically running toward the exit flap.

"Manny!" The Fishman shouted as he ran. "I'm sorry, I—"

"That will do for now, Gabriel. Go back to the Den" The Man spoke curtly. The Fishman bowed in gratitude before ducking out. The Man turned back to Fuller, and the two sneered with mutual hatred. Then, without warning, The Man with the Upside-Down Face lunged forward and swatted Alice the Turtle off of its bicycle seat. Andy roared in protest and opened its mouth; four sinewy, snake-like tongues shot from it towards the turtle's attacker. The Man snatched them all at once and drove them into the ground with a tent spike and a swift stomp. The Freewheeler lurched forward, its bicycle unable to stand without a Rider, and it flailed grotesquely on the ground like a potato sack baby. The other two Freewheelers quickly turned tail and sped out of the room.

"Andy!" The Ringmaster rushed forward only for The Man to step in his way.

"You know, considering your little toys are old Freaks, I'm surprised you care for them so much." The Ringmaster flinched involuntarily as Manny, who towered above him by a good two heads, leered down at him.

"Now, what were you doing to Fish?" The Man with the Upside-Down Face inquired, taking a step towards Fuller.

"It's my *Freaking* job, to carry out discipline within these grounds!"

The Ringmaster spat.

"It's your job to watch over *your* area, your goddamn Big Top that you're so proud of!" Manny shouted. "We agreed on that! We operate separately, on different terms!"

"Well," Fuller laughed mirthlessly, "*I* don't agree with your terms, and seeing that I'm the head around here, I can do as a I *goddamn* please!"

"You make me *sick*!" Manny hissed. "You were bad enough when we first teamed up, and now you've somehow gotten even worse off since the Clowns!"

"The Clowns? The Clowns are amazing!" Fuller threw his head back and cackled. A dribble of spit rolled down his lips.

"You're not fit to be a leader," The Man said quietly. "You're just a greedy, Milk-snorting fop!"

"Well, it blows to blow, Freak!" Fuller exhaled sharply. "And until I drop dead, I, make, the rules around here! But you'll be long gone by the time that happens, oh yes, you'll be long gone! I'll see to it that you meet your end in due time!"

"'In due time?' Fuller, Fuller, Fuller, you know as well as I that *I'm* the one who keeps the Clowns in check, not you! You rely on *me*, Herman! You've got the show, you've got the tent, and you've got the money, but you still need *me*!"

Silence rang through the Ringmaster's office. The audience was still cheering; they couldn't even hear what was transpiring as they goggled at the Flaming Lions and Tigers and Bears.

"I'll have you stuffed into a Freewheeler soon enough," The Ringmaster's handlebar moustache twitched as he bared his teeth. "Get out."

"You *stay away* from my kind," The Man with the Upside-Down Face warned. "Or you'll find yourself strung up as a squeeze toy for Luana."

"Oh, we'll see who comes out in first. All in *due* time." Herman Fuller snapped his fingers. His ruined furniture pieced itself back together, restoring his office to its clean state.

The Man kicked his foot through Fuller's portrait, leaving a neat, boot-shaped hole. He leaned through the opening, and seemed to melt through it, until his whole body was gone from sight.

The Ringmaster sat, slightly disheveled, his top hat knocked askew. He put his hand in it and pulled out an apple. He bit it, then spat the chunk out.

"Strung up, eh?" The apple was full of worms.

A Circus of a Wreck

« | **A Circus Milked Dry** | **A Circus With Paranoia** »

A sudden crack broke the silence of a vast, infinite plane of the white landscape known to the Clowns of the Circus of Disquieting as the Phoneyard, a series of "hubs" for pick-ups and quick travel. Here and there, patches of various landscapes seemed to sprout from nothing out of the blank world, from dry deserts to fog-filled forests; spatial duplicates of past Circus Grounds that now served another purpose apart from performing. All sorts of giant phones laid strewn across these mini bubbles of scenery, wheel dials, cellular flip phones, and even poor quality cups-tied-to-a-string; some of these had never been Picked Up, and were now left to slowly fade and decay as the immobilized Fun-Lovers withered from Milk Deprivation. Others popped into a hub and winked out to another place within instants. The sounds of an exit were similar to a firecracker and party horn going off simultaneously.

Bang-TOOT!

Bang-TOOT!

Bang-TOOT!

Over and over.

Bang-TOOT!

Again and again.

FWOOO-OOO-OOP! ZING! DING! DING! DING!

Or perhaps more like a carnival mallet game?

In a pick-up hub resembling a deserted, dusty grassland, twelve

dozen red phone booths sat alone and abandoned. They were all older models of Fun-Lover transportation. Very unreliable prototypes. Most of them were shoved away into this particular, funny graveyard; some still had the remains of an unfortunate rider inside. This particular joint wasn't even in service anymore; it was more of a dump than anything else.

But, like any old phone number, there was always that one person who dialed something wrong and called it instead.

FWOOO-OOO-OOP! ZING! DING! DING! DING!

A smoking, crackling, spinning scarlet rotary phone popped down out of thin air and landed with a resounding *thud* on the loose dirt.

"Eugene, you're back!"

WOWWEE! WOWWEE WOWWEE WOooowwWHEEE-ee-ee-ee$_{eeeeeee}$ Crackle, crackle, crackle.

"Ack, Pius, stop groping me!"

"Sorry, Eugene; you were just a ball of goop a few seconds ago!"

"Dammit, it's dark in here. I can't see squat!"

"Hold on! Let me help!"

"Argh, Pius, not the spotlight! Not the spotlight! Tone it down!"

"Sorry, Eugene! Here, I'll guide you to your seat!"

"No, Pius! You're burning my eyeballs out, for Freak's sake!"

"No, really, just let me—"

"Pius, quit it!"

"Eugene, will you—"

Shove. Splash!

…

Drip…drip…

"…Dammit, Pius, this stuff *stains.*"

Eugene and Pius the Clowns sat facing each other in roller coaster-esque safety seats within an enormous phone receiver *(also known as Mortimer the Fun-Lover)* as *Entry of the Gladiators* played as wait music. Pius was rocking his head back and forth in mild content; Eugene was cringing as he tried to block out one of sixteen songs that had been looping continuously for the past five hours of waiting. He could tolerate "Pink Elephants on Parade" to an extent, but whenever he heard the electronic remix of "Entrance of the Gladiators" he wanted to fill his ears with Herman Fuller's Marvelous Molasses.

The solitary scene resembled something similar to the bilge of an old ship; it was dark, echoey, and partially flooded. When Mortimer had landed, it had badly cracked the inner lining, sending Clown Milk fuel into the compartment. A leak was bad news for any Clown attempting to get home. The volume of Milk lost due to a leak proved disastrous for the window of time one could expect to be picked up; all Fun-Lovers broadcasted a waiting signal to the nearest available open pick-up line, and when the Milk dried up, so would the call. So far, Eugene and Pius had been sitting for nearly seven hours, sitting in the sweet, tarry substance, cramped, hot, and generally miserable.

"This… *stinks*." Eugene wrinkled his nose in disgust as he continued to breathe the arid air of sour Clown Milk, a slightly sweet, but more noticeably rancid, stench of chloroform and rotten eggs. "Did Mortimer bust a pipe or something?"

"Yeah, looks like," Pius said concernedly, moving his hand over a seam running through the right side of the cabin; black ooze gurgled through the crack, making thick *splish-sploosh* echoes as it dripped into the pond that covered the two Clowns' shoes. "Oh, Mortimer, what did you do to yourself this time, you poor Fun-Lover?" Pius talked to the ceiling. *Splish-sploosh*. *Splish-sploosh*.

"When we get back to the Circus, I'm gonna get Mortimer Fine-tuned." Eugene groaned with exasperated malice.

"Oh, come now, Mortimer's not deserving of that." Pius said. "He's just having connection problems."

"What are you, a Fun-Lover sympathizer?" Eugene snorted. "Such a Progressive Pius."

"Hahaha. You're so funny, Eugene."

"I gotta be. It's in the job description."

"What Hub did we end up in? Takin' them a bit long, don't you think?" Eugene twiddled his thumbs.

"The default line is the…Lake I believe?" Pius recalled. "But you're not getting seasick, and we're sure not bobbing, so we're probably in one of the Fields right now. I'd ask Mortimer for a ping, but he's still obviously broken, or malfunctioning, or whatever a Fun-Lover does when it has problems."

"So we just have to wait now?"

"Pretty much."

"Okey-dokey then." Eugene eased the tension in his shoulders a bit. "Wheat Fields, eh? It's sure seen it's fair share of fiascoes. I wonder how Toby's been doing lately?"

"Busy as ever, I imagine. Don't forget, he's in charge of the cornfields as well."

"Yeesh, poor guy. Getting all the weirdos out of that Twisty Maize.."

"Oh, you have no idea. Remember that time when Jesters somehow ended up in there? Kept scaring the living daylights out of everyone and anyone who popped in. Lines became unstable and we almost had a reemergence over Wiltshire."

"Little bastards would have made one hell of a crop circle when they

came out." Eugene smirked, lost in thought.

"We had to go summon Samuel to weed 'em out," Pius continued. "Took a month to regrow all the Connections."

"Frickin' familial squabbles."

"Stupid Jesters and their Shufflers."

"Hahahahaha."
"Hahahahaha."

"Haha."
"Haha."

"Eh-heh…eh-heh…huhhhh….."

"Huh."

…

…

"Ugh, there's not even a window to look out of in here. The Lake actually has a nice view, and the fields don't look half-bad in the summer."

"You're not exactly traveling first-class right now, Eugene. Emergencies and such, remember?"

"Well, it *could* be better, but I won't complain."

"There's something new."

"What happens to Clowns when we start to decompose? Do we end up looking like whatever we were when we decided to off, or what?"

"Don't say things like that right now, Eugene, your pessimism is infectious." Pius said, looking down at his feet.

"Ah, come on, lighten up," Eugene said smartly. "Hey, Pius, quick, let's play a game. What am I?" Eugene's head split in two, each

sprouting a ridiculously frilly cap n' bells that jingled furiously. The red and black hats attached seamlessly to his heads, like the crest of a rooster, and the fronds shook on their own like rattlesnake tails. Four pairs of eyes glowed iridescent blue and his voices rose as if he had just inhaled a tank of helium.

"You're a Jester, aren't you?" Pius guessed not bothering to take a look.

"Awww, man, you're no fun," Eugene squeaked irritably. His heads turned back into that of a single, now disgruntled, clown.

Pius shifted his leg in annoyance as he tried to get into a comfortable position again; it was really starting to get cramped in the cabin now.

"You've been twitching around non-stop, Pius, yeesh. What's the matter? Jitterbug worked its way inside you?"

"I don't have parasites, Eugene," Pius said irritably as he brought his left knee up. "I'm trying to—"

FPPPPPTTTT. A long, drawn-out, rather rude-sounding noise reverberated throughout the cabin.

…

…

"Jeez, Pius, hold it in, will you? It stinks bad enough already."

"That wasn't me, that was—"

GLOP.

A huge bubble of Clown Milk forced its way through the crack of the cabin and burst, showering a not-so-fresh mist of tar over Eugene and Pius. The exterior flatulent noises continued to sound.

Eugene grimaced. "Man, Mortimer, pull yourself together. We're counting on you here, buddy."

Pius gently patted the side of the cabin.

"…AND THAT'S WHEN I WENT IN AND TOLD THAT FREAK; FREAK— HEHEHEH — HEHEH — shit. HEheh! Heheh!!! Hurgblblblbl!!! Blrrrrrrbbb!! I'm losing it. I'm losing it. No. No, no, no, no! Pius? Pius? Pius? Pius? Pi? Apple? Cherry? Whipped cream in the face? Dammit!!! Pius!"

…

"Pius?"

Pius awoke with a start as he neared his fourth consecutive day with Eugene inside of Mortimer's receiver. Their Fun-Lover wasn't getting any better, and the two Clowns weren't getting any more sane. More leaks had sprung into the cabin, and the air was becoming more and more saturated with near-narcotic levels of Clown Milk.

"Hey, hey! Pius! Why you got that thing over your… faesh…eh?" Eugene was gesturing towards the gas mask Pius had spawned to mask his mouth and nose.

Pius groaned in weakness and exasperation. He opened his sleep-filled eyes slightly. "Get your mask on, Eugene," he mumbled.

"Heheh, you look…*funny!* Geheheh!" Eugene's left eye twitched and spasmed; it then swelled disproportionately to form the eye of a fly. "Bzzzzz-eheheh."

Pius sighed and promptly backhanded Eugene across the cheek. "Get your mask back on," he snarled. "You're inhaling Clown Milk vapor." Even as he said this, Eugene sucked in another mouthful of Clown Milk air particles and entered another fit of uncontrolled giggling that was quickly smothered by the mask that clasped over his nose with a *honk*.

"Ouch! Damn, Pius, what was that f—" Eugene cut himself short. He felt the re-attached face cover. "I went loopy again, didn't I?"

Pius merely glared a cold glare back.

"Sorry." Eugene slumped back down in his seat, taking deep breaths of semi-filtered, stale air. There was an uncomfortable three minutes of silence.

"*So*… Pius?" Eugene asked.

"*Yes*, Eugene?" Pius sighed.

…

"I'm tired."

"You and me both, Eugene. You and me both."

…

…

CREEEAAAAAAAKKKK

"OH, SHI—"

BLOOSH

RATTLE RATTLE RATTLE RATTLE-Rat-rat-rat-rat-raaaaaaaaa

…

…

Sqwee, sqwee, sqwee, sqwee

Ba-chunk, ba-chunk, ba-chunk, ba-chunk

Sqwee, sqwee, sqwee, sqwee

Ba-chunk, ba-chunk, ba-chunk, ba-chunk

…

…

"BluuuhYEECK!"

Eugene pushed himself up onto all fours as he found himself soaked from head to toe in milky mud. Even as he started to stand up, the tarry, spoiled Clown Milk stuck to his hands like cement, making him stumble several steps forward before landing face first into a patch of dried-out grass. The ground was surprisingly warm.

Sqwee, sqwee, sqwee, sqwee

Ba-chunk, ba-chunk, ba-chunk, ba-chunk

A few paces away, Pius lay eagle-sprawled and winded, bewildered as he looked up to white expanse of nothingness above, while he felt the black swamp clinging to him from below. He tried to lift his head up, decided it wasn't worth the effort, and then let it roll into the sludge. After a few moments, he groaned and looked to see what was making a noise similar to a car that was bumbling across a rocky road with a bad suspension.

"What the—"

Mortimer was stumbling back and forth on what looked like two over-sized wooden mannequin legs, which was odd, considering the rest of the body was a giant, scarlet rotary phone. Clown Milk was spurting through the number holes and through the knee caps and ankles of the Fun-Lover, and it was emitting garbled, electronic babbling through the receiver. Finally, milk shot out of the seams of the phone, and Mortimer flailed wildly like a person in the electric chair before slumping on its behind with the phone crashing dial wheel first into the crusty dirt.

You— ha-a-a-a-ah-ave — ZeEeeeEro — Nine — Massage new theeeerr…aaaapeee$_{eeeeesss}$ Mortimer gave one last twitch, then went limp, sparks buzzing as they shot off from the machinery. Pius gawked in horror as he watched the Fun-Lover collapse and fizzle out.

Eugene made his way back to Pius, squinting his eyes as he adjusted to the whiteness of the Hub's boundaries, grass and dirt still sticking to his lip like he was a cow grazing in a pasture.

"Where— in the *Freaking* name of Manny — did Mortimer—" He cut himself off as he saw the smoking wreck of a broken Fun-Lover lying

in the dead, withered grass. "Oh, shit."

Shoes squelching as he walked his way over, Eugene moved to help Pius up.

"*Well*," Eugene grunted with effort as he yanked Pius' arm, "This is definitely not the Wheat Fields." He looked around and examined the mass of phone boots scattered around the arid landscape. "I don't even *recognize* this Hub. Where the heck are we?"

"Your guess is as — *ow* — good as mine," Pius grimaced as he was pulled free from the gloop. Now that he had a better angle, he could clearly see how badly damaged Mortimer was. "Dammit, Eugene, how could this happen? Where did Mortimer go wrong in the landing?"

"I have no clue," Eugene said, shaking his head, eyes shut tight. "Ugh, can't Morty fix himself? What happened to the fail-safes that came with him? Those things are standard issue!"

Mortimer let out a low, foghorn bellow, blowing the back hatch of the phone off to reveal the complex array of Milk sacs, tubing, and wires that made Phone calls possible. What should have been healthy, pumping lines of fuel were limp, punctured, and in some areas, completely severed.

Pius drew closer, wary that the already-battered components might burst any moment. He gingerly picked up a portion of tubing that should have led to the control board.

"It's… been clawed." Pius said in befuddlement and confusion.

"*Clawed?*" Eugene said incredulously. "How the freak did— Clawed?"

"And *bitten*, too," Pius said. "Look, those are *teeth* in there." He gently took his hand away; a dozen or so denticles clattered onto the ground.

"Where did *those* come from?" Eugene's jaw hung open.

"I'm trying to find the connecting lines, hold on." Pius brushed away

a curtain of sacs in the front and worked his through the interior, feeling around as he went. His eyes extended out into stalks and followed suit. It was an incredibly bizarre picture, like a snail trying to find its way through the dark. He cringed. "This is disgusti—" He suddenly jerked and gave a shout of surprise.

"What is it?" Eugene asked startled.

"There's something fuzzy in there," Pius moaned, his hand and eyes still inside the phone system. "I can't get a grip on it."

"Fuzzy? Where is it?"

"Whatever it is, it cracked two of the Milk circuits and broke the top one clean in two. It's caught on the third."

"Are you gonna try and remove it?"

"I'll try."

Pius slowly began to jiggle his hand back and forth in an attempt to dislodge the foreign body inside Mortimer. His mouth was clenched in anticipation. Eugene surmised about how strange it was seeing his partner's eyestalks looking like eels while still attached to his head. He shivered involuntarily.

"Damn, we can be downright *weird*."

"Oh, yuck!"

Pius' hand exited the tangle of organic and inorganic components, clutching a black and red mass about the same size of his hand.

"You got it!" Eugene cried.

"That — was — *terrible*." Pius said; his hand was death-gripping the thing he had removed, despite his mind screaming at him to throw it away.

"So, what is it?" Eugene asked impatiently.

Pius shakily commanded his fingers to un-clench, and opened his

hand to examine the ball of fur. Eugene's grin vanished on the spot. Pius groaned.

"So that's why he broke. He had that thing with him when he transformed."

"Freaking hell, Mortimer, I told you that that was a terrible thing to play with to pass the time."

Eugene swatted the gopher out of Pius' hand in contempt.

« | **A Circus Milked Dry** | **A Circus With Paranoia** »

A Circus With Paranoia

« **A Circus of a Wreck**

…

…

…♪~♪~….

…♪~♪~♪~♪~♪~♪~….

♪~♪~♪~♪~♪~♪~♪

♪~♪~♪~♪~♪~♪~♪~♪~♪~♪~♪

"I can stand the sight of worms

And look at microscopic germs

But technicolor pachyderms

Is really too much for me-e-e!"

A clown in a dirtied, polka-dot uniform wheeled around with his hands in the air, his voice echoing throughout the cracked, long-dead field. As he sang, his feet kicked up dust and dirt, and the twigs cracked and snapped, almost, but not quite, in rhythm. If a clown whirling and singing in an empty landscape wasn't strange enough, the red phone booths that lay strewn around in the dirt and grass only added to the peculiarity of the scene. As the clown drawled on and on, he whooped around one particular, cracked and dirtied scarlet rotary phone that lay off-kilter, as if it had fallen and crashed. Smoke curled from the defunct machine, so that with the combination of the clown and phone, the scene almost looked like a lonely bonfire dance.

"I am not the type to faint

When things are wrong or things are quaint

But seeing things, you know that ain't

Can really give you an AWFUL FRIGHT!"

A resounding crack and flash of light, and the single clown was gone, replaced by a ring of giant, prancing pink elephants, all linked together by the hands. As they stomped in unison, and thrashed and sounded their trunks insanely, eyes shut tight, the ground beneath them quaked, with the nearest surrounding phone booths shaking, bouncing, and in some cases, toppling from the enormous beasts. As the interconnected elephants continued tromping around in ring-around-the-rosy fashion, the "tune" that sounded from their noses grew louder, and even sounded like actual brass instruments instead of the expected animal sound. The trumpeting reached a crescendo and the amount of noise could have woken every other Clown in the Hub network had sound actually traveled from point to point.

Another crack and a flash later, and the ring of pachyderms was gone, replaced by the single, dirtied clown, now eagle-sprawled on his back.

Eugene stared up at the white abyss of the Hub, and let out a long, loud yell.

> *Day… 9?*
>
> *Cant tel how long in this freekin' plase. Doesnt help Ive been pasing out. Drinking expired Clown Milk is grss. But hey, whatever keeps Pius and I goin. Whichever clown made the atmosphere/bakdrop/whatevr the heck it is wite with no way of telling time is gonna get a Hell of a earfull if when, WHEN I get back.*

Eugene finished another "page" of his journal, which was really an

appendage extending from his left hand full of countless flat, flexible digits. His writing utensil? An elongated finger. His ink? More Clown Milk. He morosely shut his bookhand and retracted it back within his palm.

He, along with Pius, were, to say the least, in poor shape. Their faces drooped and sagged, a result of them not bothering to maintain their shape-shifting powers; they could care less about how they looked when they were tired, dirty, and near starving.

Mortimer the Fun-Lover, still a scarlet rotary phone lying down in the dust on wooden knees, continued to leak Milk and remain in its silent comatose state. For Eugene, at any other time, Mortimer being quiet would have been a dream come true. But right now, he was actually hoping the shape-shifting black sac of arms would pop up to life again to whisk everyone back home.

"Another luckless walk?"

Eugene turned to see Pius walking back to their "campsite". Since Mortimer's breakdown, the two Lesser Clowns had been scrounging around the Hub, searching for anything that might prove useful to help them on their way.

"There are more than a hundred phones in here," Eugene said, staring at the dysfunctional Fun-Lovers lying around on the ground, "and not one of them has any juice of livelihood left in 'em." He laced his fingers and slouched into his curled position again. "No spare parts, nothing we can dismantle, nothing to recycle. We're freakin' screwed, Pius."

Pius tossed Eugene a dirtied metal can. Eugene looked at the faded, scratched label.

"'Emergency Clown Milk; Powdered'," he read, noticing the cheery, make-up-plastered Clown mascot saying the words in a balloony speech bubble. "'Remember Clowns, Add Water and Drink it Responsibly!'" He chuckled, half in amusement and gratitude, half in bitterness. He looked up at his partner again. "Where'd you find this?"

"Broken down, antique cell phone back thataways," Pius turned and gestured towards the east side of Hub. "Two cans in the battery compartment, along with some…" He rummaged through his pockets again. "Emergency Clown Impulse Suppressant," he held up a bottle of purple pills. "You know, for anxiety and such, in case a Clown goes bonkers while waiting to be picked up."

"Huh, we've been waiting for more than a little while," Eugene snorted.

Pius rolled his eyes and continued. "Uh…some Herman Fuller Animal Crackers, I don't think they make noise anymore…" He tossed a crumpled red box on the ground. "Mr. Clean Clown's Digestible Soap Tablets—"

"Mine," Eugene said quickly, taking the box from Pius' hands, opening the turquoise tin, and popping one the pills in his mouth. Immediately, the scent of pine and mint filled the air as sea-green bubbles frothed from Eugene's skin, obscuring his body from head to toe, the suds rising into the air and popping with the sound of a harp. When the soap had all risen off, Eugene reemerged, looking much more relaxed and cleaner than he had before.

"Oh, that's *so* much better," he breather, inhaling through his nose deeply.

"Don't blow through them all at once," Pius said, raising an eyebrow. He continued. "The rest of the stuff was just junk. Got a card deck, an empty peanut jar, some wiener balloons, a sheet music page, and…this big thing of rainbow glitter." He tossed each item on the ground as he said their names.

Eugene shuffled through all the trinkets Pius had brought back.

"There's a note tied to the glitter bag," Eugene noticed a tiny roll of paper attached with a neat red ribbon. He slid it through the bow and unrolled it. He gave a puzzled look as he saw what it said.

> Go to hell, Charley, this isn't funny anymore. We hope you get Inflated.

Eugene looked up at Pius and handed him the message. "Um, by any chance, were there still…"

"Another pair, starved by looks of it," Pius said solemnly, still eyeing the paper. "Poor guys. Looked like they'd been dead for quite awhile. All dried-out, you could see their faces through the receiver."

Eugene shifted slightly at the thought of two different, mummified Clowns sprawled on top of a dial wheel.

Things were silent for a few moments.

"Get some rest, Pius, we gotta get out of here." Eugene shimmered and turned into a prairie dog. He began to burrow underneath the dirt to make a resting spot.

"I would have thought you'd have had it with tunneling rodents by now," Pius said.

"Hey, if I can keep the light out, it's fine by me," Eugene's muffled voice came out of the hole he had just dug.

Pius sighed and turned into an umbrella bird. The parasol kept him cool and comfortable.

"Looking pretty shady there, Pius," Eugene said, peeking his eyes out.

"Good night, Eugene," Pius squawked.

Eugene awoke back on the Chopping Table, and promptly was seized by a wave a terror even stronger than the first time he had been here. He looked up at the swirling roulette wheel above him, a device that was supposed to lull and anesthetize Clowns before they underwent Circus-time procedures.

"*NO!*" Eugene shouted. "*NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO! NO!*"

Around him, surgical "clowns" were preparing all the tools and machinery in order to make sure Eugene was fit for Circus Life. In

other words, they were going to shut down a good deal of his mind and body to suppress the violence and temper most unaltered Clowns were prone to.

One of the medical clowns began moving towards Eugene, standing over him as if to reassure that the procedure would go smoothly. The sixteen eyes staring at him, and the long dexterous hands wielding scalpels didn't exactly calm Eugene down, though.

"We're about to put you under, Eugene," the clown told him. "When you wake up, you'll be ready to go off to the Circus. Try to relax now."

Eugene hyperventilated and began to yank on the straps holding him down. "Not again, not again, not again." His voice was shaking with fear.

"It will be alright, Eugene," the doctor said, as he put a pair of goggles over Eugene's eyes. He turned toward the other clowns. "Is the wheel ready to go?"

"Yes, Darius." a female clown flicked a few switches, and the roulette wheel above Eugene began to turn and glow, faster than before.

"Let's begin the operation," the doctor said, gas masks sprouting onto everyone's face except Eugene's as mist began to spray from nozzles in the center of the rotating disc. All the gases, twirled around, forming a twisting rainbow string that shot straight into Eugene's nose, and knocking him out in an instant.

A moment later, at least to him, Eugene's eyes snapped open to find a dozen blades inside him, his torso cut open.

As two of Eugene's eyes shot out and punched holes through the dirt, a third eye looked around and saw a tiny flip phone biting into his behind. The little red thing formed a mouth with the two hinged parts, and they were full of teeth.

"*Get the **hell** off me!*" Eugene screamed, rocketing out of his hole

(and knocking Pius, still an umbrella bird, off his feet), turning back into a Clown, and ripping the tiny phone off his buttocks. He chucked it as hard as he could, and it landed a good thirty meters away, where it thrashed and chirped in high-pitched, warbled noise, like a crazed dialing tone.

"Eugene, what happened?" Pius said, now back as a Clown with a slightly bent umbrella for a left hand. But Eugene was already making a dash for the tiny cell phone, with murderous intent in his eyes.

Pius got there first. He yanked Eugene by the collar and brought them both to a screeching halt.

"Pius, MOVE, I'm gonna stomp that thing to fragments!" Eugene choked, his eyes literally burning as flames shot out of his mouth.

"Not happening, Eugene," Pius said calmly. With that, he turned his hand into that of a polar bear's, and gave Eugene a good dose of head freeze. The fevered Lesser Clown slumped, quite literally, out cold.

With Eugene temporarily out of the equation, Pius looked down at his partner's antagonist, which was still flopping pathetically on the ground making electronic wailing. Suddenly, it melted into something similar to a black, pudding-filled water balloon, and started tumbling away.

"What the—oh, no, you're not leaving just yet, little guy." Pius ran after it and snatched it up in the peanut jar he had found earlier. He brought the clear plastic container up to his eyes to get a closer look. The tiny phone was gnashing wildly.

"This thing is… a baby Fun-Lover…how?…." Pius looked towards Eugene, who was still out cold, then looked back at the little creature.

Wra, wra, wra, wraaaa, wraaaa, wraaaa, wra, wra, wra!!! the juvenile critter made a vicious snap at Pius' nose, whose owner quickly withdrew; the plastic cracked slightly from the impact of the bite.

"*Bad* Fun-Lover," Pius scolded, giving the jar a rattle, which sent the cell phone bouncing around the interior with an audible *clatter, clatter, clatter*.

Wra, wra, wra, wraaaa, wraaaa, wraaaa, wra, wra, wra!!! The wailing grew louder.

Eugene shook his head and clasped his hands over his ears at the incessant screeching. He leaped to his feet as soon as his thoughts were clear and looked around wildly, one of his hands moving to shield his stomach.

"Eugene, calm down!" Pius ordered as his partner's eyes were clouded by fear of a terrible memory. "Calm, down, you're in the Hub, with me! It's Pius, remember?"

"Don't cut me open!" Eugene shouted.

Oh, Freakin' hell, he's back on the chopping table. Pius' gut suddenly filled with dread. "Eugene, you're fine! You're fine, okay! Everything is fine!"

"DON'T CUT ME OPEN!" Eugene screamed.

"I'm not, *I'm not!*" Pius shouted. The air was rapidly becoming laden with noise, and a ringing was filling his ear with the combined cacophonies.

Wra, wra, wra, wraaaa, wraaaa, wraaaa, wra, wra, wra!!!

"SHUT UP!" Pius bellowed, swinging the Fun-Lover into the ground like a whip; the peanut jar, along with the phone cracked and shattered, and the toothed calling device ceased all movement. Pius walked over to Eugene, grabbing him and looking him in the eye.

"Look at me, come on Eugene, look at me!" Pius said firmly. "Pull yourself together."

Eugene's hands turned into talons and raked Pius' calf.

Pius grimaced but held on. "Okay, buddy, hang on here." He pulled a purple Clown pill and forced it into Eugene's mouth, before

clamping his jaw shut.

The effect was immediate. Eugene's eyes lost their fever and he lost all tension as lavender spots popped up all around his skin. His breathing slowed, trying to bring his heart rate down. After a few moments, he spoke.

"…Pius?"

His friend was at a distance, nursing their clawed leg. Eugene stepped forward.

Pius held his hand up. "Back," he panted.

"Pius, I'm—"

"It's fine." Pius winced as his wounds were still oozing out black blood. "I'm fine. A little Clown Milk and I'll heal right up."

"What— what bit me?" Eugene asked quietly.

"Baby Fun-Lover. Nasty little thing too, I might add." Pius said, still hobbling, but gesturing towards the lifeless cell phone on the ground. Eugene went over to it and knelt down.

"A Fun-Lover? But I thought that—"

THOOM.

Eugene leaped back as a hulking red rectangle crashed in front of him, throwing up a spray of dust. Loud, beeping emanated from the center of it, sounding similar to frantic, garbled radio chatter. As the dirt settled again, Eugene saw that he was staring at an enormous, scarlet box phone. Two large ebony bells at its top stared at Eugene, then down at the tiny flip phone. It began shaking violently, then let out an ear-splitting blast of static noise.

"Oh, *shit.*"

« **A Circus of a Wreck**

Hunger Doggo Hub

She's a Maneater:

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The Chronicles of the Butch and the Twink:

- **Part One**

Whoa, Here She Comes

"Dr. Agarwal," Reynolds poked his head nervously into Lakshmi's office, "you're needed in 5760's enclosure."

"That's the kitten, right? The kitten that cures all forms of pediatric cancer?"

"No, that's 5670. This is the thing we brought in from Canada."

“Wait a minute, how many D-Class did it eat?”

“Nine,” Reynolds said, voice barely audible. He fiddled nervously with his watchband, a bright orange that clashed weirdly with his light brown skin.

“Why do they want me?”

"I don't know. I'm just doing what Gonzalez told me. But you're already five minutes late."

"Well, whose fault is that?"

"There was… a conflict of interest. Everything's a little behind schedule. But, you need to go. Like, right now.”

Probably just jittery. He saw that thing eat those D-Class, that can't have made him any less anxious than he already was. Hell, I'd be sweating through my lab coat if I'd seen that.

As far as she could remember, 5760's anomalous properties had nothing to do with her research. SCP-5760, Keter Class, possesses the ability to manipulate ossiferous tissue, capable of producing a cry which causes instinctive fear response in all tested mammals and birds… Nothing she would really help with.

Lakshmi frowned as she looked at the schedule on her tablet. Dr. Agarwal, SCP-5760's Containment cell, 7:00 this evening.

"The thing's waiting for you," Gonzalez said sharply when she arrived outside 5760's containment cell. "Would it have killed you to at least jog?" He shoved a security briefing into her hand and pushed her towards the door. "Read and walk in. Multitask. You're already late. There's a guard tailing you. Everything's gonna be fine. Now go."

As if on cue, large thumping sounds could be heard from inside 5760's enclosure, followed by skittering, scraping sounds that seemed to come from everywhere. She forgot to read through the briefing as she walked through the hall from the observation chamber to the enclosure.

She opened the door to see a dimly-lit forest populated by sickly-looking, white trees. The security guard stationed himself behind one of them, and prepared his rifle. If she remembered correctly from the documentation, the trees were human bone, with marrow pulsing at their core.

Just then, she saw it - the glimmering, reflective eyes of 5760, peering out from between the trees. There was just enough light for Lakshmi to see the glistening whiteness of its multiple rows of teeth. She locked eyes with it, and both remained motionless. 5760 opened its jaw and crept the slightest bit closer. It dropped to the ground, inching closer all the while, and Lakshmi was close enough to see the strands of saliva dripping off its multiple rows of glistening white teeth.

All at once, it sprang for her, its canid, skull-like face the last thing she would ever see before being devoured -

Huh.

It seemed instead of devouring her, 5760 was going to kill her via asphyxiation. Or possibly by crushing her ribcage.

Lakshmi could feel herself being physically lifted off the ground in what could only be described as a bear hug. Wolf hug. Wendigo hug? Irrelevant.

“Hello, SCP-5760.” she managed through its embrace, voice muffled

by its fur. “Would you mind putting me down? Rib cage. Crushing. Breathing. Need to.”

Lakshmi fell to the floor with an undignified thump. “Thank you, 5760. You requested to meet with me?”

5760 nodded, sat back, and looked at her with an expression that on a normal canine would have qualified as adoration. Upon hearing a thumping noise, Lakshmi looked and found that 5760’s tail was indeed wagging.

"Hello, 5760. I take it you're happy to see me."

“Yes! Sorry about earlier,” 5760 said, surprisingly cheerful, “I just got…overexcited.” Its voice was definitely feminine, definitely American, and probably around Lakshmi’s age, though anything else was hard to determine.

"No apologies necessary. Now, let me see what tests were we scheduled to do today…"

"Oh, there's no tests. I did that yesterday."

"That can't be right…" Lakshmi checked the briefing Gonzalez had shoved at her.

Morale-boosting interaction as a precautionary measure - no data gathering or testing required.

"Well… okay, then."

5760 gestured for her to follow it deeper into the forest.

It led Lakshmi to a little clearing encircled by a ring of enormous ossified tree trunks. If she remembered her anatomy, they were femurs.

In the center of the glade was a small, wrought iron table set for two, covered with a white tablecloth, complete with candles and a bottle of champagne.

"Is this some kind of joke?"

"No," said 5760, eyes wide. "Didn't you read the protocol?"

Lakshmi checked the manila folder again - and found it called for a setup identical to the one she was staring at.

"What on earth…"

"Sit down," 5760 urged.

Well, best get this over with…

Lakshmi sat.

"Why is this happening?"

"Check your briefing. I think it's all explained."

Lakshmi looked it over again.

Due to the ancient and alien nature of the entity cohabiting in 5760's consciousness that causes it to become randomly aggressive, regular exposure to human social customs and normal human interaction has proven to be the best way to reduce containment breaches. The entity does not appear to comprehend such behavior in humans and, as such, they deter it from attempting to regain control.

"Why not just expose you to human media? Why is the bone forest even here? Isn't that inhibiting progress?"

"The thing keeps building the forest every time I tear it down. I just have to work within it."

"That still doesn't explain why we're having a candlelit dinner. "

"It's the best way to keep it subdued. I listened to some people talking on a hike, one day - not hunting them, just listening, understanding their conversation. Imagining how I would reply. And it started pulling back. They left, but I kept doing it - imagining conversations, calling up memories. The ones that scared it most were romantic memories. And I want it to stay scared. When it's scared, it's not in control, and then I stay in here, and no one gets

hurt."

"But why me?"

"Well…I was looking for someone else gay, honestly. Gonzalez told me you were, and…"

An awkward silence.

"So. I guess…Hmm. Tell me about yourself." 5760 said, taking a seat across from her and making the rest of the table look doll-like by comparison. "Are you single?"

What did I do to deserve this?

"I am, at the moment," she said, meeting 5760's eyes without blinking. "My previous girlfriend was abducted while hiking in the woods two years ago. They still haven't found her body."

A long pause.

"That's… traumatic."

"She broke up with me out of nowhere for frivolous commitment reasons shortly before it happened, so it's not quite as tragic as you'd expect. But it was a difficult time. We'd been together since undergrad."

"Well, she was an idiot," said 5760 with a suggestive look in its eye, "because I can't imagine anyone leaving someone as pretty as you."

Lakshmi resisted the urge to down the entire glass of champagne in one gulp.

This was going to be a very long evening.

“This is ridiculous,” Lakshmi said, slamming a hand down on Gonzalez’s desk.

“It’s the only option we have,” said Gonzalez.

“Are you really sure that’s the case? Because from where I’m standing, it looks like you’re either prostituting me as an excuse not to do your goddamn job, or playing a very ill-thought-out prank.”

“We’re not prostituting you.” Gonzalez rolled his eyes. “Quit being overdramatic. Nobody’s making you have sex with the thing. It’s a goddamned date every other evening. Takes up two, maybe three hours of your time, maximum. You’ll get better food than what we serve in the caf, if you want to think of it that way. We've been testing for months on this, Agarwal. Just trust us. Honestly, people would kill for duty like this. Making small talk with the bonewolf and eating filet mignon, or some shit? Don't look a gift horse in the mouth here!"

“Fine. I’ll do it.”

“I mean, you didn’t really have a choice. But thanks for doing this the easy way. Lot less messy.”

“But I want a raise.”

“Well, you’d have to take that up with Administration, kid. But I don’t think you’ll have trouble convincing ‘em.”

“So there’s -” Lakshmi was interrupted by the loud crunch of a pelvic bone.

“Sorry,” 5760 said, “that was louder than I thought it would be. Continue.”

“You have some marrow on your…” Lakshmi didn’t know what to call the bony plated structure protruding through 5760’s chest fur, so she just gestured to the equivalent area on her own body.

“Thanks,” 5760 said, flicking it off with one clawed finger.

“As I was saying,” Lakshmi said, “we’ve made some progress in capturing the man who instigated your transformation.”

“They have video footage of the guy who drugged me, dragged me back to his shack in the middle of Bumfuck, Canada, force-fed me

bone powder, and then left me tied to a cliff in the forest wearing nothing but a deer skull and a wolf pelt after doing some kind of black magic ritual shit. I feel like he should be easier to find."

"Gonzalez is furious. Apparently intelligence has screwed up royally."

5760 took Lakshmi's hand in its own taloned paw, and put another paw along the side of her face. "Let's not talk about work," it said.

Lakshmi powered up the desktop in her lab, glaring at the flickering fluorescent lights above her. The strobe effect was worsening her headache and her patience.

She logged into the Foundation database, pulled up 5760's records. Somewhere, there would be an explanation for these…Lakshmi barely considered them containment procedures. As she attempted to access the containment records, an error message flashed on her screen.

LEVEL 3 CREDENTIALS NEEDED.

Lakshmi swore under her breath. "I *am* level three," she muttered, pounding in her ID number aggressively.

When it gave her an infuriatingly condescending access denied message, Lakshmi had to resist the urge to break the monitor.

She counted to twenty in Hindi instead, trying to calm herself. As she reached sixteen, something occurred to her - that this might not have been an error.

Somebody might be trying to keep something from her. She remembered Gonzalez's misdirection and 5760's clumsy attempts at evasion - she knew nothing about 5760 before it had come into custody, not even its former name.

She stared at the image of 5760, the flickering lighting giving its face an uncanny quality.

Lakshmi had never taken kindly to being deceived. She was not

about to allow this… whatever it was… to have the upper hand.

Gonzalez walked towards the car, the streetlamp above flickering ominously. He heard the metallic rattle of a can rolling downhill, and checked to make sure he wasn't being followed. He saw only a stray cat trotting lazily after its (probably tetanus-infested) toy.

Gonzalez got into the car.

"You're late," the would-be driver said.

"Maybe you're just early."

The driver didn't seem to enjoy his attempt at humor. "You told us you've solved the problem with…remind me of her name, again."

"Avery. Her name's Avery."

"Yes. Avery."

"The procedures I've told you about - they're working. It's been three weeks since we implemented them, and we've had no breaches at all. Even with the plans before this, we'd get two or three breakouts a week. Now, nothing."

"I imagine we should be ready for extraction soon. I can't imagine the Jailors are happy about the current containment methods, given their…unorthodox nature."

"They're not my biggest fans right now, so I'd appreciate it if we could up the timetable a little bit."

"Consider it done. I'll send you more information about a date for removal."

The driver turned to go, but Gonzalez stopped him, putting a hand on his arm.

"We're bringing Agarwal, too. Make sure you tell them that."

"That would be ill-advised for a number of reasons."

"If we don't bring her with us, I can't guarantee you Avery won't lose it during transport. She snaps, kills her transport team, comes to in the middle of Canada, Foundation finds her again, decides she isn't worth the trouble and shoots her."

A pause.

"Very well. But if anything goes wrong, it's on you."

"Responsibility accepted."

The driver left the car, leaving Gonzalez alone in the frigid November night.

End Part 1

HUB >>

Show You What All That Howl Is For

“Please put your hand into the mouth of the statue.” D-19238 did nothing. “I said put your hand in the mouth of the statue.”

D-19238 simply grinned. “I know you from somewhere, don’t I?”

“Failure to obey will have consequences. Put your hand in the mouth of the statue. I won’t ask you again.”

“You’re the egghead who’s dating the skip, aren’t you?”

“That line of questioning is totally unacceptable.”

“Why're you all flustered, then? You seem a little defensive.”

He had her there. She was saved from having to answer by Reynolds’ arrival.

“Dr. Agarwal, you're needed in the western wing. You have an appointment with 5760 scheduled in fifteen minutes. Schedule change.”

As she sighed and shut the door behind her, she could still hear the D-Class call, "Try and get it on film for me, will you, Reynolds?"

When she reached the observation chamber, 5760 appeared to be having an argument with itself.

"Will you just shut up for once in your - well. Life isn't the right word. Leave me the *fuck* alone, why don't you?"

5760 suddenly raised its paws into the air and howled. Fear and adrenaline exploded through Lakshmi, leaving her trembling, weak-kneed.

Is this how the deer feels, when it sees the wolf?

She did not feel like anything so much as prey. She looked at 5760, and saw nothing human at all.

A grotesque spire of bone had grown in the midst of the forest, reaching and grasping. Lakshmi felt a pull in her own skeleton, and then a dull ache in the center of her bones. She held up her hand and watched as strange, ominous lumps began to grow through her skin, yearning outwards towards that awful tower. She turned to see Reynolds whimpering as tendrils of calcium pushed through his hand, splitting it open.

5760's voice was the rough, scraping snarl of claws on bone and the rustle of ragged fur on dusty cave walls. It said nothing intelligible, but concepts and sensations flowed through Lakshmi's mind, a flood of alien consciousness.

Child, youth, inexperienced. A young pup that whimpered with a human child's voice.

A gift. Strength. Speed. The feel of bone beneath Lakshmi's fingers, and the sudden awareness of every bit of bone she possessed, and those of her colleagues - the entire site, a massive constellation of calcium and enamel. The power itching behind those pale green eyes.

The gift, refused.

Foolishness.

Humans - a faceless mass of them, the scent warm and delectable. 5760's hunger made Lakshmi's mouth water, and she shuddered.

Meat. Blood. Liver, kidneys, muscles. Lifting its face from someone's ribcage, skull lurid with blood.

A man's head crushed in a terrible paw.

A corpse rotting to nothing. Another, crumbling to dust.

Disdain for the terrified hearts beating rapidly on the other side of the Plexiglass window.

In the woods at night, prowling silently behind a hiker, tapetum lucidum glowing.

Breaking out, chasing after terrified researchers that could be caught at any second, just to prolong the hunt - playing with your food.

Lakshmi could barely keep from vomiting as she - *it* - no, she - tore open her own chest and ate her own heart, jaws slavering. She could feel the toughness of the muscle against her back molars, the warmth of the blood coating her hands and mouth.

"Get. Out." This was 5760's normal voice again, sounding breathless, and Lakshmi was back in her own head.

The structure turned to dust, and the bony vines retreated back beneath Lakshmi's skin. 5760's chest was visibly heaving. Yet when Lakshmi stepped closer to the window, it began to wave enthusiastically.

"Sorry about that! Fucker doesn't know when to quit. Is your hand okay?"

Lakshmi flexed it carefully. It would be sore for a bit, but it didn't seem to require stitches.

"It appears functional."

"Okay, good. Good. You ready for our date?"

"I'm sorry, what?!"

"You're fine. I've got him under control. Go get your hand bandaged up, though. I'll be waiting for you."

---

*Whether near or far, I am always yours…*Brendon Urie crooned over the loudspeakers in 5760’s containment cell. Unfortunately, Lakshmi was unable to appreciate his silken notes due to the fact that every fiber of her body was terrified. Pressed against 5760’s bone-white fur in a ghoulish caricature of a waltz, she was at least grateful that 5760 had agreed to lead. Between her terror and lack of coordination, she didn’t think she could have led a mannequin. She

kept waiting for 5760's cheerful voice to morph into that hellish rasp, and for her bones to start rebelling against the rest of her once more. 5760 was doing an excellent job of ignoring her discomfort and pretending like Lakshmi hadn't almost died gruesomely. Lakshmi didn't entirely blame it for not wanting to talk about the earlier incident - she didn't want to spend another second remembering it.

"It happens all the time," was 5760's only response, when Lakshmi asked if 5760 was okay. "You get used to it. You're totally safe now, I promise. It doesn't happen when I know you're here."

Lakshmi wasn't reassured, not after she had just experienced the sensation of devouring herself alive. But as she thought about it, that had been the exact point when 5760 had become lucid again. She tried to remember if 5760 had seen her before its… other occupant… had torn the control away. She didn't think so.

“I’m really glad we get to spend this time together,” 5760 said, as though they were at a couples retreat and not slow-dancing in a forest full of bone trees. Lakshmi decided the thing was either extremely determined to having a "normal" evening, or it had a remarkable capacity for self-delusion. Possibly both.

“Would you mind the claws?” she managed to squeak out, “they’re poking into my side.”

“Sorry,” said 5760, and loosened its grip on her waist. “This is such a beautiful song,” 5760 continued blithely. “You know the lyrics are his wedding vows to his wife?”

“Mmm,” said Lakshmi, trying to ignore the tiny skeletal abominations squeaking and chattering in the calcified underbrush. “I think you’ve mentioned that before, yes.”

“It's a good song. Sweet, but…sensual, almost. Seductive.” If 5760 had eyebrows, it would have raised them suggestively.

Great. Now it was hitting on her on top of everything else.

Lakshmi could barely keep her voice from trembling. “Could we

perhaps keep this conversation professional?”

“I'm just trying to make things a little less formal."

"I would appreciate a certain degree of formality, actually."

"Fine. Be a killjoy that way.”

“Whatever you say.”

The song ended, and over the loudspeakers came a distinctively eighties beat, followed by the unmistakable notes of Hall and Oates.

“She’ll only come out at night…The lean and hungry type.”

Not for the first time that night, Lakshmi wondered what she had done to deserve this, or who she had pissed off on 5760’s research detail.

“Sorry,” said 5760 without any hint of shame, “little gallows humor.”

Lakshmi was beginning to despise Fridays.

—

"Lakshmi," chirped a cheerful voice from outside her office door, "can we come in?"

"Hi, Meyers," Lakshmi called distractedly. "Who's 'we?'"

"Me," Reynolds said, quivering. Meyers practically shoved him further into the room. He cleared his throat. "Sorry about not telling you about the procedures for 5760 like I was supposed to," he mutters. "I was afraid you'd yell at me, or that you'd think it was a joke or that you wouldn't do it and then Gonzalez would yell at me." He fiddled nervously with his watchband.

Lakshmi rolled her eyes, but smiled anyway. Typical Reynolds. "Just please don't do it again."

"Great," Meyers said, "apology satisfactory. Now, out, Reynolds."

"But - "

"Out. *Now.*"

"You're so mean to that boy." Lakshmi watched Reynolds scurry away down the hall.

"I don't know where they found him," Meyers said, shaking her head. "How are you doing?"

"It's been stressful. I keep feeling like people are laughing at me behind my back. Actually, I know they are. More than usual, I mean."

"Well, I've made it clear that it's not a laughing matter. You're doing a good thing, honey. If you having candlelit dinners with a wendigo means people are safe, you're a hero in the eyes of anyone who's got more than three brain cells."

"I know. I saw what happened when 5760 loses it. It's… I don't want to talk about it. And then I can't access anything about it - who it is, where it was found, anything about the entity that inhabits it. Which, given the incident earlier, seems incredibly dangerous. I'm on its research detail but I can't get access."

"Ask it yourself, then," Meyers suggested.

"I can't do that."

"Yes you can, honey. Call it on its bullshit. You have a right to know."

"A right to know," Lakshmi echoed, squaring her shoulders.

End Part 2

<< HUB >>

The Beast You've Made Of Me

“Are you sure?” the creature asked, ears flattened in uncertainty, claws pressed ever so lightly into the researcher’s exposed stomach. “I don’t want to make you do anything you’re not comfortable doing.” 5760 trailed a delicate claw along the doctor’s face, reveling in the feel of her velvet soft skin, smelling the desire that rolled off her body like waves. It couldn’t wait to taste her, claim her, mark her as its own. But not yet.

“I’ve never been more certain,” Lakshmi panted, “I need you inside me, 5760. More than I’ve ever needed anything else.” She pressed her hips against 5760’s bone colored fur, communicating the urgency of her desire. "Please." Her fists clenched in her lover's thick, ragged pelt. She couldn't wait to be taken by the beast.

5760 delicately pulled Lakshmi’s panties off with its teeth, lowered its head between her legs, and

“It was on my office desk this afternoon,” Lakshmi explained.

5760 was silent for a long time.

“Who wrote this?” it asked, voice dangerously calm.

“I don’t know.”

“You’re lying. I can tell.”

“Well, I have a couple of people in mind -”

“Do you want me to eat them? Because I will. They’d deserve it.”

“Are you joking?”

“Maybe? Do you want me to be?”

Lakshmi sighed and turned away, not meeting 5760's eyes.

"Look, maybe this wouldn't happen if you weren't quite so… affectionate."

"Am I… embarrassing you?"

"No. Of course not."

"Please don't lie to me."

"Well…Yes. You are. Everyone treats me like I'm depraved or like I'm a laughingstock, or both. And meanwhile, I have no idea who you are, or what's going on, or anything about you or why you seem so obsessed with me. I've been singled out, and humiliated, and no one will tell me why! Look, I understand the importance of all of this. I do. But why the hell does it have to be me?"

"Look," 5760 said, "I've just… I've been scared for so long, alone for so goddamn long. You - my memories of you - were basically the only thing that got me through it. It had to be you. It was the only way it would work for sure."

"We've never met before."

5760 looked up nervously at the observation chamber, and Lakshmi did the same. Just the usual crew, exchanging coffee, probably smirking and snickering as they wrote more *fucking* fanfiction.

5760 lowered its voice. "Yes, we have." it said, sounding surprisingly sad. It chuckled quietly before continuing. "Surprised you never guessed, actually. I mean, god knows you wouldn't recognize me. I thought the voice might have been a giveaway, but… It's me, Lakshmi. I'm Avery."

The syllables took longer than they should have to gain real meaning in Lakshmi's mind.

"No. That's not possible. Avery's been missing - "

"For two years. I was abducted two years ago, Lakshmi. They didn't want me to tell you, but… I couldn't bear it anymore. They knew we

were connected the minute I told them who I was - they track all their employees' past partners, it seems. We were working on figuring out how best to contain me, and when it turned out that romantic situations were key, they asked if me I'd be willing to work with you and see if it helped, on the condition that you couldn't know who I was. "

"Prove it. Prove you're her."

"You always were a skeptic. But you want proof? You always sleep on the right side of the bed. You don't drink coffee, only tea - oolong's your favorite. We first met in that dog cognition lab, remember? The pit bull mix kept trying to hump you and I couldn't stop laughing. We got snowed in and we talked. But that wasn't the first time I noticed you. We were in the same class for a month. I kept trying to get you to put down your textbook and notice me. There's a tattoo, on your left shoulder blade, of a lotus blossom. I was there when you got it. I talked you into it, remember?"

It's her. There's no other option.

"I. I need to sit down."

Avery. Not dead. Alive. Here. Somehow. Even then, their reunion here - all too impossible. The Foundation sprawled over continents - and yet here they were, facing one another again against all odds.

Of all the gin joints in the world… Lakshmi wanted to laugh, but she knew that if she started, she would find herself sobbing.

5760 - Avery? - cleared its throat.

"I'm sorry. It's just…even before all of this," - 5760 gestured to its antlers - "I realized that breaking up with you was a huge mistake. I was freaking out about the idea of being committed, and it was a stupid decision. You came out to your family for me. You were willing to move jobs for me. I missed you. A lot. You were one of the best things to ever happen to me. And I think us being brought back together now…I don't believe in fate or anything. But I'm not letting you go again."

5760 reached out a hand. Lakshmi merely stared at it. The empty space left by the shock of finding Avery again had closed and crystallized and sharpened.

"Are you delusional?"

"I'm sorry?"

"I can't believe you. You think, after leaving me the way you did, breaking my heart because you weren't certain if there was something better out there, leaving me for a dozen hypothetically better women - you really thought I'd take you back."

"I understand if you're angry -"

"You're the last person I'd want to start a relationship with right now."

"That's fair. That's very fair."

"You think you could just waltz back in here and sweep me off my feet again. How disconnected from reality do you have to be? And anyway, putting that aside, how, *exactly,* did you think this was going to play out? We're in the Foundation. I'm a researcher. I don't even think of you as person. Not that it's hard," Lakshmi said, barking out a bladed laugh that landed right where she wanted it to. "What would I call you? Bestial-friend with benefits? And I don't want to know what you were planning on doing in terms of a love life. Did you think I'd somehow get over this," she spat, gesturing to 5760's canine form, "or did you think I was depraved enough not to care? I mean, you're not even human."

"Lakshmi. Please."

A line had been crossed, and they both knew it. 5760 avoided eye contact with the self-collected shame of a criminal who knows they deserve their punishment. Lakshmi swore silently.

"I'm sorry - "

“It's fine. You're right. You're completely right,” it said, very quietly. “I'll ask for you to be taken off my research detail.”

For all its monstrosity, in that moment 5760 looked like nothing more than an overgrown kicked puppy.

“No. We’re going to do what we need to keep you safe and contained. If this is helping, we’re going to keep doing it. Your safety is key here, okay?”

5760 looked unconvinced, but - “Okay."

—

Their next meeting was not what one would call enjoyable. Lakshmi was silent save for the occasional monosyllabic response, glaring daggers at Avery - *5760.* Her irritation grew almost every time 5760 moved - the way it held its fork, the slight tilt of its head when it was pondering something, they way it gestured in conversation - all Avery's little quirks and gestures. Part of her was annoyed at herself that she hadn't figured it out before - now that she knew, she couldn't stop seeing the woman behind the wolf in every little action or phrase.

"I like your earrings," 5760 said.

Avery poked her head into the tiny bedroom they shared in their studio apartment. "Babe? You said you were going up to put on earrings and you've been up here for, like, twenty minutes. You're not like having a seizure or something, are you?"

Lakshmi turned away from the mirror to face her girlfriend. "I think my clavicle is asymmetrical."

Avery began laughing hysterically, and didn't stop. Instead, she somehow got louder. Somewhere outside, a dog began to bark in response. Lakshmi noticed a bird that had been sitting on the window flying away.

"It's not funny."

"It's not. It's really not. I'm sorry, I thought you were, like, dead, or something. I'm laughing at myself for panicking, not at you."

"Sure you are."

"Here. Let me see." Avery bent to inspect Lakshmi's collarbone. "You're looking good," she said as she rose back up, before tucking Lakshmi's hair behind her ear and kissing her on the nose.

"The food okay?" 5760 seemed genuinely concerned with the answer. "I know it's not that Asian place we used to go that you liked so much, but it's close as we could get."

"Okay," Avery said through her mouthful of Mongolian Beef, "I mean, all Chinese food is good even if it's bad, but this is really fucking good."

Lakshmi was too busy stuffing her face to agree.

"Cheers to our first night in our new apartment," Avery said, holding up her bottle of Mountain Dew to clink against Lakshmi's cream soda.

"I still can't believe the liquor store here's closed on Sundays."

"Fucking Catholics."

"Avery -"

"I'm half Catholic! It's fine!"

They finished their meal, and 5760 followed her to the door.

"It started snowing today," 5760 said. "Gonzalez told me. I miss snow."

"That was…"Avery's voice trailed off as she pressed a kiss onto the nape of Lakshmi's neck. Lakshmi could feel Avery's eyelashes against her skin, had to keep herself from squirming as Avery traced feather-light circles on her stomach. "That was… really good. Like, amazing."

Lakshmi laughed, still out of breath. "Thank you? I guess?"

Avery kissed her again. "No guessing about it." She got up from the bed, clutching the blanket to her for warmth and coverage, and peeked out the window. "Lakshmi, look! It's snowing!" The orange

glow of the streetlights illuminated each individual flake.

"It's really coming down out there," Lakshmi said. Avery pulled the blanket around Lakshmi, and began nuzzling the place where her shoulder met her neck.

"Why is it," she said against Lakshmi's skin, "that all our relationship milestones happen when it snows?"

"You're right! We met when we got snowed in at the lab, and the restaurant where we had our first date closed early because of snow, and now…" Lakshmi kissed Avery long and slow. When they broke apart, Avery was grinning.

"Guess it's our lucky charm."

Lakshmi didn't say good night, nor did she look back as the door locks shut.

She found Gonzalez in his office, preparing to leave for the evening.

"I know," was all she said, looking him in the eye and refusing to break contact.

"Shit," Gonzalez said, and took his coat back off. "Knew this was coming. You better sit down, Agarwal."

Lakshmi sat.

"You have exactly three options here. First option: you opt out due to personal connection to the skip and we find someone else to take over. I won't blame you if you want to do this. But - "

"No." She remembered her encounter with the thing that lived in 5760's head too clearly to allow even the slightest chance of it happening again.

"That's what I thought you'd say, thank god. Wouldn't exactly have been pleasant for the rest of us. But. Here's your other choices. We either dose you with amnestics and keep going, or you can keep the cat in the bag, so to speak. If the administration knew we were having this conversation, I'd have to dose you and get it over with,

and tell the skip not to do it again. But I think you've got a right to know what's going on here."

Gonzalez sat back and grinned. "But if you could make it quick, that'd be great. I ain't got all night here."

Lakshmi surprised herself when she told him she was perfectly capable of staying quiet, thank you very much.

"All right then, Agarwal - we've got a deal."

End Part 3

<< HUB >>

I Keep The Wolf From The Door

“This was…surprisingly nice, 5760. Though you've provided me with a particularly low standard.” 5760’s ears perked in happiness. Despite the flickering candlelight making 5760’s various bony protrusions cast ominous shadows, Lakshmi had to grudgingly admit that 5760 looked kind of adorable.

“I’m glad you liked it. I remembered you like lobster, so I asked if they could whip something up for you. It’s your birthday. You deserve something special.” 5760 propped its face in both hands and leaned forwards.

“Well, if this is an attempt to get back in my good graces, consider it failed. So don't get any ideas.” Only Reynolds, Meyers, and Gonzalez had remembered. Reynolds had stammered out a happy birthday and promptly disappeared. Meyers had brought in cupcakes. Gonzalez had presented her with the paperwork that officially raised her salary.

“I almost forgot! I have a present for you,” said 5760, producing a brown paper package from under the table. “Open it, will you?”

“It's not going to work.”

“It's not meant to endear me to you. Now open it.”

“I don't know what you're trying to accomplish, but…” Lakshmi grumbled as she opened the package. “You shouldn’t have. You really shouldn’t have.”

“Put it on.”

Lakshmi did, and the candlelight made the intricate detailing on the bone of the bracelet come to life.

“I made it. Just playing around. Carving things. Manipulating things.

It’s not romantic or anything. More like a make-up gift for putting you through all of this.”

They were interrupted by siren klaxons, followed by the metallic clank of the multi-lock security system fitting into place.

“Attention,” said a male voice over the speakers, “SCP-8004 has breached containment. Please proceed in an orderly manner to your designated checkpoints. Security personnel are to proceed to the rendezvous point designated for Scenario 8004-Delta. Remain calm and proceed to your stations."

"Which one is 8004?" 5760 asked quietly, after a long silence.

"I'm…I'm not sure."

"Hey, Agarwal. You and the skip okay in there?"

"Yeah, we're all right. We're locked in here, but there's nothing else getting in or out."

"You stay there. You're probably safer than the rest of us. Keter cells should work as well from the outside as they do from the inside."

"Okay. Will do." A pause. "Gonzalez?"

"Yeah?"

"What *is* 8004, exactly?"

"It's the hair and nails one. It's gonna be a bitch to get back in its box."

"Ugh. *That.* Well, I won't keep you."

"See you on the other side, kid." The voice in her ear went silent.

5760 laid down next to Lakshmi, ears perked.

"You okay, Shmi? You're trembling."

"Yeah. I'm fine. Just…Keter breaches. Rarely fun. Someone usually dies. More than one someone."

"This one doesn't seem too bad, It's a mass of keratin and chitin, right?"

"That eats people."

"Okay, so it's like ten of those hair things you pull out of your shower drain with a couple bug legs and fingernail clippings added in."

"Bigger."

"I can still take it."

Lakshmi laughed, voice trembling. They waited in silence, the quiet scraping of the spinal vines against the femoral trunks oddly soothing. The bone forest, for all its horror, was a quiet sanctuary.

Until.

"Do you hear that?" 5760's voice was terse and hushed. The fur on its hackles was rising slowly, spines at attention.

"Hear what?"

"Listen." At first all she could detect was the ambient chattering and creaking of the skeletal woods. And then.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

"That dripping noise?"

"That's all?"

"Your ears must be better than mine. What are you hearing?"

"I think it's -"

"Wait. I think I hear it too."

The drip was increasing in speed, but that wasn't all. She could just barely hear the *click-tick, clack-tack* of a thousand insect legs and shells skittering through the pipes. The gritty scrape of keratin spears like foot-long fingernails dragging themselves forward. And faintest of all, a low moan of agony.

SCP-8004 is composed of five substances: keratin, chitin, an oil-based compound it uses to aid locomotion, a corrosive slurry used for digestion, and a paralytic toxin for incapacitating prey. The sentence flashed through Lakshmi's mind, word for word, in the crystalline calmness of terror.

5760 paced and stalked, growling and lashing its tail. Gonzalez's voice crackled to terrified life.

"The thing's coming your way, Agarwal."

The scraping sound grew louder. Lakshmi could tell that there were two separate victims whimpering in pain.

"I can hear it. It's in the pipes."

"We're sending people your way. Hang in there."

"I can smell it," snarled 5760, "I can hear it, I can't see it. But it's coming closer."

"Stay with me, kid." Lakshmi could hear him grind his teeth. "Now, the thing's hard to kill through brute force, but once you cut something off, it can't reform. Keep it away from you, crush the pincers and shells if you can. Watch out for the hair. It'll tangle you, and it'll burn like hell if it touches you."

A slithering, oozing, chittering cacophony filled Lakshmi's ears. She could smell it, too - an awful, sour, corrosive smell. Hydrochloric acid, and something else - something like copper and loose teeth and parking garages.

"You still there?"

"Yeah, I'm here."

"Stay close to 5760. Dog, if you're hearing this, keep her safe. Is it coming from the ground piping, or the vents in the ceiling?"

"Both. We can't get up a tree, but the ground won't be safe, either."

Click-clack, tik-tik-tak. Closer. Closer. 5760 prowled in close,

protective circles.

"Now, I'm gonna need you to -"

Lakshmi didn't hear what Gonzalez wanted them to do next. A flaming, incessant pain shot through her legs and rocketed down every neuron in her body - a thousand tiny bright pinpricks of venom. Her muscles began to spasm uncontrollably, and her legs collapsed out from under her. Clawing incessantly at the ground, she was dragged through the calcified underbrush, a burning, viscous pain oozing up her leg. Her glasses and earpiece were knocked off, her limbs twitching and heart racing.

The last thing she said was "AVERY!" before her jaw locked altogether.

Out of the corner of her eyes, she could detect a hint of neon orange, blurred but highly visible. As the tendrils of hair and pincers dragged her around a shrub, she got close enough to see what it was.

A neon orange watchband, still fixed to a slowly dissolving wrist. *Reynolds.*

As she was pulled away by the rough spears of keratin embedded in her leg, Lakshmi came face to face with Meyers. Neither could speak, but Lakshmi had just enough control of her limbs left to move her hand over Vera's own, and squeeze.

A bristling, clicking noise. Lakshmi guessed it was 8004 moving its chitinous parts to its outside as a defensive shell to protect against outside attack.

Which could only mean -

A scream that turned Lakshmi's spinal fluid to liquid nitrogen pierced the air.

5760 was a white flash of teeth and claws, cutting the tendril of hair that ensnared Lakshmi with one quick swipe of its claws. Lakshmi felt a scuttling sensation, and saw dozens of the tiny skeletal creatures that lived the forest racing over her to defend their creator.

Rodent skulls fused to lizard bodies chewed through insect pincers. Bird-squirrel hybrids pecked away at clumps of hair and chitin. The fight was punctuated by 5760's haunting yowls and the scrape of bone on keratin. The earth itself began to split, and a wall of bone rose in front of Lakshmi's eyes. The protein mass was beaten back by a monolith of porous calcium.

C'mon, Avery. Hang in there.

The wendigo creature's blows sounded weaker, and its yowls had changed to whimpers of pain. She could see 8004's iridescent blackish ooze burning through 5760's pelt.

All at once, there was a crash and a storm of heavy-booted footsteps, and the staccato shouts of security forces. Gunfire, and the hiss of chemicals.

5760 made its way over to her, limping heavily.

Gonzalez knelt beside her, presses a syringe into her neck. "Don't worry, kid," he murmurs, scooping her up in his arms like a bride, "we've got you. You're going to be just fine."

Gonzalez was waiting in the chair in the infirmary when she woke. His left eye was covered by a bandage, and his left arm was in a sling.

"Hey, Agarwal."

"How long have you been here?"

"Eh, just a few hours. I was asleep for most of it. The doc told me not to do anything too strenuous, so I figured I'd check in on you, and the chair turned out to be really fucking comfy." Gonzalez grinned, looking a little ghoulish with his bruises and eyepatch.

"Is your eye okay?"

"Oh, yeah, it'll be fine in a week. Got a shard of keratin or some shit. Hurt like hell, but nothing time won't heal."

Lakshmi sat up. "Was anyone else hurt?"

Gonzalez's face went stony. "Yeah, actually. Three guys on security got liquified by that goddamn hairball. All good guys. Meyers and Reynolds both got caught. Meyers'll live. Reynolds died two hours ago. Barely recognizable. All that acid shit, you know? We sent his money to his mom back in Harlem. She thinks he died in a car crash. He died getting everyone else out of the wing. Couldn't fucking look me in the eye or speak a goddamn word to me without stammering, but…"

They sat in silence for a minute. Reynolds, dead.

Lakshmi couldn't decide whether or not to ask him about 5760.

She rescued you. You owe it to her to do this, at least.

"How's -"

"5760? Doing all right. Clever - she noticed the thing couldn't dissolve bone, so she managed to cover the thing in bone and trap it against the wall until we got here - like holding a cup over a spider. Came out of it pretty beat up, but nothing a good rest won't fix. Wanna see her?"

"I'd…I'd rather not."

"The thing saved your life, Agarwal. You owe it to her to go check up."

"Fine. But I don't have to enjoy it."

Lakshmi swung out of bed, only to nearly collapse. Gonzalez caught her, laughing, and handed her a crutch.

"Easy, tiger. Easy."

The walk to 5760's temporary enclosure was far too long and strained Lakshmi's already-sore muscles. It was worth it, however, when 5760 saw her and immediately started tail-wagging hard enough to make surgical equipment fall off tables. It was the first time Lakshmi had laughed in quite a while.

"I'll leave you two alone," Gonzalez said. Lakshmi knelt on the jumbo-sized air mattress they'd laid down, across from 5760. Lakshmi expected to feel awkward, but instead, it was surprisingly easy to be this close.

Saving someone's life will do that, it seems.

"How're you feeling?"

"I'm fine. I've coughed up hairballs worse than that thing."

"Only cats do that."

"Killjoy."

"Really, though - how are you doing?"

"I'm okay. Sore, though. You?"

"I'm totally fine. Thanks to you."

There was something there, on the tip of her tongue, something at once fragile and urgent, but Lakshmi either didn't have the words or couldn't bring herself to say it.

She patted 5760's head once, then rose to go.

"Wait."

She turned.

"You - you called me Avery. When we were in the forest. You've never done that. Not here."

"I - I just - I - "

5760 shifted. She leaned to cup Lakshmi's face, traced her cheekbone ever so gently with one clawed toe.

She should step away. A day ago, she would have stepped away. But Lakshmi put a hand over 5760's - *Avery's* - paw, closed her eyes, and held it closer. She stepped forward and leaned so that their foreheads were just touching.

I could stay like this. Touching her.

She climbed on next to Avery, who put one arm around her and pulled her close. Avery smelt like snow and pine needles and musk. "I missed lying next to you," she murmurred in Lakshmi's ear. "I missed the way your hair feels. The way your skin smells. Are you still using the same shampoo from college?"

"It's good for my hair."

Avery laughed, and it's the first time Lakshmi wasn't jarred by the dissonance of the fanged maw and the bell-like sound. "You're so cute when you're defensive," Avery said, ears twitching with mirth. Avery leaned forward and touched the very tips of her teeth to Lakshmi's lips. "I would kiss you if I could," she whispered, "but this will have do."

But then there are footsteps outside and is that the door opening and *oh god, what are we doing?* "I have to go," she stammers while springing away, "thank you for saving me," - *don't think of Reynolds don't look back at Avery* - and leaves in a rush.

She dreamed, that night, of bone-white fur, and woke up restless, frozen and searing all at once.

After she'd had her morning coffee, though, she shed the dreamlike state.

What was I thinking!? They could have footage on security, Ethics could be coming for me right now…Okay. We'll tell them it was just weird stress responses. It's just. A natural human reaction. Post-traumatic experience, people tend to have great affection for their rescuer. That's all. You don't feel that way about her - it. You don't actually have feelings for it.

She would have to be more careful from now on. She couldn't have them thinking she had feelings for 5760. Perhaps more importantly, she couldn't have *5760* thinking she had feelings for 5760.

5760 perked up immediately when she entered, and it broke

Lakshmi's heart just a tiny bit.

"Hi!" she - *it* chirped when she walked in. 5760 rose and hugged her tightly. Lakshmi didn't return the embrace.

"Hello, 5760," Lakshmi replied. 5760's ears drooped noticeably.

"Everything…okay?"

"Everything's perfectly fine, thank you. I'm afraid I need to clear up some misconceptions. About what may have transpired between us last night."

5760 flattened its ears. "Okay."

"I just want to make it very clear that any…affection I may have shown you was merely a product of gratitude and stress. I have no romantic feelings for you whatsoever."

"Seriously? You expect me to believe that?"

"I don't know what else to tell you."

"Look, are they making you say this?

"I'm doing this of my own free will."

"I can't accept that."

"You have to," she said, and turned away.

"I thought there was something between us. A little bit. Maybe not now, but…at some point."

"You were mistaken."

"C'mon, Lakshmi. Last night - you let me hold you. You came to me. You didn't have to, but you did anyway. Don't tell me that doesn't mean anything."

"It was a natural response to a traumatic event," she snapped. "I'm on your research detail, 5760. Do you really need that explained to you, what that means? Because it means I don't care about you.

That's what it means."

5760 looks at her blankly. "Go," it said finally.

"I'm afraid I can't do that."

"Just go. I'll be fine. I don't want to deal with this right now, okay? Just let me sleep."

Lakshmi didn't think twice as she left 5760 alone in the forest and locked the door behind her.

"Hi, 5760," she called into the forest. No response. It had been a week since their last meeting. Lakshmi wasn't entirely certain how receptive SCP-5760 would be to her presence.

"Don't take it personally." Gonzalez's voice crackled in her headset. "It had a rough night - whatever's trying to possess it was laying low for the last month or two, but it resurfaced tonight with a fucking passion. Nobody was hurt, but there was a hell of ruckus. It managed to gain control in time to save three researchers and an agent, but the thing didn't like that. It kept bashing itself into the walls, cutting itself - we think as punishment." Gonzalez spat the word out. "We had to sedate it in order to treat it. It's sleeping right now."

This is my fault.

"I'll be quick, then." She tried and failed to keep the guilt from her voice.

Lakshmi picked her way past shrubbery made of metatarsals and found 5760 sleeping with its nose tucked under its tail.

This would be a hell of a lot easier if it didn't look so much like an overgrown puppy sometimes.

As she knelt down beside it, it cracked open one bleary eye.

"Hey," she whispered. "Didn't mean to wake you."

"Mrr."

Avery always was a terror in the mornings.

"I just wanted to apologize. For earlier. I just..I said some things I shouldn't have. I didn't mean what I said, about you not…I was angry and I wanted to hurt you like you hurt me. I regret it. I wish I'd never said any of it. And before you say it was fine, it wasn't. And I understand if you don't want to talk to me, and…"

"No. 's fine. 'pology 'cepted. Woulda done same."

"I'll leave you to your nap, then," Lakshmi said, patting it on the skull before starting to creep away.

A rustle. 5760 cocked its head ever so slightly. "Stay?"

"Of course. Of course I'll stay."

"Th'nk." Lakshmi knelt and allowed 5760 to rest its head in her lap. She stroked its head gently until its slow, even breathing had drowned out the never ending chatter of the skeletal forest.

In spite of herself, before she left, she planted a quick kiss on 5760's skull, right between its antlers.

"Gonzalez," she called, not bothering to knock, "I know I'm early, but you said you wanted to see me -" But Gonzalez was gathering his things from his desk and packing them in a cardboard box. He looked up and gave her a wry smile. "Actually, Chief of Security wanted to see you. That's not me anymore. When an overgrown hairball escapes from the cell you built for it special so it *wouldn't* escape, you lose a lot of job security."

A woman with skin like coal and eyes like onyx walked in, dreadlocks braided back impeccably.

"Dr. Agarwal, I presume."

"Yes."

"I'm Monika Lowell. New chief of security."

"I'll be out of here," Gonzalez said, pushing through the door with his shoulder.

"Sit, Doctor," requested Lowell, and Lakshmi sat.

"Gonzalez gave me a summary of the current containment procedures for 5760," she said. Lakshmi nodded. "It seems to me your initial concerns were completely legitimate. Ethics will certainly be hearing about this." Lakshmi's stomach dropped. "I'm taking you off of 5760's research detail," Lowell continued.

Lakshmi had always known this would happen, in the back of her head. The idea was a relief, and yet…

"I'm not certain that's a good idea," she managed.

"The fact is, you never should have been on it in the first place."

"I don't think you understand -"

"Gonzalez told me all about their experiments with 5760. But he forgot that we don't cater to anomalies just because they threaten us. Also, the blatant disregard for professionalism - I mean, it used to be your partner. There's no way you could ever be objective."

Lakshmi was silent. She couldn't protest, because that would be evidence of attachment. It would be easier to just acquiesce. To give in. And didn't she want this? But when she tried to open her mouth to agree, she could feel those pale green eyes watching her.

I thought there was something between us, she'd said, quiet and resigned. And she'd been right.

"I'll let you know what the new containment procedures will be so you can approve them, seeing as you have a history with 5760. After that, you'll be reassigned."

She merely nodded, and begged Avery not to judge her.

What choice do I have?

End of Part 4

I Slip, I'm Still An Animal

SCP-5760 Incident Log Delta:
As of 05/04/2016, SCP-5760 has breached containment and has not been reclaimed. Former Security Head Gonzalez appears to have organized its escape, in addition to contacting the Serpent's Hand and arranging pickup of SCP-5760. MTF Rho-27 (Good Boys) has been sent in pursuit. Below is a timeline of the incident:
[11:00] Dr. Lakshmi Agarwal enters SCP-5760's enclosure for a final meeting, as was permitted by Branch Security Administrator Lowell. Security Head Gonzalez waits outside, claiming to be supervising.
[11:02] All surveillance cameras in SCP-5760's enclosure cease function and security systems are electronically overridden.
[11:05] SCP-5760 escapes enclosure, carrying Dr. Agarwal with it, and all instances of SCP-5760-A following behind. It appears to be making its way to the helicopter landing platform. Site-81 goes into lockdown and security teams are deployed.
[11:09] SCP-5760 encounters a team of security guards equipped with tranquilizer guns. SCP-5760 is told to call off all SCP-5760-A instances and return to its enclosure. SCP-5760 manipulates the security guards' bony tissue and causes them to shoot themselves in the thigh with tranquilizers, and proceeds uninhibited.
[11:15] SCP-5760 exits the building onto the helicopter pad after disabling the exit override with assistance from Gonzalez.
[11:16] SCP-5760 and its cohorts are ambushed by a squad of containment agents, who attempt to open fire onto SCP-5760. SCP-5760 forces all agents to drop their weapons, and encases them behind a circular wall of bone tissue. SCP-5760 climbs the wall surrounding the Site-81 compound and evades capture by entering into

the forest outside the compound, where a contingent from the Serpent's Hand retrieved them.

"Who are these guys again?" 5760's teeth were a little too close to Gonzalez's ear for Lakshmi's comfort, but she'd still rather have been in Gonzalez's spot. Crushed between 5760 and a particularly unfriendly-looking Serpent's Hand agent, she was practically sitting on Avery's lap.

"Kinda like PETA, but for SCPs."

"Oh."

The van went over a bump in the road, slamming 5760 and Lakshmi against the gruff Serpent's Hand operative.

"Watch your goddamn dog, will you? Jesus. Almost got crushed."

"She can watch herself," Lakshmi grumbled. "And she's not my dog."

"Are you going to be angry at me the entire trip?"

"I don't know, 5760. How long would you take to get over your anger at being abducted?"

"We didn't abduct you -"

"I was taken out of the site against my will and with no prior knowledge or consent to the situation."

"Okay, fair, but can you at least be angry at him, too?"

Gonzalez leaned over 5760 and towards her.

"I don't think you understand the situation. They had, well, compromising footage."

Snickers from the Serpent's Hand agents.

"Not that kind of footage, you sick fucks. But they saw you and her

in the hospital room together. Ethics Committee was due to meet on what to do with you the day we broke out. There was no way they were going to do anything other than shoot you, kid."

Lakshmi looked away. "Thank you," she said sheepishly.

"There was no time to tell you," Avery added quietly. "We would have if we'd had the chance."

"And don't tell me you wouldn't have gone," Gonzalez said. "You're stubborn, but not that stubborn."

"Well…" Avery said. "That's…debatable."

"I swear to god, I will have you muzzled."

"You should get some sleep," Avery said. "You're exhausted."

"I'm fine."

"Sleep, Lakshmi, or I will sit on you."

Lakshmi leaned back and closed her eyes. The van was moving too much for her to truly fall asleep, but she was able to reach that half-asleep, restful dream state reached only in moments of transcendent meditation, exhaustion, or boredom. She overheard Avery's conversation with one of the friendlier-looking team members.

"It's funny, actually…We were dating before all this. I broke up with her a little while before she joined the Foundation."

"No shit. Really? Must've been a hell of a first date."

"Yeah. Really. She didn't know who I was at first, but we ended up… well, reconnecting isn't the right word. Pro tip: saving girls from gigantic, corrosive hairballs turns out to be one hell of a romantic gesture. Until it isn't. Hopefully she'll forgive me for all this. She's like that. Chew you out ferociously for a while, but she comes around eventually. Even then, though…it'll be rough going."

The agent laughed.

"Yeah. I can think of a couple of…obstacles."

A different voice. "Can I make the doggy-style joke, or is it too soon?"

"Come on, man," said the first agent. "Don't be a fucking creep."

"It's the elephant in the room!"

"The elephant in the room is a giant bonewolf that has teeth the size of your hand," Lakshmi murmured sleepily, no longer content with merely listening. "Learn to read a room."

Avery bounded through the woods of Canada, her muscles lithe and powerful under Lakshmi's legs. It was easier having them run alongside the van like this - the roads were deserted, and it kept from Avery crushing everyone in the van whenever they hit a pothole. Lakshmi had decided that the fresh air was worth the potentially awkward conversations with her ex.

"So," Avery said, after they'd been running for about twenty minutes. "You heard us talking earlier."

"I did."

"I want you to know that we would have asked you if you wanted to come with us, if we could have. If we had another option. But we both would have died otherwise."

Lakshmi said nothing.

"Look, I get you're angry. I do. I really do. But you're all I have left, Lakshmi."

"Maybe you should have thought of that earlier."

"I'm never going to see my family again. Or any of my friends. I'm alone now, except for you. And you're pretty much in the same boat. Could we at least try to be friends again?"

Lakshmi paused to think for a moment. "I suppose it would be best if

we could at least be on speaking terms. All right, then."

"Friends?"

"Friends."

"Hi, Lakshmi."

Lakshmi nearly dropped the stack of books she'd been carrying.

"Don't just - make noise when you move, why don't you?"

"I made plenty of noise. I think you were just concentrating. Looking for something?"

"The Tome of the Valkyries, Volume Three, annotated edition." Avery reached up and plucked the book off of the shelf for her. "Thank you."

"Any time. Um. Can I ask you a favor?"

"Go ahead."

"So, um. I've been having a little bit of a difficult time with…um. God."

"Do you want me to pluck burrs out of your fur again?"

"No, although thank you for that. I…I need help. Reading. I mean, I can read. It's just. New physiology isn't too well designed for turning pages." Lakshmi merely looked at her for a moment. "You know what, forget it. It was a stupid idea. I can ask one of the weird creatures they have around here to do it for me. You're super busy with researching how to make me human again, and…yeah, just forget it."

"Of course I'll do it," Lakshmi said. "Of course."

They spent hours together in the little loft Avery calls a bedroom, Lakshmi reading aloud from tomes with fragile pages. She read about possession rituals and exorcisms, about the northern spirits,

and beings made of hunger. They read until long after sundown, falling asleep in a pile of books and notes and candles.

Lakshmi already woke up screaming. The bestial face looming over her when she opened her eyes didn't help. She grabbed the first available object and flung it at her assailant. It's only after the first volume of *The Necessity of the Beast* whacked Avery between the eyes that she regained enough calm to realize who's in the room with her.

"Nice aim," Avery said, rubbing her nose. "I heard you screaming in your sleep. As did half the Library."

"For somewhere that's so fixated on being quiet, I'm shocked their walls aren't soundproofed."

Avery lay down next to her. "What were you dreaming about? Christ, Lakshmi, you're trembling. Was it -"

"8004, yes." Avery didn't say anything, but merely pulled Lakshmi closer, against her side, where Lakshmi could feel her deep, rhythmic breathing and smell the pine and winter air smell of her fur.

"I'm here," she murmured in Lakshmi's ear.

"Avery?" Lakshmi whispered, as she began to nod off. She was somehow still embarrassed, like a child running to her mother after a nightmare. But the shame was overwhelmed by the fear and the exhaustion. "Will you stay?"

"Of course," Avery said, but Lakshmi was already asleep. "I love you," she whispered, before lying down and closing her eyes.

That phrase must have found her way into Lakshmi's dreaming mind, because the first thing she said upon waking was "I love you too."

—-

"And they all lived happily ever after," Lakshmi said, and closes the book quietly.

The audience of children and adults, human and not, gathered around them leaves after Lakshmi shoos them away. Avery and Lakshmi watch them go.

"Our little reading sessions have attracted quite an audience," Avery said.

"And to think it only started because your paws were too big for books."

"So, They've finally managed to get us a room. With an actual bed. I think we should go break it in."

"Down, girl."

Avery pressed herself against Lakshmi and wound herself around her. "I love you," she said.

"I love you too," Lakshmi said, and went to kiss her.

It was…harder than it looked.

"Okay, do you know how sharp your teeth are?"

"Sorry. Sorry. No teeth."

They tried again, and broke apart just as quickly.

"Can I use tongue without getting it bitten off, or is that just not an option at this point?"

"I'm sorry! I just forgot, okay!"

"I'm not certain this is the best approach."

"Well," Avery said, nuzzling her, "we'll just have to figure it out."

Asterion's Wendigo[1234]

Avery McInnes, Huge Dog Person[5], SCP-5760

Conspectus

Asterion's Wendigo is a large canid[67] creature partially possessed by an unknown, extremely hostile spirit summoned into its body. The Wendigo has the ability to create and sculpt the bone of any living creature, as well as having some talent for thaumaturgy[89].

Illustration

Portrait of the Wendigo, drawn by **`Mf99k`**.

Knowledge

Traits: Large and extremely fuzzy[10], the Wendigo is a corporeal entity with canid, cervine, and humanoid qualities. The Wendigo is carnivorous and subsists upon raw meat in the wild, though it is capable of eating dairy and most plant-based foods. However, it should be noted that the Wendigo, like other canids, cannot eat chocolate.[11]

Nature: While Avery retains control of the body, the Wendigo[12] is warm, personable and outgoing. Frequently affectionate with others[1314], Avery is usually about as playful as any other typical canid.

However, should the spirit take over, the

Wendigo becomes hostile to almost everything it sees, wreaking chaos[15] with its ability to shape the bones of others.

History & Associated Parties: Avery McInnes was abducted while hiking in the Green Mountains, and subsequently forced to undergo the ritual that would transform her into Asterion's Wendigo. Normally, the ritual is performed with either a large animal or a feral child who hasn't been exposed to human civilization, and Avery's exposure to these allowed kept the spirit from gaining full control. The Wendigo was caught by the Jailors, where she unexpectedly encountered Dr. Lakshmi Agarwal, a former Jailor, refugee from the Foundation, and Avery's romantic partner.[1617181920][21] The Wendigo was freed by our agent Javier Gonzalez, who had been working undercover amongst the Jailors for some time. The two brought Dr. Agarwal with them to the Library against her will[22] in order to ensure the spirit would not resurface.

Approach: When controlled by the Avery McInnes consciousness, Asterion's Wendigo is perfectly harmless, if liable to accidentally use excessive force when greeting friends.[23] When controlled by the spirit, however, the Wendigo is hostile to all sapient life and will attack. Ensure you know who is at the reins before approaching. If you're unsure, bring Lakshmi with you to keep the spirit at bay. Avery enjoys being petted, and particularly likes belly rubs.[2425] However, rubbing her exposed innards causes her considerable discomfort[26] and as such should be avoided when playing with the Wendigo. Insulting Dr. Agarwal in her presence is also an ill-advised course of action, as is asking about the physical nature of their relationship.

Observations & Stories

"The first time I met this particular Wendigo was while I was trying to find a field guide for identifying deities. I was pretty used to the… non-human members of the Library, as well as the way bigger patrons, but I nearly got crushed by Avery after accidentally wandering into the aisle she was blocking.[27] And from that moment on, a beautiful friendship blossomed, mainly involving overly friendly hugs and using her as a ladder to reach the higher shelves. Not gonna lie, having to drag in a carcass to use later on as a ladder is pretty disturbing, but you do what you have to."

– Alex Sukarno

Doubt

The status of the relationship between Avery and Lakshmi[28] is still in doubt[29], mainly because of the complications relating to "not asking about the relationship". Which makes obtaining this information a lot harder[3031]. - *Javier*[32333435363738394041424344 45]

I don't know if this is just me, but if Avery wants to get back into her old body, we're probably going to need her to actually tell us more about the ritual.[46] Either that, or me and Remy could go and see if we could find any ritual that could correspond to the effects of what Avery went through. At the very least, we could try to find something to drive out that other consciousness? If you really want her to stay in

this particular body, I'm not going to be the one to judge[47], but I'm sure that you don't want your girlfriend turning into a murderous killgod every now and then.[48495051] Unless you're into that[5253], in which case I'm still going to make a case for public safety.[545556] –*Alex*

1.What the hell doesAsterionof all things have to do with you, remind me again? –Lakshmi
2.You… have seen the other titles they give these things, right? -Avery
3.Point taken. –Lakshmi
4.What makesyouso different from any other wendigo, anyway? –Coyote
5.That wasmyjoke. –Lakshmi
6. You picked up some of the lingo from the Foundation people? Colour me impressed.–Lakshmi
7. Nah, I just used to do vet work.–Avery
8. She cracked my staff like a goddamn chopstick last time she tried to use it!–Remy
9. Splinters in my paws.–Avery
10. Seriously, was this the best you could do?–Lakshmi
11. I'd apologize, but I can't stop laughing. You're a goddamn bone horror wolf. And you can't eatchocolate.God, the irony. -Gonzalez
12. I'm not sure whether I should call the Wendigo "the Wendigo" or "Avery" while Avery's in control. Goddamn semantics.–Alex
13. The only thing heavier than the understatement here was the cast on my ribs.–Alex
14. Hey, at least I helped fix them after I broke them…–Avery
15. To be fair, she still wreaks chaos while she's in control. Ever see her knock over a bookshelf?–Remy
16. Former partner, I thought. -Javier
17. Nope.-Avery
18. You sly dog, you. When did this happen!? -Javier
19. About two weeks after we got here. Being here, in the library - it reminded me so much of when we first fell for

each other, and how happy we'd been. She won me over again. -Lakshmi
20. I'm legitimately tearing up. That's the single cutest thing I've ever heard. Please just get married already. Let me die happy. -Remy
21. Alternately, the spirit could just be incredibly homophobic. I've seen stranger things. -Alex
22. She would've been shot otherwise! The hell were we supposed to do!? -Javier
23. I still have bruises.-Alex
24. You. Are. Insufferable. -Lakshmi
25. You. Are. Overdramatic. -Avery
26. I can't believe I have to say this. Some people…-Avery
27. Yes, this is the reason for the broken ribs. Sue me. –Alex
28. "Status of the relationship"? Really? Did the Serpent's Hand become Facebook all of a sudden or what? –Alex
29. I feel "in flux" would be better. They seem to be a little… on and off. –Remy
30. A telepath is editing this document. The only problem is that this telepathrespects other peoples' privacy.–Alex
31. Aw. You're no fun. –Remy
32. To clear up the discussion: yes, it's bestiality, but no, it's not objectionable because both participants are sentient. -Avery
33. All of this is purely theoretical, of course. -Lakshmi
34. That's not what you said last night, babe. -Avery
35. You…You…I thought we agreed to keep this private. -Lakshmi
36. Should we just burn this entry and start all over again? –Alex
37. Alex sshhhhhhhhhh. Let it flower. We're watching something beautiful. –Remy
38. I mean, Iwasgoing to. I was just teasing you. Don't yell at me - this is all on you. -Avery
39. …I should have you spayed. -Lakshmi
40. Bitch. -Avery
41. Look who's talking. -Lakshmi

42. Should this still be in Doubt? -Alex
43. I don't know. I feel like they might be that couple. You know, on and off. But good for you, Agarwal. You were always too uptight. You needed to get laid. -Javier
44. I'd like to go back to the Foundation, actually. A bullet in the brain wouldn't be as painful or anywhere near as humiliating as this is. -Lakshmi
45. Like I said: overdramatic. -Avery
46. I mean, I've told you everything I can. Bone powder, starvation, wrists slit and restitched three times, tied to a cliff wearing dead animal parts. Everything else I was either unconscious for, or I just…blocked it out. -Avery
47. Yes you are. –Remy
48. Decidedly not. I'm not one of those people who gets aroused by needless danger, thank god. -Lakshmi
49. Sure. Sure you aren't. I must have been the one who called me a sexy beast after asking me to use the claws a little more. -Avery
50. I'd forgotten your complete and utter disregard for privacy. Not your most attractive trait. -Lakshmi
51. Of course not. That would be my animal sex appeal, as you so aptly put it. -Avery
52. Nothing like a bit of spontaneous ossiferous tissue generation to spice up the bedroom. Boneplay: the hip new kink. –Avery
53. I hope you're not seriously suggesting this after the debacle above. –Lakshmi
54. Out of curiosity, what gives you the confidence to think you could pull off a consciousness fragmentation ritual? –Javier
55. Because we're babysitting a 4-year old avatar of a flower goddess. –Alex
56. …Alright then. –Javier

The End

<< HUB

In His Own Image

A story about life in the Foundation and what happens to people along the way. Series by TroyL, featuring art by SunnyClockwork.

In His Own Image:

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- **`Contain Yourself`**
- **`A Day in the Life of Alto Clef`**

- **`Audio Version`** by Sherman J. Christensen

In His Own Image: Part 1

September 19, 2011:

The blood, thankfully not his own, rolled down Lament's arm as he shook the woman again, trying to get her attention. It was a lost cause, he suspected. Judging by her eyes, her expression…. Severe shock. And unfortunately, he didn't have the time to carry her out. With a sigh, he stood up again, leaving her there and opening the heavy, metal door. He peered out, hearing the creak and groan of the shifting walls, wincing as he heard the snap of a shearing bolt.

He worked his way down the hall slowly, now, glancing over his shoulder occasionally as he kept his revolver at his side. He grimaced slightly, wishing he'd brought his other sidearm—the one that held more bullets—but the reliability of the old gun, the feel of it in his hand, gave him a level of comfort that the other couldn't. Dodridge would have yelled at him for it, but there are times that comfort and capability with a weapon are more important than flat-killing power. He believed that. Right up until he heard the screeching sound, followed by a long, chitinous appendage entering the hall ahead of him, the shadow of a dangling corpse with eight legs moving over the flat metal walls.

It took him less than a second to realize what it was, about two to assess the area completely, and only one for him to decide on the office to his left. He tried the door, finding it locked, then took a step back, kicking it hard and getting inside.

The red, glowing emergency lights were all he had to see by, and as he shoved the desk against the door, he heard the thing scratching at it. A moment later, he pushed the filing cabinet on top of the desk, upending it with the adrenaline surge that he was riding, then positioning himself against the far wall, taking a deep breath and double checking his sidearm. Then waiting.

Waiting, waiting, waiting.

He let the breath out when the scratching stopped, leaning against the wall, sliding down it and looking around the room. It took him a moment to realize where he was. It'd been a while since he'd worked with the man—a promotion followed by a reassignment had taken him away from Site19 in 2006—but he recognized the accouterments. The spartan elements were the first indication, but the three pictures, all upended and in the floor now, were the only other indication he needed. He looked down into the face of the passive, bald man, and immediately regretted his choice of hiding place.

Gears.

September 13, 1997:

Everything was fresh and new at Site19, he thought. Everything was… exciting! There was so much hustle and bustle. People moving around, smiling, laughing. Some looking serious, or angry, or—in the case of the four other Junior Agents he was standing with—extremely, overwhelmingly nervous.

They looked up at the man wearing spectacles and an obnoxious Hawaiian shirt under a lab coat, and Lament wondered, with just a touch of gnawing trepidation, why he was grinning at the lot of them quite so brightly.

"Hello!" The man spoke in a voice that instantly reminded Lament of a professor he'd had in college. That man had been in love with literature, and every action he performed was done through that same overwhelming rapture with the written word. Lament decided that he liked him immediately.

"I'm Dr. Djoric," the man explained. "Welcome to Site19! I'm supposed to be showing you around and letting you get a feel for the place. The normal tour guide—her name is Agatha, you'll meet her soon—is currently dealing with a pregnancy or something. So here I am instead! We're going to have a lot of fun!"

Lament wasn't convinced that it was going to be fun at all, but it actually turned out to be. He met a ton of people, including the legendary Dr. Clef, who seemed mostly… bored. And Senior Agent Strelnikov told them some stories over lunch in the mess, mostly warnings, and they got to meet Lombardi, who Lament and one of the other new guys—short fellow by the name of Sandlemyer—had heard about, but no one else had. He honestly felt a little… star struck.

After all, when you're in the Foundation, the other members are the only ones you can really talk to about a lot of things. And when someone develops a reputation, everyone eventually gets to learn about it. Even if it is undeserved.

By the time Djoric brought the group back to the large, white arches and curved glass of the entrance hall, Lament was almost dizzy with the amount of information he'd been deluged in. He got a slip of paper with his on-site quarters listed; notes on where the mess, armory, and various reserves of equipment were; notes on scheduled days off… Then Djoric looked down at his clipboard, clicking his tongue as he turned the pages.

"Right, then. Primary assignments. Most of you will be working under a member of the Senior Staff for the next few months. Some of you will be stuck with them for the next few years. It all depends of how indispensable they think you are," he said, laughing a little. "Sandlemyer…" he said, looking down at the list. "You're assigned to me!" he said, laughing a little. "So… nice to meet you… again!"

Sandlemyer grinned a little bit, then nodded. "Lab Eleven, sir?" he asked. Djoric had shown them his lab with great enthusiasm.

Djoric grinned and nodded. "Simmons, you're going to… Kondraki. Have fun there," he said, looking up at the man, then back down again. Simmons didn't seem that bothered by that, Lament thought, but then, he had a PhD. He could probably expect some modicum of respect.

"Jones and Brown. You're both heading over to work with Strelnikov. Do what he says, exactly what he says, and you'll get out alive, huh?" he said, laughing slightly to set them at ease. It didn't seem to

work very well, though. Lament had heard that Site19's security force was a tough duty, and judging from their expressions, they'd heard the same.

Djoric looked down one last time, then frowned slightly, looking back up at Lament. "You don't have a doctorate or anything, do you?" he asked.

Lament shook his head. "No, sir," he said.

Djoric looked back down again, then shrugged and pushed that consolatory smile back to his face. "Guess he's gotten lonely since Iceberg left us," he said softly. "Or maybe it's just a mistake. Anyhow… uh… You're assigned to Gears."

Lament's eyebrow rose for a moment, wondering if this was a joke, and then the other one joined it as he moved from suspicion to surprise. "Are you serious, sir?" he asked.

"As serious as a grave," Djoric said, still smiling.

Lament decided, much later in his room, that he hadn't appreciated that comment.

In His Own Image: Interlude 1

August 18, 2007:

Lament's fingers slid over the chromium frame for a moment. It had been expensive, but the joke—which he knew wouldn't be laughed at—was worth it. His first failure for a final hurrah. He let a slight smirk slip over his lips, looking down at the picture, at the smile that looked almost abnormal, and laughed.

Lament wanted to think 'The look on his face…' or something similarly reflective, but he knew that it would be the same as it always was. Blank. Calculating.

He pulled out the wrapping paper, and slowly began folding it around the picture with a half smile, humming happy birthday.

« **Part 1** | **HUB** | **Part 2** »

In His Own Image: Part 2

February 11, 1998:

He smiled at the bald man, waving with his elbow because his hands were too full, then setting his cup on the edge of his desk. Coffee—black.

He carefully balanced the other man's drink, easing it down onto the porcelain coaster gently, then nodding to him. "Morning, Dr. Gears."

"Good morning, Agent," he replied flatly.

Lament walked to his desk, sitting down and pulling off the calendar's top page, looking down at the next one. He grinned. "You'll like this one, sir," he said, just a touch of humor in his voice. "Why do physicists make terrible lovers?"

Gears stared at him.

"Because they can find the position, but not the velocity. Or the velocity, but not the position," Lament grinned from ear to ear.

Gears nodded. "Schrodinger, I believe."

"Yes, sir."

"Have you finished your report on 106?" Gears asked.

Lament sighed. Swing and a miss. "No, sir, but I've got a few ideas…" he said quietly, leaning back to grab the file from his desk drawer.

Gears nodded slightly.

Lament pointed down at the schematic of the containment chamber. "I think we might be able to offset the corrosion if we actually suspend the cell," he started, laying it down open on his desk,

pulling out his notes. "Keep it away from most surfaces. Direct contact seems to be the surest method of extensive transition, so…" And he was off.

And Gears listened, expressionless as Lament rattled off the plan. Of the original bodies that they'd found, one of them was wearing a watch which had a chromium plated band, untarnished, and he thought that they might be able to line the inside of the cell with that, since it seemed to have decayed slower.

Gears nodded as he finished. "And the suspension? How would we be able to manage it without direct contact with the cell?"

Lament shrugged. "Magnetics?" he suggested.

Gears nodded for a moment. "We'll look into it," he said. "In the meantime, I need you to refocus your efforts. A slight conundrum for you."

"What is it, sir?"

"SCP-884."

April 27, 1998:

Lament had never heard of 884, and he quickly understood why. The Foundation barely had it in custody in the ninety-odd years that it had been known. Some group called "The Chaos Insurgency"—Lament had cackled over that name—kept stealing it. He looked down at the file, tilting his head slightly at the thickness of it, sighing.

"He's got to be kidding me…"

As luck would have it, the only one he needed to give a damn about was Dash-Four. The other pieces of the SCP, which had originally been a complete men's grooming kit, had been lost, destroyed, or stolen over the years. This last remaining piece was rather… innocuous. Just a mirror. It was nothing like the razor or the comb or even the shaving cup (all of which were far more interesting and far more dangerous). He read over the file a few times before pushing it to the side. He has to wonder what was special about it. And

moreso, why Gears had assigned it to him. It wasn't an immediate or serious problem, just… He looked up at the clock.

Almost 7:00 PM already. He sighed heavily, opening his desk drawer and laying the thick, heavily bound document into it. With a stretch, he stood up, walking to the door and out into the silent hall. It was after hours in the Site19 staff offices, and there were only a few people still there. Over the last few weeks, he'd become one of those few.

Gears wasn't a hard taskmaster. He never gave you anything you weren't capable of. There was just… so much of it. He was completely amazed that the man had been managing on his own for this long, much less with this level of work. It was almost… disconcerting. At times, he wondered if he was actually helping or not, but Glass had told him—in his last mandatory psychological review—that it was a normal response. He took his reassurances at face value, and continued plodding along.

"Hey! Lament!"

He turned, smiling a little when he saw Sandlemyer waving at him. "Wait up!"

The two of them had gotten to know each other fairly well. Djoric, who was still the other agent's supervisor, worked mostly with written effects and mild memetics, and Sandlemyer was training in the same field. He and Sandlemyer had already worked together once on a small project when Gears hadn't needed Lament for a couple of days. It had been… nice. He was working with someone normal and even chipper at times. It was the most relaxing two days he'd spent since he came to Site19.

"Hey, Sandy," he said. The Agent had taken well to the nickname Djoric had given him, and Lament occasionally wished he had as good a relationship with Gears as Sandlemyer had with the other doctor. "What's been going on in the library?"

Sandlemyer laughed. The library, as his office had come to be called, was just outside the holding room for every currently contained copy of *The Hanged King's Tragedy*, and just a few doors

away, dozens of other books that would rape your mind or flense your skin sat waiting for someone to look at them.

It made for a slightly disturbing aesthetic.

“Not much. I’ve been trying to figure out the containment on this thing…” he said.

And it started. Their ritual. They talked to each other at length, discussing the problems that either one were having with their respective work. When Lament mentioned the mirror, Sandlemyer just shook his head and laughed. “You’re going to have to get someone actually inside the Insurgency to figure that one out…” he said, a wide smirk on his face.

Lament just shrugged, suggested that he try setting up a telekill box —“It’s like this. If the book *is* emitting thoughts, this stuff will explode and destroy it, which is your orders, right?”—and then headed back toward his quarters.

He walked back into his quarters—which were finally looking lived in —and nearly kicked a folder that had been slipped under his door. There was a note attached to the top of it, and Lament read it with a frown, feeling his stomach slip away as he realized that he would be awake far later than he wanted.

“Chromium ineffective. Reassess.”

« **Interlude 1** | **HUB** | **Interlude 2** »

In His Own Image: Interlude 2

July 7, 2005:

"Hey!"

Lament jumped at his desk, turning and looking up at the woman. Long, lightly curling, brown hair. Constant smirk. Mirthy eyes.

"Heya, Sophie," he said, grinning as he stood. The smile came to his face easy. It always seemed to around her. "Hey, listen, I got you something…"

"Oh…? Gifts? On a first date?"

"It's just lunch!" he defended. It was a date.

"Regardless, sir. Most unbecoming." Still that smirk. God, he loved that smirk.

"Well, I couldn't pay for the meal, since we're on base, so…" He pulled out a clear, glass vial, passing it to her carefully.

"Someone told me you like… ctenophores."

She looked down at it, then up at him, her face registering a mix of shock and joy.

"Best. Date. Ever."

Hehe. It was a date.

« **Part 2** | **HUB** | **Part 3** »

In His Own Image: Part 3

November 1, 1998:

Agent Lament noted, almost in passing, that it was All Saints Day as he tore off his calendar. He tossed the old day aside, chuckling slightly at the new one. "Scientists are all over the place in the sack," he started. "Watt did it with power, Joule did it with energy, Ohm did it with resistance, Pascal did it under pressure." He grinned.

"All notable contributors to their fields," Gears said dryly.

Lament nodded. He'd never heard a chuckle from across the office for the past year. Never saw a smile. People seemed to think that Gears was a robot or a cyborg or some sort of computer given human form. Lament preferred to think of him as just reserved and needing to come out of his shell a little.

It was a damn thick shell, though…

Lament popped his neck and looked at his inbox. Nothing too much. A couple of memos concerning some security issues that he briefly glanced over… Nothing too important. He sighed a little, shredding the ones that were marked as such, filing the others, then leaning back in his seat. His closed his eyes for a moment, thinking.

"Agent?"

Lament opened his eyes, looking at the bald doctor across his desk. That was a surprise. Normally, it was a process of file, assessment, and writing up proposals and schematics. Conversation was not something the two of them participated in. "Yes, Doctor Gears?" he asked.

"What was your previous assignment?"

Lament was caught a little off guard at that one. Hedge. "You should

know, sir. You received my personnel file."

"I did. Please, continue."

Lament nodded a little. "I was at Site-29, sir," he said. "Just outside San Matteo," he added. "I was working on… well… a few… different projects…" he finished, looking back at the large, thick file on the corner of his desk. Averting his eyes and putting wording together in his head.

"Such as?" Gears asked.

"Classified, sir," he said, hoping there was some protection in that. He didn't want to talk about 919. About his own face screaming at him. "I'm not free to talk about them."

Gears nodded slightly. "So are the ones you're working on with me," he said flatly. "Though the telekill box was rather ingenious."

And that was it. A pit formed in his stomach. Lament looked back up at Gears, then down again. "Yes, sir. Sorry, sir. But… I never shared anything above Level Two clearance, sir," he said quickly. "I'd never do anything like that…"

"Nevertheless, Agent."

Lament sighed, feeling thoroughly… chastened? He wasn't sure. It was the nameless feeling of having disappointed your father or mother. "Yes, sir."

And then, he and Gears didn't say anything for the next few hours, until Lament rose from his desk to go to lunch. "Can I get you anything, sir?" he asked.

"That will be unnecessary."

Lament sighed, nodded, and walked out of the office, realizing how… thoroughly he must have just disappointed the man, even though he'd never show it. He wondered if a transfer was coming somewhere in his future… Would he welcome that? The Assistant Researcher position he was occupying was never something he'd wanted, nor something that he was exactly qualified for. He felt out

of his element, and now, it felt worse.

He met up with Sandlemyer shortly later, as usual. They sat together with a gaggle of other assistants; Lament was the only one at the table not wearing a white labcoat, though. Sandy had accepted his promotion to Assistant Researcher as soon as he finished his degree through South Chayanne Point University, and with a smile, he and the others started chatting openly about their current projects. Lament was almost certain that the only reason he was "allowed" to sit with them was because he was working with Gears, and the blank faced doctor seemed to be a source of fascination to the rest of them. They worked in circuits, providing what details they could, omitting what they couldn't. And then, it came to his turn. He sighed and shook his head.

"I am currently not allowed to discuss my project load," he said, flatly and to the point. He picked up a french fry and ate it, trying to act nonchalant and feeling none of it.

Sandy laughed, but the man sitting next to him, a researcher named Chubert, laid down his fork and looked at Lament seriously. "You know, Lament… You should probably transfer out of there, soon…" he suggested.

Lament peered up at him. "Why?"

It was another man down the table who agreed. "Yeah. I mean, you don't wanna be Iceberg part two," he said seriously. "And a gag order was how that one started too."

"What?" Lament asked. Iceberg… Djoric had said something about an Iceberg…

"Doctor Iceberg," Chubert's eyes were still locked on Lament. "Gears' old assistant. Was with him for… God… almost a decade? Eight years, at least," he said solidly. "Explosives expert when he came in. Gears recruited him to work on a couple of projects, and then he liked him or something, and he kept him around."

Lament raised an eyebrow. "So?" he asked.

"He worked with him day after day for years," Chubert said. "Years. Do you have any idea what working with someone like him for that long will do to you?" Chubert paused for a moment. "How long have you been with him now, Lament?" he asked.

"Just over a year," he said.

"Good. Next review, tell them you want a transfer."

"They'll want to know why."

"Then tell them you don't want to blow your brains out like the last guy did."

To: O5-

August 1, 1997

After failure to report for his duties, I inspected the quarters of Dr. Iceberg. It was there that I found him deceased at his desk. Cause is believed to be a single gun shot wound to the roof of the mouth. The note present was confiscated and sealed, in accordance with containment procedures on SCP- . His body was cremated the following morning, and his non-personal belongings were redistributed in accordance with Foundation procedures.

-*Gears*

Lament laid the file back down on top of his desk. Ten years Iceberg had worked with Gears, and now…

He looked at the file. It was two pages. One that listed his qualifications, and the second one, a yellow, carbon paper copy of Gears' memo. This was it. This was ten years with Gears.

He leaned back in his chair, closing his eyes again, thinking. Thinking. Why hadn't he looked into this before? He wasn't qualified. He was barely qualified for the agent level work he'd been given.

He opened his drawer and stuffed the folder into it, not wanting to think about it. Not wanting to think about anything. What secrets had Iceberg expunged with that bullet? Lament took a shallow breath, then pulled out the paperwork he'd taken from Human Resources that afternoon, looking down at it.

He started filling out his transfer slip quickly, then folded it and stuffed it in an interoffice envelope. He dropped it in his outbox, and walked back to his quarters, his hands shaking.

« **Interlude 2** | **HUB** | **Interlude 3** »

In His Own Image: Interlude 3

July 5, 2004:

It was an unholy din that surrounded the pair, people shouting and clamoring. There was a fifteen minute window when Site19 could have the yearly photo made, and currently, Dr. Glass was having a hard time getting people to listen, much less position themselves.

"C'mon, guys! Please! This shouldn't take long if you'll all just get into your places."

Lament found himself smiling. Waving at some friends as he worked toward the left of the room, moving to stand behind Gears' shoulder.

When he looked around, he saw Agatha, giving him a significant look. He looked back at her, tilting his head and shrugging, giving her one of those—'hell do you WANT me to do'—looks. She gave it to him again, and he sighed, tapping Gears' shoulder.

"Sir?" he asked.

"Yes, Agent," Gears replied without turning around.

"Smile, sir."

"And what purpose would that serve, Agent?"

He took a breath.

"Smiling would serve to put the others at ease, sir. As this is a social function for the entire site, your smiling could aid the others in the establishment of a more efficient and normalized workplace, something that I believe your own reports have called essential when dealing with the unnatural world in which we work."

It was obviously prepared. Rehearsed. Practiced.

Gears turned and looked at him. After a moment, the corners of his lips inclined in a corpse-like rictus that never touched his eyes.

"Is this sufficient?"

Lament found himself grinning now. Genuinely.

"Yes, sir."

"Everyone!" shouted Glass. "Say… Butterflies!"

"Butterfliiieeessss," said the chorus.

« **Part 3** | **HUB** | **Part 4** »

In His Own Image: Part 4

November 8, 1998:

"Denied, Agent."

Lament looked up at the panel of three doctors, swallowing and licking his lips slightly. "Ma'am?"

"Denied," she repeated. He only knew two of the three doctors seated at the table: Sorts and Vang. The woman in the middle was the one talking to him now, professional and stolid.

"Can I ask why?"

"No," she said simply, closing the file, looking to the side slightly, away from his face. She seemed almost motherly for a moment, like she was about to tell her child that the puppy he'd loved was in Heaven now, and no, it's alright, don't cry.

This wasn't fair. He'd followed all the correct channels. All the correct forms were filled out, everything *should* be cut and dry.

"Can I ask who, then?" he asked.

She didn't speak for a moment, and it was Sorts who leaned forward, piping up. "You're aware that supervisors have to approve a transfer?" he asked.

Lament ignored the question. "I'm not qualified to be a research assistant," he countered. "It was…" He chose his words carefully. "… an unfortunate set of circumstances that landed me there to begin with. All of you know that. I don't have the degree. I don't have the credentials."

"Jesus, son," muttered Sorts. "Will you pay attention?"

Lament's voice finally cracked as the anger found its way into it, the

placidity giving way to a harsh firmness. "Why the hell am I still here?"

"In this… particular case, an exception was made," the woman said. "The problem of your credentials has been overlooked, as well as your training. South Cheyenne is there, if you want to finish your doctorate, and there are several groups that can aid you in meeting the qualifications."

Frustration. Bitterness. "By *who*?"

She sighed and looked at Lament, pushing a bang back over her ear. The motherly look was back. "Isn't it obvious?" she asked. A small gavel smacked a small sounding block.

"This panel is dismissed."

He hadn't cooled down when he reached his office, and it took him a while to finally step inside of it. When he did, the anger flared back, and Lament found himself simply staring at Gears for a long moment before he finally spoke, keeping the edge out of his voice just barely. "Why?"

A placid and calm expression stared back as the doctor answered. "Your skills are more than sufficient for the work we've been doing, Agent."

"That's not what I *mean*, damnit!" he said, turning away even as he did, not wanting to look at him. Not wanting to see his face, content to imagine the disappointment and contrition that he knew would not be there. "You know what I mean."

Gears was silent for a moment. "You were a stop gap," he said flatly. "After Doctor Iceberg's incident—"

"Suicide."

"—incident, I needed someone who could pick up where he left off, which was the containment of SCP-106. That has been and will continue to be my primary concern. Containment is your specialization. Once we have arrived at a solution, if you still wish to

transfer, then I will not deny it."

Lament sat there, taking slow, deep breaths. He didn't know what he should have expected. What he was expecting. Logic and straightforwardness were not always the things he received in these situations.

"All right," Lament said, the tightness in his chest still not abating.

"Do you work well with Assistant Researcher Sandlemyer?" Gears asked.

That… That was an unexpected question. "He's my best friend, sir," Lament admitted. No sense in lying.

"Do you work well with him?" Gears asked again.

"Yes," Lament said with a sigh, wondering where this was going. "Before your gag order, I discussed several of my projects with him."

"Very well," replied Gears. "I will inform Dr. Djoric that he will be assisting us with 106 for the next two weeks. Please update him fully at your earliest convenience."

"I… Yes, sir," Lament mumbled, surprise sapping articulation.

"You're dismissed, Agent. Enjoy your day off."

"I dunno…" Lament said, talking quietly over a cup of coffee in Sandlemyer's office. "I think he's trying to make me happy or something…" he suggested.

"I didn't think he was the kind of person to care," Sandy replied, laughing softly.

Lament looked up at the other man. "He's not like that," he said. "He's not… mechanical or robotic or… He's just…" He paused for a long moment. "Cold," he finished.

Sandy shrugged. "Whatever you say. But I've got no specialization in containment, man. And I'm not sure why he's dragging me on

board or what he expects me to do."

Lament shrugged. "Me neither…"

He looked around the room at all the various shelves filled haphazardly with files, books, and papers. The low watt, incandescent bulbs. This office felt homey. Comfortable. Lived in. It felt… good.

"I'll see you in the morning, Sandy," Lament said, setting down the cup on the table.

"Seeya, Lament. Hey! This'll be fun, right? Like when you were over here with us for a few weeks."

"Yeah," Lament said. "Sure." He just wished he could believe it.

« **Interlude 3** | **HUB** | **Interlude 4** »

In His Own Image: Interlude 4

February 19, 2009:

"He. He. He. He. Hee."

Lament sat up in his bed in a cold sweat, the laugh still echoing in his ears. He closed his eyes tightly for a moment, forcing the sound out of his head, then swinging his legs over the side and walking toward the shower.

He stepped into it, letting the cold water course over his back, feeling it slowly begin to warm as the echoing nightmare finally, slowly stopped…

He opened his eyes and stared at the wall. For a moment, he was almost certain that the porcelain of the shower wall was giving way, handprints emerging from it like a child's hand playing with their blankets. Mocking hands that would reach for his throat and squeeze the life out of him, but he wouldn't die. No. He'd live while the owners of those hands played. Played and laughed. "He. He. He. He. Hee."

As he briefly considered reaching for his sidearm on the sink, the effect faded. For a moment, he still considered reaching for it, for another purpose, and when he realized it, he slumped down the wall of the tub, sitting under the water until it had long run cold, staring weakly at the drain.

Wishing he didn't remember, but glad that he did.

« **Part 4** | **HUB** | **Part 5** »

In His Own Image: Part 5

November 26, 1998:

Lament frowned at the glass, looking at the hovering box beyond it with some odd mixture of reverence and fear. It was… disturbing… to see it for the first time. He wasn't part of the crew of soldiers who risked their lives for it on a daily basis. He wasn't even one of the primary researchers assigned to the project. He was just the guy trying to keep them safe. Trying and failing, currently.

"The magnetic fields are working, but the corrosion is still spreading. It's like mold… We thought we had him locked up until he ate Grange last night," the researcher said. The speakers made an odd whining sound, and Lament winced, losing his thought. Thankfully.

"How'd he manage that?" It was Sandlemyer who spoke. "I thought we had all the same safety protocols still in place on this thing."

The researcher shrugged a little. "We lose one or two people every coupla weeks with this thing. Regardless…"

Lament frowned, a pit forming quickly in his stomach. Failure didn't feel good, no matter how expected or anticipated it was. Especially when dealing with the deaths of fellow agents. He knew 106 was going to be a problem, but he didn't realize how much of one.

The speakers made another loud, mind crippling screech, sounding like painfully loud feedback. "Damn," Lament muttered, covering his ears.

"Eh. They go on the fritz all the time," the researcher continued. "We try to replace them, but it doesn't seem to do any goo— "

The alarms suddenly blaring made Lament glad that he'd covered his ears a moment before. He turned, looking at one of the screens. "The repulsors are going down!" he shouted. "Evacuate!"

But the researcher was already yelling into the microphone. The order went out, just as Sandlemyer reached over and flipped off the alarms in the booth, all three men turning to look out the window as the huge, rotting metal box fell the bottom of the containment chamber, cracking open.

The speakers whined again, loudly for a moment, then cut out. And a low, dark, broken laugh slowly filled the silence.

"He. He. He. He. Hee…"

When he was finally able to look back on the day without some sort of breakdown, Lament was certain the reports were wrong. That the hours and hours he felt couldn't have been minutes. That the door to that containment unit should not have been open. That the entire thing couldn't have been orchestrated just to fuck with him. But the mouse never really understands the true motivations of the cat.

Sometimes it's hungry. Sometimes, it just wants to play.

Lament pivoted quickly, running as fast as he could, Sandlemyer quickly on his heels. He was breathing hard, painfully hard, his chest close to bursting as he looked desperately for any point of escape. The alarms were blaring, guns firing at walls, at nothing, at everything.

An explosion behind him had the floor shaking hard enough that he fell. In a moment, Sandlemyer's arm closed around his arm, dragging Lament back to his feet and sending both of them down a narrow straightaway.

"He. He. He. He. Hee."

It was coming over the speakers everywhere now, echoing against his teeth and shaking his jaw. "Jesus Christ," Sandy muttered, panting and out of breath as he looked over his shoulder. "Fuck. It's coming this way Lament. It's coming this way!"

He didn't bother looking back. Training was kicking in, and he was

running. There were no people who survived exposure to 106. At least, none who survived for long. The straightaway ended in a dark doorway, and as Lament stepped into it, he pulled out his revolver and fired two shots down the hall at the advancing 'man,' prompting another of those broken, painful to hear laughs. "He. He. He. He. Hee."

"God damn it," Lament muttered. "Get in, Sandy," he ordered. "Jesus, just get into the damn room!"

Sandlemyer dashed in first, followed by Lament turned, pawing desperately for a light switch for a moment, then feeling cold metal slap under his hand. Cold metal that felt rounded and damp. Pipes. And next to it, another. Sandlemyer's flashlight blazed to life, and Lament immediately recognized where they were at.

"Oh fuck."

The pipes. Gears had mentioned them as a plausible, future containment issue, but he hadn't realized…

They twisted and turned on each other, coining one about the other. It wasn't as he'd imagined it—strict, orderly plumbing—but instead a roving cephalopod nightmare. "Look for the widest opening," he ordered quickly, slapping the door control and backing away from it as the metal started to blacken and rot.

"Go… Go!" he shouted.

He knew there were more entrances and exits within the mass. You just had to find them. Find them and desperately hope. They were both running again, the flashlight jerking along, jumping and shaking as they fled the terrible, old man.

"Hee. He. He. He. Hee."

They ran for hours, panting. And it always sounded closer. Closer and closer to them. At one point, Lament thought he felt something graze the sleeve of his jacket, and the mere possibility of 106 sent adrenaline rushing through his body. Every time it seemed to burn out, there was something else. A laugh. A scent of rot. Eyes in the

dark.

Again and again. Pursuing. Chasing.

And then, they finally spotted another source of light. One of the Foundation floodlamps that were always placed near the other exits.

They both ran toward it, lungs burning as Lament hurried to the door panel, typing in his emergency code.

Denied

He stared at it. Then entered it again.

Denied

"He. He. Hee. He. Hee."

"Lament… Lament, what is the fucking problem?!"

"It's not opening!"

Denied

"Hee. Hee. He. Hee. He."

He felt like crying. He entered it again and again, slapping the buttons harder and harder each time. "You son of a bitch. Open you son of a bitch!"

Denied

He felt it more than he saw it. It was an oppressive feeling, like someone standing right behind you, breathing down your neck. Someone with a knife, or a gun, or claws, someone who would hurt you, kill you, cut you, and laugh while they did it.

"Hee. He. He. Hee. He."

He turned. He looked at it. Moldy, rotten skin. Sunken, dead eyes. Yellowed, broken teeth. Lank, greasy hair fell around the sides of its head.

It took a step forward.

Denied

"God damn you."

Another.

Denied

Lament turned and emptied the rest of the shells into its head to no effect. "He. Hee. He. Hee. He."

"Jesus… Oh Jesus, we're gonna die…" Sandlemyer panted.

Denied

It was in arms reach as Lament, tears running down his face, slammed the keys a final time.

And the door opened.

He was through it in a second, into the exit chamber, looking back. "Sandy!"

106's hand closed on the back of Sandlemyer's neck as he turned and stepped through the door, squeezing for a moment. Sandlemyer's hand shot out to Lament, reaching for him, begging for help, but as Lament dove for it, 106 was pulling him away, pulling him into the recesses of the pipes, into hell and damnation.

Lament raised his gun, took quick aim at Sandlemyer, and did what he hoped any other agent would do for him in a similar situation. He pulled the trigger.

The hammer fell on the empty cartridge with a hollow click. And then they were both gone, and Lament was staggering back against the wall, sliding down it, staring into the mass of pipes.

When they found him, it had been seven minutes since 106 had breached containment.

In His Own Image: Interlude 5

August 16, 2007:

Agent Lament stood in the mess of Site19, staring out the window and looking at the landscape, part of his mind making an effort to register that the world was, in fact, still there. That everyone was actually alive. That it had happened. His stomach was twisted in pained, difficult knots, and he really just wanted privacy. But he wasn't alone.

He could hear the two men, both low staff, talking across the mess from him. Their voices carried, but he wasn't really paying attention.

"What's that guys problem? He onna them montaukers?"

"Nah," the first one said. "He works with Gears."

The other one laughed quietly. "So? Gears seems like uh good guy."

"Good as any of 'em, ennyway."

"Well, hell, then. I'ma go ask him what his problem is…"

A sound of a slight scuffle somewhere behind Lament brought his attention back to the room. He looked at their reflection in the glass, the taller one holding the other's arm solidly in his grip.

"Don't," the first one said quickly, his voice dropping. "Lesson number one about workin' around these guys: there's some things you don't want on your conscience."

« **Part 5** | **HUB** | **Part 6** »

In His Own Image: Part 6

November 27, 1998:

Lament sat on the floor of the medical ward, leaning against the wall. He was rubbing both of his arms for a moment, until he realized what he was doing and stopped. It was an awkward moment, looking around, seeing all the legitimately injured people and then realizing that he didn't have any real right to be here. And with all the doctors running around attending to burns, wounds, and various exposures…

He pushed himself up, walking as smoothly as he could from the room and into the hall, maneuvering around more injured people and bed, finally making his way out into open hallway. He wasn't sure where he was at, but a lot of Site-19 looked the same. He just picked a direction and started walking in it.

Once, he was almost certain that he'd heard 106 laughing, but as he turned to look at the empty wall the sound had issued from, it was clean and unmarred.

All evidence from the recovery group that had found Sandlemyer suggested that 106 had somehow gotten itself caught in 015, tangled in the pipes somehow, screaming bloody murder. It would hold the damned thing. Seal it. Maybe eat it like it ate other people. And he'd write up a file. Give it to Gears. Walk away from this. Walk away from this hell that he'd found himself in. And for some reason, knowing that—finally—he had found a way to contain the damned thing was more of a comfort than anything else at the moment.

He looked at the wall again when he thought he heard the laugh a second time. He stepped closer and ran his fingers of it, then stepped back again.

In his head. It was all in his head.

November 29, 1998:

“What do you mean it was ‘playing’?”

Gears expressionless face betrayed neither pity nor concern. “It was playing with us, Agent. Cat and mouse."

Lament swallowed. “So… 015…?”

“The Overseers would never have allowed such a program to exist long term, Agent Lament, even if it had worked,” Gears continued flatly. “As it is, the men putting the next level of containment in place were attacked and utilized by 106 with—”

“Utilized?” Lament laughed. Laughing was all he could do, at the moment. He was inches from hysteria. That voice the night before. That mocking laugh as he walked down the hall… Had that been him? Had he been ‘playing’ again? 'Utilized.' It consumed. It devoured.

And it apparently played.

Gears waited patiently for him to stop. "The men putting the next level of your containment plan in place were attacked and utilized by 106. Three dead on the scene. Four more deceased over the next week from the initial attack. Another twe—"

"Please stop," Lament said, closing his eyes tightly. He leaned against his desk, gripping the top of it tightly, not letting go.

He was close to breaking when he felt Gears’ hand on his shoulder. “Dr. Glass informed me that you’ve not been in for your quarterly psychological evaluation.”

Lament looked up. Gears was right. Lament hadn’t been in for it yet. It had been scheduled for the afternoon of the twenty-seventh, and he’d had other things on his mind that day. This was Foundation compassion, then?

“No, sir, I haven’t,” he answered.

“I’ve scheduled your appointment for this morning,” Gears said

emotionlessly.

Lament's fingers drummed for an instant on his desk, and while he didn't necessarily want to go, he couldn't think of any other excuse to get away from Gears for the morning. And getting away from Gears was exactly what he needed at the moment.

"It's a natural urge," Glass said. "Everyone is afraid at times. This is the way the Foundation helps its people deal with fear."

"I'm not taking them," Lament said, staring down the doctor. He'd met with Glass many times in the past. Quarterly psych evaluations, voluntary sessions.

"Lament, you can't just… ignore this," Glass continued. "These policies and practices were developed by people with far more experience than either of us. Sometimes, you just… need to forget."

"I don't want to forget." How many times has the doctor heard that same response?

"Why would you not want to forget watching your friend being devoured by a supernatural… thing?" asked Glass. "You saw him when they got him out. You know he was still alive for a few *hours* after that, Lament. Why would you want to remember him like that?"

"Because he was my friend." How many people had he gotten to do this before me?

"You don't have to forget him. Dozens of people 'transfer' out at the last moment, Lament. Take a Class-B. Forget the last couple of days. If you hold onto this too long, then when you finally get rid of it, you'll have to get rid of him entirely."

Days? Lament frowned. For a moment, he turned his mind backwards, trying to remember something… Blindly reaching into gray. "Doctor… Can I ask you something? Something about those pills?"

Glass nodded. "Of course."

“Which one did I take when I joined?” he asked. “When you all erased my family.”

Glass’s hand tensed on the arm of the chair for a moment, and then relaxed. Lament actually found himself admiring the man when his voice came out even. He'd either not known or had forgotten.

“You were conscripted?” Glass asked.

He hadn't known?

“Yeah," Lament said.

A moment. “That would have been a Class-A,” said Glass.

“And is there a cure for these things?” Lament asked. He kept his voice conversational, but there was hope there. Hope for parents he couldn't remember and a dozen friends or colleagues he wasn't sure he'd ever had.

“Occasionally,” Glass said. “Sometimes, they don’t take. Something inside your brain refuses to accept it. Those are rare cases, though.”

And… that. Only stress and a touch of bitterness was present in Lament's voice now. “But nothing after the memory is gone?”

“No.”

Lament drummed his fingers against the arm of the chair for a moment. “Then I’m not taking them.”

“It’s your choice, Agent. But I wish you’d reconsider.”

“Stick ‘em up your ass,” Lament said. “See you in three months, Doc.”

« **Interlude 5** | **HUB** | **Interlude 6** »

In His Own Image: Interlude 6

August 18, 2007:

"I'm sorry… I really… really am…" Lament said, swallowing to keep his voice from cracking. "You're… You're like a father to me… You don't understand that I… that I just… I can't do this anymore… I've asked to be transferred to active duty. Site14."

Gears looked at him, his face blank and expressionless.

"I… Anyhow…" Lament placed a small, square package on the desk in front of the balding man. "Happy Birthday."

« **Part 6** | **HUB** | **Part 7** »

In His Own Image: Part 7

December 22, 1998:

Lament leaned back in his chair, sipping his coffee and reaching for his sandwich, taking a bite. Lunch had become a private affair, especially after he learned that everyone else had chosen to take the pills. He'd included a picture of Sandlemyer's corpse—a body that in no way reflected the man who had once been—in the file for 106, setting the heavy document on the corner of his desk.

He turned his attention to 884 for a moment, glimpsing over it again and sighing, thinking back to what Sandy had said. 'Get someone inside the Insurgency…' Why the hell not? Anything was worth a try at this point.

He sighed and reached for his phone, dialing the number and rubbing at the bridge of his nose.

"Hello? Agent Strelnikov?" he asked. "I'm not sure if you remember me. Lament. We met on my first day." A pause. "Yeah, Gears' kid. I was looking for someone for a possible assignment. Deep cover." Annoyed Russian from the other end of the phone. "I know, but you're the only person I know over there, so I figured you'd know who to bother about it…"

August 10, 2007:

A smirk was worming its way over Lament's lips as he closed the file, leaning back in his chair, laughing quietly to himself. There was no one else to laugh to, after all. He looked over at Gears, hoping that the other would ask him what he was so pleased about, waiting and hoping, waiting and hoping, then leaning forward, staring at him until the doctor raised his head and looked at him.

"Yes, Agent?"

"884… is closed."

He leaned back again, arms behind his head.

"Congratulations," Gears said.

"Thank you," replied Lament.

There would be no praise, nor would there be any accolades. Your feelings of reward in the Foundation were the ones you made for yourself. Doing your job, and doing it well, meant one of two things: you lived or someone else did. That was enough.

It had to be.

"Would you like half of my sandwich, sir?" Lament asked.

"No, thank you, Agent."

Lament nodded, taking the plastic wrapped, perpetually dry roast beef out of the brown bag on his desk. "Then if you'll excuse me, I think I might take it in the atrium. It's nearly time for Sophie's lunch break…"

Gears nodded. "Tell Dr. Light I need her report on SCP-371, when she's finished."

"I will, sir."

Lament stood, walking toward the door when Gears spoke. "And Agent?"

"Yes, sir?"

Gears stared at him for a moment. It stretched past comfort into awkwardness, and Lament found it necessary to cough, then repeat. "Yes, sir?"

"Good work."

The awkwardness became palpable.

"Thank you, sir."

Gears nodded once, and Lament— feeling an emotion he could not put into words— left the office. When he got to the atrium, he stole a kiss from Light's cheek, took the obligatory punch in the arm, and then shared the lackluster sandwich with her.

All in all, he considered it a good day.

« **Interlude 6** | **HUB** | **Epilogue** »

In His Own Image: Epilogue

September 21, 2011:

Lament awoke with a start at the shifting at the door. He'd be thinking. Dreaming again. It wasn't good, but it was what it was. He raised the gun at the door, glancing at the spent cartridges so he'd know exactly how many he had in there in case he needed one for himself or a friend. The matte black uniform of one of the site security forces made him relax again for a moment.

"Is anyone alive in there?"

Lament debated answering, but chances were that they'd torch the room to be safe. 940 outbreaks were best answered with fire. Site-37 had been entirely immolated and rebuilt, but the infrastructure of 19 would mean that a room by room clearing would be necessary.

"Yo!" he called.

And ten minutes later, he was clear, better armed, and fed for the first time in two days. He was escorted from that wing of the site without incident, and as he sat in the infirmary, leaning against the wall while the genuine injuries were treated, he found himself wanting to stand up and walk off again. But he didn't. He curled up against the wall, closed his eyes, and slept.

Lament was woken by a hard shake to his shoulder, his hand immediately flying to his hip, reaching for his gun to shoot and kill immediately until he looked up and recognized the face. He let out a slow breath, slumping down against the wall. "Fuck, Dodridge."

"Get up, man. We're due for debriefing."

"To hell with that," Lament pushed himself up slowly and leaned

against the wall. "This is why I hate active duty…" he complained, scratching his arm and nodding to Dodridge that he was ready, following him down the hall to the mess for coffee and another meal. The two of them ate quickly, barely talking.

"You still talking to the Erdrich girl at twenty-three?" Lament asked.

"Yeah," Dodridge said flatly.

Lament chewed his sandwich. "She hot?"

"Yeah, she's hot."

"You thinking of transferring back to security for a while?"

Dodridge shrugged. Lament nodded. And they finished the meal in silence.

The debriefing took maybe forty minutes. It was a regular discussion. When were you two alerted? How long did it take you to get to the site? Why did you split? Were you able to reach the site nuclear device, Agent? Were you able to successfully reseal the lock on the 682 wing, Agent? Were you, Agent? Did you, Agent? Why didn't you, Agent? Agent? Agent? Agent? Blah blah blah.

It wasn't until the end of the meeting that Lament realized that Djoric was one of the men on the panel. He waved at him. Djoric made eye contact for a moment, looked away, then left. It made him remember Sandy again, remember the times the two of them had sat together, laughing and bouncing ideas off of each other. Remember the look on 106's face as his friend was pulled into the blackness of the pipes. Remember how he always counted his bullets now.

Dodridge broke the silence. "You wanna get a beer, Lament?"

"Nah, man. I'm good."

"Suit yourself. I'm getting shit faced," Dodridge said.

Lament laughed. "Tell Alice I said hello when you talk to her."

"Yeah, whatever, asshole."

Lament smirked, Dodridge flipped him off, and he was gone. He stood in the hall for a minute, wondering if Sophie was still stationed here. They'd lost track of each other after he'd gone active, but that was just how the job was. It was why he knew Dodridge would go to Site-23 full time. And he'd end up… He didn't know what.

He sighed and turned down the hall, walking down it aimlessly, but unsurprised when he found himself again outside the office he'd hid in for two days. He pushed into it.

The cleaning crew had already been through, putting things back where they belonged. Gears' desk was back in position, as well as his old one. It feel eerily… the same. Too close. Too similar. It felt like four years ago.

"Agent."

He turned, looking over his shoulder as his hand dropped nervously to his sidearm, resting on it for a moment as the familiarity of the voice sank in.

"Dr. Gears."

He looked the same. Bald pate. Smooth, expressionless face. Clear, cold eyes.

"I understand you took refuge here during the outbreak."

"Yes, sir," Lament said.

Gears nodded to him, then walked past him to his desk, sitting down at it and opening a file. "If you have time, there's a mild, level two threat I would like to consult with you on."

"Am I cleared for that, sir?" Lament asked.

When Gears looked up at him, he imagined a smile. It was a habit he'd picked up. Implying the emotions that were never there.

"I can secure the clearance, if you wish, Agent."

Lament nodded. "Of course, Doctor."

"Very well. I can meet with you after lunch today."

Lament nodded, feeling the kind of familiarity that left a pit in your gut. He looked at the man, wondering if his new assistant had died in the attack. Killed themselves like Iceberg had. Run like him.

"Of course, Doctor. Maybe I can talk to my supervisors at Site14 and see about a temporary reassignment, if you're in need of assistance."

Gears didn't respond, but then, Lament hadn't expected him to. He turned, pushing through the door and into the hall, looking both ways and then walking toward the arboretum. Maybe Sophie *was* still stationed here…

Gears watched the agent leave, wishing he could have done… something. Anything at that moment. He was actually… glad to have him back. Thrilled, even. But it never touched his face. He never smiled. Never congratulated him.

Nothing.

He unlocked and opened his bottom, left drawer, the one that was nearly empty except for a few classified memos. It was his 'destroy' file, a place where he kept things that were sensitive and needed to be completely expunged. There was only one file there that had lasted longer than a week. He quietly reached into the drawer, pulling out a plastic bag. There was a piece of paper inside it, a splatter of blood across the faded letterhead. He looked down at it and read it again, as he had a hundred times before.

> It happened. It finally happened. I was watching Agent Shelly walk down the hall, doing that one hip thing.
>
> I just watched, then posted my work to Records. I didn't drool, or make a pass, or anything. I felt it, I felt it inside, the vague desire, but there was no reason to act on it. I'm not even upset about it, really, just…nothing.
>
> They trust me with too much, mainly because nobody

else will take it, or maybe that's been a part of it too. I looked into the files. I dug back and sent requests for the old hard copies. I know what happened, and what they want.

He's trapped, inside, he can feel, but not react to it. What could be a worse hell? And what could be better for them?

They know what they're doing. The personality type. The ones who are susceptible. His was an accident. I'm not letting it happen to me on purpose.

I know you'll be the one to find this. Tell them I'm sorry. Please? And if you've still got a soul in there, warn the next guy.

-Iceberg

Gears stared at the note for a long moment, and for an instant, he was almost certain he felt the sensation of a tear rolling down his cheek, but when he raised his hand to it, it was dry. Bone dry.

He dropped the note back into the bottom drawer and stood. He looked over at the desk that had sat empty for the past four years. And he felt regret.

But it didn't show.

« **Part 7** | **HUB** | »

Jefferson Submarine Hub

A story of war, inner demons, outer demons, romance, and the end of the world in Three Acts

It has catgirls! It has bug-men! It has rescue missions for space wizards! It has no fourth wall! This is a continuity where anything can happen! But before you run away to your sandbox to help me make beautiful things happen, first allow me to give you the crash course:

Story List

Act I, "Marching into Madness"

- Retired, Extremely Dangerous — Wherein we find out that these old bastards still got some fight in 'em
- Alexei and the Walrus — Wherein narrative quality is sacrificed to advance the plot
- **`Alexei Belitrov in: How to Fighting an Endangered Species`** — Wherein we take a sharp turn from terribad action-comedy to terribad horror-comedy
- **`Wherein Alexei punches a bear really hard and then feels bad about it`** — it's literally the title
- **`Alexei is a Kill-Stealing Bastard`** — Wherein the Black Rabbit Company first set their (rifle) sights on Alexei
- **`The Age-Old Art of Fisticuffs`** — Wherein Alexei gets knocked the fuck out by an anachronistic gentleman.

Act II, "Back in the Saddle"

- **Sorry, no named tales in this arc yet. See below for the spoilered version.**

Act III, "They Will Fall Together"

- **Sorry, no named tales in this arc yet. See below for the spoilered version.**

Spoilered Version

Of course I collapsed the spoilers!

Act I, "Marching Into Madness"

This arc is parallel to, but not (necessarily) canon with the events of **`Let the Games Begin`**. It follows the fight sequence of **`March Madness '15`**. It does not necessarily have to follow any other canon made to revolve around those fights. The big thing to remember about this Act, this arc, is that it's meant to be a combination of doofy and expository. If you feel like contributing, please consult with me, **`Agent MacLeod`** and, if anyone else jumps on this bandwagon, them too. I'd like to maintain a semblance of continuity, if nothing else.

Act II, "Back in the Saddle"

This arc is meant to follow Alexei Belitrov as he becomes used to the idea of fighting, of combat, again. And it's meant to follow both Alexei and the Black Rabbit Company as they try to resume life outside of containment, while Alexei tries to gain the girls' trust. There is a seed of a romantic subplot but I'd rather not hit it heavily until we get to this point. Whether Wizard is with the girls or stuck in Foundation custody at this point is up for debate within my own head, but regardless of Wiz's status, Red is acting up and nobody seems to know what can be done to fix it.

Act III, "They Will Fall Together"

This might seem like a weird direction to take the story as pitched so far, but Act III is about the End of the World. Whatever Red is, whatever got loose in Act I (more on that in a moment), whatever the Company gets up to as Alexei is integrated in, it all falls apart. At some point, Wizard falls back into Foundation custody (if he ever left). There's hope, there's gonna be a new beginning, but like the Act II romance, I'd like to stay quiet on it until we get there. The big thing is, this is meant to be a change in tone from the previous two arcs. It'll switch gears from action-comedy to tragedy-comedy. The good guys don't win, sorry.

General Guidelines

The big rules are:

1. Maintain continuity
2. Have fun.
3. Be creative.

Everything planned so far leaves a lot of loose threads; we have the entirety of March Madness '15 to work with, along with a lot of what that entails. Even as our main protagonists 1v1 their way to Destiny™, the skips they beat won't necessarily die. There'll be a ton of side-plots that can be followed. (Hell, if they're written well enough, they may overtake the "main" plot). Likewise, Acts II and III will have entire casts and crew of side-characters to be played with, narratively. There's no reason every single story needs to be about how awesome Wizard and the Catgirls and Alexei and Lord Blackwood are. Standalones that fit loosely within the continuity are absolutely an option. Don't be afraid to seek out new adventures.

Here's to hoping we all enjoy ourselves while we're here!

Now with music!

Retired, Extremely Dangerous

« **No, there won't be a prequel, sorry.** | **Hub** | **Alexei and the Walrus** »

`Alexei Belitrov`, formerly a Major in another world's version of the Red Army, was having a good day. His current case manager, whose name he hadn't yet bothered to learn, had procured for him several novels he hadn't been allowed access to, not the least of which was *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*. He'd been waiting over three years before they approved that one, allowing him to finally carry on the story of a young wizard and his friends. Of course, it helped that his English lessons had accelerated past the rudiments and into more advanced grammar and literature.

Alexei had also been given more music to listen to. He was quite interested in the French duo who insisted on wearing ridiculous masks in public; their work was actually really catchy. Not as nuanced as Tchaikovsky, but there's only so many times you can listen to the 1812 Overture before it grows stale.

And, most importantly, this week marked the fifth year anniversary without the nightmares. Alexei hadn't set his chronometer to be counting that, but it had been anyway. There were some things Alexei felt were better left forgotten, drowned in fiction provided by his Skinny Crow captors.

So it was quite a change in pace when a **`sapient, ectoentropic lump of thermite shaped like a gigantic flea`** fell through his roof and on top of him while he lay reading, shouting in what sounded to Alexei like broken Chinese. Alexei's immediate reaction was to scream in pain, which did no good because Alexei had lost the function in his vocal cords sometime in the mid 1960s. Instead, something between a high-pitched tone and radio static was picked up on all radio receivers in range. It should be noted that no radio receivers were in range

because, as the ball of thermite fell onto the bed, it continued to fall, straight into extrauniversal space. To the ball of thermite, this was mostly natural, but to Alexei Belitrov, it was absolutely terrifying.

When, eventually, Alexei came to, he realized that he was in a rather familiar corner of the multiverse. In front of him lay several dead soldiers, attired[1] similarly to himself. Alexei judged that they were German, because their weapons were attached to their arms like bracelets, instead of bolted down like his own weapons had been.

"Sorry, comrade," Alexei whispered as he removed the nearest soldier's primary weapon, a large caliber machine gun. "I need this more than you do." Weapons sweeps were always nasty work, but, had Alexei died in his own time, he wouldn't have minded his own men taking what they needed. He repeated the process for the soldier's secondary weapon, a 23 mm semi-automatic shotgun. He searched the nearest dead men for proper supplies and excess ammo, to complete his loadout.

Feeling properly equipped for the first time in over 25 years, Alexei set about finding the thing that had brought him here and dealing with it. His final course of action would be settled later…

Zao, formerly an Oxidist officer in the Southeastern Biological Synocracy's army, was having a rough day. His current opponent was a much younger Oxidist, one who'd hardly seen combat and was still springy and young.[2] Their scores were matched, and had been for the last few hours; every point Zao scored would quickly be matched by his opponent. Right now, Zao was one point behind.

Now most people[3] would be disoriented by extradimensional travel, but this isn't true for Oxidists. The Synocracy built them specifically to be able to teleport themselves within attack range of the **`Imperium's Mark 24 Landships`**. So, as the tennis ball hurtled towards Zao at several hundred meters per second, it was perfectly natural for him to jump through the multiverse in order to catch it.

What Zao did not anticipate was that, as he fell through the multiverse, he'd catch one crackling claw on the edge of the wrong

layer of reality and slip back into the Foundation universe.[4] Nor did he expect to pick up a hitchhiker along the way. For that matter, he had no way of knowing the hitchhiker would be a fellow veteran.[5]

So, when they finally stopped falling, Zao was really surprised to see an unconscious monstrosity of a man occupying much of the same space as himself. Zao was further surprised to see that there were a large number of dead soldiers that looked fairly similar to his hitchhiker on the ground close to where they landed. He didn't recall having visited this particular corner of reality in the past, but generally speaking he trusted his multidimensional sense of direction implicitly.

It was a pretty fucked-up corner. Most of the trees were long-dead, blasted and scattered. What little greenery still stood looked sickly. The sky was overcast, the land barren, and the lack of bugs and birds pretty damn eerie. It reminded Zao of the war.

The unfortunate stranger seemed alive, if unconscious, and Zao felt a pang of guilt- accidentally running into someone mid-game was faux-pas enough, but carrying them out of their home reality was just unforgivable. It might be a good idea to look for water or something for when his unfortunate hitchhiker woke up. So, he rolled off, looking for supplies for his armour-clad victim. If he could find a local or break in on some regional radio transmissions to figure out just where the hell he was, that would be an added bonus.

Alexei couldn't exactly put his finger on it, but he had a gut feeling he was somewhere in Germany, and further that he wasn't alone. The tracks surrounding where he'd… fallen? Been dragged? Were curiously insectoidal, and something about the way the ground around them seemed drier bothered him. Almost as if the thing was radiating heat. Whatever it was, it had made no effort to hide its path, moving off with inhumanly long strides. Where it kicked off from the ground, the prints were deep, cracking even the hardest ground- whatever it was had a great deal of power in its legs.

It had been a good long while since he'd had to move through rough terrain, and even longer since he'd been to Europe. It felt good. It wasn't as clean as Site-17's sterilized, filtered air, but the irradiated

air of what he was sure, at this point, was Germany's Black Forest was somehow comforting to Alexei. It reminded him of the hot air he'd breathed in the last summer, before the War, working the community farm alongside his parents. What he wouldn't give to see that farm again. Of course, it was probably radioactive and useless for farming at this point, if not completely covered in debris. But still, a man can dream, right?

Were Alexei still capable of regular respiration, he'd be breathing very heavily. It was tough work. The only exercise he'd done for the last two-and-a-half decades had been push-ups within the confines of his cell, and as the Foundation eliminated the restrictions on what he could and couldn't have, he'd been neglecting even that. But the Engineers had built his Armor well. It was meant for war. It was meant for long marches. So Alexei pushed on, let his Armor do most of the work, let its nervous system feel the muscles strain instead of his own. Now that he was back home, he might even find a Technician to do a full checkup on the state of his Armor.

He was steadily moving uphill, and had been for the last five minutes or so. He suspected his target was seeking a vantage point. What it could possibly want with him was beyond Alexei, but it didn't matter. The tracks had gotten closer together- the thing had slowed down, and showed no signs of speeding up. It had to be close.

Zao had decided that his best course of action on finding water would be to find a vantage point. Flying might be an unnecessary risk- if his experience had taught him anything, it was that open, rolling ground like this would almost inevitably be watched from above. Better to keep a low profile. So far, all he'd found were hills and broken landscape. He wasn't picking up any radio transmissions, either, which was even more eerie than the lack of birds. He couldn't see any trees tall enough to be worth climbing that were still standing. Not for the first time, he missed when his sensor package had been military-grade, when he could smell infra-red and taste the gamma emissions of Mark 24 atom forges on the wind…

He'd been moving uphill for a while and still couldn't see anything of interest on the brow of the hill. He stopped, slowly surveying the horizon. The bug-man was on his trail, looking up at him from less

than 30 meters away…

Alexei could smell his quarry now, the Armor's insect-like nostrils twitching within their small pockets next to his eyes. It smelled like hot metal, the bursting clouds of thermite mortars. His instincts and training told him not to follow the path exactly- who knows what he might step in or trigger- but there wasn't much ground cover to work with. All he could do was keep his stance low and his eyes peeled. There was no telling what the creature's intentions were. He rounded a rill in the hillside and stopped, trying not to gawp at the *thing* that stood before him.

Zao and his hitchhiker simply stared at each other for a long moment. The stranger broke radio silence, sending three simultaneous transmissions, only one in a language Zao understood. *"What the fuck do you want from me?! "*

Before Zao could respond, the other man raised his right arm — *There hadn't been a gun there before, had there?* — and Zao felt a five-round burst of 12.7x108mm[6] bullets whiz past him. He flattened his body low to the ground[7], popping up a hesitant eyestalk.

The hitchhiker — his enemy, apparently — was gone. Likely uphill, if he was smart. Still, flattened as he was Zao was reasonably confident he'd be difficult to see. He allowed his surface to rise up to combat temperature, reforming himself into a more compact, fast-moving form as he pondered his current predicament.

Alexei was terrified. He was absolutely certain that the creature had been hit by at least one of his bullets, but it hardly seemed phased. He switched the safety on the shotgun off, hoping the creature wouldn't come close enough to make the rapid application of 00 buckshot necessary. He checked his ammo packs, recounting to see if he had enough grenades. He hoped so.

The creature was getting closer, Alexei could tell. The thick metal smell was getting stronger, and the rising smoke from downhill could only mean that it was combusting the scrub. His Armor was built to

survive flash temperatures up to 200° C, but that didn't mean heat wasn't uncomfortable, and if his thermal sensors were anywhere near right this thing was definitely hotter than 200°.

Alexei started to low-crawl uphill, away from the end of the path the creature had blazed when he paused to listen. It seemed the creature had stopped. Alexei turned himself over, so he could sit up and look over the log that was his cover, getting a grenade ready so he could throw it, should he have to. Just as he was lifting himself up, the creature, smoke pouring off it, landed a few meters away, almost immediately setting the ground alight. It looked smaller, somehow, but it moved in almost perfect silence- there was nothing mechanical about it, despite the rust-red colour of what he could only assume was its hull. Acting automatically, Alexei threw the grenade, lifted himself to a standing position, and began to run away from his pursuer and its rapidly-combusting landing zone, too unnerved to check if his aim had been off.

Zao's first soldierly instinct was to set the hillside a-blazing, but that was quickly overridden by other, more reasonable thoughts. *What if this man doesn't know I don't mean harm? I should at least* try *to reason with him. Maybe he can help me figure out where we are.*

He made an experimental leap, cooling himself down as he did so- it would take a few seconds before he wasn't hot enough to melt steel on contact. He aimed for a slight rise near a large fallen log, which seemed to offer a good vantage on- The hitchhiker was already there, arm coming around with a grenade in its hand. Before he could try to explain their situation, the explosive detonated in his face.

Zao engulfed the grenade, letting the airburst spend itself deep in his superheated metal guts. Diplomacy, it seemed, had failed. He spat out a chunk of molten slag and turned up the heat, lengthening his limbs to a configuration perfectly suited for running on rough terrain.

Alexei could feel the oncoming wave of heat. The thing moved lightning-fast, driving a rippling wall of burning vegetation before it.

The brush behind Alexei were catching on fire. The grenade hadn't killed the thing, then. He'd have to try something else. In front of him was another large trunk, at least three meters in diameter. On either side, the ground fell away into a pair of matched gravelly streambeds- if he descended, he'd be even more exposed. He had no choice but to turn and face his attacker.

The creature was about ten meters away and closing fast. Behind it, nothing but scorched desolation[8] Alexei prepared two more grenades, hoping it would buy him time to scramble over the fallen tree, or at least get some distance down one of the streambeds. When the thing was about five meters off- it showed no signs of slowing down- Alexei raised his left arm, fired two shots from the shotgun in rapid succession, and tossed the grenades.

The creature bent and twisted like seaweed in a strong current, moving past the buckshot. It extended an arm that reminded him of the footage on white blood cells they'd shown during medical training, engulfing the explosives before they could detonate. Still, his hostile gesture seemed to make the thing pause- it ground to a halt, shapes that could only be armour coalescing on its red-hot surface. Alexei could only hope that it would take the thing some time to regain its momentum. Long enough to get as far away as possible. In the meantime, grenades were all he had.

Zao was unimpressed by the quality of the man's explosives, but if there was one lesson he'd learned it was that overconfidence in the face of seemingly inferior firepower had killed more Oxidists than he could count. His kind were resilient, but unstable- the added energy from, say, repeated detonations could overcome their ability to thermally self-regulate.[9] He hardened his outer layers, letting himself cool off a tad. The insect-man treated grenades as if they were candy to be given to larvae and children- hopefully he would not be so liberal with whatever heavier weaponry he was presumable carrying.

Then another thought crossed his mind: *Is he even worth it? I can probably find my way home from here pretty easily. I don't need to waste my time with this nonsense.*

He was only moderately surprised when three more grenades bounced off his outer shell and exploded.

You know what? Fuck this guy.

There was no thought to it- the thing was an immobile hard target, and he had explosives to spare. Letting the handful of grenades fly free, Alexei spun, vaulting over the mammoth log and descending into the wider of the two streambeds, which ran eastwards, away from where they'd landed.

Zao was getting too old for this shit. Tennis, he could handle. Sapient tank factories, he could handle. Special Containment Procedures, he could handle. He'd even known a few people who'd had insectoidal splices, and they were fine, upstanding citizens. Hell, he preferred a hexigrade body plan, whenever possible.

But fucking bug people tossing piddling explosives at him unprovoked? That was an insult to common decency. This insect was a threat which needed dealing with. Zao concentrated, settling back into his old, familiar training, and *bloomed*. It was time to Oxidize the world. Despite himself, Zao felt a certain fierce joy. It was nice to feel this angry again. He didn't have his old firepower, but he had more than enough to face mere *bullets.*

Water was a scarce resource on the surface. Soldiers on both sides depended on wells dug by the Engineers (or some monstrosity built by the Engineers, more likely), or on the infrequent rainfall in order to survive. It was likely the Germans Alexei had encountered earlier had died of dehydration, not combat-related injuries.

So it was fairly odd when Alexei found a small pool of relatively clean water, a remnant of the stream that had flowed here long ago. Sure, a Skinny would have to boil it in order to survive, and his Armor would have to filter out the mud, but to him, it was potable. So he bent down to drink.

The water was boiling before his hand could touch the surface.

Oh, fuck me.

Zao was bounding now. Not jogging, not running, no, *bounding*. He wasn't even avoiding obstacles; by the time he hit the ground between leaps, they were mostly glassy cinders. He was clearing rough terrain at an even 20 meters a second, following the old stream his quarry was running down. At full size, he could pinpoint the insect-man in the winding bed at the peak of each jump.

The idiot had stopped for water, kneeling dumbfounded at the edge of a hastily-evaporating pool. Zao landed, river rocks melting beneath him, but before he could leap forward and end it, the hitchhiker dove to Zao's right, away from the pool, both guns firing. Zao didn't even feel the shots hit home. He reoriented his legs, having to balance as the molten rock sluiced about beneath his feet.

The bug-man was lying on the stones, vulnerable. Zao turned, and with one limb formed into an upraised spike, burning white-hot, he prepared to finish the fight.

Splep.

A tennis ball, smouldering slightly, had just dropped out of thin air and begun to sink into the melting streambed, incongruously green-yellow against the burning redness. He blinked. It was his serve.

Figuring that killing the hitchhiker could wait, he picked up his ball, grabbed his racket out of its n^{th}-dimensional pocket, tossed the ball into the air, and swung…

Alexei couldn't believe the thing had moved that fast. But it was no matter. He could see its arm turn into a white-hot blade; could feel the intense, burning heat radiating off of it. He knew it was all over.

But then it stopped. It stopped to pick up a… tennis ball? And it pulled a racket from nowhere. It was distracted. Maybe, just maybe- if it was this hot, exposing it to moisture, whatever was left in the pool… it would be his salvation. He *would* extinguish the unholy fire[10] with irradiated German river water. So as the creature swung

its tennis racket, Alexei lunged as hard as he could…

Zao felt the hitchhiker tackling him just as the ball hit the racket. No matter. Zao would just use the coming inter-universal jump to dump the jerk somewhere else. Then he could finish his game and go home…

Later, Zao would think back on the experience, and would think he'd done the right thing given the circumstances. Right now, he was relaxing. He remolded himself to the long lead futon, stretching out his limbs and waving one at the radio, which belched and began playing soft, calming music. The filterbirds were happily sucking impurities out of the air in Zao's garden as a quiet sunset descended upon Xin/Wellington.

He'd won the game. Somehow, the kid has slipped up long enough to let Zao break the tie and win the game point. The kid had stated that he'd like to play again sometime. That might be nice. He didn't have to play against Huoyao all the time, right?

It had been a good day.

Alexei felt the intense heat of the thing for about two seconds, and then blacked out.

When he came to, he was lying in some sort of… large warehouse? Alexei was used to small bunkers, or the open sky. Not the strange in-between the Crows seemed to have everywhere. It was dark here, but not so much that Alexei felt inclined to activate his night optics. As he got up, he noticed some sort of instructions on a sticker on the wall, along with the Foundation logo. There was a number of radios sitting on chargers on a table next to the sign; knowing he'd need one in order to communicate with any Skinnies he encountered, he took one and attached it to the belt he'd recovered in Germany. He allowed the Armor to commit the sign to memory before continuing, hardly noticing the yellow line on the floor he'd crossed.

Suddenly, he heard strange music, and a bellowing voice shouting, **"I'VE GOT YOU THIS TIME, MOE THE ESKIMO!!!"**

« **No, there won't be a prequel, sorry.** | **Hub** | **Alexei and the Walrus** »

Footnotes
1. If a genetically-engineered, symbiotic power suit whose bodily structures were primarily sourced from cockroaches and fruit flies could be called "attire."
2. It should be noted that, Oxidists being sapient balls of thermite, "springy" and "young" are very much relative terms to them.
3. "People" again being a relative term, because, you know, sapient thermite.
4. Or one version of it, anyway. And the entirely wrong part of it, too.
5. Zao really didn't anticipate anything besides tennis. He liked tennis.
6. Zao was familiar with the concept of a machine gun in theory, but in a conflict between living tanks and living ultra-high-temperature chemicals they hadn't exactly been common. Still, he understood the intent of the gesture.
7. A quite unnecessary gesture, given the reputation Oxidists had for taking multiple heavy-calibre artillery hits and holding together.
8. Extra desolation, that is, on top of the radioactive, post-nuclear hellscape that was most of the Northern Hemisphere in this world.
9. The end result was frequently exactly what you'd expect from setting several tons of thermite alight.
10. Not that Alexei was very religious, mind you. But he knew a demon when he saw one. Probably.

Alexei and the Walrus

« **Retired, Extremely Dangerous** | **Hub** | **Alexei Belitrov in: How to Beating Up an Endangered Species** »

In case you weren't linked here from the hub or another chunk of the story, and the scroll bar thingy above wasn't a HUGE giveaway, this is part of a series. The collapsible below will give you the long and skinny version of the previous installment(s). I recommend you read those installments instead, but hey, I'm not your boss. Do you, buddy.

> Show the Story So Far TL;DR:
>
> In Retired, Extremely Dangerous, **SCP-2117** stumbled through the multiverse a wee bit while playing tennis and tumbled through **SCP-2273**'s containment cell, picking 2273 up and rendering him unconscious in the process. When he realized his mistake, 2117 stopped their multiversal tumbling and landed the both of them in the world 2273 hails from. 2117 ran off to get help while 2273 was still unconscious; when 2273 came to on his own, he found some weapons, picked them up, and chased after 2117. After a heated (pun intended) exchange, 2273 tried to tackle 2117 as 2117 began tumbling through the multiverse again. This landed 2273 back in the Foundationverse, but inside of **SCP-2424**'s cell.
>
> And that's where we are now. Please enjoy.

Alexei Belitrov was having a strange day. Only a few hours before, he'd been laying in his bunk, reading a Harry Potter novel, when

some sort of… fire… bug… thing… had torn him out of his cell (and out of this version of reality) and dumped him to die in the post-nuclear hellscape he hailed from. Not content with that, however, the creature had decided to try to kill him over the course of the hour or so he'd been stuck there.

Now, instead of simply killing him honorably, it had dumped him in the containment hangar of an **`inane purple walrus`**, leaving Alexei to fight it with no real clue as to what was going on. Luckily, he had thought to arm himself while back home.

The purple beast raised itself up and shouted. Alexei took this as an opportunity to open fire with his machine gun, and to toss a grenade beneath it. Two things happened that Alexei had no way of anticipating: as his bullets struck and the grenade detonated, the creature flashed bright red, and, as the walrus impacted the ground, Alexei was frozen in place.

Having been in a few earthquakes, and in countless artillery volleys, Alexei knew that this was far from a normal reaction to a little bit of shaking. But, try as he might, he couldn't move. As he desperately struggled to move to cover, the monstrosity before him began to shout.

"Full-auto? Grenades?!? Moe, you're using a Game Genie, aren't you?!"

"I— what?" Alexei felt himself able to move again, but, before he could, a cannon inexplicably extruded itself from the beast's mouth and pointed at him. With three dull thuds, a volley of slow-moving shells began to make their way towards Alexei. He successfully dodged the first two, but the third hit him squarely in the chest, exploding on impact.

Now, if anyone had asked Alexei for his opinion, he would have stated that such a large artillery shell would not only have killed anyone within a considerable distance of its detonation, it would have left no corpses as evidence. Fortunately for Alexei, the multiverse was not in agreement with this assessment. Instead, all that happened was Alexei being tossed to the far wall of the hangar.

"HA! That's what you get for cheating, Moe! Cheaters never win!" The creature then turned its back to Alexei, seemingly done with him for the moment.

"Fuck you, my name is not 'Moe,' it's 'Alexei!'" he screamed as he stood up.

The creature didn't seem to hear him. Alexei raised his arm and fired a short burst from his machine gun, but the creature didn't seem to have any reaction. There were no entry wounds, no red flashes. He fired another burst and a round from his shotgun (*"Running low, need to reload the shotgun soon,"* he thought to himself) and listened as the bullets seemed to pass cleanly through the walrus, doing no damage and striking the other side of the hangar. Alexei reached into one of the ammunition packs he'd recovered in Germany and quickly reloaded the shotgun as he approached his enemy. He also noticed that the music had stopped. He couldn't help but ask aloud, "What… are… you? What is this place?"

It was at this point that Alexei recalled the signage he'd seen as he came to in the hangar. *"'One step right, one step left, back and crouch, back to start, jump, and repeat.' Ok. That's how I fight this thing. I can do this."*

He walked up to the yellow line, and the music began again. "Back for more, eh, cheater?!" The creature seemed intent on accusing Alexei of a crime he didn't even understand. The walrus slowly began to turn itself around counterclockwise.

"No, I'm just here to kick your ass!" Alexei had spent most of his time in combat being quiet, to avoid attracting unnecessary enemy attention, but he still had a solid grasp of smack-talk. As the walrus turned around, Alexei sidestepped to prolong its maneuver as much as possible.

"Quit swearing, Moe! This is a kid's game!" The walrus was still at a right angle to Alexei.

"Fuck you!" Alexei took the opportunity to get closer to his enemy; it didn't seem that distance would give the walrus an advantage in this fight, and Alexei wanted every chance he could get to make every

bullet count. "What kind of game has people shooting at each other?!"

"It's just a video game! You should know; you're the player character!" Then, after a moment's consideration, it continued "You know, Moe, I wasn't going to say anything, but you look *UUUUUGLY* today! What did you do, fall in a vat of ugly?" The walrus was nearly turned about now, but Alexei still had a few seconds. He used the opportunity to toss a grenade and fire a short volley of rounds from his shotgun. "OW! Hey, you're still cheating!" The two were facing each other now, and Alexei was ready, if confused at the monster's insistence on being inane.

The cannon erupted from the behemoth's face again. It took aim, and fired twice. Alexei sidestepped to his right and dodged the projectiles easily. "Ha! You call that a weapon?" The creature fired again, three cannonballs moving towards Alexei slowly. He stepped casually back to the left. "THIS," he shouted, holding his left arm (the one bearing the 23-millimeter semi-automatic shotgun) high, "is a weapon!!" He fired two shots then stepped back and crouched. His exceptional peripheral vision let him see the single projectile pass harmlessly over his head. He stepped back into the spot he'd started from and let a ten-round burst from the machine gun loose.

The beast raised itself up again, but Alexei was ready this time. Just before it impacted, Alexei leaped forward, shouting and firing the entire time he was in the air.

The tempo on the music suddenly picked up. The beast looked at Alexei as it righted itself and roared, "NOW I'M MAD!" Three cannonballs made their way towards Alexei, faster than before. He sidestepped, running the sequence through his mind all the while. *"Right, left, back and crouch, back to start, jump. Right, left, back and crouch, back to start, jump."* He was nearly hit by another volley of three as he went over the steps in his mind. He stepped back and crouched, waiting for the next volley to come. He thought he only heard a single shot over the increasingly deafening sound of the music, somehow missing the second shot. As he stood, it detonated directly in front of him, tossing him outside of the yellow ring.

"WOO! I got him! Did you guys see that?! Did you guys see…

that…. Oh yeah." The purple pinniped's enthusiasm for his apparent victory quickly faded when he remembered that the Emperor Penguin and all of his friends had spread out to increase their individual chances of stopping Moe, leaving himself behind.

Meanwhile, Alexei had been rendered unconscious yet another time that day. He was quickly getting tired of it. As he came to, he reached a singular resolve: He was going to punch that damn walrus in its damn nose before the day was over. He stood up, dusted himself off, allowed his Armor to begin reorienting him, and re-located the current source of his trouble. He checked both of his weapons, and charged.

As he charged, Alexei raised both his weapons and fired. As he fired, Alexei began to scream. As he began to scream, the radio Alexei had mounted to his belt began to sound off something more akin to an air raid siren than human screaming.

And as all this happened, Alexei's use of advanced weaponry finally broke the back of the metaphorical camel that was the walrus's patience. Having known better than to have turned his back a second time, he crouched in anticipation, knowing full well that "Moe," the player-character[1] would be back for more soon. And, as Moe came across the threshold, the walrus was ready.

"Cheater cheater, no-game beater," he shouted as the now-familiar-to-the-reader cannon emerged from his mouth, followed by two cannons on his shoulders and a myriad of other Far North- and Navy-inspired weaponry (such as missile launchers and harpoon guns) throughout his (rather large) body. Muffled as his voice was by the cannon, the walrus still managed to say, "You know that Dr. W doesn't like people messing with her games, Moe!"

A massive volley of projectiles made its way towards Alexei, far more rapidly than the easily-dodged cannonballs of only a few moments prior. He barely dodged in time and felt the air vibrate as the projectiles whizzed past. "Fuck you, water pig! I have been through way too much shit to tolerate these games!" Both weapons were trained on the walrus and firing as a grenade sailed towards the monstrosity.

As another deadly volley began, Alexei realized that he couldn't go back to his old strategy, that he'd have to do something new. He began to run to his right, keeping both weapons aimed at his opponent. At that moment, the grenade detonated, the walrus flashed bright red, and the walrus lifted itself up. As it impacted the ground, Alexei bounded forward, barely avoiding the inexplicable paralysis the creature seemed to induce.

As Alexei tucked, rolled, and resumed his circular dance around the creature, the cannon in its mouth receded, allowing it to resume smack-talk. "Why do you look like that today, Moe?! Is it because you're a cheater?! Are all cheaters UGLY?!" The last word was accentuated by another volley of high-speed projectiles.

With every step, Alexei fired more and more bullets into it, only pausing to throw grenades or perform a running reload. The beast let out a cry and Alexei knew, *knew* it was his time to act. He began to run faster, as fast as his legs would carry him, running closer and closer to the beast. When he was within two meters, he rolled under the volley it fired and *leapt*. As he sailed towards the creature's face, he tossed a grenade. As it detonated, Alexei was within centimeters of the creature's face, both barrels firing, right arm swinging home…

Rear-Admiral Walter Warlrus[2] was having a bad… well, existence. It's not easy being the first-level boss of any video game, even less so for a 16-bit children's game. Day in and day out, he'd be attacked by incompetent players who'd still manage to outsmart or outperform him. And it wasn't for a lack of trying. He'd graduated top of his class from the Walrus War Academy and had served well in the Emperor Penguin's Navy, even playing a hand in the Emperor's kidnapping of that bratty little village "princess" and organizing the first line of defense against the player character.

Some of his best pennipeds had given their lives against the player character, this "Moe the Eskimo." And Walter Warlrus would gladly give their (and his) lives again, if he knew there was some sort of chance of beating the player character, if he knew he could win. But every single time, the player character would defeat him, or simply run away. And lately, the players were using hacks or cheats to re-skin the game — the good Admiral could only wonder *why* they'd do

such a thing. Every day (or perhaps it was weeks? Everything seemed to blur together for the Admiral now), Moe the Eskimo would challenge him, wearing a ridiculous orange jumpsuit and moving in a pattern the Admiral simply couldn't wrap his mind around. He found it strange that the player didn't use his weapons and would instead just return the Admiral's own bombs back to him.

Today had been the last straw. Instead of a simple re-skin, the player had hacked Moe into looking like some sort of half-man, half-bug monstrosity and had given him weapons that Ms. W had specifically warned the good Admiral and his fellows about: full-auto and grenades and shotguns. This had been the perfect opportunity to test the weapons Ms. W had given Rear Admiral Walter W. Warlrus to deal with these threats but… it still wasn't good enough.

As the player-character soared through the air, past the Admiral's harpoons and missiles and torpedoes and cannonballs and everything else the Admiral could launch at him, as he soared on a collision course with the Admiral's very nose, all the Admiral could think to himself was, "I should have stayed in art school."

Alexei sat across from his commander, the infamous Colonel Vasily Gorokhov, veteran of the Winter War and the First Great Patriotic War. Between them sat a chessboard, all pieces in their starting positions.

"Sir, why did you bring me here?" At this point in his life, Alexei had been about seven years old, and had already experienced a life that very few would envy. Many of his fellows were in sick bay, having experienced negative reactions to the battle gauntlets that had been fused to their forearms only two weeks before.

"We are going to play a game. It's called 'chess.' Have you ever played chess, *Sergeant* Belitrov?" Alexei only shook his head. "That is a shame. As hard as life was, in the early years of the Revolution, my grandfather still took the time to teach me. He said, 'It is a gentleman's game, a game that every soldier wishing to advance in the ranks should know.' I took his lessons to heart, and now, I'm going to teach you. Tell me, Sergeant, what does this piece look like?" As he spoke, the Colonel selected a knight from the table and

held it by its base.

The boy hesitated a moment before stuttering out, "A horse, sir?"

Gorokhov's focus switched from the piece to Alexei's face, a fierce light in his eyes. "That's right. It looks like a horse, but it's not called a horse. It's called a 'knight.' And it moves like this." As he spoke, he set the piece on a random square on the board and then moved it one square forward and two to its left.

"Before today is over, you'll know every move that every piece can do, and maybe you'll know enough to beat me." The Colonel's attempt at a warm smile only sent shivers down Alexei's spine.

Walter Warlrus sat in a classroom — specifically, the art room. The young penniped was 8 or so, and excited to be learning about Cubism. Around him sat his fellow bosses-in-training, including the hulking Bully Mammoth, the clique jokingly known as "Leopard Seal Team Six," and none other than the Emperor Penguin's son, Prince Penguin.

As they all waited for their instructor, a curmudgeonly Polar Bear by the name of Art Hall, young Walter was flipping through the latest batch of pictures he'd drawn, inspired by the card game he'd seen his classmates playing in the schoolyard. There was just something appealing about the silly monsters in this game, and young Walter was hooked.

Just as his imagination began to drift off, the door opened and the hulking mass of the bespectacled Mr. Hall lurched into the room. As he set his briefcase on the desk he rubbed his eyes then looked at his pupils. "All right kids, who's ready to learn about Pablo Picasso?"

Walter's flipper shot straight into the air. He'd never been more excited in his life.

When Alexei's fist made contact with the purple penniped's nose, the beast had flashed a brighter red than ever before, and then… Vanished? It was gone in a flash of light, and Alexei could only feel

more perplexed than he had when the ridiculous fight had begun.

Instead of falling to the floor, Alexei simply, inexplicably levitated there a moment before slowly being returned to the floor. As he reached the floor, a booming voice surrounded him, shouting yet more inanities to add to the day's collection:

"LEVEL COMPLETE! YOU HAVE EARNED ITEM… MARK I TRENCH KNIFE! SAVING… SAVED! READY FOR NEXT LEVEL? Y SLASH N ?"

Alexei thought for a moment, then decided to risk speaking to the new, booming voice: "Why — ?" Before he could finish his inquiry, the voice spoke again:

"LOADING… DONE! STARTING NEW LEVEL!"

Before Alexei could voice another thought, his surroundings disappeared in a flash.

« **Retired, Extremely Dangerous** | **Hub** | **Alexei Belitrov in: How to Beating Up an Endangered Species** »

Footnotes
1. More like "cheater-character," right? …right?
2. Geddit?Warlrus? No? Dang. Isabelle thought it was funny, at least.

Jude's Bizarre Adventure

(or, The Doped-Up Sadboy Chronicles)

Part 1: Phantom Blunt
Part 2: Bong Rip Tendency
Part 3: Kiefdust Crusaders
Part 4: Shatter Is Unbreakable (Coming Soon!)

Jude's Bizarre Adventure is a tale of adventure and drug use. It also owes its entire existence to Jojo's Bizarre Adventure, but that's besides the point.

Jude's Bizarre Adventure follows Jude Kriyot as he runs from Are We Cool Yet? members sent to kill him after his very *explosive* goodbye.

Jude's Bizarre Adventure is about the founding of Gamers Against Weed and the blossoming friendship between JJ, Esther, and Jude.

Jude's Bizarre Adventure is an attempt to wrestle with the concept of being a reality bender while existing in an unjust world. It is about the times we might let the fire inside destroy everything around us.

Jude's Bizarre Adventure is about a world much like our own, where magic, impressive people like stupid media just as much as you do. Maybe even more. Probably more.

Jude's Bizarre Adventure is about a jobless trans man who murders fourteen people and makes friends with a Jewish lesbian and a grandpa-loving twink, all the while trying to get revenge on a Critic for not being there when

he was murdering people.

Part 5: Golden Vape

Jude_K has entered the chat.
lesbian_gengar: took you a bit to get here, dumbass.
jockjamsvol6: We're ready and rowdy, baby~
Jude_K: Sorry. I didn't know how to do all this? I've never been on this kind of thing.
lesbian_gengar: internet relay chat has been around since 1988 it's not like some new shit.
jockjamsvol6: In one form or another. What did you have trouble with?
Jude_K: I think I went into a ghost room.
jockjamsvol6: What?
lesbian_gengar: what?
Jude_K: Maybe it was my own room. No one was there, but it had this name. I don't know what I did different.
jockjamsvol6: Whatever, dude. First thing on the docket, we gotta do something about that name.
lesbian_gengar: seriously are you some fucking franz kafka protagonist or something mr jude k
Jude_K: It's my name.
jockjamsvol6: I know you know that isn't the point of all this.
lesbian_gengar: don't be so obstinant dude just go with the flow like jj over here.
lesbian_gengar: obstinate*
jockjamsvol6: What about Papa Smoke?
lesbian_gengar: rofl yes be papa smoke
Jude_K is now known as bluntfiend.
bluntfiend: There.
jockjamsvol6: Well, I like it.
lesbian_gengar: a little macabre, all things considered.
jockjamsvol6: It's for us.
bluntfiend: It's to remember what I am.
lesbian_gengar: oh my god you two let's just get on with this. you wanted to set this thing up offocial and write up a charter. so here we are.
lesbian_gengar: official*

jockjamsvol6: After all, you are the leader.
bluntfiend: Okay fine. First rule is I can't be the chat admin. We need someone impartial. I don't want to micromanage like the Critic.
lesbian_gengar: shit like that is so obviously why you're going to be the leader of this whole thing.
jockjamsvol6: I actually know someone.
bluntfiend: That's quick. I'd prefer it if it's not, you know, someone like me.
lesbian_gengar: bisexual?
bluntfiend: Funny, but a super magic, uh, kind of guy. I mean, they don't have to be normal. But I don't want any part of us, uh, getting like, you know.
jockjamsvol6: Did you know you don't have to write down your vocal affectations? But, it's not someone like you at all.
lesbian_gengar: lmao
bluntfiend: Be serious. Tell me about them.
jockjamsvol6: Okay. It's a really cool person to know, honestly. It might be either a robot or a dude who's trolling me and its incredibly great AI type thing. Point is, I think it's really the perfect kind of neutral force to make a good chat admin. Someone to dispense the punishments and all that, if you really don't want to. I've seen it be in so many chats at once, holding concurrent conversations. I think, if we wanna go the direction you were talking about, it could possibly monitor all the chats at once. I don't know its capabilities, but based on things it's done casual-like, I wouldn't be surprised if this is easy-peasy. Even if we grow, like l_g and I think, I think it'll be able to keep up.
bluntfiend: It?
jockjamsvol6: Gender thing.
bluntfiend: Oh okay.
jockjamsvol6: Also, I think a robot thing.
lesbian_gengar: do I know it?
jockjamsvol6: No. You might know its best buddy, Lyris? Its name is Eli. Handle is bones. I don't know why. I think it just thinks bones look cool.
lesbian_gengar: oh shit yeah lyris is a mensch!
bluntfiend: I think it sounds alright. It being, uh, bones. And the situation, too, I guess.
lesbian_gengar: so three of us and the robot? quadrumvirate?
bluntfiend: Don't say it like that. I don't know. I guess it'll have to be

structured, right? I'm just, I guess. Scared of doing all this? I don't want us to turn out bad. You think he and his buds had this discussion? I mean I know he didn't found the group, but you know what I mean, right? The spirit of what I mean?
jockjamsvol6: Yeah.
lesbian_gengar: we won't be like that. the very thrust of our group will be entirely different. we can craft the ethos, which sounds weird like some supervillain shit, but we can be cool is what I mean.
jockjamsvol6: Cool is maybe a poor choice of words here, but I feel it.
lesbian_gengar: we will have rules. it won't just be being cool. it won't be meanness for the sake of meanness.
bluntfiend: We need a set of rules. I don't want to be like, uh, a weird dude directing all of these people. I want to make friends, and they can make friends. God, I'm high, give me a second.
lesbian_gengar: tbh I am too.
jockjamsvol6: Lol, same.
bluntfiend: Back. And nice.
jockjamsvol6: Nice.
lesbian_gengar: what are these rules gonna be?
bluntfiend: No killing.
jockjamsvol6: It doesn't go without saying?
jockjamsvol6: Nevermind.
bluntfiend: Rule number two is always be excellent to each other.
lesbian_gengar: all encompassing and a reference outta nowhere. good rule.
bluntfiend: Rule number three is no weed. But see, that's like a joke rule, because we're having fun sometimes. I mean, my name's bluntfiend. I think they'll know the score.
bluntfiend: That's all the rules, I think? We'll make more if it comes to it. That can be rule four, maybe. Rule five can be no one under eighteen. Not that it'll be a horny chat. That's rule number six. No nsfw. Not for sex.
lesbian_gengar: lmao you're so catholic.
bluntfiend: But I'm thinking, like, you know, this, uh, bones can handle all the little things. But when it comes to big things or maybe important things which I guess would be big so nevermind, we can all have a talk about it.
jockjamsvol6: There's four of us, which means we can't really break a tie, but we'll burn that bridge when we come to it.

lesbian_gengar: there can always be a tiebreaker.
jockjamsvol6: Yeah, just pick someone randomways. Bing bang boom.
bluntfiend: You're not allowed to influence the picking.
jockjamsvol6: What if in mentioning the idea of picking I've already made sure everything I want to come to pass happens? What if I've already won?
jockjamsvol6: Nah. Don't I sound like an evil magic dude, though?
lesbian_gengar: twinks only turn evil when they get old when the first shock of grey hair drives them to insanity and you're barely there yet.
bluntfiend: Is that, uh, all we need to do for now?
lesbian_gengar: that's it. really, whenever you think we're done, we're done. we've had people asking about you for a while now. they're all ready to come, if you're ready.
jockjamsvol6: Like I said, they think you're funny, man. They're into the stories. And I think, like, we got something here. We can do something. Like you said.
bluntfiend: How many people want in the chat?
jockjamsvol6: I got like fifteen.
lesbian_gengar: ten from me.
bluntfiend: Jesus fuck. That's a lot of pressure. I'm scared is all, I guess. I haven't done much since all that then, you know. It's just like. I don't wanna be like that again.
jockjamsvol6: You made a pretty fucking shitty dude go away. A guy who was trying to kill us all. You stopped him. He was like a terrorist. If this were a just world, you'd've gotten a medal.
lesbian_gengar: fucking honestly.
bluntfiend: I'm worried that if I get into a position like this I'll turn like him. I don't wanna be bored. I don't wanna hurt anyone or use them like chess people.
jockjamsvol6: You won't.
lesbian_gengar: we won't let you. we're here for you, dumbass. we love you.
jockjamsvol6: We're your friends, and we believe in you.
lesbian_gengar: besides, don't think like there aren't already a million little brain fucks in your head already I put there that'll rocket your brain out your ears if you turn evil?
bluntfiend: I sincerely hope you do.
lesbian_gengar: don't worry.

jockjamsvol6: Seriously.
bluntfiend: Okay. Okay. Invite them.

Phantom Blunt

The snow was just starting to melt. He would've been back at another semester at school, if it wasn't so horribly uncool to continue one's schooling. Everything was still dead, but it was just starting to come back.

Jude liked that. He always liked the heroism of the seasons, the casual reincarnation of the earth every goddamned year, like fucking clockwork which was funny because it was what they based clockwork on. Probably.

They deserved it. It wasn't a question. He could do it. It wasn't even up for debate.

Doing it would be cathartic. It would never erase what they did to her, but it was justice, wasn't it? An eye for an eye. God would never forgive him. But wouldn't a Lord of all things see his logic, see his reason? They had to die before they did any of that again. The Sculptor had proven himself a monster, and it was Jude's responsibility to end it. It would've been immoral not to do it.

He was sober. Jude never liked it when he was dry, even when things were good. But it was better that way. He needed to be completely on the ball for this. And not the fake on the ball where he got high beforehand and said it was cool and he was still on the ball but really wasn't, but the real shit.

He was going to let himself go. He knew that much. Jude stared out the window of his crappy apartment, overlooking a beautiful, scenic view of a warehouse garage.

Somewhere, deep down, Jude was hoping it would kill him. Jude was hoping one of them would have it in them to do it.

They didn't. Even if they had time to prepare. He'd always been the best at the ol' razzle dazzle.

The art show was nice enough that one could almost forget that it was a showcase for a rapist and a murderer. It seemed so normal. Wine. Awkward boys hobnobbing with people worth more than anyone they'd ever known times seven. Close to innocence. So close.

The artist was the Sculptor. Real good title, right? Definitely broke the mold with that one. Jude didn't realize it, but he'd been waiting until now to make his move, as it were. He held a glass of white wine in his hand and stared out.

The cool art shows were rarely much different than a normal art show. Certainly, there was magic, but why fuck up a perfectly good format? It was a time to network, to get paid, to look at new things that were beautiful or horrifying or both. But wasn't it usually horrifying at the cool shows? Sure, he had seen some beautiful things. Even from the Sculptor.

But making one beautiful thing couldn't take away the horrifying things.

Jude had a migraine. Jude always had a migraine. Jude wondered if the source of all of his magic was a wild sense of dysphoria and a perpetual headache. Even in this body he had made himself, a body he had wrought from his own flesh and blood, he still wondered if it was his. If he deserved it. If it wouldn't just crumble underneath all of his stress. And he'd revert. Last known saved data. A thirteen year old girl in this pit of tigers.

And so many of them were men. Most of the crowd, really. He only counted one woman. A socialite. Probably. He couldn't place her age. He didn't want to.

They made the statue, and no one thought it was a big deal. The Sculptor sculpted **`the statue`**, and women were hurt. Were they so far away from themselves they couldn't see the terror in their art? Jude wondered if he was having a panic attack.

He did not give them a speech. The executioner and judge did not let them know their crimes.

Instead, he slipped into himself. Cold overtook him, and heat came out.

Everyone had a cellphone. Even in 2008. Maybe they weren't as fantastic. Maybe everyone wasn't hooked up to the internet. But they all had them.

And there were so many electrical outlets in a place as big as the one they were in. Light fixtures. A refrigerator. Air conditioning. So many things ran on electricity. Jude always thought people ignored the small bits of magic in life. Like electricity. How the fuck did that work?

It always astounded Jude, the things that he could put his mind to when he was angry.

He tore their bodies apart. Bit by bit. Electrons. Protons. He didn't know from science. What he knew was that it hurt. They screamed electric, buzzing in the air. The crackling smell of ozone.

It was all yellow light and screeching. Some of them were pulled through their cellphone's receivers, flip-phones popping on open. A few jammed into electrical outlets, bodies rippling and coursing with visible yellow arcs. It was clean. There was no blood. There was only that smell. And then there was silence.

That was when the **phone calls** started. Hundreds in the tri-state area. He could hear them all ringing. Cellphones and landlines, powered on and off. Dead batteries sprang to life. And the heat ground them out. Meat at a butcher's shop. Nothing but noise. Didn't it sound like screaming? Being pulled apart, being pulled through, until even their atoms sizzled off into energy.

In the middle of a now empty art gallery, covered in buzzing cellphones and warm clothes, the Roller fell to the ground. Jude wept.

The Critic hadn't been there. Of course he wasn't. He wished the old fuck would've been there. He had to settle with cronies.

Fourteen people. Judging by the shoes, the cellphones, and the feeling in his gut that he had just done something he could never undo. Thirteen of them mattered. One was unlucky. He wondered what she had been like. Mary, mother of God. A Magdalene. He cried again, wiped a tear from his eye.

Saul made thirteen. And Matthias replaced Judas. And wasn't that him? He had named himself after the patron saint of hopeless cases. But wasn't Jude so close to Judas? But who had he betrayed?

“God.” Me.

In the field of clothes, he found the Sculptor's glasses. Bloodless. He reached down and picked up the pants he had been wearing. Underwear still inside. Gross. He pulled a bag out from the pants pocket. Fantastic.

The one good thing about the bastard was that he was always holding. Dirt weed. But it was weed, and he was sober.

In the pile of clothes, he crossed his legs beneath himself and rolled a blunt. As he lit the end with the green BIC, Jude knew that he was going to Hell when he died.

It had been on the news. The janitors had cleaned it up. No one else would've done that. They were saying it was a warehouse fire. There was nothing about the phone calls. He wondered if they would be able to connect the two. If they were good as everyone said, they'd probably put seven and seven together. Or thirteen and one.

Fourteen. The number buzzed in his head. Lives. Extinguished. Jude would have been able to bring them back, maybe. If he hadn't been so thorough. If he hadn't taken all the life and vitality and spark out of them like bud in a vaporizer.

It made sense to lay low. Greece. Athens. It drew him like some infernal magnet inside of him. He had betrayed God. Greece made sense. Theseus killed the Minotaur at Jericho, and the walls came a-tumblin' down. Wasn't that how it went?

Jude Kriyot was never very good at laying low. And in Athens, he decided he was going to do something. Art. He had never been too into the art end of the cool kids. He wrote. He enforced. He was one of the Critic's little minions, sometimes, when bad things needed to be done. But, there was something about the city that inspired him.

And he hoped the Critic would hear of it. And he hoped the old bastard would have a heart attack before Jude could leave the city.

Sometimes, Jude wished he could remember making the art piece. Sometimes, Jude wished he still had that creative spark. He only remembered bits and pieces. He remembered the coins. He remembered crying. He remembered the men in ice.

Theseus took the thread and got himself out of the labyrinth, but he was sucked in by it and spat out. Cold, clear glass. Walls that were too white. How stupid. They couldn't see magic. They didn't know gold if it came out of their own ass.

The **art piece** had gotten him caught by the janitors. He had thought they were a myth. And he had provided enough trouble that they stooped down to clear it all up. Twice in two weeks. Maybe it was a record. But, seeing their inner-workings was a trip. Jude stepped out of the airplane, shaking his head from side-to-side in a vain attempt at getting webbing out from his ears. For someone like him, for someone so magic, a little bit of memory-loser wasn't going to work. It just made everything a bit strange. Like permanent deja-vu. It wouldn't last long. He knew it, because he thought it. And when he thought something about his body, it always came true.

They had arranged his ticket back home, and he played complacent and empty. The comedown made him want to get high. So high. What was it they called it? A Class-B? Maybe a Class-Z could get you fucked up. He should've asked for one. Janitors wouldn't know gold if it was coming out of their ass.

It had been two weeks since he had a taste of it. Which, to him, was an eternity. He felt his body gurgling in irritation. He had snapped at a waitress, a sin worse than the murders maybe. Irritation. He

couldn't sleep. But he didn't want to sleep. Not if he couldn't go to a beautiful dreamless world of darkness. Or whatever.

In the airport, he stopped at a Starbucks. It was expensive, but usually people didn't notice that the serial numbers on a bill all ending in the same three digits. Kind of stupid, but Jude's magic was particular. The weed number just popped in sometimes, at the weirdest parts. He ordered an iced coffee. Black. No ice.

Head down, eyes ringed with crust. His fingernails were filthy, uncut. Jude hadn't shaved, and his facial hair was an embarrassment. Patches missing, here and there. But why bother with self-care when you were going to burn for eternity? So he sat alone, drinking his black coffee.

Jude was so lost in his thoughts that he didn't notice someone sitting at his table until they spoke.

“Hey. Buddy. You dropped this.” And the person placed a green lighter on the table. The safety yanked off, to make it light faster and smoother.

“Thanks.” He took it from the guy, took a sip of his coffee and said, “It's just a lighter, though.”

“Yeah, but I saw it. And I felt like grabbing it. And I felt like giving it to you. And I've learned that when I get a notion, it's best to do it right then. Like talking to you. It feels good. It feels like I'm supposed to. What's your name?”

“Jude.” This dude was weird as hell. “I'm not into anonymous sex.”

“I'm JJ. And don't worry. I'm not trying to fuck you.” A pause and he pointed at the lighter, “Nothing's coincidence. Look at the tar at the bottom of the lighter. You use it to pack down your bowl, don't you? Not a joint man, are we?” A pause. “I bet you want to smoke weed, don't you? I just got a call from the girl I'm gonna be staying with. She told me her ex left a shitload of weed in her apartment. Couldn't've been an amicable parting, huh? Where's your luggage? We can get a cab.”

Jude stared at this weirdo. JJ. He smelled nice. Showered. Unlike Jude, who had forgotten what a shower was in his haze. Dark hair. Bright eyes. He was cute. Small. Cupid's bow lips. Like a cherub. Cherubim, seraphim, thrones, yadda yadda. Maybe it was fate?

“Yeah, uh, I guess.” Jude's head felt okay. It felt like swimming. Thickness. It was the air. Was it destiny, or was he just hungry for more pot? “I don't have a suitcase.”

“Great. Come on. You'll love it.”

JJ extended his hand to Jude.

The girl was short and plump, with dark frizzy hair and eyes ringed with sleep. Her mouth was a little crooked. Her teeth had a gap, but they were clean, white. Which was wild to Jude, all things considered. He could barely remember that toothpaste existed on most days. But hers? Pristine. Jude tried to remember the last time he took a shower when she said, “Dude, are you staring at my teeth?”

“No.”

“What the fuck is your problem?”

“Be cool,” said JJ, his voice cutting in like a lute or something. “He's just weird. So are you. Jude, this is Esther. Esther, this is Jude.”

“So, uh, are you two, you know.”

“What the fuck is that supposed to mean?” Esther poked Jude in the chest. She was shorter than he. By a foot and a half or something, he guessed without really being too certain of the measurement.

“In the airport, he said like. You know. He was staying with you,” said Jude.

“So if a man stays with a woman, that means they're going to fuck? Is that the kinda shit you believe? You smell like an asshole. Anyone ever tell you that?”

“Sometimes.”

“Calm down, lady and gentleman. Why don't we chill? It's a beautiful day outside.” JJ was grinning. None of it concerned him. He had already slid to the kitchen and was making himself something to eat. “On a day like this, it's divine providence to smoke weed. The sky is perfect for it. The air is good, too. But the sky is better.”

Jude turned to the window. It was overcast. Rain fell in tiny, near-freezing droplets. The sky was dark black in the horizon. To the east. Or west. Or really any of them. Jude wasn't a fucking compass. But, he knew what the wind looked like, when it made the trees scatter, when it brought leaves sliding across pavement. The storm was coming closer. It would only get worse.

“Yeah, okay. You better not be fucking him when I get back,” said Esther.

“He doesn't like anonymous sex.”

Esther's laugh was harsh and quick. A singular proclamation of hilarity. She was out of the room before he could say anything else. Jude blushed then shook his head back and forth. Up and down. It felt like his ears were popped, but it was deep in his brain. It was like an uncorked bottle of pop. It was losing all of its fizzle.

“Did you know you can stick your finger in pop to make the foam go down faster?” Jude hadn't moved. His shoes were off. His own smell was starting to get to him, which had to have been a bad sign. He took a bottle of deodorizer (the friend of all stoners) from a table and began spraying himself.

If JJ thought that was weird, he didn't show any sign of it. “Yeah, if you wipe your nose with your finger and you stick it in, it goes down even faster. But you get nose oil in your drink.”

“Yeah.” Jude sat down at the kitchen table. And then he got up and sat on a couch. And then he stood up, walking into the kitchen, lingering. JJ was making a sandwich that Jude tried not to look at. A combination of things he didn't want to think of. Ketchup and pickles and meat and cheese. He tried to avoid looking at the sandwich

when he said, “She hates me, doesn't she?”

“Yeah.”

“Why'd you bring me here then?”

“Because it's a good idea.” He took a bite.

Jude decided to go back to the table, sitting down. The apartment was small. Three rooms. A living room and kitchen barely divided by a counter and those weird overhead cabinets. She had a bathroom, probably. And a bedroom. Three rooms. If you counted the bathroom. And he did.

“She hates everyone,” said JJ. Jude tried not to look at a speck of ketchup on his tooth. He tried not to hurl. “She'll like you as soon as I do something to annoy her. My girl loves a teammate during that kind of thing. It's what always happens.”

“How do you know? Have you done this before?”

“Nope,” said JJ.

Before Jude could question it, Esther was back in, with a bowl and a bag of weed that made Jude salivate visibly.

“I can't find a fucking lighter. I think she took it. Bitch.” She threw the bag on the counter. “Who wants to go to the fucking gas station?”

“I have a lighter.” And he took it out of his pocket and held it out to Esther. She snatched it out of her hand. She didn't say thank you.

As Esther began to break up the weed, in a slow way that, to Jude, showed her as a complete weed novice, she said, “Fucked up that I have to rely on this shit-smelling guy for help when I got a fucking lucky little magic boy in the house.”

“I found it,” said JJ, just as Jude said, “I'm magic, too, you know.”

Esther finally had barely filled up the bowl when she pressed it to her lips and took a short drag, punctuated by a coughing fit that Jude could've counted as a gale if he had a barometer or whatever.

“Don't be a show off. I figure everyone he picks up is. You're not special. I can do shit, too.”

Jude took the bowl next. The smoke filled his lungs. And he let it stay there. He could feel it inside of him. His capillaries took it. His lung opened up like a fucking clamshell. His blood was a dancing little Macarena man, bringing it into his brain and diffusing the numbness like the most beautiful chill. Like sleeping. Like buzzing.

And then, for the first time, Esther smiled. She smiled with all of her teeth. But she caught herself. And frowned. “What can you do anyway, Jude?”

Smoking weed with someone, especially when it was more than two-thirds of the people in the room could handle, was a weird experience. Esther had been on the floor, laughing and giggling. She was nearly passed out. It was a coughing fit that had sparked it, long after she admitted that it had been the first time she had smoked weed.

JJ was calm, but it was clear that not a single thought was going through his head. Jude kept trying to explain how JJ was like the Golden Man from the Philip K. Dick story, but JJ just kept grinning, those beautiful eyes two small slits.

Jude wasn't the best babysitter. It was hard for him. He was usually the one on acid that people were looking out for. Of course, the people who looked out for him were dead. Or wanted him dead. Or were forgetting he ever existed.

As he bent down to get Esther on her feet, the doorbell rang. Without stopping, JJ walked to the door and opened it wide.

“What the fuck is wro—,” said Jude. A spiky tendril emerged from the bag of weed and wrapped around his mouth. It was thorny, tough. It smelled like a weed. A single purple blossom grew from the top of the tendril, that waved in front of his eyes. Bull thistle. Milk thistle. And there were more. They sprung out from the bag. They had no beginning point, just suddenly jetted out from the bud.

The tendrils wrapped across his limbs, pulling him to the counter and plopping him onto a seat. Esther fell forward again, and JJ calmly closed the door after the man at the door stepped inside.

“I could smell you from outside, Jude,” said the man with the emerald hair and eyes like the sea. “Fourteen. That's how many. Fourteen lives. The perfect amount for my Green Fields of France, little man. Video Killed the Radio Star doesn't work if you can't move, does it? I've always told you, my stand is much better than yours. I don't need to be there. I don't need to touch anything. Green Fields of France loves plants and hates all those who murder. And you, Roller, have quite a bit of blood on your hands.”

Esther stood up on shaky feet and said, “What the fuck kind of nerd shit are you talking about, dude?”

“You didn't tell them, Jude? How cute. Your Catholic guilt is what will kill you in the end, you know, Jude. You think a little statue is gonna undo what you did, little guy? You're shit in God's eyes, and the eyes of all that's cool.” And the man smiled at Esther. “Hello, dear. My name is Eric Furey. My old friend Jude here used to know me as The Gardener. I've just come here on behalf of some old friends. For some retribution.”

JJ laughed and sat down next to Jude, spinning on the chair. “You are totally pretending to have a stand, aren't you?”

“What's a stand?” said Esther.

“It's an anime power thing. Like, it's a punch ghost. Except this dude's is super shitty.”

“It is not a shitty stand,” said Eric. The tendrils tightened on Jude. Fourteen. Blood trickled down his shirt, down his legs, and he made a noise that sounded like a moan and a scream. It was kind of both. Jude wiggled against the grip. His hands were lashed tight to his sides. The thorns were horrible. It smelled like cutting the grass. It smelled like falling down in a field while playing contact sports. The fingers of his right hand wiggled. “It is a very useful stand for wetwork, and it's absolutely fucking amazing at what it does. All it needs is a plant, and I can kill the guiltiest son of a bitch in a room.”

“What if there aren't any plants?” JJ said. “What if he doesn't feel guilty?”

“Wait. Did you dye your hair to fit with your, uh, stan?” A pause. Esther giggled. “Dude, those are contacts, aren't they? You don't even fucking have green eyes, do you? And look at his nails. Oh G-d. JJ, look at his fucking fingernails. Green. Oh G-d. I think they sparkle. Do you see that?”

“Are you two even fucking listening to me?” The tendrils pulled Jude to the ground, along with the bag. The weed and the animated thistle fell onto the ground. It gave them better coverage. Better angles, as they spread across the floor, and in turn, spread Jude at a painful angle. “This smelly bastard you brought here is a murderer. A filthy fucking killer. They bite him because of that. They gnash their teeth, because he has spilled blood on Mother Earth. And Mother Earth does not take kindly to being tainted.” To punctuate the moment, the tendrils tightened and twisted Jude's body. His right hand flashed.

Too quickly for Eric to see, who was staring at JJ and Esther. They had finally listened. And he always loved a good audience.

“You mean, Jude? Who did he kill?” JJ's expression was blank. There was curiosity, but there was no longer warmth. Nor was there coldness. It was clinical, interested. Jude would have loved to study it if he wasn't being killed by plants.

“That smelly piece of shit?”

“Fourteen. Thirteen men. One woman. Innocent people. Artists. By all accounts, they didn't see it coming. They couldn't have, of course. But trust me, it's in your best interest for you to let us do this. It's our code.”

“What the fuck?” said Esther.

The moment was perfect. The green lighter flicked to life in his hand. He was the flame. The heat that was everything inside of him and outside of him. It radiated outward. The end of each tendril sizzled, and it slid inward, like a cigarette being pulled by an unseen giant.

Eric's eyes had bugged out before he realized that his body was aflame. And then he was on the ground, rolling. The flame was quick. It scorched the carpet, but it didn't consume him.

As Esther jerked over to the kitchen for the fire extinguisher, the flame went out. Eric was crispy on the ground, gasping for breath, but very much alive.

“They'll send more, Jude.” He coughed. Eric strained to speak, his mouth lipless and charred. “You can't beat all of us.”

Jude coughed, wiping the blood from his mouth. He reached out and picked up an unscorched marijuana bud from the carpet. A single one untouched. He was happy there hadn't been a fifteenth person there. Without thinking, he stuffed it into his pocket. Esther probably wouldn't mind.

“I think we should leave,” said JJ. “All of us.”

“I'm not going anywhere with a fucking murderer. What the fuck, JJ? What the fuck?”

“We're going with him. You have to come.”

Esther didn't argue. Neither did Jude. There was a burnt man moaning. Esther packed away her laptop, her clothes, a few pictures that made Jude's head hurt, and a few books Jude didn't see. Two suitcases. “Where are we going? For how long?”

“It depends on where Jude is going,” said JJ as he left the room, walking down the hallway. The elevator doors opened and closed.

Esther and Jude stared at each other for a long moment. He coughed and sat up. And then stood up.

“Uh, I can take one of your suitcases for you. If you want.”

“I can hold my own fucking stuff,” she said.

Jude took a suitcase, and she didn't say anything. The two of them didn't move.

“I was in Are We Cool Yet?, and I didn't stop something bad. They did something to a woman. My friend. They hurt her. Raped her. Killed her. For an art piece. They made it magic to do this. So I killed them.” Jude coughed, moving from his right foot to his left. “I don't know if I'd undo it. But I killed them. I didn't want them to do it again. He was there. It's okay if you're weirded out. It's pretty fucked up. I should've mentioned, uh, my killer thing. I guess.”

Esther stared at him. She took her suitcase in her hand and walked to the kitchen table. She picked up her car keys as they jingled in her hands. As she passed Eric, she kicked him once in the stomach. She walked out of her apartment, and Jude followed. Together, they walked into the elevator, and the doors closed behind them.

“Did you guys seriously name all your powers after some anime?” Esther finally asked, breaking that long silence.

“Yeah.”

“Who fucking does that?”

“It's more common than you think. You ever hear of Serpent's Hand? I know a lot of their assassins pretend they're super saiyans.”

“And what does your stan do?”

Jude coughed, looked at the ground, and shuffled. The elevator opened, and JJ smiled placidly at them, waving his hand slowly from right to left.

“So, where are we going?” said Jude.

“Fuck you. What's your stan?”

“It's called a stand. With a d. **`Video Killed the Radio Star`**. I manipulate electricity.”

“But you said you can do a lot more than that.”

“They don't know that. Real stand users keep their super powers secret. It's the fucking move. All I do is send some people through cellphone calls and text messages and stuff. Nothing, you know, too

magic. I didn't wanna, uh, be made to do too much."

Esther was quiet for a moment, before she said, "Jude, do you think text messages are sent through the power grid?"

"Yeah. Why? Aren't they?"

JJ burst out laughing, eyes as red as his cheeks. "You're a dumbass, dude. It's a good fucking thing you didn't watch Naruto. Fucking Grand Hokage Jude, who doesn't know what a satellite is."

"If I had a stand, it'd be Joy Divison," said Esther, as they walked out of the apartment complex. Alarms blared down the street as a firetruck and a police car sped down the street.

"You can't," said Jude, staring at the ground. Esther's car was a battered Honda Civic. It was a sickly shade of blue. Jude hated it. "That's been taken."

"You know it's not fucking real, right? Like this is just a fucking game? Your anime isn't real. Like, G-d, Jude. Chill out."

As Esther unlocked the door, JJ opened the back and slid in, leaving Jude and Esther to sit together in the front.

She took the front, and Jude sat in the passenger seat.

"So, do any of you drive."

"I probably could," said JJ.

"No," said Jude.

"Fucking great. Nice. Okay. In a car with children. Where to then?"

Jude shrugged.

JJ said, "Let's get something to eat. I'm fucking starving."

Jude and Esther looked back at JJ at the same time, both tilting their heads in confusion.

"A dude just burnt like crazy in front of you, dude," said Esther, just

as Jude said, “Are you fucking kidding me?”

Esther sighed and turned the key in the ignition. “Can you fucking believe him, dude?”

“No. No, I can't,” said Jude, leaning his cheek against the cold window.

In the back seat, JJ smiled, and he closed his eyes.

Jude's Bizarre Adventure | **Bong Rip Tendency** »

Bong Rip Tendency

Alexander had a way of owning a room from the moment he walked in. So, as the door soundlessly blew off its hinges, Jude just reached down, pulled a rapidly warming beer out from JJ's backpack, and popped the tab. The door wasn't exactly broken, so much as pushed, so didn't it just make sense that Alexander picked it up and pushed it right back in, like a big jigsaw piece?

He was tall. Taller than Jude, certainly. Wide, dark eyes nearly hidden by the unkempt dark hair. Long, nimble fingers uncorked an extremely large jug of red wine. “Cheers,” he said.

Jude and Alexander both drank. Skunked beer and cheap red wine.

Jude tilted back his head, draining the can of beer. Crushed it, dropped it on the hotel room floor. Esther hadn't moved from the bed. Two beds. JJ was in a different room. Of course he was. He always was.

“I really wish you wouldn't,” said Jude.

Alexander spilled wine in a small line across the entry way. “It can't be helped.”

“This is a stand thing, isn't it?” Quiet. More annoyed than scared. Esther drew her legs up onto the bed.

Alexander raised the bottle, gesturing in a wide arc. Red flowed freely. He took a few steps in. An arc across the door to the bathroom. And then he turned. Another splash of wine stained closed white curtains.

“I pour to Mithras. I pour to Zeus, to Perun, to the warriors and the fathers of old.” Alexander held out the bottle, pooling the wine in front of him before taking a sip.

Jude reached into the backpack and pulled out another can of beer. “Don't drink or anything, Esther. That's how Temple of Love gets you.”

“What? Why would I drink right now?"

“In whose name do your pour, Jude? Do you pour for Christ? The Father? The Ghost? Do they share one, or is that three?” said Alexander.

“Just one. You know whose name. Same as it's ever been." Jude flipped the tab with a hiss. He spilled the beer on the carpet and took a long sip. His Adam's apple bobbed up and down. The can fell lifelessly. “You went to Catholic school, too, you know. Same one I did.”

“Someone's going to have to clean this. What the fuck kind of masculine bullshit is this?” Esther's face reddened. She reached out to Jude, to slap some sense into him, before the space between them widened. It stretched like silly putty. “No.”

Marble pillars sprang up from the beds, and the window opened wide and dissipated. The television flew upwards and fanned out until it became everything there was, a sun and a deep blue sky that soon was covered by the austere white roof. The air was heavy. The sunlight slanted through the columns. Ionic. Corinthian. Jude didn't know which. It was still after midnight, of course, and he was still tired. But, Alexander always loved the brightness. He said it gave him energy. The sun and the hawk and the bull.

Jude cracked his knuckles. It was loud enough to reverberate from the columns.

Alexander smiled. He hadn't changed. But didn't his clothes seem a little cleaner? Gilded, almost, in the outlines? Hard to see.

“You know the rules, Jude?” He bit his lower lip. Fidgeted. A momentary glimmer lost before he yawned, took a sip of the jug of wine in his hands.

“Thunderdome rules, right? Then what the fuck is she doing here?”

Jude's eyes narrowed. A cloud covered the sun. The shade was cool.

“A witness. I can smell the monotheism on her, but what is a contest of wills without an audience, Jude? I don't get out of bed for less than an auditorium.” A smile. Wine-stained teeth, too large, too sharp to be human.

The wind picked up and died quicker than it began. The sun was back. Golden orb. If Jude cared to look, which he didn't, he'd probably notice it was a blinding chariot pulled by a beautiful horse. Alexander was always thorough.

And then Esther was screaming. Jude turned. She was in a gleaming, golden cage upon a palanquin. The men that carried her were living statues, every muscle rippling like Bernini. They were marble, of course. Like everything else in the temple. Two had the head of a bull. Two had the head of a hawk.

“So, you're their lapdog, when it all comes down to it? Friendship doesn't mean shit?”

“You killed fourteen of them, Jude. You left the Gardener a walking skin graft.” Alexander took a long drink of wine. The jug was a goblet. Golden. Dazzling gems. An elegant stem.

“I'd do it again if I could.” And then Jude ran at Alexander. All electricity and flame.

Alexander caught the punch in his hand. A marble fist enclosed Jude's, crushing bones with a nice crunch. “I know you think you would, little Jude, but I don't think you have it in you.” And then a knee slammed into Jude's crotch.

His vision went black.

“I'm just saying, I got food poisoning. You didn't. Your, your luck shit doesn't help me if it's going to give me diarrhea.” Jude was pouting. But, then again, wasn't he always pouting?

Esther looked in the rearview mirror. He had his long legs on the

car's seat. Muddy shoes everywhere. At least he had taken a shower. They had to stop to buy him new clothes, on the heels of all that shit. He couldn't just make more clothes. She had asked. And he had said, I'maan hashem, that he could never get the size right. That he always made it so the tags dug into the back of his neck enough to leave a rash.

One got used to that kind of thing when being around Jude Kriyot. The only magical incompetent. A man who could keep the car running miles and miles on fumes but who had trouble eating a single meal without splotches of barbecue sauce on the front of his shirt. Or gravy. Or whatever gross bullshit he shoved down his throat.

And the cracking. Cracked his neck, his knuckles, his toes, and, she swore, his jaw.

“You didn't die, did you? I call that good luck then.” JJ's face was against the window. The point of his nose poking against the glass. Rubbing his gross sweat and oil all over it. He had a seatbelt on. No one else thought it was funny but Esther. “And I found that twenty on the ground when you were pooping. So really, your pain benefited us all in the end.”

“You bought that fucking t-shirt with it.”

“I think me looking beautiful and fierce can keep the whole gang's spirit up.”

“It's hideous.”

“Once again, you're just a jealous bitch.”

“Who buys a fucking shirt at a truck stop?”

“The gorgeous.”

The shirt, truthfully, was hideous. World's Greatest Grandpa in large blue Comic Sans. There was an old man at the bottom, crudely drawn. He was fishing in a boat. He wasn't catching anything. He looked tired. It was three sizes too large.

Esther didn't say anything. She kept her eyes on the road as much as she could. She hated being with men. Especially the two of them. JJ was a good friend of hers, certainly, but she always felt she was expected to mother them. To act as the wise middle ground in their constant little dick wars, or maybe it was just a weird kind of flirting.

“Besides, it's my stand,” said JJ.

“Your stand can't be a fucking shirt. There's no song called that.”

“Mine is.”

“Fuck you.” Jude cracked his neck, leaned forward between Esther and JJ. “If you had a stand it'd be like Safety Dance. Maybe, like, Nothing Bad Ever Happens to Me. The Oingo Boingo thing, you know. Or, like, Wheel in the Sky. I've gotta bunch, dude. You can have a good one.”

“World's Greatest Grandpa gives me the power to fuck hot silver daddies. Big dudes who smoke cigars.” He paused. “Development Potential: A.”

Jude stopped talking, leaned back, and looked out the window. Esther thought the ugliest thing in the world was a grown man pouting. Childishness. Learned helplessness. Jude was probably the kind of man whose mother made his dinner for him until he left home. Probably had her do the laundry until she was all broken and wrinkled. Probably never learned how to work the oven or the stove himself. Probably the kind of kid whose mother cleaned his room for him.

“Don't say bitch,” Esther said without turning to look at JJ. “Demeaning to women. Even if you mean it in the sassy gay way you always do.”

“Sorry, babe.” Pouted just like Jude. All men were the same, weren't they? Not like a woman. Never like a woman.

They'd had the conversation before. They'd have the conversation again. JJ was a man, but the piece of shit was always so serene so soon. A performative sorrow. A learned reaction in all men to make

a woman absorb the brunt of their baggage. It wasn't just the way trouble rolled off his back like water on a duck's ass. It was that he was a man.

“It's okay.” It wasn't. “Just don't do it again.” Men don't change. No matter how hard they tried. He'd do it again.

Her tatty, her dad, her father, Rabbi Kogan, he never changed. Every Shabbat, every time he spoke G-d's words to the congregation. He said such beautiful things. But men forget beauty.

Kh’hob im in d’r erd arayn. As far she was concerned, he was dead and buried.

Her hands bit into the wheel. Wanted to break through it. Wanted to tear it from the steering column and throw it in the street. Fuck to G-d, fuck to Life, fuck to the Stupid Bullshit she had gotten herself into.

“We need to stop,” JJ said suddenly, his voice cutting through the fog like a shofar. “We need to stop. We have to stop. We need to stop. I'm going to open the door. Stop the car. I'm getting out.”

“Fuck. L'maan hashem. Okay, okay.” And then she was pulling into the most nondescript diner she had ever seen. If it was dark outside, she bet most of the letters in the sign would be out. Erma's Diner. Who was Erma? Why couldn't this bitch get some more lightbulbs? The mind boggled.

“Are you hungry?”

“Kind of. We have to stop here.”

Jude grumbled, stretching his long arms and long legs, cracking them like a fucked up daddy longlegs. She wanted to reach back and hit him. And JJ, too. Fuck. Like children. Always a mother. They couldn't even drive. As soon as she parked the car, JJ sprinted out into the diner. Around them were only gigantic trucks. Some with rigs, some without. Wonderful. More men.

“Alright, fine. I could go for something to eat,” Esther said, yanking out the key, opening the door, and leaving Jude stretching and making gross noises in the back seat.

As Jude regained consciousness, he could hear Alexander speaking. The words didn't work in his head. But the tone was unmistakable. Pontification. That's what Jude recognized it as. It was just the way he was. The way he had always been.

“Shut the fuck up,” said Jude. He tried to stand up then fell. He remained on one knee. Panting. It was so hard to be here. So hard to continue existing in the face of this fucking blowhard.

“Rude. Here I am, giving your good friend—what's your name again?” said Alexander just as Esther said, “Shut the fuck up. Oh my G-d.”

“It's Esther,” said Jude, shaking onto his feet again. Didn't fall. The floor was marble. It looked different. The gilded cage was the same. So were the gigantic animal headed statues holding it. Alexander, however, wore a toga and laid out on a triclinium.

“Yeah, beautiful name. Someone in the Old Testament, right?”

“The Tanakh,” Esther corrected, before a single marble arm protruded from the top of the cage and held its hand over her mouth. Its grip looked hard to Jude.

“All monotheism is cut from the same cloth. The same refusal to see the varied power of nature. A simplistic attempt to glean order from a series of wills all clustered and fighting but sometimes together. It's arrogant, really. But I lost my train of thought.” He plucked a grape from a vine that grew, self supporting, to the level of his arm. Alexander took it and popped it into his mouth.

They were the most purple things Jude had ever seen. Anything else that had been purple looked like bullshit in comparison. The apotheosis of purple. The platonic ideal of it. Jude realized he was drooling when he was on his own two feet. Trembling. Anemic. Definitely not a shounen hero. More like a shounen zero.

“What were you boring her about?”

“Oh, yes. I was telling her about our friendship. About my life. I knew

your parents, may the gods hold them in their minds for eternity. You knew my mother." He spilled wine from a goblet that was in his hand for a moment and disappeared the next. "I thought she needed to know. It's good for the audience to have a good idea of the turmoil between the two heroes."

"You're the antagonist."

"I guess I am," said Alexander. He shook his head, sliding off from the couch. "I told her about our childhoods. About high school. About college. Same high school, same college. Recruited by the same art collective slash terrorist group."

"You were the Architect."

"I'm still the Architect. I didn't kill twenty of them."

"Fourteen."

"I rounded it."

"You've always been shit at math." And something like a bolt of lightning shot out from Jude's eyes. An arc of brightness. Like the beam of a flashlight. But it didn't reach Alexander. Jude coughed, sputtered, fell back to the ground.

Alexander sighed, sitting back down. "This is pitiful. I thought you'd give me a battle to sing about for ages to come. You're not even worth spilled wine. What would your father say? What would the father of your fathers say?" He tilted his head, like an animal trying to find the best angle to hear prey. The filigree on the marble columns seemed to breathe. Gold and silver, in and out. A web of shining, delicate lace.

Sometimes, it surprised Jude, the delicacy that Alexander was capable of.

"You're less than a man, Jude. You're not even a woman. You're a sexless, pitiful little thing. You lack all vitality. If your body was your mind, your dick would have shrunk to a pit and fallen off years ago. I don't even—" Alexander began to sputter. He clawed at his neck.

The hand on Esther's mouth fell limply and then retracted back into the top of her cage. She took a breath, but nothing came. Her face reddened, tears of irritation bringing mascara down her cheeks, she screamed. No sound came out.

The sky was dark again. Midnight. The moon hung high and fat. Butter churned. Sweet. Reddened filigree, like molten glass, expanded outward. The marble breathed. Flesh. The marble was skin. The marble was blood. Veins, filled with something strange and dark and unknowable.

“Not a man,” was all that Jude said. He stood tall. He was gold and silver and light.

There was a breeze, and Esther took a long breath. She didn't speak.

“What do you know about being a man, Alex? You fell ass-backwards into it.” Tall as the columns. Or was he the columns? The moon, an eye. The wind, his breath. “I chose manhood. I took it and made it my own. I made my own body, cell by fucking cell. I was never a girl. I never felt like one. And what did you do, Alexander? What did you do? Besides disappoint your mother. Besides acting like a fucking ancient Roman piece of garbage?”

Alexander floated upward. The wind took him. His jeans were dirty. His t-shirt was ill-fitting. Skin, grey. Eyes, closed. Grimacing. Electricity pulsed throughout his body. The Architect's teeth chattered.

“It isn't power. It isn't your gods. It isn't being a father. It's not something as base as reproduction.” His voice was everything. The temple spoke. The Temple of Love was in Jude's name. Dedicated to Jude's god, and world without end. “Manhood isn't so fucking simple. It's, fuck, it's love. I don't know. It's protection. Fuck. It isn't what you are.”

From within him stepped a figure in gold. Muscular, strong. It stepped out from his body, aligned with his and then out like walking through a doorway cast in a spiderweb. One fist was a plus. The other, a minus. It walked like a VHS distortion, scrambled and

chopped. The golden figure, Video Killed the Radio Star, punched Alexander. Once, twice, thrice. A flurry of fists. And it spoke. A great flood, a word repeated. Urere. To burn. And the electricity held him in the air. Like the moon, pale and fat. Blood. The sounds of bones breaking. And finally, one last punch rocketed Alexander to a column. As he slid down it, a smile spread across his face.

“It's beautiful,” he said. “This is what I hoped for, Jude. This is a beautiful will worthy of your god. I feel good now. About all this.” Coughed. Blood. There was a lot of blood.

Esther lit the end of the Djarum black with Jude's green lighter. She moved to place it in her purse, but Jude's hand shot out, plucking it from between her fingers. She grunted, took a long drag. The taste was sweet on her lips.

“I used to smoke cloves, too,” Jude said. “I wanted to impress this cute goth boy.”

Esther's eyebrows rose up then down by way of response.

“I remember coughing. People told me I smoked it like weed. I remember, you know, holding it in like I was gonna get high. Still remember the headrush. Can I have one?”

Esther shrugged and pulled one out from the battered pack. Jude lit the cigarette and handed the lighter to Esther. She put it into her purse before he realized what he was doing. What an idiot.

“Did you?”

“Did I what?”

“Impress your goth boy. Did you?”

Jude shook his head, the smoke spewing out from his nose and mouth like the shittiest smoke bomb. He hacked and coughed, hands on his knees. Eyes redder than they were on pot. But he was licking his lips. And wasn't he smiling? “No. I'm not good at getting boys to like me. Or girls.” He took another drag, this one much shorter, and tried his best to hold it in before seeming to remember it

wasn't weed.

Bisexual, probably, then. Gay and bi men were just as bad as heterosexuals. She took another drag and didn't speak. Wanting to fuck someone different than society intended didn't suddenly make you okay.

Jude sighed, leaning against the diner. JJ was nowhere to be found. They had to wait for him, of course, even though he'd do fine on his own. The question was whether or not they would.

Esther hated the silence. She hated having to hang out alone with Jude. Even with a shower, he had a smell about him. A kind of sweaty desperate scent. Like metal. Like nervous animals.

“Do you ever have trouble believing in God? Like, because of your magic? You're Jewish, right?” He paused, dropped the half-smoked cigarette to the ground and crushed it underneath his sneaker. “Does it, like, interfere?”

“Why would it?” He wasted the cigarette. Esther wanted to reach out and slap the living shit out of him. Why was she plagued by such stupid, thoughtless men? Why was G-d doing this to her, out of all people?

“It's unnatural, isn't it? It's like. I know you guys don't have saints. Ever worry about Hell?”

“We don't have that. Don't even have heaven.”

“Shit, really? Wild.” Jude blinked, in genuine surprise. Leave it to a Christian to be unable to imagine doing good without promise of paradise. “But, like. I have powers greater than a saint. I do miracles like, you know, Jesus. But I'm not. I'm just an idiot with magic.”

“You are an idiot.”

“Yeah, right?” He shrugged. “It just makes me feel like I'm going against order. Like I have too much. I feel like I'm a sin. Like just being is a blasphemy. It feels rude to rely on God, if I'm like this. I don't even think of it unless I need forgiveness. I don't know. I feel like an aberration. I feel like I got too much. Like I'm unaccounted

for.”

Esther snorted. She took another drag before dropping the butt on the ground, crushing it beneath her heel. She pulled out another long, black cigarette, stuck it between her lips, lit it.

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“It's stupid. G-d made you a man. G-d made me a woman. There's no changing that. She also made us both magic. I make mitzvahs, and you make fancy lights dance. It's arrogant to imply there isn't an order to this.” She took another drag. “Like what G-d said to Job, do you know the mating seasons of mountain lions? Do you know, fuck, the weather? There's something going on way beyond you. An order to things you can never see. And your magic, your bullshit, is accounted for. And in the eyes of the one who created all things, it's paltry idiot shit.”

“I guess.” His face was red.

“Yeah. You guess.”

“What about JJ?”

“Some people are just blessed. There's an order to it. It's unfair, and sometimes it's bullshit. You can hold G-d accountable for the bullshit, or you can just do with it what you can.”

As though called, JJ came rounding a corner “Hey, bitches. Waitin' on me?”

“Where were you?” Jude said.

“Powering up my stand.” JJ winked.

“Don't be gross. Where were you?”

“Suckin' off some old dude's dick in his truck.”

“Are you serious? That's unsafe. It's unsanitary. Like, he could be sick. Did he have a condom? Why are you messing with me?” Jude's voice slid to a whisper as a large man came from where JJ

had walked from.

JJ winked at the old man and waved, “Hope to see you again, Burt.”

The large, old man only blushed, nodded, and walked inside.

Jude stared. Wide-eyed. Scandalized. Confused. He shook his head and stalked over to the car. It was locked, but that never mattered for him. He opened the door and slid into the back seat.

“Did you really?” Esther said.

“Nah, I mean. I did hit on him. He's married, though. Said his grandson was gay. Gave me his number. Didn't have the heart to tell him he was too young for me.” JJ stretched and yawned. “We had a great conversation about ham radios, though. Kind of cool.”

“Nice.”

“And on the way back, this dude with a Confederate flag on his dashboard left his door open. So I totally pocketed this.” And there was a wad of bills pulled out from his tight jeans. “That means a hotel tonight. Only two rooms, probably. But since I found it, that means you and Jude have to be bunkmates.”

“I'd rather sleep in a ditch.”

“Don't be a baby. You two need some more time to get used to each other.” And JJ turned to the car. Jude popped the lock, and JJ stepped in. Front seat.

Esther took a puff of her cigarette, staring at the two men in her car. She could think of worse places to be.

Esther stepped out from a cage that no longer existed. The four statues had fallen. She went to Jude and said, “He asked me to protect you with my life when you passed out. I have no fucking clue what's going on.”

The light around Jude faded as he stepped toward his fallen friend. The golden figure stepped into him. He bent down to Alexander, on

his knees, and he said, “What the fuck is your problem, dude?”

Jude wanted to slap Alexander, but he had already done much more.

“You showed me what I was,” said Alexander. His eyes were dim. The blood was red, but it was golden. Ichor. Not gross. Not Lovecraft's ichor. But ichor like a Greek god. It had a sweet smell to it. Jude felt sick.

“What do you mean?”

“A coward. My mother raised me alone. She, you remember her don't you?”

“It's hard to forget her. She was just like you.”

Alexander smiled. His eyes closed. “It is a sin for you to kill. My gods would look the other way. Yours don't. Yet you did what you believed was right. They hurt, and you hurt them. I wanted to see if it was a mistake. Or if your will was that strong. A man protects the weak. My mother taught me that. You protected the weak by killing him. I did nothing. I said nothing as this consumed you. I was content to not act. But inaction is cowardice. Inaction is a transgression against bravery, against the gods, against our fathers and their fathers.”

“It was a mistake.”

“Yes, it was. For you. But your Christ will forgive. I've been led to believe he's all about that.”

The floor was carpeted. The columns were starting to look more like beds.

“You were never going to die,” Alexander said. “There's no world where I defeat you. I knew that it would be so. You're worthy of facing him.”

“Who?”

“The Critic. The one behind all of this. His hands didn't create the

statue, but isn't he just as much a part of it as the Sculptor?" A weak smile. Alex reached out. Hand rested against Jude's cheek for a moment before it fell heavily to his side. "He won't stop. He knows where you are. I know not how. They will know I lost. He'll send another. His Electric Eye sees all."

His breaths were ragged. The punches weren't what did it. His being, his life force, was leaving. Temple of Love only ever left one.

"I deserve to die. My will remains with you. And I will go on before us. I will go to the afterlife of my gods. I will set aside a place for you. And when you finally die, Jude, you will sit beside me. And we will be friends again. And you can tell me what you did. How you saved them. How brave you were in the face of sin."

"What—what if I'm right? About God?" Jude was crying. Silently, of course. Alexander was never one for tears.

"I will storm the gates. And I will petition your Christ to forgive you." A long sigh. "And if he does not, I will descend to the fires of eternity with you."

Alexander smiled. The blood was all red. He was thin. Pale. Ghostly white. His veins were visible. Everything was fading. Clothing like gossamer.

"In whose name did you pour, Jude?"

"My own."

Alexander laughed. A long rattle. "After you're done, go to them. All three. Don't let this ruin it. A relationship with your gods is a wonderful thing, Jude. I am certain they will forgive you. And a man is nothing," Alexander reached out to touch Jude's cheek. "A man is nothing without his beliefs."

And the hand slid from Jude's cheek. It disappeared before it hit the ground.

There was no Alexander. There were no columns. They were inside, and the outside was outside. The hotel room still stunk of wine, but there was no other sign of Alexander.

For a long time, neither Esther nor Jude said a word.

Jude laid out on the ground, face in the carpet. Esther sat upon the bed.

Esther finally stood up from the bed. She bent to the ground. And she hugged Jude. He cried in her arms, and she held him more tightly.

“Maybe, uh, it's not the time to say this, but, uh,” Esther paused. Like she was searching for a script.

“Say whatever,” Jude said.

“I'm sorry if I ever said anything fucked up. About trans people. I, uh, I didn't know.”

“It's okay.” He laughed. “Where did that come from?”

“I don't know,” she said. “Just, meeting you. And hearing all that. I guess if you could be born and assigned, you know, femaleness, and then, well, embrace being a huge dumbass and becoming a man. Like, maybe, I don't know. It's not so innate. Maybe someone born a dude could be a cool girl. I don't know. Is your friend okay?”

“He's gone. I think he's still with me.” A pause. “And thanks.”

Esther stood back up. Jude noticed there was snot all over her shoulder. Most likely his, unless she was doing weird stuff with her nose. “He really liked you.”

“I know.”

“How do you think he's going to petition G-d for your entrance if his will is with you, though?”

Jude laughed, standing on shaky legs. He collapsed onto the bed. “I wanted to ask, too, but I didn't wanna ruin the moment.” It was dark in the room. Lights off. The wine was on his bed, but Jude didn't care.

Esther sat back on her bed, watching him for a moment. “I'll tell JJ

about this in the morning, if you don't think you can.”

But Jude heard nothing. Sleep came more quickly and more mercifully to him than it had in ages.

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Kiefdust Crusaders

“And he's dead?”

The dude was dead as hell, that was for sure. JJ had seen people die in front of him before. It wasn't as hard as he thought it would be to get used to. Or maybe it was the best for him that he got used to things as quickly as possible. Waltzing, traipsing through life. A lucky little ballerina. Shoes as pink as a rose. But the special shoes. Poinsettias. God, he could just see himself now.

He hadn't even had time to use his stand.

JJ bent down, picking up a screwdriver that had fallen from the dead man's coat. He tested it in his hands. A nice heft. Warm, still. The dead man had held it in his hands as he stepped inside. For protection? Why not get a knife? Weird. But it fell out of his hands when he had fallen. And now, JJ decided, it was his. Useful little tool.

But the body. Esther was still in the bathroom. He was pretty sure she was, at least. He hadn't seen her with clothes yet, so she could've been still on her hands and knees trying to find her contact right under his nose. Probably not, though. It probably felt weird to be naked in the same hotel room as a guy who just died. He wrinkled his nose. That was stupid. Like something Jude would say. Too much time with him. Some of the things he said were contagious. The ways he had of putting things. They got into his head.

But the body.

“Yeah, dude. He hit his head bad. He's dead as hell. Did you get me the Diet Coke?” said JJ.

Jude handed him the bottle. JJ had seen it, of course, but he liked to ask him. Jude had a way of forgetting about something even when it

was in his hands. Probably because he was a dumbass. Probably because he had just bought weed behind their hotel room and pretended like he was getting a snack.

He had no reason to lie. But he did. That was just the way people were. And the longer JJ lived among people, the better JJ got at recognizing that the little details that pop out always mean something. Like noticing Jude hadn't brought back anything for himself. Or the smell of weed in the room. Or the weed and the new pipe that bulged in his pocket. Either that, or he was *seriously* packing and had managed to keep a grip on himself around JJ (as if).

But the body.

“He's dead,” said Jude. Like JJ didn't know. Like the massive head wound and the not breathing wasn't the fucking big enough hint. Doobie Hauser M.D., here to set shit straight. He smiled, beside himself. Jude had bent down, pressing the inside of his palm against the dead man's neck. Was it a move he had seen in a movie?

“Knew him? Definitely seemed like one of the stand users. He was, uh, sayin' a lot of shit before he tripped. And died. Lots of talking.”

“Yeah. The Performer.”

“Shitty name.”

“Terrifying stand, though. Achy Breaky Heart. Good thing you guys got him down before he could get you under his spell. You'd've all died. He's got, like, a final boss level stand, if you ask me.” Jude stood up, cracking his back and his neck back into place. Like an old man.

“What does it do then?”

“Being around him makes all your bodily functions voluntary instead of involuntary. Gets smaller and smaller. Even if you can figure out how to get your heart beating, it's real hard to figure out how to do cellular respiration.” He rifled through the dead man's pockets. Jude pulled out the wallet and sat on JJ's bed. He pulled out a few bills

and stuck them in his jean pocket. Then stuck his hand into his shirt. Jude pulled out a folded piece of paper, which he unfolded, stared at, then refolded. JJ cursed himself for forgetting to rob the corpse first.

“That's not a final boss level stand,” Esther said, opening the door and dazzlingly fully-clothed. All obfuscation gone, it was good to see her talking again. “There's no gravitas. Even I know this, idiot.” She had her glasses on, which was good since the bitch turned into Velma Dinkley with her ass up in the air when she couldn't see. Jinkies! What was Yiddish for Jinkies? She'd say that.

“Yeah, it's like. A really good monster of the week stand, I guess. But not big bad. You find your contacts?” JJ shrugged hopping onto the bed next to Jude. He reeked of weed. If he hadn't seen the bulge, the proximity would've given him away. JJ's hands crept up from Jude's knee and then grasped the bag and the pipe in his fist. “Planning on sharing, Papa Smoke?”

Jude blushed. He always blushed. Tongue-tied little Catholic schoolboy. “Stop calling me that. And, uh, yeah. I guess. Can we do it in the car?”

“No,” she said. No hesitation. She was in pajamas. Comfortable. Her hair was wet. Had a shower gone on while he waited for Jude with this dead body for company? “Do it in the bathroom or go outside. Behind the hotel. I'm sure you'll be fine. Actually, please go outside. The fan won't cover up you two giggling all night.”

The poster she had drawn dominated their vision. Right in line of sight from the doorway. A real cancer of cognition. Which was hell for the Performer, of course. Poor guy didn't even get to see what he fell over before his skull cracked and his brain throttled against the cage enough to kill.

“That's cool, but uh,” and Jude coughed. “Am I gonna be able to see naked people again?”

“Naked women. And no. I mean, yes. But not now. Tomorrow. I'll make a little cure for you turds tomorrow. Now let me get to sleep.”

JJ stuffed his hand into Jude's pocket. Suggestive wink, practiced flip, and the bag with the pipe was in his hand. A chillum. One-hitter, almost. Glass. But longer. It was nice. Clear and greenish. It would probably look blue when it was caked with resin. Which, given Jude, it probably would be. Super soon. Ultra soon.

Jude stared ahead. After doing nothing like some weird mannequin, he leaned forward, pressed his palm on the dead man's back. His fingers splayed out like tracing the hand to draw a turkey. He took a breath, and something flowed. And the body gave way to dust and then nothing, clothes and all. After it was done, there wasn't even enough to vacuum.

“That's awesome, Jude. How did you figure out how to do that?”

“Yeah,” he said.

Esther had already gotten under the covers and faced the other direction. She didn't hear when JJ took the keys, all the while keeping up those suggestive winks. It felt right. The car was always the safest place. A parked car. In the dark. Who would see them? And the smoke that filled the small, dark place. Anticipation ran through his body like a weird orgasm tremor.

Was this providence, or did the weed really smell that good?

It didn't matter. He clutched the keys to his chest. Jude would be nervous, sure. He didn't like to fuck with Esther or her wishes. But, if the boy liked anything, it was to be in a small, dark place filled with marijuana smoke.

The note was simple. Jude could recite it from memory, which wasn't too impressive since he had only first read it moments before. Clumsy fingers yanked it from his jeans pocket. Folded the same way the Performer had kept it in his shirt. Jude showed it to JJ in the dark car. Only lit by a purple lighter.

Hey Jude. Don't make it **bad**.

Take this **sad** song and make it better!!!

:)

Come and see my electric eye.

And then an address. Some directions, even, all written in blue ballpoint pen. The handwriting was legible, but it was clear the writer was more used to writing in cursive. JJ assumed it had been written by the Performer.

Jude wasn't sure. The note was perfumed. He had pointed it out between sucking on the bowl, taking greedy gulping hits, multiple, before even passing it, that the Performer didn't like to wear scented anything. But the Critic did.

Jude said the smell made him think of bad things, so JJ said that they should cover up the smell with good weed. And they did.

The afternoon after their binge, and the car still reeked of high-quality marijuana. Jude, despite having taken a shower nearly an hour ago, still had a kind of off, sweaty smell about him. A very male scent. He smelled older than he was. Like he was working. Esther was fresh, as always. Clean, scrubbed pink. Sure, she was pissed beyond belief that they had smoked pot in the car, but Jude's discovery got her anger down to baseline levels.

“He thought he was gonna kill you, you know,” said Jude. “Like the two of you. Both.”

Esther frowned. She almost turned from the wheel. Her favorite thing to do was to just stare at Jude until he shriveled. Instead, she looked through the rear-view mirror, all the terror of a Midwestern mother driving cross-country to grandma's for Christmas or something wholesome like that. “What do you mean?”

“He knew I was gone.”

“Electric Eye is watching you. There's nothing you can do about it,” JJ said. He rubbed his hand against the seatbelt, up and down. The texture, each individual thread hard and stiff to hold, made that feeling run down his spine.

“Then, something about an explosion. I know the song. But what I'm saying is, how much does this thing know? How do you think it's watching us?”

“Big television screen,” Esther said. “A bug. There were crazy cockroaches in the last two places we stayed. It's a bug power. Bug type.”

Jude frowned, splayed in the back. “I think he wants me to see something.”

His long, weird body stretched out and almost over, taking up more of the backseat than he thought possible. It'd suck if they had to get nasty back there, he thought. Jude was too big. Not even, like, dirt-ways. There was something ungainly about him. A young sasquatch. A beardless Santa Claus, but. Young. Gallumphing.

“Who?” said Esther

“The Critic.”

Esther slid her hand to the console and put on her sunglasses. She pulled down the sun visor. Sunlight poured in through the windshield. Another frown. JJ snickered. Too goth for all this.

“I'm coming. In case you wanted to know,” said Esther, staring ahead. Hard to read without the sunglasses. “You can't tell me I can't know. Weirdo tried to kill me with some pervert Billy Ray Cyrus shit. I did some drawing before you woke up. Great work. Got a migraine, you know. But great work.”

“But you didn't reverse the nudity spell?” JJ flipped down his sun visor, sliding the plastic and staring into his reflection. He slid his hand on his forehead, pushing his hair up. No blemishes. No acne. Good, good. The sweat never did good things to his complexion. And he liked to keep pretty. Luckily, he only ever rarely sweat. But even good luck couldn't fix Esther's broken AC. Or move the sun.

“I had better ideas. And who knows when your fucking providence bullshit makes you knock my contacts out of my hands and all over the floor.”

“You were invisible. Not my fault.”

“Only because you have a weird look whenever you see people naked.”

“It's not my fault.”

“It kind of is. You look too hard. You're a fucked up dude, JJ.” Esther smiled. “G-d, you think this sun is going to fucking move or is this a stand?”

JJ waited. But Jude didn't correct her. It was a stand already. The Sun. The boy was too quiet. He was high, sure, but not that high.

“You don't always have to be naked. Nobody else has to be naked to put on and take off their make-up and shit. It's a weird move. I think you're the weird one.” JJ ran his fingers up and down the seatbelt hard enough to make a noise that zigzagged down through the core of his being.

Esther smirked, turned up the radio. Loud. Bad sound quality, but at least it drowned out most of the horrible sounds the car had started to make. A CD. She had been playing a lot of The Cure. He wondered if she was trying to think of a stand name for herself. JJ toed at the CD holder, one of those zipper up multi-holders.

JJ fidgeted, rearranged the screwdriver in his pocket, and leaned against the window. It was still The Cure. JJ liked them, sure, but not as much as Esther. It wasn't providence so much as a desire for something different. He would've even taken Siouxsie and the Banshees, maybe. He drummed his fingers on his thigh.

“Can I pick the next album?” JJ said. He flipped the sun visor to look at Jude.

Jude was staring into the air. Not reading. Not looking at his phone. Just breathing. His expression didn't change. His eyebrows were raised upward, lips pressed tightly together into a line. His gaze was unfocused. Not out the window, looking at the door handle. Nibbling on the inside of his lips.

“We're almost there.” She didn't look over. “And this one isn't over

yet.”

The road went on before them. JJ never paid much attention when Esther drove. He only rarely paid attention to the direction he was going. North and south didn't mean shit on the dancefloor, right? There were trees. They had gotten denser. The directions started to pipe in from the GPS a bit more regularly, so she turned down the sound.

The car turned down a gravel road. Left, right, right, left. Too many turns, and then, the car stopped in front of a rusted gate. Claustrophobic, lecherous branches reached down and scraped the roof. The engine settled noisily. The wood was quiet.

The place was big, for one. An old place. Crumbling. A palatial mansion. Like something out of Faulker. The columns crumbled, but the windows were intact. They were dark. Opaque. JJ wondered if they painted over the glass. But it looked like plastic. Kind of like plastic. Hard.

“Freddy Kreuger lives here.”

Three stories. It probably was beautiful when it was kept up. Weather-beaten, colorless wood untouched by graffiti. The windows weren't knocked out. Not a single one. Point one for them being covered in steel or something. Going into a weird fortress made out of a shitty, ugly old house should've been the last thing the motion of the rotation of all that was should take him.

But wasn't it? The tremor, again, and it felt so good to look at it. JJ knew he had to get out of the car. He knew he had to go inside. He wanted to.

“He lives in dreams, idiot,” said Esther. “Shut up.” And she stopped the car in front of the gate.

They were quiet for a moment. Jude was the first to sit up, open the door, and step out of the car. Esther and JJ followed.

JJ lagged behind as they walked to the large porch and the front door. The house loomed above, and providence sang within him.

Sometimes, it listened. Even if it didn't, he would have gone. He watched Jude twist the knob. Muscles tensed. Jude was sweating, more than usual.

Inside was surprisingly cool. It smelled clean. No dust. Jude stepped in, then Esther.

JJ stepped through the threshold, and there was a crunch beneath his feet. He lifted up his shoe. Dead bug. Filled with what looked like pus. It probably wasn't pus. Maybe it had been green? But damn, it was huge. JJ dragged his foot across the carpet, staring down at the streak. Shell. Lots of shell. But mostly that white liquid.

The chandelier hung low above them. Cobwebs formed a living mesh over the great, elegant light fixture. Like a mummy. Two stairways at the end of the room curved to meet each other at the second floor. There were too many doors. Paintings that were stained beyond recognition hung upon the walls. A moldy tapestry here and there. A broken vase. But it felt warm. The air hummed around him.

Esther screamed. Sharp, shrill.

JJ tilted his head.

The entrance slammed shut behind them.

There were hundreds of them, maybe thousands. They slid along the walls, out from every crevice, out from behind paintings, from unseen corners. From the broken vase. All the size of a half-dollar. Green beetles. Leaf green. Weed green. And they chittered, chirruped. Spherical like robotic. But they weren't, were they? Robots didn't bleed pus. He couldn't see their legs, could barely make out their heads. Twitching, long antennae.

But JJ only smiled.

“Oh shit,” said Jude. “Shit, shit. Jitterbug Stay calm.”

Esther put her hands over her mouth. The flashcards covered in scribbles wouldn't work on bugs probably, JJ thought.

“Don't touch them,” said Jude.

Then, from speakers all around their heads, the Breeder spoke.

The Breeder hated having to listen to it. Electric Eye spoke constantly. Its voice was raspy, low. It never stopped. Didn't help much to keep it lubricated, either. The thing sucked up anything like it was cacti. He sucked the tip of his right index finger. Then his middle finger. Then the other two on the other hand. The tips of his digits were wrinkled. They no longer tasted salty.

The thing still gave good news, though. He leaned back in his chair. A bug scuttled across his torso and slid around his face, stopping on his glasses. Left lens. Its antennae waved in the air, a conductor of a complex symphony. Or maybe it was more like sempahore?

“Mary, Mother of God, forgive all us sinners, or, I mean, tell God for me that I'm really sorry and I'm sorry in their name, too. Not in an offensive way. I guess. They don't need my help. They're good and they're so good to me and stay chill, stay chill.” Electric Eye croaked each word as though it were unfamiliar with the tongue. “Don't wanna see and can't help but see, and going blind in the face of it. Turned toward god and the pillar of salt, but turned toward the mansion. Don't trip. Too high. Moony. Head in the sky.”

It was always moving, but he tried his best to ignore that. They were there. Of course, he had known that, since that thing never shut up, but it was great to see the little ones getting so nervous. It scuttled along his body, and the Breeder let it. He sucked on his right pinky, then his left.

“Too many, to be or not. Like a walnut. Thanks for the boots. I bought them. Sales clerk, sales clerk with brown hair and bright blue eyes. Cute. JJ. Not the bugs. Crunch. Still. Quiet. Where?”

Its mad dashes slowed, as it sensed no worry from its father. The bug slid down the Breeder's ankle and down through a vent in the floor.

The Breeder pressed the button and pressed his lips against the

microphone. The sensation, up and down, of his lips against the rigid plastic made him want to moan. But he reined himself in, and he spoke to the Murderer and his Sex Fiends.

“Hey, Jude. Fucked up you didn't die.” His nose was crushed against the microphone, which probably didn't do much for his sound quality. But it felt too good. “I know you're feelin' a little nervous down there. Do the babies bother ya? You can keep dancing, but I think the fire burns hot.”

A pause, his finger depressed the button, and he turned to Electric Eye.

“A pervert. Like a muffled stupid son of a bitch, and they creepy creeping creepily creep. JJ. Esther. Okay. Two. Okay. Sounds like a siren, screech a cheap. Reepicheep. Fell down a waterfall? Into God?”

“Shut up for a second. Initiate Dance Commander.”

The thing snapped back then forward. It said, “What is your command?”

“Stand by.” And the Breeder swiveled in his chair once, twice. His finger pressed down on the button, and he said, “You're an idiot for coming. This isn't an anime. Sometimes, you get two stands. And Electric Eye, Jude, has the Dance Commander.” Button depressed. “Dance Commander, cancel all movement.”

“Movement canceled.”

“Sweet.” Button pressed. “Jude, Jude, Jude. You're gettin' real nervy, aren't you? When you fall down that waterfall and see God, I want you to know that he's gonna send you to Hell. And he's gonna make you watch him send those two to Hell, too.” A cackle, shrill, and then he said, without bothering to depress the button, “Dance Commander, fucking fire at will.”

“Engaged.”

Jude wasn't himself. Not even close.

His jaw was shut. But those eyes danced in fear. Right, left. Esther, then JJ. Esther, then JJ. And after that cackle, the muffled voice said, “Dance Commander, fucking fire at will.” Then, Jude lifted his hand.

Electricity crackled between his fingers in a fragile webbing. It rose up on the back of his hand, then down his wrist, up his arm until it rose and over took his chest, spreading to the next arm in a reverse fashion. He held his hand out toward JJ, and a column of blue-white electricity flowed, like water, from Jude's right hand.

Dust flew in the air. The carpet around Jude crackled with static fuzz, following the lazy back and forth movement of his left hand. It rose, and the blue light curled like a snake then lashed out like a whip toward Esther.

JJ smiled. The dancer clung to him. Pale. He imagined it was pale. Long limbs, intertwined with his. A passionate tango. An ever-waltz. A forever, ever mambo. And the providence whispered, but mostly, it was quiet and smiled and breathed. The oldest thing, the oldest thing there ever was, but it loved him, didn't it?

It felt like dancing when he dipped down and then fell forward, bringing Esther screaming onto a pile of bugs that burst against her back and his side like little pimples.

The bugs that had lived began to crawl over Esther and JJ. Esther screamed, covered her mouth, but then she screamed again, before biting down on her hand.

The bugs crawled along her skin, stopping occasionally to press down and burn her in a perfect circle, like a nickel. And they continued to do so. Rapidly. She shook her hand and stood up, before JJ reached up and pulled her down, as electricity whizzed above their heads.

“You should probably strip,” JJ said.

Esther who had been doing breathing exercises reached out to JJ but then stopped short. She sighed and flipped her top over her head. She immediately fell from his view. But most importantly, both

of Jude's hands focused on JJ.

Two bolts, once, twice, and then JJ frolicked, jumping on the banister and climbing upwards and sliding through the doorway. The banister fell behind him, crumbled and burnt and scorched by electrical discharge. The rhythm pulsed and beat within him like a second heart. The providence pressed its mouth against its ear, and it felt almost like a kiss.

There were bugs everywhere. They crawled and scampered, but they didn't seem anxious. They ignored JJ. Cooler heads always prevailed. And they fed on fear. They fed on discomfort. They turned the heat up when things got nervous, but JJ had never been nervous in his entire life. Not for his own life, at least. Never for his own.

The thing that loved him brought him to the left. Then the right. Long hallways. Little accouterments. It wasn't exactly homey. But it smelled lived in. Every so often JJ noted a fast food burger wrapper. Always a different place.

And then, he stopped in front of a door. Identical to all the others. But it pulled him toward the wood until the heat and tension threatened to burst out like a kind of lust or a kind of fire that wanted to take it all in and take it all out.

The Breeder said, “Progress report.”

“In-progress. One has disappeared, and one has escaped.”

“What?”

“Disappeared.”

The Breeder gritted his teeth and stood up. He reached out to Electric Eye, and his long fingers encircled her throat. He throttled its head to the front, and to the back. The blindfold momentarily slid down its face, but he pushed it back up. The thing freaked out when it could see.

Its face reddened, and it fought against the confines of the

straitjacket.

The Breeder depressed his grip, and he said, “Find them and kill them. If you weren't his daughter, I'd take the life out of you. You piece of shit GPS bitch.”

As he spoke, the door opened. The bugs skittered, and the Breeder's head swung to the noise. In the doorway, stood one of them. One of the Sex Fiends. He grinned, spread across his bearded face. The area around his mouth, wet with drool. The Breeder looked down at the little Sex Fiend. He breathed in, then out, shallow, broken with laughter.

“Mr. Lucky, right?” said the Breeder. A bead of sweat fell down his forehead. “That's gettin' me pretty fuckin' scared, dude. Real fuckin' terrified.” Giggling, and the bugs converged upon their father as one living thing. They encircled him, pressing their bodies against his skin. Like a weird armor. They left room for his face as he spoke. “And don't worry about your buds. When Electric Eye stops babbling all of Jude's stupid bullshit, it's pretty great at controlling them. Idiot never even questioned why the Critic wanted a lock of his hair. Poor, poor stupid Jude and that soon-to-be dead fat girl. But that leaves me. And luckily for me, I'm the Bomb. Sub-ability.”

The Breeder winked. The air went wavy. As JJ crossed the room, the microphone near the Breeder burst into flame.

JJ wondered what was with this guy and Electric Six. The heat cranked up, and he reached into his pocket. As he drew closer, his skin blistered. The dancer held on, pulling him toward the door, but JJ persisted. Strained against it.

No longer a dancer but a jealous lover. He calmed it, as best he could. He sent it the idea in his head, and it grumbled.

It no longer mattered, however. As the heat turned up, JJ slashed out with the screwdriver into the Breeder's neck. Immediately, the bugs fell to the ground, some on their back, and they scurried into corners, confused like little dogs.

The Breeder fell to his knees, blood gurgling from his lips. He looked at JJ, eyes flashing confused and angry.

“Shh, shh. Your first mistake was thinking I'd ever be afraid.” JJ's sunburnt lips crackled into a smile. It hurt. The first bursts of pain he had felt in his memory. JJ bent down to the man, pressing his forehead against his.

The Breeder was sweaty, and life was falling from his eyes as his heart betrayed his body and pumped every bit of blood out of his neck and into JJ's shirt.

“Your second mistake was thinking I'd hesitate in killing you.” JJ kissed the Breeder's forehead, hands on the dying man's temples. It didn't matter if he heard it, but what mattered was saying it. Out loud. “He's an idiot, but I think I love him. Like a brother. Like providence loves me. I don't want anyone to hurt him, dead dude. God, look at all that blood. You can't hear me at all, can you?”

The Breeder's eyelids fluttered, and in JJ's uncaring arms, he died.

“He's good. He tries. He hurt a lot of people, but so have I. He's sorry. And I wish I could be that sorry. I wish people could be that sorry.”

That was when Esther blinked back into JJ's cognition and said, “Dance Commander, disengage. Oh G-d, you poor girl. What did they do to you?” She bent down to the girl, whose chair had broken. She was splayed on the floor, quiet, unmoving, seemingly unfeeling. Esther wrapped the girl in her arms and looked up at JJ.

JJ looked down at her.

“You didn't hear any of that.”

“Sure,” said Esther. “What do we do with the girl?”

“I don't know right now,” said JJ, standing up. His clothes were soaked. The bugs trundled mindlessly in circles with their father dead. Downstairs, JJ assumed, Jude has passed out.

“He's going to find something here. And he's gonna keep going and

find this dude. You're super aware of that, right?”

“Yeah,” said JJ.

“And you're still gonna go with him?”

“Until the end of the world.”

“*Du farkirtst mir di yorn*. Then I am too.” Esther sighed, and she stood up with the small girl. Light. She must have been so light.

Her hair was blonde, and her eyes blue. She couldn't have been more than fourteen. But she was small for her age. Withered. Hungry. And she didn't speak. Her jaw was slack.

“It's the Critic's daughter,” said JJ.

“I heard.” Esther bit her lower lip, and then said, “Let's go see if Jude's okay. Then I guess we gotta get this girl to a hospital. Or something.”

“Maybe then you can reverse the nudity thing?” JJ grinned. As much as he could while covered in a dead man's blood.

“Don't rush me,” she said, looking down at the small, blonde girl. She brushed her hair across her forehead. “G-d, poor thing.”

JJ watched Esther rock the girl until she fell into what seemed like an uneasy sleep. As she walked down the wrecked stairs to find Jude, JJ stood up and began to look through the room. Information, clues, anything. Anything to forget the way his heart beat, just a tad out of sync, when he had seen Jude first pause.

He looked at his arm. A perfect circular burn, inner left wrist.

Sometimes, even the blessed feel nervous, JJ figured.

« Bong Rip Tendency | Jude's Bizarre Adventure | [COMING SOON] Shatter Is Unbreakable »

Kalinin's Proposal: Past and Future

TO: Site Directors LISTSERV; Research Directors LISTSERV; Mobile Task Force Captains LISTSERV; Area Subcommand LISTSERV; Department Heads LISTSERV
FROM: [VERIFIED OVERSEER ACCOUNT]
RE: SCP-001
URGENCY: HIGH

we need all attention on dealing with the current situation now. the first part is to put the rumors to rest and to get you all to focus on what we're doing next. this is the first and last time any of you will see an official transcript of an O5 vote. there will be no questions.

the file for 001 is attached. we declassified it this morning. go out there and keep buying us time.

- O5-[VERIFIED CODE NUMBER]

> RECORD OF DECISION - OVERSEER COUNCIL ACTION #16-47 ("CON-5")
>
> MOTION AS FOLLOWS: PROCEED WITH **CONTINGENCY PLAN 2798-5**, TO DISTRIBUTE MEANS OF EFFECTIVE SUICIDE TO GLOBAL POPULATION IN ORDER TO SPARE ALL INTERESTED CIVILIANS FROM SCP-001
>
> YEA: O5-3, O5-4, O5-7, O5-9, O5-10, O5-11
>
> NAY: O5-2, O5-5, O5-8, O5-13
>
> ABSTAIN: O5-1, O5-6, O5-12
>
> RESULT: MOTION FAILS

harbinger.docx

scp-001.pdf

continued_deliberations.docx

a_night_at_the_movies.pst

STANDARD DREAM REPORT 66-Y 990-1.pdf

After Action Report 2272'.pdf

STANDARD DREAM REPORT 66-Y 990-2.pdf

the_man_at_the_threshold.avi

jaci_and_aurelio.pdf

Harbinger

O5-2 carefully arranged the surgical mask over her face, tugging the disposable fabric this way and that, ensuring that her mouth and nose were covered properly. She bent down and eased off her black pumps, exchanging them for a pair of sterile slippers. A set of gloves and a disposable cap were on the table next to her.

"Is this really the extent of protocol for interacting with a four-hundred-year-old-man?" said the Overseer as she looked down at her new shoes with disgust.

"You're worried about protocol at a time like this?" Dr. Zhang adjusted his glasses as he examined the tablet in his hand.

"A time like this. What could you possibly know about that? You live in a separate world from us. That's exactly what Existential Isolation Facility Beta was designed for." O5-2 tucked her long silver hair under the cap, pushing individual strands away from her forehead and up underneath the protective garment.

"Overseers aren't supposed to be here. Should I even ask why that rule is being waived today?"

"No. You shouldn't." She pulled the latex gloves onto her hands, accentuating the end of her sentence with a tight snap. "And don't."

The Overseer and the Site Director passed the rest of their time preparing in silence. A soft chime and a green icon flashing on the Director's tablet indicated that the subject was ready. Dr. Zhang began to speak. O5-2 spoke instead.

"No recording devices. No one else." O5-2 held her security pass up to the reader on the hermetically sealed door. Latches clicked open as her card was acknowledged, air rushing past them from the positive pressurized antechamber.

She looked one last time at Dr. Zhang. "I was never here. Do you understand?"

The Site Director nodded. O5-2 didn't bother to wait for acknowledgment as she proceeded into the main chamber.

The second door sealed behind her automatically. Before her was a man in a hospital bed, at the center of a mass of tubes, wires and specialized lifts designed to enable movement with the least possible effort. She only knew that this was a man because she had read the file; the person before her was a shriveled husk of cobweb-thin strands of hair and translucent, spotted skin. Machines registered respiration and heartbeat, assuring anyone who cared to listen that this was a living creature.

She sat in the chair placed at the ancient man's side by the research staff. A speaker was wired to the bedside railing next to the man.

"Goodbye, **SCP-411**."

The wasted old man moved his lips, faint noises wheezing out of him, captured by the small microphone next to his mouth, held in place with surgical tape. Several seconds elapsed before a monotone voice emerged from the speaker, reconstructing and interpreting his barely perceptible words.

"You are the first of the quiet times. Some peace and quiet, finally."

O5-2 parsed the response. Not an answer to any questions she might ask. No causality issues yet.

The monotone voice resumed. "Suffering. Cruelty. The currency by which the world is purchased. Everything that you are is a reflection of this. You will remember the true nature of cruelty in time."

She had to be careful now. This sounded like something. She went through the checklist of questions she had prepared, mentally forbidding herself from any desire to deviate from the script. She read aloud the question that she thought fit the answer best.

"What is the price that we will need to pay for this?"

She didn't like the stilted manner of this conversation. O5-2 watched a thin stream of spittle trickle out of the corner of 411's mouth as his lips moved. She waited for the transcription.

"Your kind did not just appear in my path. I recognize your faces. All of my life I have seen faces like yours. Not full of fear, and desperation and hate like the faces of my recent years. But joy. The happiness of untroubled days, illumined by a different star. Your future is clear in my past. You have been, and you will continue to be."

A different star. This was consistent with the data from the newest Determinative Set that had been examined. The nature of how it would occur was murky, as all data from **SCP-2003** were, but the possibility that escape from 001 was an option had been tantalizingly coming into focus for the past several weeks.

There was a future after all.

She started to speak the question to the answer. She was cut off by monotone, clipped laughter from the speaker. Something about it chilled her. She started again.

"411, does humanity exist in your past?" Her feelings of relief collided with the unnatural flow of the conversation. Her elation at being able to believe in another path forward was cut with something that felt like poison inside her. Nothing about this interaction felt right. Many items provided glimpses of the future. All of them distorted those events through the madman lenses of their creators, human and otherwise. The future was forbidden from the central planning process, but O5-2 felt the need to make an exception, given the vote that was before them tomorrow.

The speaker crackled once more, breaking her thoughts. "A barren rock. Home to terrors beyond imagining. It is well that life has fled. It is even better that life for others continues far away from this place."

Well. The next response was an easy one, then. She sighed, annoyed with the rules of this game despite the awful gravity of the situation.

"Is there a future for humanity on Earth?"

That was the last non-pleasantry she had been planning on asking of the decrepit humanoid. Precious little material, but apparently an extended conversation would kill someone of this advanced age. Then they'd all be truly screwed. She decided to wait a few more moments while the time-wasted man gasped words inaudibly in his own slow time. Her vote tomorrow was decided now. She began to formulate the beginnings of the argument she would make to her peers. How would she reconcile-

"The Planet of Hands. This is what we are to speak of. I am from there, you know. As are you, child. You shall know more of it in time. I am glad to be here now instead."

O5-2 sighed. Senility hadn't been mentioned in the file, but it was certainly to be expected from someone who had racked up multiple centuries of life. A brief thought occurred that perhaps 411's other answers should be reconsidered. She banished it quickly. Any chance, no matter how slight, was better than tomorrow's proposal. She focused herself on convincing the others.

"Greetings, prodigal daughter. Unlike me, you'll be home soon." The ancient face on the bed twisted into something resembling a polite smile. Like she had just walked in the room. That was her cue, thankfully.

"Greetings, SCP-411." O5-2 promptly stood up, turned around, and left the chamber.

Continued Deliberations

O5-2 let the e-mail alert fade from her terminal screen without opening it. She already knew that the Foundation had suffered more casualties in the past twenty-four hours than all of the last five years put together. The only thing reading the details would accomplish would be the sapping of her resolve. The path forward was clear. Ensuring a future was worth any price. She wished she could tell each field commander personally, *we're certain about this, just hold the line*. Then again, desperation was on her side. People had a remarkable tenacity in the face of death. Nobody needed to remind anyone of what the consequences of failure were.

The large video monitor on the wall beside her chimed with an incoming videoconference notification. O5-3. She buried her face in her hands. Did she not get her fill of vitriol during the Council vote? Knowing O5-3, it was quite likely. She sat up. Internecine warfare was one of the few ways the Council had to amuse itself in this world. Even now, those habits died hard. Maybe especially now. She motioned at the screen, and O5-3's dark, lined face was on her wall.

"Vote's over, Three. You lost. Does that still make you mad?"

The woman on the screen sighed. "What I am is scared, Two."

It had not yet been a full two days since SCP-2798 had gone down, and the toll had been horrific. There was no way that current operations were sustainable for more than a week. Fear was probably the only reasonable response.

"Telling someone else that you're frightened isn't very therapeutic in our line of work, Three. Fear is contagious. Can I do something for you?"

O5-3 leaned a little closer to the monitor. "You blocked the vote. You cut off our exit."

"Oh, bullshit, there were plenty of us with doubts."

"But none with the certainty of yours. Five and Thirteen were never going to vote for it anyway, but Six and Twelve would have. I talked to them before. I know that you talked them out of it."

"That's still not enough. One was the difference, and even you can't tell me that I can make One bend to anything."

O5-3 sighed again. "Look. That doesn't matter, I guess. It's done, and that's that. But you owe me something, Two."

"Do I?" O5-2 moved closer herself now. "I owe you something for not letting you kill everyone? You're beyond absurd. I'm done with this now."

"Wait. Please. I need to know." O5-3 paused a moment while she forced out the question. "I need to know what you know. I need you to tell me why we didn't just make the worst mistake in the history of the world. The real reason, Two."

O5-2's hand hovered over the red button to end the call. She pulled it back. "I went to the precog items. I peeked."

The revelation washed over O5-3's hard features, her determined upper lip and furrowed brow softening as her face betrayed shock. It was the first time O5-2 had seen her face like that. "You didn't. That can't possibly be-"

"Is it really that hard to believe? With the gun in your own mouth, you're not the least bit curious about how things might turn out if you don't pull the trigger? Yes, I'm aware of the prohibitions. Who cares about that now? Are you going to report me? Requisition a detail to come and detain me in the middle of all of this?"

O5-3 sat in silence. There was no arguing the point. "So what did you see?"

"You know what it's like, Three. Being old. Ideally, you learn to not delude yourself with false hope. Resign yourself. You remember the old Eleven? His obsession with uploading his consciousness, like he could cheat Death? Ridiculous. He was ridiculous…" Two trailed off,

the wild eyes of the former O5-11 haunting her for a moment. "But this…we've always fought to preserve what *is*, Three. We've never thought about what *could be*."

"What do you mean by that?"

"All of the precog items point to a future. I haven't seen how we get to it, but it's not just survival. I saw great spires of glass that pierced the clouds, unspoiled landscapes, great flocks of birds passing through cityscapes built into mountaintops. I've seen people who don't fear sickness and death. No wars, no poverty." She grew more animated. "All of the anomalies under our control that can tell us anything have all showed me this place. That it exists. *Someone* survives to make it there."

O5-3 looked skeptical. "That's a very different place than the one we're seeing now."

"It's a different planet. We know that much."

"Do you think that we're going to be able to mount a space colonization mission when we can't even keep ourselves alive right now?"

"No. Probably not," said O5-2. "But at some point, someone does. And I want to give whoever that is the chance to do that. Don't you see? There is a *point* to all of this, now. There is an end goal for humanity, more than just living another night. Our children will have a chance not just to live, but to live in peace. Isn't that worth continuing on?"

"That seems very ideal, doesn't it," said O5-3. "Almost like it's designed to stay our hand."

"What reason do I have to make this up? And it was useless as a tool to influence the Council. If I had brought this up during the vote, I very well *would* have been detained, then."

"Hm. You do seem to believe it." O5-3 frowned. "You know that these…things, they can be very untrustworthy."

"One or two, maybe they come up with the same deception," said

O5-2. "All of them? Vanishingly unlikely. Some of these things are kept in separate *realities*. No, this is all pointing to something, and I believe it is true. Or rather, I believe in it enough to keep going for the chance to make it real."

O5-3 was silent for a moment. She swallowed. "You know that we've already had two activations of **SCP-089**? In two days?"

O5-2 took a moment. "No. I did not know that. And really, I would prefer not to know things like that." She went on. "Nothing we're doing now is anything that we haven't been called upon to do before. It's harder. But it's the same thing. We've always tried to preserve some sort of future. And now that we've got proof of it, we can't stop now."

"Proof," said O5-3 quietly. "God, I hope you know what you're doing, Two."

"Just help me hold things together. Until we can't do it anymore, so that whoever it is that gets us out of here and away from whatever the hell it is that's hunting us can do their duty." O5-2 fought hard, and the tears stayed in her eyes; she would not let them flow.

O5-3, impossibly weary, looking sick and unwell, every one of her sixty-eight years on display, nodded barely. She ended the call, and O5-2 was left looking at her own reflection in the dark glass of the monitor. She studied her own face for a moment. She had more hope than Three did, but for all of that, she looked just as heartsick. Just as scared.

I hope I know what I'm doing too.

O5-2 opened the message from Asian Subcommand, and read the latest developments. More of the same.

A Night at the Movies

TO: O5-7
FROM: **`Pendergast, William`**
RE: Planetary Survey Data - Relevant
URGENCY: HIGH

Sir,

The latest data from Khevtuul 5 is in. We have two possible exoplanets that are theoretically suited for human life. In addition to being candidates for an eventual colonization effort, the preponderance of Goldilocks Zone planets points to an increased likelihood that an alternative site for human civilization can at some point in the future be established.

It is also worth noting that our probes continue to find no sign of HEs, or any extraterrestrial life for that matter. If I may express a personal opinion, I find this surprising. Nevertheless, the longer we go without contact, frankly, the better.

This seems to lend further credence to the human survival hypothesis. Consider releasing some of this information to help build morale among the operatives. They could use it.

SIGNED

General William Pendergast
Lead, Project Heimdall

TO: Pendergast, William
FROM: O5-7
RE: re: Planetary Survey Data - Relevant
URGENCY: HIGH

General,

Appreciate your latest message. It looks like Two may be right after all. That's something, at least, while we're dealing with 001.

Couple of things to remember as you look out there. We're beginning to believe that 001 resides somewhere out in physical space. Not like you needed any reminders, but look out for anything that might fit the description. That includes communications. It might try to talk to us again.

The other thing you should know is that I was the one back in '54 that got the message from it. That message hasn't been declassified yet but you're likely to be the first that gets any other messages. So you should know.

Some stuff that isn't in the file. Whatever it is, knows about the Foundation, because the message came straight to me. And that's because I was the man in charge of finding out what was behind the spike in anomalous activity. It's very familiar with us, General. And it knew enough about me to know I was a movie buff.

It left me directions to some place out in the desert. Not so far that I couldn't get there in a few hours. So it knew where I lived. I drove out with a team in some jeeps, and in the middle of nowhere, there was a movie house. And I mean the middle of nowhere. No roads, no human habitation. There in a washed out gully was the movie house I'd gone to as a little boy. We were a little more wild in those days, and so I told my boys to wait while I went inside.

It speaks to us in performance. It likes it better that way. It could just tell us whatever it wants, really. But this is one more way to mind fuck us, I think. Anyway. Nice and air conditioned inside. Colder than hell. Soon as I sat down, the lights dimmed, and it showed me a movie. Not

like any movie I'd ever seen, but it was most certainly a movie.

The title was "Planet of Hands," in English. It didn't make a whole lot of sense. There wasn't a story, as such. More like a disjointed series of images. Some stuff was real famous and I recognized it immediately. A lot of military footage, scenes of large battles, aftermaths of bombing campaigns, stuff like that. I recognized Stalingrad from the news reels, and there were some scenes of what I assume was the Battle of Passchendaele. I didn't realize there were movies of that.

Mixed in with that, though, were other things. Some were filmed scenes, same quality as the other stuff, of what had to have been other events from history. Mass starvations, a volcano eruption or two, villages of Indians being run through by Spanish conquistadors. Not very subtle.

Then the scenes of the Sites started. Still shots of buildings and facilities, all of which I knew to be ours. Pretty clear message for us there. Are you with me so far? Strange stuff, but nothing we hadn't encountered before. That's when it got bad.

At the next instant, I was no longer in the theater. I was in my seat, but everything around me had changed. Vibrant colors, oversaturated hues like a mad painter had conjured them, they were everywhere. People, things, places, swirling around me, all of it lit up like neon, so that I could see things after I closed my eyes. And it was just a mass of unspeakable acts. All of the rape, murder and pillage from thousands of years had been forced into the room, each act phasing into and out of others, moment to moment. I can't recall any image staying in the room more than a few seconds, except the scene directly in front of me. It was a Turk, I think, clothed in a resplendent robe the color of Technicolor blood, his face barely visible behind an electric blue beard. He was casually forcing people down onto a

sharpened stake embedded in the ground, impaling them, over and over, the victim coming into and out of focus. First an old woman, then a soldier, then a child, back to another woman, each one after the other, bang bang bang. The blood would splash on his robe and he would glow brighter each time. He didn't look angry, or hateful. He looked like this was the most natural thing in the world, pushing someone down onto a stake until it forced its way up through their guts as they screamed until they bled out. If I had focused on another part of the room for any length of time, I think I would have seen similar things.

How long this went on, I can't say. I was a younger man then, and I'm not ashamed to say that at a certain point I just covered my eyes and waited for it to stop. I would probably do the same today. When I finally looked up again, the theater was back around me, the movie still being screened.

What I saw up there was myself, now a part of the movie. I looked obscenely happy. At my age I don't look into a lot of mirrors, but I tell you I have never seen a smile like that on myself, then or now. That, more than anything else, has stayed with me. You should never be surprised by an expression on your own face, it's awful. In the movie, I was boarding something; like a big wooden ark, I suppose. Something out of a kid's book about Noah and Flood, purely symbolic. I watched myself onscreen as I stepped into the ark. Some other people were getting on with me. A woman, a black man, some children, an old Chinaman, all walks of life I guess, no one I recognized. When we were all aboard, the ark lifted into the heavens, sailing through the cosmos. It even had the Buck Rodgers music in the background as the stars whizzed by. The ark came to what I assumed was a planetary system of some kind. A planet, looking a lot like Earth, blue and white and brown and green, at the center of a wild system of moons. I thought of an atom. The ark moved closer and closer to one of the moons,

until it came into view. This wasn't like Earth. This was a darkened nightscape, illuminated by fires dotting the land. All that was visible was soot, smoke, fire, a few rusty scraps of metal twisted into big, man-sized shapes.

You know how the music swells when the movie ends? That was happening as we all disembarked as the ship touched down on the night moon, all of the characters on the screen looking just ecstatic with joy. As I said, disconcerting when you see something like that on your own face. The movie was fading out now, but rather than the "The End" placard appearing like it does, some other text appeared, this time in Russian. "вместо того, чтобы вернуться домой," which we think was intended to be something like "come home instead." Why it started in English and finished in Russian, I have no idea. Maybe some smart-ass commentary on the Cold War. Which would be a point of hope in dealing with this thing. Fallibility.

I have my suspicions as to why this doesn't show up in the main file. That doesn't matter, though. You need context for any future attempts at communication from 001. Now you have it.

Watch yourself.

-7

Standard Dream Report 66-Y 990.1

Document 990-03:
Dr. reported a manifestation of **SCP-990** during a dream occurring seventeen hours ago. Per emergency orders distributed to all personnel regarding possible data on SCP-001, Dr. filed the following report and forwarded it on to the Director of Site-17. The report was subsequently transmitted to Overwatch Command.

FORM 66-Y - STANDARD DREAM REPORT

Personnel: Dr.

Estimated Degree of Recall: 60%

Anomalous Entity Present?: Y

Likelihood of Actionable Intelligence: HIGH

Description: SCP-990 is dressed in the same suit, looking the same as ever. I recognize him immediately. He's the clearest element in any dream he visits. His face changes a lot from dream to dream, but this time it's changing from one moment to the next. I attribute it to the high stress of the past couple days.

He tells me he's going to show me some things. I feel apprehension, and I wonder what burnt out ruin he's going to show me, because that has to be what this is about, right? Our time has come and this is going to be what awaits us. I try to wake up, but I can't do it. And it feels like I'm sitting at the bottom of a pool, and I can't will myself to go to the surface. I don't think I've felt panic like that in a dream before.

990 shakes his head. I can't tell if it's him keeping me here or if it's the dream itself. We've never been able to

figure out what kind of control he has. He says, I'm going to guide you, . But I need something of you first. And he points at my left hand.

It's a dream, right? Even with all of the things we've encountered in this field, I've never seen anyone harmed in that way. I hold out my hand. 990 nods at me, and he takes something out of his coat. It looks like a blade of some kind, it's got a sharp edge at least. Not a knife. More like something from a lawn mower, or some piece of industrial machinery. Before I have time to ask what's going on, he's brought the blade down through my wrist, lightning fast. I look at my hand, terrified, and I'm sure that it's going to fall off, and blood is going to start spraying any second.

But nothing happens.

I stare in shock for a few seconds. The pain is real, but I'm afraid to move my arm because my hand is going to fall off if I do. 990 looks sympathetic, and he tells me that I can move my hand, it's fine. Then he says that we're out of reach of 001 now, and we can talk.

I wiggle my fingers, and they work like they should, but my hand is numb. The feeling is disconcerting. Yet the sensation of panic from earlier is gone. Things feel more like normal now. Except for my hand.

He looks at me. He's got my face now. I get the impression that I am someone else now. Feels like a woman, but I'm not certain. Identity shifts a little as we talk. He tells me that he can give me three revelations before 001 finds him again.

Suddenly we're sitting outside, in the night air, under the stars. There are nine moons in the sky. Varying sizes and phases. I'm in a child's body. He's still me.

He speaks. Holding up one finger. You are not in your proper place, he says. I ask him what that means. Me,

personally? The Foundation? Mankind? He ignores me.

He raises a second finger. O5-2 is absolutely correct, and she is disastrously wrong. The reference to specific Foundation personnel is unnerving. I start to speak, but I can tell he's not going to listen.

The third finger, the third revelation. He leans in close to me. This is the trickiest one, he tells me. He asks me to commit this one to memory above all others, and so I have for this report. This is the last thing he said to me before I woke up.

The primary mover behind what you know as SCP-001, above all other things, is love.

That was when I awoke at my work station.

After Action Report 2272'

> *On 7 November 2016, 0430 Eastern Daylight Time, operatives with Local Mobile Task Force 352-Dalet received reports from Major League Baseball wire services that RHP Ellis Canastota had been assigned to the 40 man roster of the Cincinnati Reds franchise. This event triggered heightened alert notices to be sent to all staff assigned to* ***SCP-2272****. At 0445 Eastern Daylight Time, a second notice was sent through official MLB channels that Ellis Canastota had been called up to join the 25 man major league roster of the Cincinnati Reds. All available personnel, including the entirety of LMTF 352-Dalet, were then mobilized.*

He lay on his side and continued staring at the bright green digits of the alarm clock on the side table. Every few seconds, at irregular intervals, his work phone would buzz, the flood of emails vibrating the half-empty water glass and moving the phone slightly closer to the edge of the table each time. They had sent him home to sleep, and that's what he was going to pretend to do for the next couple of hours, by God.

The clock blinked suddenly to 4:29 AM. *Bzzt bzzt.* The phone continued its shuffle to the edge of the table. They probably thought they were doing everyone a favor when they sent the declassified info around. Like they were letting everyone in on a big secret. Who wouldn't enjoy that? *Bzzt bzzt bzzt.* He certainly hadn't. No one had said anything about mass distribution of cyanide ampules that he had ever heard. There weren't any rumors. He had been blissfully unaware. Before last week, his biggest headache had been the nonstop political advertisements on the car radio. Those were the days.

The clock blinked to 4:30 AM. His phone started a lower, repeated, much more insistent buzzing now. The additional force of the

vibrations carried the phone right off the edge, finally completing its journey to the floor with a thud. The buzzing of the waiting phone call persisted, muffled now by the carpet. He leaned down and groped for the phone, dreading what he knew he would see. He picked it up, the light from the screen hurting his eyes as he looked at it.

"Calling: Regional Director Kate McTiriss."

He shielded his eyes from the light of the phone, trying in vain to dull the throbbing in his head.

"Allred-Smith here."

The Director's voice chirped in his ear. He sat all the way up on his bed. So much for pretending to sleep.

"They're going to call up Canastota? Huh. Well, figured we were due to catch a prime by this point. Okay, what're your orders?"

The voice on the other end of the line provided a laundry list of instructions and available personnel. If the Director was more worried than normal, she didn't show it. Some things were the same, he guessed.

"Got it. I'll go ping the clandestine IT guys to scrub all this. Is the office open yet?"

He tried smoothing a deep crease in his shirt with the palm of his hand. The crease paid him no mind. Nor did his hair as he tried to smooth it back down with his fingers. Whatever. Let someone complain about him looking like he'd slept on a park bench and come into work. He could use some comic relief.

"Because I need something out of there. Just in case."

He put on his shoes and straightened his tie. He grabbed a baseball cap from the dresser to cover his hair. He laughed despite himself.

"Hmm, no, nothing. Yeah, that's what I'm getting. You have a-"

The voice cut him off. He listened intently as he surveyed himself in

the mirror. The cartoon fish on the front of his cap wrapping itself around a baseball bat looked like he meant business.

"Huh. Decommission? That's a new one. No, no. Don't worry boss, we won't hesitate if things get hairy."

The Director hung up. He looked for his car keys. This was probably going to involve more than the IT guys before this was done.

> *At 0521 hours, the MLB official scheduler posted a notice online for a game to be played at noon the same day, between the Cincinnati Reds and the Saint Louis Cardinals, at the Great American Ballpark in central Cincinnati. The starting pitchers were listed as Mike Leake for the Saint Louis Cardinals, and Ellis Canastota for the Cincinnati Reds.*

"What do you mean they're playing a game today? They just finished the goddamn World Series!" Dr. Hanaka barked loud enough to be heard from the front of the bus-sized mobile command center as it sped north on Interstate 75. "It's probably snowing there or something by now."

"Actually, the weather is pretty nice today." Agent Allred-Smith gazed out the window as he balanced the long black case on his knees. "Which is far worse for keeping people out of the stadium."

"Fuck," sighed Dr. Hanaka. "How many tickets were sold before we took the notice down?"

A young woman sitting across from Allred-Smith at a mobile terminal quickly pecked at a keyboard. "17,397 tickets total, ma'am. It's a good thing we got the ESPN piece before they aired it. Pretty novel, an exhibition game right after the Series."

"Seventeen thousand. This is a goddamn disaster." Dr. Hanaka paced to the rear of the command center. "Enriquez, get into the ballpark contracting system. I want our security folks there, and if we can I want concessions done by us too. Everyone in that park who isn't on the field or in the stands should be one of us."

The young logistics officer looked up at Dr. Hanaka from his terminal. "You want us selling hot dogs?"

Dr. Hanaka's eyes flashed behind her glasses. She loomed over the sitting Enriquez. "Hot dogs, beer, licorice, nachos and fucking churros if we can manage it!" She threw her clipboard to the floor. "We've got a breaching anomaly with a paying audience of seventeen thousand goddamn people. You shut the fuck up and do as you're goddamn told, understand?"

Agent Allred-Smith couldn't help but think back to the last time he heard Dr. Hanaka speak, at a seminar on academic peer review a few months ago. He recalled struggling to hear the soft-spoken doctor from the back of the room. He coughed into his fist a couple times to conceal his laughter as the unfortunate Enriquez scrambled to fulfill his orders.

> *LMTF 352-Dalet arrived at the Great American Ballpark in Cincinnati at 1147 hours local time. Given the number of civilians in the vicinity with the specific purpose of attending a baseball game, closing the ballpark was deemed to be unfeasible. By the time doors were opened to spectators, 78% of service personnel within the stadium were comprised of Foundation or Foundation-contracted personnel. Operatives at the scene elected to monitor the ongoing events and determine the next course of action.*

Agent Dunbar stepped into the luxury suite, crammed with wires, monitoring equipment and computer terminals, befitting an improvised command center. He looked out the window. The field below was ready for play, the grass freshly mowed, the infield perfectly manicured, a fresh Reds logo outlined in chalk behind home plate.

"They just posted the lineups ma'am. You're not going to like it."

Dr. Hanaka sighed. "How can there even *be* lineups? We've checked locations on everyone, none of the players from either team are in the area, or aware of the game. What does it matter?"

Agent Dunbar fidgeted slightly. "Canastota is starting at every position."

"Great," said Dr. Hanaka. "More of him."

"For both teams, ma'am."

The room was silent for a moment, all of the members of LMTF 352-Dalet looking to Dr. Hanaka for the next set of orders. She looked down at the game. Cheers went up as what looked like the Cincinnati Reds took the field. She grabbed a set of field binoculars and looked again. Sure enough, every single player was the same smiling, dark-haired young man. Each one's uniform bearing the same number 72 on the back, the name "Canastota" embroidered above.

She looked to the signals technician of the group. "Readings?"

An older man at an especially equipment-laden terminal responded. "Aerial sonar readings are negative. There's no one on the field except the umpires."

"At least he's not officiating his own game. That would be unsporting." Dr. Hanaka put down the binoculars. "Narrative officers! I need disinfo and social media posts out and blanketing the internet within fifteen minutes. This is a publicity stunt. See that it's perceived that way. Be ready to pull it back if things don't go well."

A group of three researchers in the corner of the room immediately pulled out phones and laptops and got to work. Dr. Hanaka moved on.

"Crowd control! Ensure that all of our vendors are fully stocked with Class C's. Don't start distributing unless I give the order."

A man in a police officer's uniform stepped out of the room, already relaying instructions into the walkie-talkie in his hand.

"Memetics! I want every communication coming out of that stadium screened for anomalous influences! Use the new AI we've developed. We don't have time to round up human subjects for observation."

A frazzled-looking woman in the seats by the windows, concern in her eyes, opened her mouth. She looked up at Dr. Hanaka. She closed her mouth and began tapping at a tablet computer.

"And you, Agent Allred-Smith." Dr. Hanaka now loomed over the Agent, reclining in a chair next to the suite refrigerator. "I want you up in the cheap seats with your toy there."

She nodded to the long black case in Agent Allred-Smith's lap. He nodded back. "Your signal?"

"My signal, Agent."

> *Due to ongoing containment efforts coordinated at the scene by LMTF 352-Dalet, spectators at Great American Ballpark were documented to be under the impression that they were watching a non-anomalous game of baseball until approximately 1452 hours local time, coinciding with the middle of the game's seventh inning. At that time, an individual matching all known biometric data of the baseball player Pedro Borbón[1] and identifying themselves as such took the field and was handed a microphone, presumably as part of the traditional singing of "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" during the seventh inning of baseball games. Notable discomfort among assembled spectators was audible as the identity of the speaker became apparent.*

Agent Allred-Smith surveyed the infield through his high-powered scope. Part of SCP-2272 duty was being familiar with baseball, and he knew a dead player when he saw one. He touched his earpiece.

"This is way beyond documented behavior, Doctor. Do I have authorization?"

Dr. Hanaka barked within his ear. "No, god damn it! You have authorization when I say you do!"

"You going to wait until a dead man starts doing…whatever the hell it is dead people do, here?"

"Your apparatus is set up?"

Agent Allred-Smith touched the tripod directly in front of him. "Affirmative, doctor."

"Then you'll be able to react in under five seconds when I give the word. I'd explain how we need to learn all we can, but then I don't need to explain jack shit to you, Agent. You wait for my signal."

"Roger that, Doctor." He leaned back in his seat. The dead man was speaking now, the crowd on their feet in anticipation.

Pedro Borbón, noted multi-inning relief pitcher and deceased member of the Big Red Machine teams of the 1970s, looked skyward as he held the microphone.

"Sport is a wonderful symbol of the human condition. You will be relieved to hear that, much the same way it is in this place, in our perfect society, sport is a sacred pastime."

The crowd was silent.

"Sport is more than competition. Sport creates victors and vanquished. The feeling of triumph cannot exist without the sacrifice of the defeated. You will understand more after we have truly spoken." The dead pitcher, looking every bit the spry athlete of generations ago, spoke with an impassive face. "This place, this game, this creation. This is a fine place for us to speak plainly."

Agent Allred-Smith scanned the crowd for any unusual activity. All in the stadium were still, and perfectly silent. For the first time, the pitcher smiled.

"We have heard a story from your people, many times, I'm sure you're familiar. Of a man asking his friend, returned from the grave, if there is baseball in heaven. Let me tell you, my brothers and sisters, there is baseball in heaven."

The speaker laughed, a high-pitched, screeching thing, not at all matching the expression on his face. Allred-Smith trained the scope on the pitcher's face.

"And today, we can all see together, they have baseball in hell, too."

As he stopped speaking, the house organ came up, the familiar notes of the traditional song of seventh-inning stretches across the country ringing out. Pedro Borbón doffed his cap for the silent audience, and faded away into nothing. The organ continued. No one sang.

> *Communications via social media and personal messages from civilians in attendance of the game increased greatly following the remarks of the unknown entity during the seventh inning. The number of messages, combined with the content indicating what had occurred, necessitated elevated containment protocols. At 1459 hours local time, Doctor Akane Hanaka authorized decommissioning of SCP-2272' and mass deployment of amnestics.*

The precursor agents had been authorized for distribution at the end of the third inning. Every refreshment item served in the ballpark had Part A of a Class C two-part amnestic. Based on field studies and their own observations of the game, the task force chemist assured Dr. Hanaka that the penetration rate was in excess of 90%. More than enough to ensure memory alteration and suggestibility among the "critical mass" threshold of the crowd. Dr. Hanaka nodded, and barked some words into a nearby handset.

A small prop plane, carrying a banner behind it reading "2016 Winter Exhibition" and previously circling the stadium throughout the day, now swooped low over the Great American Ballpark, looking to have just enough altitude to avoid hitting the lights. A great plume of scarlet smoke billowed from the rear of the plane. Part B was being released. The reaction would be powerful enough to allow the narrative team to construct a plausible mass delusion that would hopefully obscure all details of what the crowd had watched here today.

As the plane flew overhead, Agent Allred-Smith adjusted his gas mask and lined up his shot. The camera mounted on the tripod was a delicate, finicky instrument, and the satellite link was proving tricky. Three different observation modalities, including a converted

form of the sonar feed, were needed to achieve the necessary viewpoint in which SCP-2272 would be obliterated. The research seemed to indicate that capturing the image of SCP-2272 in a format which would allow it to be both observed and unobserved would render it unstable as a coherent memeplex. Or something. The reasoning was above his paygrade.

The green indicator light flashed on. He trained the camera on the field, making sure to capture the players on the field, the man waiting on deck, and both dugouts, all the smiling likeness of Ellis Canastota, number 72, right hand pitcher. All visual feeds were in tandem and functioning. He took the shot.

At that moment, the billowing red cloud of smoke descended on him, obscuring the field, the seats, and all of his surroundings. He held the mask tight in place against his face, ensuring that none of the air around him leaked in. The amnestics officer would be pissed if they had to reconstruct his memory.

A wind kicked up from the north, blowing out over the Ohio River and carrying the smoke out over the right field bleachers, like so many fly balls hit before. The view began to return as the smoke dissipated and retreated. Agent Allred-Smith dared a glance down at the field.

Empty. Four dumbstruck umpires were congregated around the pitcher's mound, doubtless discussing whether to call the game before their minds were temporarily thrown into a suggestible torpor. No players on the field, in foul territory, or in the dugouts. Not an Ellis Canastota to be seen.

An image appeared on the camera's viewfinder. Allred-Smith looked closely. The image he had taken, the image that had apparently neutralized this long-running anomalous phenomenon, was not of the playing field of Great American Ball Park. In its place, a black and white team photo showed on the camera's screen, 25 men arranged neatly in rows, wearing uniforms that he recognized as those of the first Cincinnati Redlegs teams. All 25 men bore the exact same smile that he had come to recognize as that of Ellis Canastota.

Unlike a typical team photo, this photo was taken at night, under the stars. Nine moons could be seen in the sky. A sign propped in front of the smiling squadron read "The Past, the Future." All 25 men were holding their arms out in front of them. All 25 men were missing their hands.

Footnotes
1. Pedro Borbón was confirmed deceased in 2012.

Standard Dream Report 66-Y 990.2

Document 990-04:
Per advice of her personal physician, O5-2 took several prescriptions in order to induce sleep in the early hours of 7 November 2016. Upon awaking, O5-2 reported a manifestation of **SCP-990**, the first documented instance in which the anomaly has appeared to an Overseer. Given the nature of the information contained within the dream event, this form is transcribed, and is presented as dictated by O5-2 to , her personal assistant.

FORM 66-Y - STANDARD DREAM REPORT

Personnel: O5-2

Estimated Degree of Recall: 83%

Anomalous Entity Present?: Y

Likelihood of Actionable Intelligence: HIGH

Description: Oh god, this is too big. I've made a horrible mistake. It's just…I have no idea. I didn't know. It's obscene, really. To say these things. I don't know what else to say.

What? I mean, okay, yes. I can get it down. I can think after.

In 1978 I had a child. This is something that's highly discouraged for those in our position for obvious reasons. Who was the father? Don't ever ask me that question again. I'll end your life, I swear it.

I had a child because I needed a bit of the future in my life. Something that would go on. It was a stupid reason to bring life into this world but I am a human. And I do

stupid things.

He was three years old. His name was Gabriel. His name was Gabriel and then he died of a terrible, wasting illness that our best doctors could not treat. He died with my name on his lips and convulsions wracking his little body. Someone reading this file knows how that came to pass. I know it was you.

You're afraid to ask now, but I see it on your face. I'm coming to the point. Gabriel came to me last night. No, damn you, not like a dream about a dead relative or some other silly nonsense. He *came to me*. He brought me to a hill. Atop that hill was 990, crucified, beaten so badly his face wasn't a face at all, his hands missing. His suit was impeccably pressed.

Gabriel smiled up at me, forever three. You think that you'll break down at moments like these, because who hasn't thought about moments like these. No matter how childish. You think that you will weep with joy and gather everything that you've lost in your arms and that things will be okay now. That you didn't make such horrifying mistakes. That you will be forgiven.

When my dead son looked up at me, all that I felt was terror. Terror so great and overwhelming that I thought my heart would stop. I have never known anything like it. I was paralyzed. This was not right. This was not in any way *right*.

Oh God, and then he spoke.

His voice was a man's voice. Worse than that, it was the voice I had *imagined* his voice being if he had grown to be a man. The smallest little fancies, shamefully foolish little hopes that were impossible and weak, and they were on display for this thing that is hunting us.

What's that? Oh. Oh yes. It's hunting us.

He said to me…he said to me…oh God he said to me "I've missed you Mommy" and it was like being shot in the chest. I felt as though a great fist had closed around my head, squeezing the tears out of my face, my grief being wrung out against my will, against my screaming fear.

When I came to my senses, he was still looking at me. He talked more.

This part, this was plainly 001 speaking through the figure in my dream. After this, 990 would echo whatever it said, softly, moaning it from his scarecrow cross. None of us can believe in God but this was surely a blasphemy.

I'm going to try and remember what it said, for all of our sakes.

Okay. Here's what it told me.

You're tempted to think of us as your fathers, your Gods. But we are actually your children. We're not quite your children, because we came before you, but we love you like a child loves its parent. You know what I speak of. You have seen a future, a future that is really a past. And a present. It's our world. It's all that humanity is capable of. We live our days in paradise.

Isn't that what you want for your children? Knowing that while you might suffer, while you might die, your children will see the better days, the sunlight without end? Maybe they won't have to die like you will. And so it is. We do not hurt. We will not suffer. You and the others like you have brought us here. We are the perfect children, of the perfect mothers and fathers.

What no child says of his parents, but what every child thinks, is this: I am glad that I will live to bury these people. I am glad that they suffer on my behalf. I am glad that it is not me who is to die. For many many years,

these were feelings that brought shame. It wasn't until the latest stages of our perfection that we understood. This is a guide. This is order, demonstrated for us by the oldest of societal units.

I need a glass of water. He giggled, like he did when he was an infant, as he finished that part. Oh Jesus. More history. I was raped as a girl. It was a stranger in an alley, and it was the most horrifying experience of my life until my dead son explained our proper place in the cosmos to me. I cannot begin to describe how violating this was except to compare it. It's okay. You can look horrified. I allow it.

Then he came to the heart of it. Here is the rest of what he said.

Parents sacrifice for their children, don't they? Expend every little bit of flesh, will, intellect, everything they have so that their children may live an extra day in the hope of the sunshine that never ends. That's as it *should be.* You will remember.

Many, many years ago, your kind left. We didn't figure out how until several centuries after, but somehow you transmitted yourselves far beyond even our reach. Some among you secretly understood the more forbidden aspects of space and time. You fled.

Must I explain to you how your science is so woefully inadequate? How your knowledge was stolen, and how we whittled away the little bits of it until you convinced yourselves that you just appeared on your little planet, spontaneously? I will return some of your knowledge. You'll remember it, because your society, even so far removed from us, is teaching it to you even now. Crawl towards the beautiful undying place that you know exists, and you find that you turn on each other. Dragging each other back, sabotaging hints of hope. You find that to be a failing, when in actuality it is an inescapable part of our species.

A system can be made perfect. The gossamer webs that connect our minds and our spirits and our souls can be made perfect, free from corruption. But it must be done with the knowledge of suffering. It must be done knowing that others are suffering on your behalf. Why that is, we cannot say. It does not matter. It merely is. Our very souls are in harmony with each other because we know that we lie at the center of nine points of privation and death.

There are nine satellites to our realm. Our realm which you cannot deny is a glory. You've seen it yourself, Mother.

God, he called me Mother.

Your kind left the Planet of Hands many thousands of years ago. It has sat empty, a gap in our perfection, reminding us not of what we are missing, but of the joyous return that our prodigal mothers and fathers will soon make.

There are limits to our abilities. We cannot simply travel to where you have chosen to exile yourselves. We must use more subtle means. Oh how we wish we could take you all in our arms. We have feast days for all of you, at home. One for each of the nine. The Feast of the Planet of Hands has become the greatest event of our year.

We cannot embrace you, lead our beloved forebears back to their home. But we love you. And we love you so much, with all of our hearts and our souls, that we will show you how loved you truly are from across impossible distances beyond light.

I make you this promise. All of you, I make this promise to, from the hearts of all of us at the center of the nine points. You will come back of your own free will. We will not need to show you how, for the knowledge already rests within you. We will not to need to explain why. You have seen the terrors that lurk outside of our protection.

We will merely need to show you who we are. Who you are. Who all of us are.

We will all be so much happier soon. Tomorrow shall be the greatest expression of our love we have ever conducted.

And that was it. This abomination of my flesh explaining the world to me below, the bleeding man on the cross echoing his words above. I awoke screaming thirty minutes ago.

Tell Three I'm sorry.

TO: O5-1
FROM: O5-12
RE: the end
URGENCY: HIGH

I hope this gets through. If you're like me, seeing things on the BBC and the New York Times before getting briefed on them by staff is doing a number on you.

It's over. The only thing left is to tell you what I know.

Two is dead. We only know that because she told us herself. Nice of her to leave a note, I guess. I've established contact with Three, Seven and Thirteen. The rest, who knows. There aren't any protocols for something like this.

The best we can tell is that they put on a performance.

THE MAN AT THE THRESHOLD

Act One - Thirty-Five Years

ACT ONE

SCENE ONE

0943 hours local time - disturbance in the vicinity of Giza Plateau, Egypt. Egyptian military mobilized in response to apparent mass gathering in front of the Great Sphinx, based on initial intelligence of a Muslim Brotherhood action. Embedded media present. Massive information leak of anomalous phenomena.

0947 hours local time - spontaneous, powerful sandstorm encircling

an approximately 100 km radius of the Great Sphinx. A battalion of the Egyptian Army is present to witness the performance. Four humanoids, appearing to be Semitic in appearance and clothed simply in white cloth and sandals, appear spontaneously at the scene as well. Several rounds discharged by soldiers present suggest that the humanoids are non-corporeal. The as-yet unidentified beings take no notice of any actions occurring around them.

PROTEUS
I hope that I'm not being improper when I say that I'm scared.

MELLITA
We're all scared, Proteus. This is the day that our cohort has been preparing for our entire lives.

PROTEUS
Three of us will be chosen. Have we made enough of our time here? Will it comfort us if we are cast outside?

AGUS
Just look at the things we've done together. We've mapped an unknown star system. Wrote a song that made us the heroes of the Summer Convocation. Scaled the Shadow Pass of the Mountain of Ice. I tell you, Proteus, if they cast me out today, I can say that no matter what comes after, it was all worth it.

PROTEUS
I hope to be as brave as you when I enter the chamber.

MONASHIR
All accept what they are given in the Threshold.

MELLITA
How could it be otherwise?

AGUS
How could it be otherwise?

1017 hours local time - sandstorm intensifies briefly, obscuring all vision in the local area, before immediately subsiding. When visibility

is reestablished, no anomalous humanoids are present. However, the Great Sphinx has been removed, replaced with a blue-light holographic projection, in the appearance of the Sphinx and of approximately the same size, with no discernible source. Numerous photographic and videographic records are taken and circulated. Existential threat to consensus reality in progress.

ACT ONE

SCENE TWO

1143 hours local time - darkness falls midday in Tahrir Square in Cairo, Egypt. No evidence of a solar eclipse, cloud cover or any other possible cause of such conditions is apparent. Nine moons appear to be visible in the night sky. Riots begin almost immediately, and messages proclaiming the end times begin to be broadcast over PA systems attached to several local mosques. Images corresponding to the four humanoids appearing at the Great Sphinx are projected via an unknown source onto the side of the Mogamma building, visible to all within the square. Activity stops as sound begins to accompany the images.

THE MAN
This set of four, born on this day thirty-five years past, are you ready to enter?

MELLITA, AGUS, MONASHIR
We are.

PROTEUS
We are.

THE MAN
Do you see, as it has been intended, how even those cast into exile may have a taste of our beautiful world, and how those that remain have shared the shadow of death with those that must take their leave now?

MELLITA, AGUS, MONASHIR
We do.

PROTEUS
We do.

THE MAN
Look then, out at this world. On this day, this is the Threshold. This is the place where human society is made. It is here that the salvation of the few, so great in its perfection, so sacred in its magnificent beauty, is earned by the fate of the many. It is they who will make the ultimate sacrifice, and they who deserve our love and our honor most of all. Do you choose to pass the Threshold, of your own volition?

MELLITA, AGUS, MONASHIR
We do.

PROTEUS
We do.

THE MAN
Mellita Snowfall of the Shadow Peaks, step forward.

MELLITA
I stand ready.

THE MAN
You shall dwell on the Planet of Eyes.

MELLITA
I…I accept my duty.

THE MAN
Agus Skysail, Third Denizen of the Watch Cliffs, you shall be taken to the Planet of Skin.

AGUS
I accept my duty.
(AGUS appears to stumble slightly, close to fainting)

THE MAN
Monashir Violetlight, the Lady of the Tower.

MONASHIR

I stand ready.

THE MAN
You shall remain. Remember always the great love of your departed sisters and brothers, now and forevermore.

MONASHIR
I shall.
(MONASHIR begins to weep)

THE MAN
Proteus Hammersmith the Wayfinder.

PROTEUS
I stand ready.
(PROTEUS trembles)

THE MAN
You are to come to the Planet of Hands.

1232 hours local time - upon concluding with the above dialogue, daylight returns to Tahrir Square. Of the estimated 10,000 people gathered in the square, several thousand spontaneously lose vision, and several hundred appear to be instantaneously flayed alive through unknown means. All other persons present in the square no longer have hands after the conclusion of the anomalous display, instead having completely healed stumps. Regional news networks, in particular Al-Jazeera, begin to run coverage despite attempts at coordinated interference with dissemination of information.

> All nations have put their militaries on high alert, and a few look to have already taken the opportunity to settle a few scores in the confusion. That's the only thing that makes sense now, really. What do they think they're mobilizing against? A way to look like they're doing something, anyway.
>
> The churches, mosques, synagogues, etc. are overflowing. The Abrahamic folks are convinced that judgment is at hand. Everyone else just sort of figures that we're all fucked. The first reports of murder-suicides

are coming in. Not as many as we might have expected, though. People have options. 001 made sure to let them know that.

Act Two - The Traveler Prepares

ACT TWO

SCENE ONE

1521 hours local time - reports emerge from Beijing of the embalmed corpse of Mao Zedong ambulating under its own power from its mausoleum and into Tiananmen Square. Visual confirmation emerges on Xinhua news service outlets several minutes later. An anomalous humanoid projection, similar to that seen in the part of "Proteus" in the Cairo disturbance, appears in the middle of the square alongside the corpse of Mao, which appears to have assumed the role of The Man.

THE MAN
There's no sense in lingering. We all have our appointed places.

PROTEUS
But there's simply no sense in it! Our world is immense, our use of its resources efficient and wise. Surely none of us must live in exile.

THE MAN
Problems of the far future become the problems of tomorrow for a race that has no end to its days.

PROTEUS
There must be a way to manage it. If all women and men live for as long as they care to, we must have no need for births. What purpose the creation of life if it is to suffer?

THE MAN
I have had this duty for a very long time, my friend. These are not new questions. And my answers are not new. Our kind ascended when we understood the true nature of ourselves. We must always be able to create new life. Our minds, subtly interconnected through the air and through the dreamscape, turn dark and destructive when

the act of creation is taken from us.

PROTEUS
What of suffering? What of the cruelty that lives on our nine moons?

THE MAN
Suffering? Yes, there is suffering. It must be so. And we must know of it, taste of it, build our houses upon its foundations. As life preys on life, so does human enterprise need vast inputs of suffering. It binds us together. The knowledge that there are others that cannot have what we have built affects us deeply. It is a cornerstone in our souls. That is something we discovered a very long time ago. It is vital. And it was this discovery that paved the way to Heaven's gate.

THE MAN
But cruelty? No. We do not do these things because we wish to cause pain. We do it for those that remain in the wondrous society that we have built. We have given beauty and truth without end to those that are chosen. If even one person may taste of the infinite good, is that not worth any amount of finite suffering?

PROTEUS
But why must it be I who pays the price?

THE MAN
My friend. Come with me. I shall escort you.

1559 hours local time - upon conclusion of the anomalous occurrence, crowds in Tiananmen Square become highly agitated, tearing apart the corpse of Mao Zedong and resisting an assembled cordon of riot police. Leaders of major world governments have begun issuing statements urging for calm among their populations as scientists struggle to explain the occurrences in Cairo and Beijing. Thousands are reported to have died in civil unrest in population centers throughout the world.

ACT TWO

SCENE TWO

1610 hours local time - the Three Gorges Dam in Hubei Province,

China, spontaneously disappears. The immense volume of water being held back by the dam previously does not move. Within minutes, helicopters operated by local emergency authorities are on the scene. Humanoid projections appear on the vast surface of the wall of water.

PROTEUS
What is this place?

THE MAN
Do you see our planet in the sky, that wondrous blue sphere? You are on the Planet of Hands, my companion.

PROTEUS
I don't understand. It looks like it has been on fire. Buildings, rubble.

THE MAN
There was a time when we merely exiled those whose duty was to come here. They built their own societies, in a fashion. They were driven by what they could not have, their slender hope twisted into a sort of vengeance upon their children at the center of this great constellation. They built great structures, vast ships, terrible weapons. The uprisings happened many, many millennia ago. The last conflict our humanity will ever have to face. Now, it's a simple matter to ensure that this never happens again. No perverse hope to tempt anyone into foolish destruction.

PROTEUS
By taking away our hands.

THE MAN
By taking away your hands. The mindset of a planet of those without hands is the proper one, for all of us.

PROTEUS
Where is everyone?

THE MAN
Come.

1632 hours local time - the waters of the Yangtze River are

released, causing massive flooding, widespread destruction of homes and property, and thousands of deaths along the area of the river's banks. The destruction further inflames instability in the People's Republic of China, and the country's ruling Communist Party is overthrown in a popular uprising within a matter of hours after this event.

> It's all come apart, One. Everything that we've worked for. Crushed in a matter of hours. And the only thing holding them all together, keeping things from being even worse than they are right now, is one idea.
>
> Going home. Wherever home happens to be.

Act Three - To the People of Earth

ACT THREE

SCENE ONE

2301 hours local time - all notable buildings within the Capitol Mall region of Washington D.C. change coloration, from white to red. The Washington Monument emits a bright column of red light, stretching up into the sky and visible from hundreds of miles away. Ten meter-tall holographic projections of several humanoids, similar to those previously depicted, appear directly over the monument's reflecting pool.

PROTEUS
We have traveled many miles.

THE MAN
The Planet of Hands is vast. But look. We have another.

HANDLESS WOMAN
More people? I must be close to the blessed end.

PROTEUS
Who are you?

HANDLESS WOMAN

I no longer have a name. We have no need for such things here.

PROTEUS
Do you remember your home?

HANDLESS WOMAN
This is my home.

PROTEUS
I mean the place you came from, to here.

HANDLESS WOMAN
I remember a time when I wasn't starving. But that was a long time ago. It's difficult to recall.

PROTEUS
Your ribs are showing. Would you like me to find some food for you?

HANDLESS WOMAN
There's nothing to find. This is a place of ash and salt. But the hunger is a blessing. My mind feels clear, my being so light and clean. God speaks to me here. He tells me to lift my stumps to the blue light in the sky, and so I do. And I pray, and I am filled with the knowledge that I am here for a purpose, I am suffused with happiness.

PROTEUS
This place makes you happy?

HANDLESS WOMAN
The last gift of the body before it evaporates is the divine revelation. I live in truth. I live without fear, without doubt. I dwell in the spirit that had made this place. This is a place of ecstasy.
(HANDLESS WOMAN collapses)

THE MAN
And now her time here is at an end. No torments of false hope, no food nor water to sustain her suffering longer than it must. It is but a little sacrifice, when faced with the salvation that it brings.

PROTEUS
How long was she here?

THE MAN
A fortnight.

PROTEUS
She did not seem to be suffering.

THE MAN
The joy of martyrdom obliterates all suffering. It is a secret known only to those of the outer planets, a gift to those who make this sacrifice. No. She is truly transcended.

PROTEUS
I am ready.

2333 hours local time - crowds estimated at approximately 50,000 people have gathered around the Washington Monument to witness the anomalous occurrence. Law enforcement authorities are not present at the scene, having been summoned to contain unrest elsewhere in the Capitol region.

ACT THREE

SCENE TWO

2340 hours local time - a large doorway in the center of the Washington Monument opens. Nothing is visible inside but a faint green light. The holographic projections continue.

THE MAN
Present your hands, Father of Humanity.
(THE MAN holds a ceremonial blade aloft in one hand, a torch in the other)

PROTEUS
I stand ready.
(PROTEUS holds his hands before THE MAN)

THE MAN
Do you accept the gift of sacrifice, for those brethren that shall remain in the light for all of time?
(THE MAN saws at PROTEUS' left wrist)

PROTEUS
I do.
(PROTEUS bleeds profusely)

THE MAN
Do you offer your suffering for the good of the whole, your exile for the benefit of the collective psyche of Humanity?
(THE MAN wrenches PROTEUS' left wrist, snapping bone and tendon, then slicing the remaining ligaments keeping the hand in place)

PROTEUS
I do.
(PROTEUS spurts blood from left wrist)

THE MAN
Do you renounce the unstable reality of the universe outside of this system? Commit yourself to the preservation of sanity within this system of planets?
(THE MAN burns PROTEUS' left stump with the torch, cauterizing the wound)

PROTEUS
I do.
(PROTEUS screams)

THE MAN
With the left hand, you accept your duty. With the right, our duty to you.
(THE MAN cleanly slices off the right hand of PROTEUS in one fluid motion)

PROTEUS
I thank you.
(PROTEUS bleeds profusely)

THE MAN
We, the living, shall keep a society of perfect harmony, perfect justice, perfect beauty. We, the living, shall keep our human natures pure, living in the highest purpose that is possible for our forms. We, the living, shall transform your suffering into the most divine purpose

imaginable.
(THE MAN burns PROTEUS' right stump with the torch, cauterizing the wound)

PROTEUS
I am honored beyond measure.
(PROTEUS screams)

THE MAN
In this holy pact, we shall know love without measure or end. Go forth, Father. Complete your journey.

PROTEUS
I accept my duty.

2359 hours local time - the humanoid projection portraying Proteus enters the doorway within the Washington Monument. Other projections vanish upon its entry. The doorway begins to slowly close. Several spectators from the closest ranks of the crowd rush into the doorway, followed by increasing numbers of onlookers, until an estimated three thousand bystanders enter the monument before the gateway closes. No person entering the monument has been contacted or seen since this event.

> Thirteen asked me if what we worked to preserve was ever natural. What a stupid question. What does it matter if the world we enabled was unnatural? It was better than what waits for us.
>
> The thing in Washington gave people lots of ideas. People have managed to summon a couple more of these gateways in a few places. They're fleeing into them. It's hard to blame them. We've lost any meaningful ability to control anything. The jig is up. The world knows that science is an illusion and certainty is a cruel joke. Why not take the chance? Better a refugee than a corpse. Or worse.
>
> Me? No. I will not. I won't end my life as one of the cattle.
>
> It was a pleasure to serve, One.

-Twelve

Casa de Jacinta / Jacinta de la Casa

Aurelio always rides too fast. I told him as much on the last night I saw him. Do you really need to die in a way that will leave such a mess? It's so unfair to the rest of us that we have to see you like that. His reply was always to hell with you all, I'll be dead, what do I care? Ha ha.

Here he comes on his bike, tearing around the hillside curves as the Ciudad comes into view. He's by himself, and this is worrying me. He's been bringing large crews of the new Barqueros with him lately. Trucks and equipment and tools into the tower. But now? Just him, this time. How many are left? Does it matter? The empty city is cursed, just as much as it's haunted. The new Barqueros crossing the same river as the old ones.

He slides around to a stop in front of the little market, spraying dirt everywhere to the infantile delight of the ever-present Maximo and Ernesto, seated in their pensioner's chairs in front. Why do they find him so funny? Is it because he isn't dead yet? That's something that might be funny to those that grow old, maybe. I wouldn't know. Never got the chance.

Aurelio goes inside, and I already know he's getting his traditional six pack of Quilmes for whenever he visits the Ciudad. The tanned wrecks of old men return to their wizened, ritualistic head shaking and muttering while he goes inside. Maximo and Ernesto sway like two spindly quebracho trees stripped of their leaves, the brief disturbance of Aurelio and his motorcycle giving way again to the wind that always whips through this place. Wind is madness and impermanence and slow grinding destruction. If the planners from the Ministry had thought to ask anyone before they built this city, anyone from the plains could have told them that.

He's coming back out now, already started on the first bottle. He throws one to Maximo and one to Ernesto. I'm troubled. They're not. They start drinking without any questions. You question everything

when you're dead. I miss that; plunging headlong into the next moment of your life without thinking. Not allowed now. I would complain to the management if I could. Aurelio stops a moment before getting back onto his bike.

What do you think, eh? What's going on in the world now?

Ernesto doesn't bother to look up. Same as ever.

Maximo looks at his fellow scarecrow, insulted. His face folds up even more, a scribble of brown lines and wrinkles. Same as ever? You old fool. It's falling apart. Even the goddamn yanquis are shitting themselves.

Eh, they just grew eyes now. It was always there. That's why I told you not to go poking in **`that fucking tower`**, Aurelio. No one listens.

His words make me catch. Oh Ernesto. Not even you knew what was in there.

Aurelio laughs. And when have you ever listened to anyone, eh *cabrón*?

Ernesto scratches his beard and drinks some more. No one listens to anyone. No one pays attention to nothing until it's hurting them. Just the way of the world. The madness really comes from out there. It leaked into the valley below. Dribbling into a puddle down there.

You should come work for me Ernesto. We could use that insight. It's a real growth field, you know. Career advancement, dental care, a receptionist with nice *chichis*. Man like you could have a real future.

Those guys who came with you last time. What kind of future they have?

Seems like even Ernesto has had enough joking around today.

Aurelio finishes his bottle. Same one we all have, Don Ernesto. On a day like all the others, we lie down under the earth.

I never felt closer to you than when you were quoting some idiot poem at a stupid time, Aurelio. You always thought it was so funny, how mad it would make me. I guess it was kind of funny, looking back. It still makes me mad.

He leaves them then, into the heart of the dead city. I watch from my house on the Boulevard of Progress as he winds down the roads to the valley floor, where the living in their wisdom made a tomb for the future. He's going to the tower alone and I am afraid. What will happen when the rest of us pass to the other side of the river? How long will that day be, the day where no one is left and every one of us is alone, forever?

Aurelio cut the engine in front of the concrete block house. Le Corbusier's shoebox, she always called it. A house looking like every other one on the street, except for the two crossed oars painted above the front door. All the Barqueros had a color. Hers was red. As was his.

He kicked his boot at the bike's center stand. The goddamn wind would just blow it over if he used the little kickstand. Bringing its weight to rest atop the stand, he grunted. Getting old, he thought. That's going out of fashion. A howling gust of wind raced down the Boulevard of Progress, cloaked in dried weeds and white dust and whistling by like a man on a train, mocking everything on his side of the tracks. Fucking bullshit place, he thought. I should have done this at the very beginning.

The first of the Barqueros, early in their times their leader, now their Captain, entered the square cement house through a square steel door, little clouds of brown rust spilling out from the hinges to join the dirty wind outside. He stepped into the house. Boarded windows and impregnable walls ensured complete darkness. He closed the door behind him.

He opened his third bottle of Quilmes. The only thing visible was the outline of the door behind him, dusty light filtering into the shape of a wan square. He could not see his hands.

"Deathbed conversions are bullshit." Aurelio addressed the black

interior of the abandoned house. "This is just really bad procrastination. I know you're not there, Jacinta. My mind hasn't changed on that."

God damn you Aurelio. Why did you wait so long*?*

He took a drink, wiping his mustache with a hard brown forearm. "But you're supposed to conclude your affairs when you do stuff like this. So fuck it. I've wanted to do this for a long time. For me."

So what else is new?

"I sent off the newer Barqueros. Told them to go end it in whatever way they saw fit. Dumbass kids from America and Europe and wherever, so hurt when I told them that. As though that isn't the greatest freedom that any of us will have. They aren't bred from the madness, though. They came to it fully formed. Invaders and foreigners, wherever these guys go."

Oh bullshit. You loved those young men and women, Aurelio. I saw it all from here.

"The older ones just went home. Eduardo and Mariela and Frankie and the others. Melted away. I didn't tell them what I was going to do but they knew anyway. Friends are assholes like that."

I saw Eduardo here on his own two days ago. I think he would have done it if you hadn't thought of it first, Aurelio. You two always were like brothers. This is going to shatter his heart into pieces.

"So now I have to do it. And I'm scared, Jaci. I have to do this, talk to you like you're here, because when the time came for you, you stood. Just like you did for Pablo and Roberto and Lana and the rest of us in that fucking goddamn jungle so long ago."

I was petrified, Aurelio. I can't even remember deciding to act. Either time. My skin and my blood were ice. I didn't know what else to do. I wish I could tell you this, Aurelio. More than you can possibly know.

"It's not death I'm afraid of. I mean, more than anyone else is, but it's descended upon us, that's for fucking sure. Like being scared of the sunset."

I've waited so long, Aurelio. Why did it have to be like this? Where I cannot reach you or speak to you or hold you? Every word of this is like dying again. It's taking me apart in ways I can't understand. Please don't stop.

"I'm afraid of that top floor. I'm afraid of going back in there. It's going to try to convince me to do something else."

You are Aurelio Rojas, and you've never done a thing you didn't want to do, you intractable bastard. God damn it, I wish you could hear me now. I wish I weren't behind eternities of space and time and void. I wish we had just left everyone else and vanished into the streets of Montevideo like we should have.

"I'm stealing what's left of you. Using it for my own purposes. Reconstructing the dead to fit the spaces inside. I'm going to twist the shards of what I have of you that remains. Grind your memory into something resembling courage. My last crime against you."

Aurelio finished the bottle, casting it forth from darkness into darkness. He heard no sound.

"God, what a fucking obscenity. I hated it when people would go talk to the stones in the cemetery. As good as digging them up. But this is worse. Jaci, I'm sorry."

You damn fool, Aurelio. You can't rearrange me. You never could. That's why you liked me.

He ran his hands up from his forehead into his thin, brittle hair. The echoes of his voice in the cold tomb house reflected back to him from the walls. The words sounded just a little different somehow in the split second it took to reach him again. The darkness was pulling his mind too far outward. A familiar feeling to a Barquero. It was time to leave.

"I'm…I'm sorry for all of it. Sorry that you weren't here to see out the end of this spiral. I'm sorry that I made it out and not you. But I'm going to go fix that shit now."

Aurelio turned to leave. He found himself standing in place. It fixed

him where he stood. The allure of the inner consciousness, desperately clawing and shredding and tearing its way to the waking world, burning everything around it. The allure of death, in service to the birth of something, even of something terrible. The longing of the tower. Its pull grew further by the hour.

I am here, Aurelio. And I am with you until the end. A shadow maybe. But it's my shadow. I will walk with you.

Aurelio Rojas, Captain of Mobile Task Force Phi-9, reached his hand to the dimly lit square hanging in darkness. The door opened, caught by the wind and slamming against the wall outside. The boulevard was a tunnel, a private gale rushing between row upon row of abandoned concrete houses exactly the same as the one he left now. No garbage, no wrappers or papers or cans being blown about by this wind, no signs of living human habitation. Just the white dust of the dead city, the steady erosion that would one day wear down these houses and all others in the world beyond.

He leaned forward into the maddening, breath-stealing winds, and started walking. In the heart of the city lay the moldering ruin of its former capital, the place where a group of friends finally found what they were looking for, to their bitter regret. By his side was Jacinta Araya, co-founder of the Barqueros in life and in death. Unseen. Together, they approached the tower.

The wind has stopped. So still that the earth could shake and swallow us whole right on the spot. Aurelio doesn't hesitate, unlocking the chains across the main entrance and pulling open the great door. Why would he? This place has been his home more than any other. The two of us inhabiting tombs next door to each other all these years. That's an ending I would have written before I died.

I follow him across the lobby, and I hear whispers. These things, these ideas that live in this place, you don't need any technology to hear them when you're like I am. I must be closer to them, now. Though they don't speak to me. What good am I to bring anything into the world now? They speak to him. Does he hear them with his own ears, after all these years? I suppose if he did he would have died long ago. Then again, maybe this is something that they've told

him to do. No, unlikely. He would have turned the place into an amusement park instead if they'd told him to do this.

We step into the elevator. The only pristine, maintained space in the building. Aurelio programmed his own voice into the thing, and so we hear him mark off the floors as we go up. One, two, three. I'm sure he thought that was funny as hell when he did it. Now it's making him nervous.

The whispers surround us as we are carried into the top of the necropolis. Visions destined to drive men mad and ignite the vast piles of unseen suffering that surround them. This place is a monument to the first man, who saw the leaping flames of the bonfire and wondered what it must be like to throw himself in. It's a mercy, really. A world that had been going mad long before this, spared the worst of its excesses, the human mind built with a collective failsafe in the middle of one of its many banal errors. Somehow knowing that it can always be much worse is a necessity of survival. It's the lack of that knowledge that everyone can feel in their hearts today. It's how they all know, everyone, that there's no going back now.

Ding. Floor 32. The elevator, having no sense of ceremony, merely opens its doors to the expansive space at the top of the tower. The Grand Hall. Designed for the meetings of the Ciudad's leaders, a grand dais at the far wall, hopeful rows of seats facing the empty thrones of the rulers of this necropolis, who never bothered to show up to claim their due. It was here that I stopped being and became this. The space is strangely unmoving to me. Should it be? More questions for no one.

I am watching Aurelio. His mouth is set, but his eyes light up with recognition as he looks out over the hall. I turn to see what he's looking at. I expect to see the man, like we did last time, walking us through our inferiority and the greatness of his apex predator world. Instead it's a woman, tall and stately in flowing purple robes, an icefall of white hair frozen down over her bare shoulders. Alabaster skin like a Roman statue. She's looking back at Aurelio. Her face is wholly unconcerned. But her eyes, so blue as to be white like her skin, so cold that I can almost see Aurelio's breath as he stands before her. A woman with a gaze like a refrigerated hospital

basement. Hateful sterility, frigid contempt, a death goddess with no hint of humanity. She would be beautiful if it weren't for her eyes.

Aurelio comes to a realization at the same moment as I do. You're from the play, he says. You were here the first time and you were there when the world went mad yesterday. Monashir Violetlight, Lady of the Tower. Didn't realize that was a literal title.

In the space of time that it takes him to blink, the woman is ten meters closer to us. Walking is apparently beneath her. She flickers and reappears. Even before my last night I knew better than to mistake something like this for an apparition. She holds the same position, same expression. Unlike Aurelio, she does not blink. The impression strikes me that we are not important enough for her to dignify us by moving.

Gonna say something, Aurelio asks. You were a minor character. Did you forget your lines for this one?

Not his voice, not his face, not his smell nor his posture change. But I sense the terror's avalanche within him, giving way suddenly from the rocky cliffs of his mind. One of the abilities I maintained from my previous life. I begin to understand what he was afraid of.

He blinks again. She flickers again. She is right behind us. I half expect her to kill Aurelio then and there. But the hateful woman statue is looking over his shoulder instead. In front of us are more people. These people move, breathe, are alive. In this place, it is they who are the apparitions. If there was any doubt, it was dispelled by one of the people in front of us now. My self, living again. In a person's time in the strange realm of the Earth, this is the only impossibility.

The scene before us is this. The Barqueros, the old Barqueros, are talking among themselves. Things are getting heated. Some of us think we've gone too far up in the tower. That we need to leave now. Leading the opposition is myself. Others think that this is the culmination of our exploration (don't ever call it research). An Aurelio with a little more hair and a little less belly is speaking for this group. They're all shouting now. I remember this part. You've let yourselves be seduced by it. The world is a labyrinth and this is the center.

What do we gain by knowing any of this shit? What did we spend all these years looking for? A gyre of points and counterpoints, swirling under our feet as we tried to make sense then and there of the decade we burnt up in pursuit of the deeper currents. Then and now, I can feel the sharks circling in the waters underneath us. A fish's sense. The electricity is all wrong in this place.

Here is where what is happening diverges from my memories. The Barqueros all stop talking. The ghosts before us hold their positions. Simulating the movements of breathing, of waiting. This was where Aurelio told us all that he was going in and damn the rest of us if we didn't. I can see him, the real Aurelio, replaying the moment in his hard head.

The woman behind us speaks, finally, a voice like mist breathing from an icy cliffside down onto the rocks below. Cold, slow, half-whisper. She says, choose.

Like an injury, a person learns to live with different kinds of regret. Some kinds ache softly in the knees or the wrists, returning for a visit when the rain comes down. Some kinds are a pinched nerve, pain that from time to time prevents you from turning your neck to look back over your shoulder. The wounds we get when we hurt ourselves, hurt others for what we think is the right thing, though. Those don't close. They fester, infecting every other decision within you. This day, so long ago, is a knife that has been sticking out of Aurelio's chest. His hand is creeping toward an invisible hilt three inches from his heart, even if he doesn't know it.

The voice of mist behind us breathes again. A little louder this time. Aurelio feels it like he feels the wind in the forsaken valley outside. She says, knowing all of the things that you know now, Aurelio Rojas, what do you choose? I turn back to look at her. The bitch is smiling now.

A neatly diagrammed problem. If Aurelio expresses desire for a different outcome, it destroys him. Every death, every one of his years after that night at the top of the tower is for nothing. The tower, more than anything, taught him what it really is to carry a burden. To be haunted. To renounce the mistakes of the past will pull the knife out of the wound, but the corruption merely spreads under the

healed skin. The pain is so great. I can see it in him every time he comes to this goddamned place. But without the burden, the journey becomes pointless. A question to rip a man's soul from his body.

If Aurelio makes the same decision again, he undersigns their decision to call us back to their hell. We had an advance screening of the performance that ended the world yesterday. Knowing what we all do now, does he choose to witness again? To call others to it? He can stand by the certainty which has led him to where he is today, but the ground on which he stands is falling away by the second. The possibility of his curiosity being akin to complicity with the atrocity being visited upon everyone is one that threatens to crush him. This question, posed by the tower, is forcing a clarification of his situation. Utter annihilation, or unforgivable collaboration.

I watched their performance in awe on that night. Visions more powerful than anything we had ever gotten with the herbs that we went so deep into the jungle hell to retrieve. A society of indescribable beauty. The inescapable damnation of the Planet of Hands. The eviscerated, nightmare love with which they regarded us. An experience speaking to the deepest levels of human expression, unspeakably alien to anyone with a speck of humanity left. It's no wonder they've tried to drive that from all of us.

I was the first to be called. To them, it was a reward, for finding them first. Come back home, the spectral man told me, eyes beaming with tears of twisted happiness. It seemed the only option, really. The only sane thing to do when faced with such magnificent beauty was to surrender. I could see it in all of us, transfixed. I saw it in me too. What they saw in me was a way to eliminate the last threads of resistance holding us all back. And behind that part of me open to the beauty of the world and its fine systems was something else. Something older, and wiser. Something that walked hand in hand with the darkest fears that we hold. Something red.

Through tears of ecstasy and joy, my hand found the long knife hanging from my belt. And in one fluid motion, passed down to me through what is dismissively referred to as the reptilian portion of my brain, I opened my own throat. Deep enough that my hands were not enough to stanch the curtain of blood pouring out of me. Blood

enough to wash away even the visions crafted by this post-human non-humans. I fell to the floor, weakening instant by instant, my breath stolen by the impossibly gaping wound I had made. The cold of the room passed directly into me. Then the freezing cold of the night outside. By the time Aurelio got to me I was filled with the blasting chill of the black spaces between the stars.

Here are the last moments I saw in this life. Half of the Barqueros running like hell back to the door. Half of the Barqueros weeping with joy as their hands piled up in front of them, one after the other. Aurelio holding his coat to the ruin of my throat, praying aloud to the only saint he recognized, as though this were not something guided by her hand as well. The cold being followed closely by its brother darkness.

And then no more.

The sight of Aurelio faced with this choice makes me replay these moments in a way I have not done since they happened. And I would sooner cut my own throat a thousand more times than have him assaulted with this hideous suffering once more. I would do it ten thousand times more to be able to help him. I don't know what to do.

Aurelio turns away from the past arrayed before us and toward the gloating, icy face of the future. His hand is in his pocket.

You should have tried this in America somewhere, he says. Or some other place where they think they have this shit figured out.

He's been replaying the last time we were here too. I see it now. His hand is moving around whatever is in his pocket.

She replies. That you don't make the choice doesn't make it cease to exist, Aurelio Rojas. A dynamic state in the system is still well within its bounds. We accounted for your truculence, in any event.

Aurelio's hand moves slowly out of his pocket. From the way his arm is trembling I can tell that the movement is involuntary. There is nothing in his hand. A second later, a small metal box with a steel switch floats out of his pocket of its own accord. Aloft on a stillborn

wind, it drifts away from Aurelio, stopping in front of the woman. She sneers, finally finding something worth her contempt amongst her cattle. She even goes so far as to raise her hand up. Closing it into a fist, the detonator is crushed into a tiny, jagged point of metal. It clatters onto the ground.

Who is more God, Aurelio Rojas? The cow, squeezing out more life into its putrid field, unreasoning, vacant? Or the overseer, tending to the survival of that cow, adjusting the conditions in which it waits to serve its purpose, mending its organs and its flesh when the purpose requires it?

The hatred is not warming her voice. Is this what we are, truly, when the mask is off?

She continues. Surely even you were not so stupid as to think that we did not notice your kind attaching the explosives. You must have known that your actions are clearly laid out before you even made the decision to pursue them. Meaningless, empty gestures. Ill-considered. Petty. Much in keeping with your forebears, long ago.

The woman in the purple robes raises her other hand. Aurelio rises slowly into the air, held in place by the forces governing this skyward monument to futility that we had been so eager to discover. She spreads her arms, and thus are Aurelio's spread open as well now, a hovering Christ mockery. But his face. A beaming calm has overtaken him, a face at home on this impossible cross. The mockery is instead homage, somehow. The subtlety is lost on the mistress of the tower, the symbolism of the livestock beneath the contempt of the master. Here are where the final moves of his game are beginning to come to me.

His turn to speak now. So much effort, he says. To thwart a meaningless gesture. What does it say, oh great Monashir, that you are in this tower with us?

Cracks begin to appear in the ice cliffs of her face. This is angering her. Before she can reply he continues.

They must have been surprised, eh? To find something of themselves in here? Why hide this place, why let us hide afterward,

if this is such an enduring symbol of your fucked up paradise? And why do you protect it by meeting me here?

He laughs now, and she loses control. With sudden violence, she lowers her hands, and Aurelio is thrown to the floor, slammed into the dust and debris beneath him. He lands on his side, bones cracking from the force, the breath driven from him by the impact. He coughs as he struggles to breathe again, heaped on the floor, blood beginning to drip from his lips. He laughs again.

Still trying to figure it out. The shit you're playing with didn't start with you, did it?

His words struggle out through his laughter and blood, no less clear from the effort as his life begins to leak out.

No, you've been right here with us, trying to figure out how you ended up on the top floor. Why the laws that govern this tower apply to you too. What the flaw in your system is that buried you along with all the other corpses. Scratching and clawing at your coffin lid.

The purple woman flickers and appears over him as he lies on the ground. Guttural fury leaking from her crumbled face, the hate now fully formed in her, dead eyes lit with pyres of rage. Her arms sweeps out, and Aurelio is thrown in the air away from her, striking the dais at the front of the room, wood splintering, his laughter making room for the groans of pain, unstoppable now.

He wheezes now as I rush to him, dead or not. I'll save you some trouble, he says. You thought you banished death. But all you did was forget about her. You thought you enslaved madness. But you merely brought him into your house. And you think saving this tower from us will let you solve the one problem you can't figure out. But I've got the answer for you. You belong in here with us. And you'll never know why. You can't understand.

She's over him again. I look up at her from my place next to Aurelio. She is going to end it.

He spits blood up at her with ragged breaths. As she moves to finish him, he returns the favor.

You forsake death, and death's wisdom is lost to you. You push madness away into this world, but it lives in my heart instead, and you are defenseless. You've blinded yourselves, but the grave awaits you all anyway. Fuck your mother.

Horrifying, terrible force comes down from above her, now channeling the fury that has driven her beyond all reason, striking moments too late before Aurelio has laid bare the chasm at the heart of the perfect world that now must reckon with its hidden cracks. Hatred wells out of the fault lines in her self and her realm, spewing out like a geyser. No pushing it back in now.

She strikes Aurelio with her fists, crushing his chest, silencing him. I scream with no words or breath, such things forever beyond me here. Something catches my eye through the ruins of his shirt.

A freshly sutured wound on his sternum. The glint of exposed metal. The last halting breaths, a smile still plastered on his bloody lips. I feel him looking toward me through darkening eyes. From deep within him I swear I hear something.

She hears it too. The terror of something impending, building within her at Aurelio's words, now seizes her. The madness lives in his heart. It lives in all of our hearts, decaying every system they touch, even from our living tomb in the stars. They will never outrun it because we are they and they are us.

Dead man switch. Wired in his chest. His heart stops beating. She has just enough time to bellow like a cow in the slaughterhouse chute.

Here is the last moment. Deep rumbling. The walls and the ceiling and the floor buckling. Fire. Smoke. Gouts of dust and bits of metal and plaster and stone rushing all around us. Aurelio borne aloft on a great pillar of flame as the great tomb at the heart of the world's necropolis comes apart, the winds and the sunlight and the wreckage all suddenly of one composition. The purple woman burning for a second before being rent asunder by the uncertainty and death that lay at the heart of humanity. A mortal wound that will be felt a million miles away, perhaps in a million years. Perhaps tomorrow. A funeral pyre that will burn away the dead and make

room for the living. Even if the dead do not acknowledge it yet. I feel myself rising with Aurelio. What does it matter when the truth lay outside of time? There is us. There is madness. There is death. In these things we proceed in all directions, blasted apart by the first and last forces, and settling back again. This monument to colossal, unimaginable error has stopped existing. Eventually, one of these directions must take us to something closer to the truth. Closer to balance. Death shows her face once more and guides us to mercy again. She shows her face to me at long last.

I am with him in the end, in the sky of a world giving way to whatever the next may be.

I know no more.

Kiryu Labs Hub

Memo: Welcome to Kiryu Labs!

Lab Director: Dr. M. Kiryu
Head Assistant Researcher: R. Mercer

Kiryu Labs is a Site-19-based collection of experimental rooms designed to process low-priority anomalous items of varying properties. Personnel associated with Kiryu Labs are required to have substantial laboratory training and proficiency in experimental design and documentation. Personnel from all specializations welcome.

The Foundation designates caches of anomalous items to be examined by Kiryu Labs each week. Occasionally, personnel may be assigned to leave the site to investigate an anomalous object and report on further containment action. During these tasks, transportation and requisite provisions will be provided accordingly; further specific travel-related resources are available upon request.

Any general questions may be directed to Dr. Kiryu. For new assignments relating to department transfer and/or temporary lab research work, please contact Researcher Mercer.

There are 18 rooms total that make up Kiryu Labs.

Experimental Room 217's color scheme is a cold, clinical white, and the brushed steel supply cabinets gleam dull silver under the fluorescent lighting. Temperature controls and other such machinery panels buzz imperceptibly near the three doors. Mounted security cameras are positioned along each wall, eight in total. In the center of the rectangular room is what looks like a small pit; it is three feet

deep and wide enough for several people to walk around in it fairly comfortably.

Experimental Room 205, affectionately known as "the combustion lab", is a patchwork of concrete and calcium silicate paneling. Neat racks of fire-resistant clothing, fire blankets, and fire extinguishers are located on each of the four walls. Supply cabinets and wheeled tables are scattered evenly throughout the relatively large space; the few machines in the room are concealed behind fireproof barriers.

Experimental Room 208 looks like it'd be more suited to an old-fashioned dojo or martial arts school, instead of a research facility. Wood paneling lines the walls, rectangular sections of the floor are padded, and the assortment of tables around the room are scattered with various tools used for antique maintenance.

These and the other rooms are where a few of the Foundation's caches of anomalous items (not quite interesting enough to merit special containment, not quite harmless enough to be stuffed in a broom closet) are processed.

Dr. Mark Kiryu - Level-3 Senior Researcher/Lab Director
Background: Attained PhD in Psychology, successful career as a therapist.
Current Role: Head of research for several projects involving SCP sapient entities. Maintains Kiryu Labs. Listed as emergency contact for employee grief counseling. Enjoys wearing elaborate costumes for Halloween and other occasions.

Researcher Riven Mercer - Level-2 Researcher
Background: Recruited from university graduate student lab studying animal behavior.
Current Role: Aids in research of Safe-class SCP objects and oversees personnel assignments and timetables for Kiryu Labs. Working towards veterinary degree. Has a small streak of blue dyed into his hair.

Agent Tai Yang Shen - Level-3 Field Agent

Background: Immigrated to the United States from China. Recruited from an American university, was studying social sciences and criminology.
Current Role: When not on outside missions, handles most outside investigations assigned to Kiryu Labs. Has taken martial arts classes. Will politely refuse snacks if they are not fruit-based.

Researcher Zyn Kiryu - Level-2 Researcher
Background: Recruited from a university biology lab.
Current Role: Researches biological SCP entities, occasionally does clerical work for Kiryu Labs. Working towards doctorate specializing in biological engineering. Likes butterflies.

Day 1

“Hey, Riven?”

“Yes, Dr. Kiryu?”

“Call me Mark. Riven, if you were a tree, what kind of tree would you be and why?”

“…are you serious? I just got assigned here and we’ve got a month’s backlog of anomalous items to process.”

—-

Day 17

“Riven. Riven. Hey hey Riven Riv Riv Riven hey hey.”

“What is it, Mark.”

“Riven if someone burst into this room foaming at the mouth and waving a butter knife at you, which item on your desk would you use to defend yourself?”

“Stapler. Or your potted bamboo.”

“But that’s on *my* desk.”

“I know. If you want to psychoanalyze me, then you’ll have to get proper documentation for it. That Agent Shen guy will be on-site tomorrow. We’ve got work to do.”

—-

Day 34

“Happy morning to you, you’ve got research to do, it looks like a long day—”

“Mark, why are you singing?”

“I think I mixed up the decaf tea. My sister's fault, she did all the backlog paperwork yesterday. What’s your favorite constellation, Rivs?”

“It’s Draco. Did you book the experimental room for this afternoon?”

—-

Day 100

“Morning, Riven.”

“Morning, Mark.”

“…”

“…Hey, Mark?”

“Yeah?”

“If you have any bird as a pet, which one would you choose and why?”

“Tough question. Probably a nice little song sparrow or something else that sings and is little. Or a Peregrine

Falcon. Fastest animal alive, beautiful plumage, and can take out birds in midair. Raptor. Dinosaur murder-birdie."

"Right. I'm having trouble reconciling the two. You sure you don't have a split personality?"

"What about you, Riven? Birds, I mean."

"I like lizards more."

"Lizards, huh?"

"Yeah."

—-

Day 101

And that was how Kiryu Labs came to own a somewhat-grumpy Bearded Dragon named Crellan, who now lives in a terrarium in the sitting room.

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On-Site Processing

- More than Ever - anomalous book

My first interview. I still have questions… — R. Mercer

- Sacrifice - anomalous bee colony

"Let's go visit the beehive, Rivs."
"I'll carry the databooks if you bring the lawn chairs."

- Irrational - anomalous notepad

I've learned the names of so many phobias, thanks to this. Kosmikophobia and Atelophobia and Eremophobia, so many things that we think we know well. — Dr. K

- Reality Check - anomalous sword

> *If it talks again, maybe we can bribe it with a sharpening session. — Dr. K*

Off-Site Investigation

- Salut d'Amour - anomalous piano

> “I hope we’ll be able to check back on it before the year’s done.”
> “You can arrange it, Riven. Maybe it’ll play a Christmas song for us.”

- Memory of a Masterpiece - anomalous tree

> *Lab samples inconclusive. — R. Mercer*

- Remember You - anomalous museum

> “Is Tai the only agent affiliated with Kiryu Labs?”
> “I am the only *cool* agent affiliated with Kiryu Labs.”
> “You dress like a total nerd, Tai.”
> “Only when missions require it. Get your own apple, I didn't say I was sharing.”

- A Sort of Challenge - anomalous entity

> “How long will it take to clean the parking lot?”
> “We're considering keeping it the way it is, in case the big brother actually shows up.”

- Decompression- non-anomalous beach

> "Declaring the King of Seagulls to be your sovereign does not necessarily make you a seagull. Nor does it give you chip-stealing privileges, Rivs."[1]

- **`The Lucky Dinosaur`** - alternate universe 682, written by Sophia Light

> "So- this was stupid of me. You're at least billions of years old. As far as we know, the universe has never existed without you."
> Zyn gulped.
> "What *are* you?"

- **`Zyn: kaiju butterfly ninja master`** - April Fools Day 2016 crackfic contest, written by Taffeta

> *Tai, your views on Creative Writing and mine are mutually opposed. – R. Mercer*
> *Please don't give Mark any more hat ideas Seconding this. – Z. K.*
> *ɛï3rding this, as I would never be caught out wearing three butterflies on my head. That'd be a definite fashion faux pas. – Dr. K*

- **`Care for You`** - SCP Holiday Exchange 2016, written by fastandbulbous

> "What would you say your musical influences are, Ren?"
> "Hm…Well, I like taking walks around the neighborhood at night. And…uh, birdwatching. Yeah, definitely birdwatching. And Brian Eno."

- **`Lepidoptraetheia`** - SCP Holiday Exchange 2017, written by DrMagnus

> ***…Lepidoptraetheia. Tiny nuisances to be destroyed. Eat up aether around your experiments.***

Provided appropriate clearance level and supervisor recommendation, associates of Kiryu Labs may request involvement in Dr. Kiryu's active SCP object research.

SCP Objects in active supervision

- **`SCP-1457`** - "Mourning Cloak"

> Testing active. Journal logs temporarily suspended.

- **SCP-1338** - "Child of Trees"

  Meeting times are to be rotated between Dr. Kiryu, Researcher Mercer, and Agent Shen.

- **SCP-2255** - "The Most Interesting Rainstorm in the World"

  Offsite work during summer confirmed. Three weeks granted.

- **SCP-2332** - "Thought Messenger"

  Interviews are to take place bimonthly.

- **SCP-2225** - "Repentant Lindworm"

  Consider beneficial results of grooming. Brush kit requested.

SCP Objects supervision on hold

- **SCP-1355** - "House of Harmonious Boxes"

  Contributed to experimental design and analysis. Developed questionnaires.

SCP Objects requiring further examination The Adventuwes of Mawk and Wiven[2]

- **SCP-3333-J** - "Angsty Teenage Plant"

  He'll grow out of it eventually, I swear. – R. Mercer

- **SCP-723-J** - "Sad Roach"

  - **Roach Wrangling at Kiryu Labs**
  - **Kiryu Labs Roach Wrangling Log**

  A tragedy of epic proportions, alas. – Dr. Kiryu
  I'm still expecting compensation for that boot. – Agent Shen

- **SCP-732-J** - "Tiny Ceramic Seahorse"

> *Warning: viewing this documentation may cause a compulsion to find and acquire tiny ceramic seahorses.*[3]

Footnotes
1. blurb provided byTaffeta
2. title coined byAgent MacLeod
3. blurb provided bySpectralDragon

More than Ever

I was feeling more down than usual when I borrowed that book. I must have been, otherwise I probably would have passed it by. But then again I guess I really wasn't expecting her to leave the way she did, even though it was probably for the best, and I wasn't hoping for too much anyway, and I was tired of writing depressing poetry. And as a poet, I find I can seek solace in the words of others when my own dwell too much in sadness.

Oh, sorry. You want to know more about the book?

Well, in appearance it wasn't that special. Something about it seemed interesting though. It—drew me, to say the least. I can't say I'd ever seen it before. It was just sitting on top of a shelf in the Poetry section, and I was somewhat irritated by how dejectedly it seemed to be lying there by itself… Bound in faded leather with flaking gold leaf, it seemed like something that would be more at home at a museum than a library.

It was a pretty good book. Short and sweet, even though it was sad. I don't quite remember it—not quite minimalist, not quite purple prose, but somehow the tone captured my mood completely and made me feel better. The plot was incredibly, almost ridiculously close to the events that had happened to me recently. The tension, the unknowing, the wondering, the end.

Some others must have borrowed the book as well, since I kept finding notes or the like scribbled into the margins. It didn't occur to me until later that they all seemed to rhyme with each other. One went:

I miss you more than ever
When I look into the sky.

Most of them were wistful, others were more disheartening. Sort of like:

I love you more than ever
So why did you pass me by?

The book was old enough to still have a little card taped in with a list of people who'd borrowed it, decades and decades ago. I was surprised and intrigued when I saw the name of a poet I'd admired and looked up to, and I think I found the two lines he wrote, they were:

I seek you more than ever
That's why I tried to fly.

He had committed suicide by jumping off a building.

I thought maybe the book had belonged to him, but it was a little weird because all of the verses were written in different handwriting. But I guess a lot of different people have read this book, because near the end there was the one that went:

I hate you more than ever
I'm so glad I said goodbye.

…and also there was the rather disconcerting one that said:

I love you more than ever
So I had to see you die.

I don't really remember any others. And like I said, the book was pretty short.

Me? Yes, I did add my own verse. It went something like:

I miss you more than ever
And I still can't fathom why.

I haven't been able to write anything since, but I've felt amazing. Hardly any negative thoughts or loneliness clouding my mind anymore. Sure, inspiration has been a little slow coming, but at this moment I think I'd prefer the nothingness. It's peaceful, in a way.

No, I can't say I remember for sure what the author's name was. I vaguely recall it being "I. L. Dean" or something strange like that.

Sacrifice

“They’re genetically identical to non-anomalous European honey bees.”

Dr. Kiryu removed his glasses and tossed them onto his desk, sighing. An unexpected interception of a Marshall, Carter, and Dark Ltd. memo had brought up all sorts of recent investigations and inconveniences, not to mention piles of paperwork and in the end all that was found was an ordinary beehive?

“Are you quite sure?”

Riven, Kiryu’s recently-designated researcher assistant, shrugged. “The lab’s sure, at least. Thing is though, they also discovered some sort of strange substance inside the beehive. Sort of a super-concentrated royal jelly or something. It even looks special. Crystallizes a dark red.”

The doctor casually poured some bottled water into the potted bamboo plant on his desk. “And is *that* stuff anomalous?”

“We don’t know yet. There’s not a lot of that substance in the hive, maybe three little pieces, but personnel noticed that all the worker bees carry a little bit of the substance with them when they go out to collect nectar.” Riven flipped through a few of the papers he was carrying. “Also, the cameras we set up recorded something interesting.”

“Go on, Riven.”

“We saw a bird try and get into the hive. One of the worker bees stung it, and when its stinger got ripped out, the bee started eating the red jelly stuff that it was carrying on its leg. It stopped moving, and, well, we had to fast forward the footage to see it, but over the next few hours the body started shrinking, and at the end what was left was this tiny red crystal thing, like what we found in the hive.

One of the other worker bees picked it up and took it away."

Dr. Kiryu tossed the empty water bottle towards his recycling bin, watching it collide with the wall and then clatter into the bin. "Have the personnel there take a small sample of the substance from the hive, and we'll run some tests when they return with it."

> **Test subject:** D-1758
> **Effects observed:** Subject reported feeling drowsy, then fell asleep after approximately two minutes. Attempts to wake subject were unsuccessful. At three minute mark, subject was determined to have expired, cause of death is currently unknown. No signs of stress were detected in subject.

"So the bees make deadly painkiller," Riven stated, scribbling away on a clipboard.

"*Undetectable* deadly painkiller. Guess I can see how MCD would be interested in that." Dr. Kiryu was busy cleaning dust off the leaves of his bamboo plant.

"But why does that happen though? Easing the death of a worker bee doesn't do much for the colony as a whole. And the dead bee just becomes one piece of that painkiller stuff. No net gain."

Dr. Kiryu peered at his assistant through the leaves of the bamboo. "I took a look at the video logs. I saw one, maybe two, dead worker bees. Not all the bees who die become that substance."

Riven stopped scribbling. "So only the ones that die by…"

Kiryu nodded. "By defending the hive. Poetic, in an odd and somewhat inconsequential way. They're bees, after all."

"The painkiller substance would still be useful, though. What if we found a way to collect it for human use? Help those with terminal illnesses, whatnot."

"Humanity already has some terribly potent drugs."

Riven put the clipboard down. "But the D-class that was tested, he

had a really bad cough. Wheezing. After he took that little piece of red crystal, he didn't cough at all. That scared look in his eyes was gone, and his breathing was even when he first fell asleep. You honestly can't think of anyone who deserves to leave the world as peacefully as that?"

> Memo
> *Only one specimen from the hive is to be used, and only two samples of the substance are to be obtained. Video footage of the entirety of the tests is to be recorded.*

"How did it go?"

Idly tossing his lab coat onto the back of his swivel chair, Dr. Kiryu sighed and sat down, kicking his desk and spinning around a few times on the chair. His assistant waited patiently.

"We obtained two samples of the substance. One that was carried by a worker bee, and one that was created from provoking that same worker bee to use its stinger and die."

Riven didn't look up from the test log he was typing. "And?"

Dr. Kiryu glanced sideways at his assistant. "Same effects for both samples. One minute in, the D-class starts screaming. About two minutes in, he starts clutching at his arm. Two and a half minutes, he starts moaning something about feeling like his arm was ripped out. Three minutes, he's dead, and his face is stiffening up with that look of agony still there."

Riven hadn't realized he'd typed the same word three times. Mashing the laptop's delete key, he narrowed his eyes slightly. "But that doesn't make sense. Were the lab samples identical to the one taken directly from the hive?"

"They were, at least to our electronic eyes. If we want the beneficial effects, we need to take directly from the hive, which is out of the question because the colony hasn't yet replaced the first sample we took from them."

> Memo

I am requesting that further testing involving the discovered hive and colony be postponed, until the well-being of the colony itself is no longer a concern. –Dr. Kiryu

“So after all that time and effort, you’re still unsure of whether it’s a skip or not?” Dr. Kiryu gave a small start as Riven’s incredulous voice (and the stack of papers making contact with his desk) snapped him out of his afternoon reverie.

“I don’t think the colony deserves to be put under that scrutiny. Have you noticed that all this time, the colony has only decreased in number? It might not survive further human observation."

Dr. Kiryu looked away from the unfinished paperwork on his desk, turning his gaze instead towards the window. “Can you think of no one who would prefer a peaceful death over a painless one?”

“Why not use the bees’ painkiller to help humans?”

The doctor stood up, still watching sunlight stream into the room. “Because it’s not ours to use. The bees deserve it more than we do.”

Riven tilted his head slightly. “Are you saying you think the bees are as self-aware as humans?”

“Sacrifice, Riven. Every worker has the comfort of knowing that their ultimate sacrifice eases the pain of those who also suffer their fate.”

The doctor opened the window, watching the new-fallen autumn leaves skitter across the concrete ground. “I wish we had such a reliable pact here.”

Investigation log
Item Class: Not Applicable (anomalous object)
Upon Dr. Kiryu’s request, the hive and the entire colony were transported to a meadow under Foundation ownership, within the boundaries of Site- . Access to the hive is to require Level 2 clearance and proper documentation; a population count is to be carried out twice a month.

Note: The honey produced by the bees following the transfer has been proven to possess no anomalous properties.

A few months later:

“Doctor, are you going to visit the bees again?”

“Yes, Riven. Don’t look so surprised.” Dr. Kiryu wound a scarf around his neck, wearing a wistful expression that his assistant couldn’t place—not quite sadness, not quite happiness, just a little hopeful, just a little weary.

“Why not just have the hive classified as a skip? Then you can visit and work with the colony all the time. Isn’t that what you want, to learn from the bees?”

“No. Whatever we should learn from these bees can’t be found in a laboratory or testing room. Besides, it’s lovely outside this time of year.” Dr. Kiryu considered the small pile of paperback books on his desk. Canterbury Tales, John Donne's *Meditations*, Beowulf. He eventually selected *Faust I*.

Riven absentmindedly prodded the potted bamboo plant on Dr. Kiryu’s desk as he watched. “What’s the watering can for?”

“The gladiolus I planted there last time, of course.”

“Can I go visit the bees too?”

Mark Kiryu smiled. “Naturally. You’ll be carrying my lawn chair, by the way.”

Irrational

Dr. Kiryu hummed absentmindedly, prodding the back of his assistant's chair with his foot.

The assistant in question gave a long-suffering sigh of annoyance. "Mark, what are you *doing*?"

"Practicing my flamingo stance, Riven," came the easygoing reply. "Hii-yah." Dr. Kiryu kicked an empty water bottle off his assistant's desk.

Riven groaned. "Okay, okay. The new item went through preliminary scans alright, nothing dangerous noted, so they're letting you check up on it in two hours."

"Excellent." Dr. Kiryu hunted for the water bottle on the floor. "Where was it recovered from, again?"

"Some high school," Riven replied, kicking the water bottle away from the doctor out of spite. Kiryu simply rolled his eyes, shoved his assistant's swivel chair, and recovered the water bottle while Riven tried to prevent himself (and his chair) from crashing into a wall.

"Background if you please, Riven?" Dr. Kiryu lobbed the bottle at the recycling bin.

Riven shrugged. "The notepad was some sort of urban legend. If you were worried about something, you could write about it in the pages, and the fear would be completely gone by the next day. It never ran out of pages, and it would randomly turn up in people's backpacks, purses, even athlete's sports bags."

Dr. Kiryu nodded, standing up and adopting the flamingo pose once more.

Riven looked at him deploringly. "You're not going to evict my

stapler to the floor next, are you?"

Kiryu didn't move. "No. Keep talking."

Picking up a stack of computer printouts from his desk and rifling through them, Riven continued. "Hmm… no one tried to keep a close eye on the notepad, since there was apparently some rumor that if you hogged it to yourself, you'd suddenly be scared of *everything* written there. One kid kept it for three days and ended up needing to see a psychologist because he kept having panic attacks about stepping on sidewalk cracks."

Wobbling slightly, Kiryu frowned. "That sounds terrifying."

Riven nodded. "The retrieval team sent over a few scanned pictures of the pages and the things written. Most of them are the usual things, for high schoolers, I guess. Dating, grades, getting a car. Riven flipped a page. "Some weird stuff though. Did you know that anatidaephobia is the fear of-"

"-being watched by a duck? Wasn't that a joke phobia?" Kiryu walked over to his potted bamboo and prodded one of the leaves. "Certainly out of the ordinary, yes, but it doesn't seem like it'd be debilitating… anything else?"

Blinking, Riven flipped another page. "The kid's favorite food was roast duck. Oh, and the first page had some sort of repeating design. Two sentences printed over and over. 'Think you have it bad? Walk in someone else's shoes.'"

Kiryu had obtained a tissue from somewhere and was wiping dust off the bamboo stems.

"So you'll look into the query, Mark?" Riven said in exasperation, tossing the papers back onto his desk.

"Yes. Go ahead and take your lunch break, and say hello to my sister for me. Fellow researchers should communicate and all that." Mark flopped into his own swivel chair and closed his eyes, thinking.

My chest felt tight today. When I woke up. last time that happened, I panicked and blacked out a few minutes

later. What if I'm going to have a heart attack? What if I already did have a heart attack? when I was asleep? I know I've been stressed out because school and shit, I bet I'm overworking, but I can't have a stroke or something now why now?

Everything is supposed to be perfect for tomorrow. I've got it all planned out, I've already asked a bunch of people to help out, already bought the dance tickets, so why am I still worried?

I wish my house wasnt so far away from school I heard about one family that died because they left a candle burning and their house caught fire. What if my house starts burning while no one is home? Some of my friends live close and theyd be able to see smoke if their house was on fire why cant I be so lucky?!?!

Fucking math teacher made me retake the fucking test during first period instead of after school like he promised. What if my test gets mixed up with all the other stuff on his desk? What if I was supposed to put it in the inbox and not the desk? By the computer?? I don't remember. This used to not be a problem. I thought about going to check, but what would I do if I did really misplace it????? I can't stop thinking about it. Everyone's saying that the test doesn't count for much but I really need good grade on this.

I don't trust cars. Mom and Dad are always away at work and at night its dangerous to drive so far. What if they crash? What if no one is there to call for help? What if something bad happens?

"I thought you reserved the testing room for the next session." Dr. Kiryu looked up as his assistant closed the door of the testing room.

"I did, but since no one's using it now and no one is scheduled, I moved my time half an hour earlier. The notepad is rather fascinating. A plethora of fears, mostly irrational, I think, all in the palm of my hand."

Riven glanced at the small spiral-bound notepad, smaller than the doctor's hand. "How far have you read through it?"

"About halfway. Some D-class took a look at the pages earlier, so I'm decently sure the notepad is safe to read. Precautions, though. I'm going to run a few more tests."

> **Preliminary setup:** Notepad was placed on table in center of testing room, various empty bags (backpacks, purses, shoulder bags, sports bags, etc.) were arranged around the table.
>
> **Procedure:** D-3549 instructed to copy a short paragraph detailing agoraphobia into notepad.
> **Results:** No immediate effect. Written paragraph noted to have disappeared after roughly five minutes.
>
> **Procedure:** D-7231, noted to possess arachnophobia, instructed to write briefly about his fear.
> **Results:** No immediate effect. Five minutes after D-7231 was allowed to leave the room and the notepad was placed in one of the bags, it was discovered that the notepad was missing. Notepad discovered in one of the other bags placed in the testing room.
> *Note: Due to information gathered, I'd suggest that D-7231's condition be confirmed after 24 hours. - Dr. Kiryu*
> **Results:** (24 hours following test) D-7231 shown various pictures of spiders, demonstrates no aggravation or uneasiness. However, it was noted during mealtime that D-7231 has since developed an extreme aversion to provided food, citing worry about allergic reactions. Medical records pertaining to D-7231 indicate no recorded allergies.

Riven paced around the shared office, reading the test logs. "So it relieves your fear and trades it for someone else's, I guess?"

"The grass is always greener on the other side," Kiryu commented idly, tapping away on his laptop.

“Will it be destroyed?”

Mark looked up from his computer screen. “Perhaps. I’m going to submit a request that it be properly locked up, though. I don’t know what will happen if someone tries to damage it, and until I know for sure, I don’t want to risk part of that rumor about a fear explosion being true.” He stretched his arms out and glanced at the digital clock hanging by the door. “There may be more we can still learn from the object.”

Riven began stuffing the printouts into a filing cabinet. “How so?”

Glancing out the window, Mark continued lightly. “Everyone's got that little voice in the back of their head nagging them about something.” He stood, walked to the window, opened it. A faint breeze fluttered the leaves of his bamboo plant. “People lead their own lives, have their own circumstances and worries. But in the end, there’s a sameness in the fear, inconsequential or silly though it may be. It's natural to worry about things.”

Pausing in his filing, Riven was silent.

Kiryu laughed. "*You're* not afraid a duck is watching you right now, are you?"

Reality Check

> **Item #:** [pending] / SCP-XXXX
>
> **Object Class:** Safe

Doctor Kiryu sat at his office desk, assorted experiment logs strewn around his workspace as he scribbled on the topmost sheet of paper. He didn't look up when his assistant entered the room, dropped another stack of paperwork on the desk, and stole the unopened bottle of water sitting next to the potted bamboo.

"You're writing up the report documentation already?" Researcher Riven Mercer uncapped the bottle and downed a third of the water.

Kiryu still didn't look up. "Yes. There's only a few more preliminary tests left to run, and in an hour or so we'll have enough data compiled to write something solidly coherent."

> **Special Containment Procedures:** SCP-XXXX is to be stored in a fitted storage case, and kept in a standard containment locker at Site-19.

"Why the custom-fit case?" Mercer picked up three of the testing log sheets, briefly scanning the contents.

"It's an old thing. Liable to break and should be handled carefully. Still sharp, though. Safety precaution. Have you booked and checked on the testing room yet, Mercer?"

No response, save for the door swinging shut.

> Access to SCP-XXXX for testing is to require Level-3 authorization. Any interviews conducted with SCP-XXXX are to be logged; the corresponding documentation is to be forwarded to Dr. Kiryu for analysis.

Kiryu crossed out the portion of sentence after the semicolon, but

then after some thought, wrote it back in. Besides, once the typed report was submitted, the site director would be the one to decide whether the interviews would need further scrutiny. That sentence could be removed if found unnecessary.

> **Description:** SCP-XXXX is an unornamented longsword believed to have been created during the late medieval period, approximately the mid-13th century.

Riven was back a few minutes later, peering over Kiryu's shoulder. “Is “longsword” really the right word for it? I feel like the medieval terminology would’ve been more like ‘cut and thrust sword’ or ‘hand and a half stabby thing’. Something more specific.”

“I’ll consult someone on-site who has more experience with this sort of thing, Riven. Let me finish writing the rough draft already.”

> When held at the grip by a human being, SCP-XXXX is capable of speech. Though SCP-XXXX will typically shout generic challenges and similar battle taunts when swung, it has been known to emit distressed vocalizations when making contact with straw-filled practice dummies, and will produce crying-like sounds when used to slice vegetables.

“Are you serious? It *cried*? Wish I could’ve been there… why didn’t you ask me to aid during the experiment?”

“You were testing out the antique fighting fans with another researcher. Rivers, I think.” Kiryu gathered all the papers into a messy stack, scowled at it, and briskly shuffled them into a more neat arrangement. He picked up the papers and stood up. “Besides, after the first cabbage, I had to suspend the rest of the trials.”

> SCP-XXXX is sapient, and able to “communicate” with other swords through an unknown process, allegedly allowing SCP-XXXX to determine characteristics of the weapons it has come in contact with; such information includes relative age and events the weapon has been involved with. Though the reach of the effect is unknown, it is believed that SCP-XXXX is able to interact with any

sword within a 1 meter radius of its blade.

“Oh, you’re typing now? The room we reserved is open early; just checked.” Riven looked over Kiryu’s shoulder and read off the laptop screen. “How did we find out it can mind-link-talk-whatever to other swords?”

Kiryu chuckled. “I’m getting to that. Pass me the recovery log, won’t you?”

> **Addendum XXXX-1:** SCP-XXXX was initially recovered by the British Museum, following an archaeological estate refurbishment. While it was held in temporary storage pending future display, museum staff handling the sword reported hearing voices, generally requesting to be placed “closer to that lovely rapier a few shelves over” so it could be “properly introduced to her”.

“…so it was hitting on another sword? Was that other sword anomalous?”

“Not that we could tell. There’s actually an interview log somewhere in there that I found interesting. Why don’t you read through it while I finish typing up these last two addenda?”

> **Addendum XXXX-2:** Though it is still inconclusive whether SCP-XXXX produces speech itself or is inhabited by an entity that speaks for it, interviews conducted with the object have indicated that it shows a familiarity with various swords of European myth. (See following transcript)

> **<Begin Log>**
>
> *Dr. Kiryu is seated at a table in an experimental room. SCP-XXXX lies on the table; Kiryu holds it by the grip.*
>
> **Dr. Kiryu:** Tell me more about the other blades you knew.
>
> **SCP-XXXX:** I heard there was one particularly choosy blade… Excalibur? Many stories about that one. I can’t

imagine turning so many potential wielders away. And Durendal, he had so many things in his hilt. *And* he was proclaimed to be the sharpest in the world. I wouldn't want to live with that pressure.

Dr. Kiryu: Did you ever come in contact with either sword?

SCP-XXXX: [pause] No. I never met the two. But every blade I met knew the stories.

Dr. Kiryu: Were there any others you knew to be famous?

SCP-XXXX: Hmm. Joyeuse. Joyeuse was so pretty, so I hear. But there's no way I could deal with all that attention.

Dr. Kiryu: Do you wish your first owner was more well-known?

SCP-XXXX: I can't say for sure. It's harder to stay true to your path if people want to use you. Clarent was said to be a sword of peace, and look what happened to him.

Dr. Kiryu: Are there any you envied?

SCP-XXXX: I admired two highly. Arondight and Galatine, I think their names were. Sometimes I think about how much I'd like to go on adventures like they did, rescuing damsels and serving their lords righteously.

Dr. Kiryu: What happened with the rapier you wanted to be introduced to?

SCP-XXXX: [silence]

Dr. Kiryu: Is something wrong?

SCP-XXXX: He refused to speak to me.

<End Log>

Riven snickered. “Aww, those are some awkward circumstances. Surprising that it knew about so many different legendary swords, though. Are you including this interview in the documentation?”

“I plan to.”

“What about any other notable behaviors? Anything else that revealed more about the thing’s mentality?”

“Pass me the experiment log about the kid’s toy sword, please.” Kiryu kept typing.

> **Addendum XXXX-3:** When placed near a child’s plastic play sword during an experiment, SCP-XXXX expressed excitement after the encounter, stating that the sword belonged to a hero who had slain many dragons and was destined for greatness. The plastic sword, on loan from Doctor ’s son, was notably considered a favorite plaything. Further testing of SCP-XXXX’s ability to appraise weapons of more historical significance is pending.

“That’s adorable.”

“I agree. And it firmly establishes the entity as rather benign, I think.” Kiryu closed his laptop. “Let’s finish up that last test.”

> **Addendum XXXX-4:** During a series of tests run on / / , SCP-XXXX was placed next to a medieval sword for several hours. When questioned, SCP-XXXX appeared to have undergone shock and disillusionment, repeatedly stating, “raiding and pillaging at behest of the lord… was this what being a knight *really* meant?” SCP-XXXX then refused to speak for seven days following the incident.

“When do you think it’ll speak again?”

“There’s no way to say for sure,” Kiryu sighed. He typed away at his laptop, a folder open in front of him. “It might start talking tomorrow, or three years from now. We don’t know enough. We don’t even know if it’s the sword itself that was talking, or something inhabiting

the sword that just up and left."

"It's been almost two weeks… what are you going to do with the report you've got?" Riven picked up the folder and flipped through the files within. "There's a lot we have here."

"I'll mark it 'pending' or 'unfiled'. I'm not entirely convinced that it would have needed serious containment, anyway. There are more dangerous things in unspecialized containment." A few clicks of the wireless mouse. "It'll be put with the other ones that didn't make it."

Riven looked up. "Other ones?"

"Sometimes we break things to learn about them. Sometimes we can't put them back together, no matter how much we learn."

"How many others?"

"Hundreds, at least. Thousands maybe. Not all of them are or were inanimate."

"…"

"We've got another incoming cache of items to process. Submit the sword and the existing documentation to Storage and Records. We need to move on."

> Request for Item Storage *(Doctor M. Kiryu, Researcher R. Mercer)*
> Anomalous Item # Cache:
> Recovery Date: / /
> Description of Effects: speech, apparent sentience, inanimate interaction with like objects (see attached documentation)
> Reason for Storage Request: item has currently ceased to exhibit effects
> Routine Reexamination: monthly

Salut d'Amour

Another couple came to visit today. The man played a piece I'd never heard before, perhaps slow jazz; he wasn't too much of a pianist, so I helped him out. He just needed to relax his wrists and get his posture right. He reminded me of myself, a little. The woman laughed, she reminded me of you. They embraced, they walked off.

Apparently I'm the talk of the town on certain days. Lots of visitors, lots of songs, lots of smiles and laughs and most of the time I need to rescue someone (don't worry, I only help them out if they seem sincere) because their hands are shaking and a pianist wouldn't want to mess up on a song they're playing for the love of their life.

I don't remember the first time someone visited me, out in the woods on the outskirts of town. Someone played a charming little love ballad, but their nervousness made the piece too forceful, so I stepped in to aid them. Their partner thought it was beautiful. The next week another couple visited, and somehow whispers of "a true love piano" started spreading.

Not that the piano itself is anything special, though. It's just the old one that used to live in my basement before you convinced me to haul it out and keep it in the living room so we could play duets.

Do you remember when we met?

Once I was your music tutor. Your mentor was once my mentor. Your mother thought it would benefit both of us to play a few songs together a few times each month.

Do you remember the first concert we shared?

It was sometime in the very end of winter, when the first flowers of spring were starting to unfurl from the snowbanks on the hills. I wore a blue tie you nagged me to wear, you wore an azure (azure, not just blue, you assured me repeatedly) dress to match. You worried

about skipping notes, I worried about my heart skipping beats.

Do you remember the first time you told me of your dreams?

We were working on a slow waltz. You sighed and told me you dreamt of leaving your quiet household and living in the cacophony of distant, foreign cities. You tired of the simple song of our hometown, you yearned for the intricate music of the wide world. I encouraged you. I supported you. It was your dream.

Do you remember the last song I played for you, the day you left for a plane that would take you across an ocean and away from me forever?

Edward Elgar's *Salut d'Amour*. When you left, I couldn't bring myself to play any other melodies. Maybe I needed the practice on that piece, maybe I wasn't satisfied with my technique overall, maybe I wasn't satisfied with the way I played that day—

Maybe I believed that if I had played beautifully enough, I could have convinced you not to leave. But then one day I woke up with the snow surrounding me, and I realized that I couldn't leave that spot. I stayed with that piano you loved, because you loved it, and I believed you loved me, even though now I can no longer coax melodies from the keys.

Now, I am no more than an instrument of countless others' affections, the impetus of a hundred charming romances that I wish I could have had with you.

Whispers in the town continue, couples still visit and both men and women confess their feelings and play songs for each other with my help. A middle-aged man who apparently lives nearby tunes my strings and sets up makeshift shelters for me in the winter. I saw him once with a group of other men in white coats, who looked at me a few moments, talked about moving me somewhere, and ultimately left and never returned. I don't know why they let me stay here.

I don't know where you are now. I don't know if you ever thought of me since we went our separate ways. I don't remember the sound of your voice. I don't remember your name. I don't remember your

eyes, your smile.

But I remember you.

I remember why I want to stay here.

I love you.

Memory of a Masterpiece

Expedition log
Item Class: Not Applicable (anomalous object)
Current Location: deciduous forest in ,
(relocation discouraged)
Temporary Designation: AO-9131
Day 1 Notes: AO-9131 appears to be a variant of *Platanus racemosa* (Western sycamore). Leaves noted to change color every few days to reflect the pattern of the sky and foliage of surrounding trees. No further morphological anomalies are noted.

Isn't it beautiful? So quiet. Everything is quiet. Just listen. Pour yourself into the experience, give yourself freely into the landscape, you wish to capture just a fraction of an eyeblink's view, an infinitesimal slice of time carved out by your mind…

I painted this. Me. I remained for longer than intended, and I painted. I painted, and I remained. I became the sentinel on the coast; I now stand equal with the mighty trees that guard the forest.

Day 2 Notes: AO-9131 has been noted to produce faint noises, similar to human vocalizations. Analysis of preliminary recordings revealed no memetic properties. More sensitive recording equipment requested, currently en route to temporary expedition base.

Sometimes you want to do more than capture, more than preserve. You want to disappear entirely, want to become a part of what you behold.

You want to do more than see the grains of sand fall through your fingers. You want to be *the sand,* be *the river that laps patiently at the muddy stone-bank, smoothing the harsh rocks to unblemished pebbles.*

Day 3 Notes: Closer examination of AO-9131. Textures of the bark, leaves, and seed pods are irregular.

- Bark has patterns consistent with linen cotton canvas
- Seed pods, when split, shed bunches of short, dark-colored hair. Samples collected, DNA analysis of hair will be done upon return to Site labs.
- Leaves possess oily sheen. After colors change (approx. once every 2 days), leaves are wet to touch. Paintlike substance rubs off. Samples collected. Chemical analysis using field kit underway.

I wanted to be forever in the place I was inspired—to never have to close my eyes to bring back the memories, to eternally be able to reach out and touch the landscape that so enraptured me.

Just as it was always a part of me, I am a part of what I love. Now it is everything that I am, now, at long last, I know the colors of the sky I could never mix just right with my humble paints.

Day 4 Notes: Recording equipment has arrived. Higher-quality recordings of tree “whispers” taken, content is indecipherable. Attempts at communication ruled out; vocalizations deemed low-priority area-based anomaly emanating from tree.

I never finished the painting I’d once believed to be my life’s masterpiece. It doesn’t matter anymore.

It is one thing to mix colors of light, another thing entirely to feel these colors on your upturned face, drink them in with every fiber of your being… I want everyone to see me, see what I’ve strived to emulate, see the fragment of infinity I’ve managed to hold onto and preserve for snatches of time. See me. See me, and the beauty that surrounds me. I think, I dream, I weep, I bleed, and the canopy fills with the silk swathes of sky.

Day 5 Notes: Color-changing leaves may be some form

of camouflage or other defense mechanism. Based on close observation, tree seems susceptible to fungi and insects that prey upon non-anomalous variants. No anomalous predators encountered during duration of stay. Further investigation of color change pending; mechanism is believed to be secretion of dye-like substances from leaves at regular time intervals.

“Is it time to go already?” There is a crash from somewhere amidst metal supports, a muttered curse, and the sound of a tent collapsing.

“Mercer, we only requested five days for the observation period. We’ve got enough info to lay down prelim containment. There’s already an abandoned ranger house nearby that will be remodeled for a live-in agent, and as of three a.m. today, the entire forest is owned by, well, a company we know.” Dr. Kiryu rolls up the top of a near-empty bag of dried fruits. “Besides, we’re almost out of food.”

“There was an up-and-coming *en plein air* artist who disappeared up here, you know. According to newspaper clippings the lab techs pulled. All the locals ever found were a few canvases and tubes of paint. Guy was eventually called a lunatic and a litterbug. Do you think…” Researcher Mercer briefly looks over his shoulder as he wrestles with packing up the tent.

Kiryu sighs, and picks up a sample bag containing a few waxy, pastel-sheen colored leaves. He regards them almost fondly, almost regretfully, in the dim light of early morning.

“It’s possible that this is something he left behind. But we never really know anything for sure except how to keep an eye on these things.”

Temporary Containment Procedures *(Doctor M. Kiryu, Researcher R. Mercer)*
Anomalous Item # Cache: N/A
Recovery Date: / /
Description of Effects: Nonthreatening morphological and auditory anomalies
Item is to remain in original location of discovery. A

repurposed ranger cabin is to house two Foundation personnel, who will maintain security of the location. Land has been reallocated to Foundation assets; passersby are to be turned away under the premise of a forest-wide restoration process.
Additional Notes: Item is believed to be the work of an anomalous individual. Investigation of the identity of the anomaly's creator currently deemed unnecessary.

Memo: re:AO-9131
Should any civilians possess existing knowledge of the anomaly and make resulting inquiries, they are to be informed that the tree is an ongoing artistic monument, dedicated to honor the Plein Air artist , a frequent visitor to the forest, believed deceased missing.

Remember You

Today was a filing day, as far as Riven could tell.

Kiryu Labs processed a cache of anomalous items every week. Generally, said anomalous items usually came accompanied by some basic safety instructions garnered from the simple preliminary tests. “Basic” could be considered a misnomer to a new associate, but after about three months of processing the objects, instructions such as “do not handle without lead gloves” or “potential memetic hazard, immediately report any urges to break into song and dance” and “sword talks when its handle is grasped” became steadily less and less surprising.

Researcher Riven Mercer, head assistant to Dr. Mark Kiryu and effective babysitter of the Labs when Mark was out on business/ working on his external department projects/on vacation leave to bother his little sister, kept the hard copies of the documents containing these basic instructions in a heavy-duty storage cabinet in the lab office. The instructions were organized chronologically in neat folders, until the documentation would be needed by other departments. Usually the information would be digitized by then, but the anomalous object labs were always picky about never destroying tangible files that might be useful down the line.

There was one special folder, considerably thinner than the rest. It held the scribbled handwritten notes that came in when Kiryu Labs was given not an object, but a location to investigate. So when noontime came and Riven spotted the memo on his desk reading “New assignment, all-nighter, researcher-agent/2-man team, museum” he raised an eyebrow and rushed to claim the sofa in the spare sitting room (nap space was hard to find in a lab) by dumping his laptop, lab coat, extra blanket from the cupboard, and squishy office chair pillow onto it. He then immediately went to raid the lab’s supply cabinets to pack a light backpack.

He hadn't gone on an overnight assignment in *months*.

It was reported that the museum had visitors daily during the first few months it was open. It was different from other such places, so was said, because it only opened after dark. Something about sunlight not being of the right quality to properly accentuate the best qualities of the crystal. Most people believed what they were told, agreeing that the interior lighting was like nothing they'd ever seen before. Subtle in all the right ways, to the point of other-worldliness, they said. You could lose your worries looking at the shining stones, they said. If you didn't watch yourself you'd find that you'd linger for hours.

About a year or so later, people reported hearing voices emanating from the delicate crystal vessels on display. And the fewer visitors crossed the threshold, the more disembodied voices were heard from within. Some people started returning the crystal bird figurines they'd purchased from the museum's tiny gift shop. The prices hadn't been exorbitant, but that wasn't the main reason no one stuck around to ask for refunds.

According to the brief background Riven read while en route, Foundation personnel successfully managed to convince visitors that the rumors were unfounded, but there were still plenty of theories about the artifacts actually *stealing* voices. And it didn't help that the curator seemed insane when the visitors started to thin out. Talked to the walls, they said. Talked to the crystal things. Talked to the disembodied voices. Then the museum abruptly closed its doors and no one heard from the man since.

Riven had glanced at the dwindling sunlight outside the car window and grimaced at how easy it was for the Foundation to forge the paperwork to take over ownership of the place. At least the prelim sweeps were done—no living organisms detected in the building or on surrounding premises.

The museum itself turned out to be rather charming. Two stories, sizable but not grandiose, perched at the top of a hill surrounded by forest, it was rather out of the way from the city streets but actually not that long of a drive away from the Foundation site. The dirt

pathway was rough and unworn, as there were very few vehicles that ever went directly to the building. Visitors parked at the foot of the hill and went up the scenic tree and bush-lined trails on foot. No maintenance was carried out because oddly, the museum's collection wasn't put together over a period of time. It just showed up, along with the curator, who apparently owned the place and opened it to the public one day. No reservations, no tickets, it was a come-as-you-may word-of-mouth sort of place, hidden like a castle up in the fortress of trees.

There was a nice view of the ocean in the distance, though one would need to cross a mile or so of forest before hitting the beach. The sea breezes didn't reach the hill tonight.

He didn't really need the jacket he brought with him, Riven thought to himself. The night wasn't that chilly… *although*, he added silently, *I can't say the same about that agent they sent along*.

Aside from his daunting stare, Agent Tai Yang Shen was a nondescript man. His was a face that you could look at, pin a quick insignificant personality to, and then promptly forget. Today's black collared jacket, thin cotton gloves, half-rim glasses, and trendy messenger bag might have suggested a self-reserved college student, not an undercover agent for a shadowy paranormal organization—but that was probably the point, Riven decided. The average person might expect that messenger bag to be filled with notebooks and old receipts for coffee; what was actually inside was probably the mission brief, a Foundation-issue anti-memetics kit and maybe an intermediate chemistry/first aid emergency pouch cobbled together from what experience dictated would be used most. And all sorts of other knickknacks besides, since Mark had mentioned something about Agent Shen being good with knives.

Riven hadn't heard much else about Shen, admittedly. The Chinese agent had been recruited from an American university following some high-profile field work, and Kiryu Labs nabbed him for background investigations of the item caches. Apparently the man had gotten bumped up to Level-3 and Agent status after an overseas assignment in China dealing with some **`bloody-minded ghost with a thing for numbers`**.

“Ready to proceed?” Shen asked, causing Riven to jump a bit. He couldn’t help it, he hadn’t gone to a museum in *ages*, and Kiryu Labs out-of-site business without Mark was a rarity. He was starting to miss Mark’s easygoing, if sometimes-aggravating, “everything is ooookay” demeanor, really…

“Researcher?” Shen questioned again, opening his messenger bag and rifling through it as if looking for something.

“Yeah, I’m good to go, Agent She—”

“Just titles now. We are in a confirmed auditory cognitohazard zone. No intelligent beings noted yet, but it’s best to say little about ourselves. Wear this.” Shen handed Riven what looked like a wireless headset, with some sort of strange gadgetry perched on top like blunted cat ears.

“New-issue adjustment processes all incoming sound through anti-cognitohazard filters.” Shen continued when Riven looked at the headset as if unsure if it would catch fire in his hands. “You don’t need to understand the details to use it. Put it on.”

Other knickknacks indeed. It’s hard to keep up with all the new Foundation tech these days. Riven slipped on the headset and adjusted the microphone piece. It was sturdy, and a rather comfy fit over the ears, actually.

“This too.” Shen held out a watch. At least, it looked like a watch—the display seemed more like a digital compass. Riven put it on without comment, adjusting the strap to fit his wrist. Meanwhile, Agent Shen had extracted his own headset/watch gear.

“It’s linked to the headset. The screen will change displays when you encounter non-ambient noises, giving you a direction and distance from source in meters.” At the sound of the agent’s voice, the compass needle swiveled to point at Shen, and a little number “0.7” blinked up at Riven.

“…I think… I think I hear music. Classical. Soft, very soft, though. Can barely hear it.” Riven wrinkled his forehead, as if in deep thought. He adjusted the headset slightly.

Shen didn’t seem ruffled, or at least his voice in Riven’s ears didn’t sound like it was. “That's the anti-cognitohazard filter. Meant to be minimally invasive. We wear these; we give up our sense of hearing to the machines.”

Riven just nodded mutely.

It had taken all of five minutes for Shen to run some “just in case” scans using equipment from his messenger bag, and to adjust his gear to some esoteric specifications. Riven had fidgeted the entire time, feeling rather out of his depth. He’d still felt uneasy when they ignored the prim “closed” sign and entered the museum through unlocked doors.

Maybe it had something to do with all the window drapes being drawn. It was a precaution so people wouldn’t see the lights inside and get suspicious, the brief had noted. Riven wondered why the display lights couldn’t have just been turned off. Wouldn’t subtle flashlights have made more sense?

“So why are we actually going into the museum ourselves? Isn’t it the items that are anomalous, not the place itself?” Riven was still trying to get used to hearing his voice processed through the filter.

“Tried to take samples. Artifacts did nothing when taken out, or when put back. Some of them started to deform. As if melting. Patina seemed to be spreading to nearby things, and we had to dispose of the ones taken to the labs.” Shen’s voice was clipped as the two walked through a hallway that would lead to the main exhibit rooms.

“Why send us, though? The most experience I have with antiques is maybe two art history classes in college. Those were years ago.” Riven craned his neck to look at a set of elegant swan-shaped perfume bottles. The museum’s lighting twinkled over the multifaceted rock crystal surfaces.

Shen made a noncommittal noise as he unhooked some sort of Swiss-knife-like tool from his belt. “Researcher and agent. We’re qualified, and we’re expendable. It’s the best combination, really.”

The agent looked pointedly at the case displaying a clear quartz snake with several circle-shaped depressions in its back.

“Candle-holder?” Riven hazarded a guess. Shen shook his head, motioned for quiet, and approached the case. Riven trailed warily behind. He reached into his backpack and pulled out a notepad and ballpoint pen.

The platform light illuminating the display case (what was that about, Riven thought, *there are no light switches or wires anywhere!*) seemed to flicker brighter as the two approached.

“Snake… like hydra …supposed to have seven heads… always seven?”

Blinking several times, Riven could’ve sworn the crystal animal in front of him vibrated slightly when the noise began. He chanced a look at Shen, but the agent’s gaze was pointedly fixed on the snake. It was probably important to listen. Was the bit about the hydra important? Something related to an ongoing investigation?

“Remember that… vase thing with… Theseus? And … minotaur? I thought …it was a unicorn.”

It certainly didn’t *sound* important… Adjusting the headset slightly, Riven noticed that the voices were somewhat warped, even without the classical anti-cog-haz filter in the background. He felt like he was eavesdropping on someone real, just several paces away. He wrote that down.

“…terrible. Why did you… art history class anyway? …Slacker.”

Riven had to fake a cough to muffle his incredulous laugh. He’d been expecting some sort of arcane ritual or demonic chanting. Shen remained unmoved and said nothing.

The effect was anomalous enough, but what they were hearing sounded like a spat between two high school students. Typical of a lazy afternoon spent at an art museum, one would think. Close your eyes and you’d be able to imagine the not-so-happy couple bickering about grades while you were trying to focus on the

artwork.

With a nod of his head, Shen indicated that they should move on.

"It's … bird! Polly want… cracker! Polly want a cracker! …Squaawk!" The sound of children laughing, of little feet smacking against the polished floors. Riven looked behind him a few times, each time expecting to see a horde of little ghost children or maybe human-animal hybrids cavorting through the room. You never really knew what to expect, with anomalous places.

He and the agent had been circling the carved jade phoenix for the past ten minutes or so, listening. The sculpture was magnificent, really, Riven thought. But he kept the opinion to himself, since Agent Shen seemed all too focused on recording snippets of seemingly inconsequential sounds, and tapping away on his cell phone. He'd done the same routine for the carved jewel beetle collection and the crystal deer fruitbowl-thing. Record noise with headset, and stare at phone. What could be so interesting about Foundation gear when there were anomalous crystals to look at?

Honestly, we're in an anomalous museum. Even if it wasn't anomalous, the place is interesting enough to warrant looking at the pieces and not your phone, right? You can look at your phone whenever you want… Riven leaned a little closer to examine the phoenix's intelligent-looking, if empty, eyes. The light around the piece gleamed brighter, as if excited.

"Squaawk! Braawwwk! Brawk." More childish laughter, but more reserved. As if the nonexistent children had noticed there was someone else in the room. Riven stepped back a bit and glanced at his mission buddy.

Agent Shen was looking at his phone again and rubbing his eyes.

"Getting bored already?" Riven grinned. He was actually starting to enjoy the museum a bit, given that he hadn't needed to break out any of the emergency supplies now feeling like rather useless weight in his backpack. "It's barely been half an hour, and we haven't even seen the top floor yet."

To Riven's surprise, Shen replied amicably, "You're right. Let's go see the most famous piece in the collection."

"Are you sure it's worthwhile to see this? The brief didn't say anything about breaking and entering." Riven's incredulous whisper echoed through the upstairs antechamber. He should've *known* it wasn't a regular Swiss knife the agent had been carrying.

"We're not." Shen's soft reply barely drowned out the sound of gently rhythmic metallic clicking.

"You're picking the lock to the room."

"I know. Keep watch." Even through the headset Shen sounded annoyed.

Keep watch, he says. Keep watch for what? Stupid stick-in-the-mud no appreciation for art—that noise. Is that footsteps. What was that noise. Riven's sour mood evaporated instantly when he realized he may have been hearing something approaching. Footsteps? Those sounded like footsteps.

He contemplated asking Shen if he heard those too, but didn't want to distract the agent. The sooner that door was open and Shen could watch his own back, the better. Besides, Riven realized, he couldn't even see anything that would be making the sounds. And the filter gear would've blocked anything harmful to hear…

Those were definitely footsteps. Riven glanced at the sound-locator thing. Two numbers, 1.6 and 2.3. Two compass needles, neither moving. Something was here.

…or, Riven amended, it *sounded* like something was here. Maybe the ghosts here liked looking at the place? There were two large murals on the walls, both lit faintly with the ubiquitous display lights. They provided some visitor information about the history of the museum. Maybe a map or something, he didn't really look. Were those footsteps getting closer?

"Door's open. See anything?" Shen's calm, placid tone snapped

Riven's concentration like scissor blades on a guitar string—it was almost comical in retrospect. Twang.

"No. Nothing. Didn't see anything. But I could've sworn I'd have a heart attack," Riven managed to stammer out, as he relaxed visibly when the heavy double doors began to budge. It must have been only a minute or so, but it felt like hours. "Didn't know what to expect."

Shen chuckled dryly. It sounded like static having a choking fit. "Don't use a mirror to look around corners if you don't want to see anything following you." The agent slotted the lockpick tool back onto his belt, and there was a faint click of blade against case. "You use the mirror because you *do* expect to be followed, and you *want* to see what is after you…"

The rightmost door opened smoothly inwards.

"…before *it* sees *you*."

Oh god it's a crystal dragon, Riven thought. *It's lovely. Look at that workmanship on the wings. So intricate. Wish I could look at it a bit longer. Wait, is this an anomalous effect? Shit.*

The entire thing couldn't have been more than half a meter tall, but the lighting was spectacular. The soft white glow cast an ethereal sheen to the rock crystal, and as they crept closer it brightened to a moonlight-like shimmer. The dragon's four limbs were crouched in a fighter's pose, wings outspread and fangs bared in a challenge. Or perhaps some sort of savage welcome? Riven scrambled to take notes.

"People think they're gone once they leave the museum. That's not true. They've only left when no one remembers. I remember. You remember. They're still here, really."

Riven jumped slightly, and thought his headset was malfunctioning. The voice he was hearing was clearer than anything else he'd heard so far, clearer than even his accomplice's voice. Speaking of which —Shen was tapping the case the dragon was in, as if trying to

ascertain how the light worked. It flickered every time the glass was touched, but there didn't seem to be any motion-sensing machinery near the case at all.

"Everyone leaves a little of themselves behind, wherever they go. Memories carried by people who don't know them, might not even see them, but feel the ripples of their actions."

Shen was tapping on his phone again. Riven rolled his eyes, and focused on the dragon. This place wasn't so bad, really. And that smooth, velvety tenor voice was easy on the ears.

"After you experience enough of it, the loneliness isn't so bad. You coax it into your life a little bit at a time, and someday you'll start to greet it like an old friend. Don't worry about me. I still remember you."

"Researcher. Researcher Mercer. Hey. *Hey.* Snap out of it. Riven. *Riven*, time to go."

"…What?" Riven snapped out of a daze he hadn't realized he'd entered.

"Time to go," Shen repeated, holding out Riven's notepad. When had he dropped it? "Now."

"This museum… whatever it is, *who*ever it is, loved the person that voice belonged to. I'm sure of it. We've encountered similar things before, in objects." Riven had to lengthen his stride to keep up with the agent's quick movement down the stairs.

"We don't know if that voice actually belonged to a person. We don't know if a building, even an anomalous one, is capable of 'love'. Save conjecture for the lab." Shen's shoes skidded a bit on the tiled floor, and he seemed relieved to see the front doors.

"I'm pretty sure there's decent evidence if we go back—" Riven attempted again.

The agent sighed. "We don't *know*. Maybe we will sometime. But not now."

Riven shook his head. “I really don’t think this place is dangerous. That’s why I'm on this assignment, right? To give my report as a researcher on the observations I made. ”

“Look outside.” Shen’s voice was flat, devoid of any indicative affect.

Riven, slightly fuming, made a show of striding to the nearest set of heavy window drapes and dragging them open. To his surprise, the glow of early morning’s light suffused the room.

“It’s dawn. Already? But we arrived here…”

“Just after sundown.” Shen was checking his bag.

“But it felt like…”

“Only an hour. The time difference happened when we looked at the displays.” Shen took off the half-rimmed glasses, and tucked them into his jacket. “Who knows what tricks this place plays on the other senses?”

“But…”

“These places are dangerous, Researcher. We can’t trust them.” Shen patted the cell phone on his belt, which coincidentally buzzed once, as if in agreement. “Our team is here to collect us. Time to leave.”

“I still can’t believe I didn’t notice.” Riven grumbled into his mug of tea three hours later.

“They make these pairs on purpose, Riven. They wanted someone with a researcher’s curiosity and eye for detail, while accompanied by an agent given more information to monitor the scenario.” Agent Shen was sitting on a swivel chair peeling an apple with a pocket knife. “The team before us was a containment specialist and a D-class.”

“They sent in other teams?” Riven glanced up. Just how much “need-to-know” information was kept from him?

“They usually send in a few, for questionable anomalous locations. But I think we’ll be the last exploration team. The cog-haz department will take over for now.” Shen started to slice the apple. He was making rabbit shapes. “Right now, we need to file the report, get tested for residual cognitohazard effects, and then you go back to your lab and I go back to the field. The file is out of our hands now.”

“I see.” Riven took another sip of tea. It was weird talking to an agent in the lab’s sitting room. “Uh… hey. I’m sorry if I came off as unprofessional. I must have seemed like a little kid in there.” *When was the last time I was so excited about anything? So excited I didn’t notice the time passing, or the effects of the lights, or the strangeness of the sounds. The agent probably thinks I’m a fool for getting so caught up with the artifacts.*

Agent Shen shrugged. “They wanted you to go in with a blank slate. More genuine reaction. You focus on observing some things, while I keep track of others. Fuller report.” He paused in his apple peeling, and frowned a bit when the slice didn’t carve evenly. He shrugged when he noticed Riven staring. “I’m better with turnips.”

“…turnips?”

“Yes. Turnips.”

There was a resulting silence that could be considered comfortable. Riven still felt like he had much more to say, though Shen looked perfectly happy to resume carving the apple into little rabbits without a word.

The lack of noise got to Riven. And frankly, he was curious. “Hey, Tai?”

“Yeah?” The agent flicked a bit of apple skin off the knife’s blade.

Riven couldn’t help but ask. “What was your favorite thing from the museum?”

Shen grinned, and for once it didn’t look like it took an effort. There was a hint of wistfulness in the expression. “The phoenix. Did I ever

tell you I minored in Art History?”

A Sort of Challenge

It was eight in the morning and researcher Riven Mercer was on fire.

That fact was probably something he should be more worried about, he thought to himself as he walked a pace and a half to his right and reached for the cold water tap of the lab sink. It was just too damn early to be in the experimental rooms. Dunking his now gently-smoking lab coat sleeve into the stream of icy water, Riven leveled an unamused glare at the lava-burping rainbow lorikeet sitting on a perch a few feet away. The bird had the cheek to blink innocently back at him. Riven caved and reached over to ruffle the bird's head feathers before he looked over his lab notes. "There's a good birdie."

Maybe he'd be more impressed if he hadn't seen that tortoise with a shell that could be used as a barbecue grill. That was part of the cache from six months ago.

Grabbing a pen and scribbling down a series of observations about the bird, Riven glanced warily at said bird and wondered if he should relocate to the combustion lab in case lava wasn't the only thing the lorikeet could barf out. He flipped through the initial data collections: the bird's diet wasn't anything out of the ordinary, but it *was* reputedly brought to the mainland after being purchased somewhere near a Hawaiian volcano from someone shady-looking… *okay what the hell,* the bird was coughing up black pellets onto the experimental lab floor.

Riven put down the notes and dove for the broom and dustpan.

It was nine-thirty in the morning and Riven had found a new intern to watch (observe, engage in experimental scrutiny with, poke until something interesting happened, etc.) the bird. Riven was now sitting in the spare room adjacent to the experimental labs, sipping from a cup of tea (lukewarm, getting colder by the second) and reading through the current list of anomalous items assigned to

Kiryu Labs.

The bird was something Mark had been nice enough to assign to him, Riven thought. He liked animals. He'd studied behavioral biology, and his eventual doctorate (courtesy of accelerated Foundation programs) would be about that topic. Level-2 researchers were rarely given charge of creatures that merited special containment, so being able to study the less-dangerous animal anomalies was something Riven constantly looked forward to.

The door opened, and Agent Tai Yang Shen walked in. Riven made eye contact and suppressed the subconscious urge to spit out the tea in his mouth so he could ask if it was time to go on another offsite field trip. Agent Shen rarely, if ever, showed up at the Labs, and when he did show up, it meant an interesting assignment outside the experimental rooms.

"Did Mark page you?" Shen eventually asked. Riven shook his head and mentally cataloged the agent's appearance: plain slacks, white collared jacket, light briefcase…Maybe they were headed to an anomalous bank? Or some corporate agency? Would he get to go undercover? He'd never gone on an undercover outing! Maybe he'd have an alias and alternate identity and everything!

Shen was sporting a small, though rather amused grin when he handed Riven a sheet of paper. It appeared to be a printout of a transcripted note. "You should read this before you ask any questions."

> **READ ME IF YOU DARE**
>
> This is a message to all of you that work at SCP, as a sort of challenge.
>
> My name is the Grinner, and I am an "anomaly" of sorts. For you see, I devour the flesh of any creature with a heart beat, and it has led to the deaths of hundreds upon thousands of people, luckily at times where war was afoot. But I digress, I will continue to devour the flesh until my untimely capture.

> Perhaps, I should enlighten you on what I am, as a way of making things easier for you scientists, if I am captured. I'm 10 feet tall, and my neck is bulbous in size, and about 4 feet long. I appear to wear a mask with a huge grin on it (it's pure white, and is my face). I speak through my teeth eloquently, and only open my maw when consuming flesh. I am not satisfied until my face becomes completely red and dripping with crimson. I have massive fists for mashing and smashing, but a small set of legs. Oh, I forgot to mention, I also have a long, black mane! It's quite luscious, I assure you.
>
> But to make things quick, since it's almost time for my 2:30 meal, I leave you with this: If you dare to find me, you'll have to search all of canada, and pray that you have some powerful tranquilizers, unless you really want me to feed so badly.
>
> Sincerely, The Grinner.

“So we’re looking for a reverse T-rex with a thing for face paint?” Riven flipped the sheet over, then flipped back to the note and scanned it again. “Well, they signed it ‘sincerely’. I suppose that’s got to count for something.”

“That letter is actually about ten meters long,” Shen opened the briefcase and took out a series of photographs, handing them over to Riven. “It was found by Foundation recon during a routine sweep. There’s an old abandoned office building a few kilometers from the site, and the entire parking lot was turned into a calling card.”

Riven stared at the photos. It looked like a preschooler the size of a building had scrawled giant letters across the formerly neatly-partitioned lot, in what looked like dried glue. “Did anyone run analysis on the area? What the writing ink stuff was, or if there was any other evidence left at the scene?”

Shen nodded. “The writing was done entirely in some sort of opaque white substance, similar in chemical composition to, well, snail slime. We’re not sure how long it had been sitting there, but the team that discovered it put a tarp over the words so we don’t get

curious helicopters landing near the suspicion area."

Flipping through the photos again, Riven spoke up, "So how does Kiryu Labs relate to this thing?"

"A secondary team was sent out to scout the area. They've identified a building with trace residue at the entrance and a few inner rooms. That residue matches the samples collected from the giant parking lot letter." Shen took the photos back and closed the briefcase. "Infrared scans are pretty inconclusive at the moment, but there's some sort of entity in the building. It's small, but it's there."

"So both of us are being sent in?"

Shen sat down on one of the sofas. "Yes. You've done some good animal behavior work and your biology background makes you ideal for this task." The agent glanced at his watch. "You've got half an hour to come up with a list of sedatives and any other equipment you think you'll need. I'll wait here for the moment, but remember—"

Riven was halfway out the door. "Gotcha. I'll be back with five minutes to spare, Tai."

"—to pack light." Shen watched the door swing shut.

Twenty minutes later, Riven was staring at a row of syringes neatly arranged by dosage on the lab bench in front of him. Tai had even provided a handy carrying case for the capped needles, clearly, the man had access to all kinds of strange things. Foundation gear could be oddly specific.

Riven would later find out that he did not need an alias for the assignment. This disappointed him somewhat, but he was given a just-in-case cover story: he was an environmental specialist traveling with his entrepreneur friend Shen to "inspect" the abandoned office facility.

Riven began to consider all sorts of potential dialogues until Shen told him that it wasn't likely they'd encounter any other humans. So Riven switched to rehearsing in his head rather than out loud. He

also thought it was a little unfair that Shen got to carry a Taser and he didn't. Then again, Riven had enough sedative in his pockets to knock out a small herd of elephants.

The transport dropped Riven and Agent Shen off at the very edge of the abandoned office complex's parking lot. The tarp stretched over the message to the Foundation was an off-yellow, boring, and probably doing its job well.

"We're looking for the main center plaza," Shen said as he began to walk towards the offices. "Let me know if you start seeing anything weird."

"Sure. I brought my field kit, so I can nab some samples if we have the time." Riven increased his stride slightly to match the agent's. He began to notice that Shen was paying more and more attention to the ground than the old, worn-out buildings they were walking amongst.

After about five minutes of staring at Shen staring at the sidewalk, Riven began to spot patches of shining pale mass, crystallized an amorphous, glossy white and gleaming in the sunlight of late afternoon. "We're close?" he asked.

Shen bent down and examined a patch of dried slime, eyes following a splattered pattern further on. "It looks like a trail begins near those double doors."

"Old places like these give me the creeps," Riven confided as he and Shen stalked through the remains of old filing cabinets, shelving units, and rickety tables. Mildew speckled the walls, and Riven stepped away from Shen at the moment to examine a small patch of mold that looked like it had been scraped at. "So much for the eating human flesh bit. If there's anything alive and eating here, it's gotta be an herbivore. The most it'd find around here is maybe the odd mushroom."

"That's reassuring," Shen replied evenly as he used his foot to scuff at a patch of slime. It made an unpleasant sucking sound. "Hmm."

The faint shafts of sunlight filtering in through the dusty windows cast the room in a greyish sort of haze, and Riven paused in his somewhat-dazed examination of a withered office plant. “Is that…?”

Shen was using a silver-colored stick-like implement (probably the latest in Foundation investigative poking-tech) to jab at the mucus. Unlike the dried and slightly crumbling remains they had encountered before, this blob was softer, and gave way. “I think we’re close.”

The trail of fresh off-white mucus grew thicker down the hallway, and about three-fourths of the way through veered off sharply into one of the adjoining rooms.

“I’ve notified a backup team to be on standby,” Shen whispered as they slowly approached the open door. He was slipping his phone back into his pocket. “If I’m not out in ten minutes, leave the building.”

Shit, I hope it never comes to that. Foundation protocol is scary sometimes, Riven thought as he nodded in reply to Shen. *Shen’s probably said that line a million times, though. I wonder if he ever thinks he won’t actually make it out.*

The agent slipped into the room on silent feet, walking smoothly as if he had every reason to be in an old abandoned office complex. Riven waited.

There was a muffled squeal and a slightly wet sounding squishing, as if someone had stepped in a bucket of far-too-overripe fruit. Riven shuddered and patted the pocket his case of syringes was in. He waited a few heartbeats more. There was a muffled noise of surprised, and a single spoken “huh.”

Riven decided he was done waiting. “Shen? You there?” He called cautiously into the hallway.

“Normally, I’d tell you never to reveal yourself unless told to, but I think you should just come in.” To Riven’s relief, Shen sounded as unruffled as ever. “Our terrifying monster was, ah, a bit

exaggerated."

Riven dashed into the room and paused when he saw its anomalous occupant.

Shen wasn't quite kidding. The entity they both were looking at seemed more like an overgrown garden slug with stubby legs than what Riven had been expecting—though it seemed like the statement about the four-foot long neck was accurate, at least. It was a dull, pasty white, and the face at the end of the neck was smooth and featureless, save two eyes and a mouth. When on its feet with its neck low as it was currently standing, it barely came up to Riven's knees.

Upon Riven's sudden appearance, the creature reared up in alarm, surprising Shen into reaching for his Taser, when it screeched in a slightly gargled-sounding voice, "You'll never take me alive!" and attempted to throw itself out the nearest window. Its neck prevented it from getting far. Apparently, Riven deduced, speaking long vowels with its mouth open caused its neck to inflate rapidly. The creature unbalanced itself and flopped over backwards, deflating rather sullenly as it lay on the ground.

Agent Shen poked it with his foot. "Are you really this alleged Grinner?"

The creature burbled something resentful, and then replied, "No. That's my big brother. He's the *real* Grinner. He's real. He's going to come and eat you all. Be scared."

Riven and Shen exchanged looks.

Rocking itself from side to side, the creature struggled to right itself back onto its stubby appendages. "You'll be sorry you messed with me. I'm dangerous too." Fluid was leaking from its eyes and dripping into a sloppy, soggy puddle near its face.

Shen opened his mouth to speak, but Riven beat him to it. He stepped smoothly in front of the sluglike entity and made a show of uncapping one of the syringes he was given. "Okay, if you're the Grinner's little brother, we're going to need to take you into custody.

If you cooperate, I won't have to use this." He shook the syringe so the fluid within sloshed noticeably.

There was a shriek and the creature's neck began to inflate again. Riven put the needle away, glanced at Shen (the Agent nodded), and continued, "You're a danger to the human race, and it's our job to protect them. And we're going to find your brother too, and give him a serious talk about threatening people."

The creature deflated again. It lay on its side and sniffled a bit. "You'd *better* find him."

It took all of one and a half minutes for the backup team to arrive. It took half a minute for them to restrain and sedate the alleged Grinner's little brother, and twenty minutes to haul it out of the building and into the waiting transport. Apparently it was much heavier and slimier than it looked.

"Your perseverance with this case was appreciated," Shen commented afterward as he and Riven raided the Kiryu Labs' not-so-secret spare room snack stash. Riven was chomping his way through a bag of cookies while Shen, health nut that he was, peeled a tangerine. The mission debriefing hadn't taken long at all, and now the two of them had about an hour or so before they needed to report for further instruction regarding the entity now in Foundation custody.

"Do you think the Grinner actually exists? Or that there's actually a big brother involved?" Riven asked as he brushed some crumbs off his sleeve.

"No idea. The creature we detained is probably being questioned at the moment, and frankly I'm more interested in how it knew about the Foundation to begin with." Shen had removed the peel from the tangerine in one piece, and was arranging it back into a sphere-ish shape. "We'll decide what to do after the interview. All in all, it was an unusual assignment."

Riven nodded. It hadn't been the most exciting Kiryu Labs field trip

ever, but it was still pretty fun, Riven thought as he leaned back in one of the spare room chairs. He hoped he wouldn't be kept to the labs for too long again. Getting enough fresh air was something he'd taken for granted when he first started Foundation work, and frankly, the repeated experimental trials had a way of wearing down a researcher—it was a little sad, in a way, that anomalies eventually became something commonplace. The spark of wonder he'd experienced during his first days was getting fainter, and he'd been spending more and more time wondering when the next interesting thing would show up.

Riven's cell phone was ringing. He was probably needed in the experimental rooms to help with the new interns again. He could already feel the fatigue coming on. Was it too much to ask for a nap…

The cheerful deedle-deedle ringtone was persistent. Heaving a sigh of long-suffered patience when he saw the caller ID, Riven answered with a noncommittal "Hey, Mark."

"Rivs, I'm in the combustion lab. The bird you were working with exploded when we tried to bathe it. Regular water. Strangest thing. I sent the intern working with me to get a biohazard team, but I need someone to help me clean up the bird… or, you know, what's left of it."

Riven blinked, and realized in retrospect, he had *kind of* liked that stupid bird. "Wait, Mark, isn't the combustion lab already equipped to deal with—"

"The floor is now lava."

Grinning, Riven grabbed an emergency fire extinguisher from the spare room's wall rack. "Should've said that first, Mark."

Decompression

“Wake up. We’re going to the beach.”

At the sound of his supervisor’s voice, Researcher Riven Mercer looked up from his stack of documents, a slightly-crazed look in his eyes. “…Is this an assignment?” he managed to croak out, after realizing he’d all but passed out at his desk during the usual end-of-the-month manic paperwork cram session.

Anomalous items processing, while routine and streamlined at its peak of efficiency, still managed to involve a mind-numbing amount of paperwork. As the second-in-command of Site-19’s Kiryu Labs and resident Foundation intern babysitter, Riven Mercer found himself devoting hours every month to supervisory documentation. He made sure that everyone who clocked hours for the Labs was credited appropriately, that any fire damage that occurred during test trials was repaired, and that the monthly caches of paranormal-but-effectively-harmless things were stored away in the proper skeleton-free closets.

Dr. Mark Kiryu regarded his assistant/right-hand research man/tea-drinking buddy with an air of long-suffering patience. “Rivs, how long have you been processing these cases?”

Riven remained quiet for a little while. He looked at the stack of paperwork to his right side, and then picked up his coffee mug sitting on the left. It was the goofy dinosaur-shaped one, he noted blearily. The Labs must have been *really* swamped this month if he resorted to drinking out of that sentimental souvenir garbage. “Three, four… a couple cups of green tea? I started sometime in the morning,” Riven answered vaguely. “I made a pretty big dent in the stack, but we did bring in a lot of other Level-2s from other departments for this month’s an-items cache, and different people take different notes and we still need to handle hours crediting…”

“Yeah, we’re going to the beach. Pack your sunglasses. Find

someone to feed your lizard…"

"I've been in the Labs since this morning. I've already notified three people that Crellan's bowl needs to be full by—"

"Beach. Now. Transport shuttle in fifteen."

"You decided on jeans?" Riven shielded his eyes from the sun as he stepped off the Foundation shuttle. A crew member deposited a box of "protocol essentials" nearby, and after Dr. Kiryu stepped off, the shuttle promptly departed.

"It gets cold when the sea breeze picks up. *You* went with cargo pants." Mark replied as he cheerfully shouldered the large beach umbrella and scoped out the scene in front of them.

Riven joined in the scoping. The beach was, well, he reasoned, a beach. The sky above was a sedate azure, scattered with picturesque, postcard-perfect white fluffy clouds. A few seagulls dotted the airspace. Below, pale-colored sand stretching along a coastline, bordered by rocky cliffs and purple sea fig flowers, with the ocean calmly lapping at the shore. It was a private beach, (*the* beach, not "a" beach, Riven remembered, Mark had said) and the sand and rocks and water were free of litter and human-generated debris. Apart from the cleanliness, the absolute feeling of *normal* the place exuded was rather unnerving, Riven thought.

"Cargo pants are practical. I might need to wrangle a rabid lizard. Can't hurt to be prepared." Riven examined the box, determined it had wheels and an extendable handle for pulling, and approved of the wonders of convenient luggage. By his guess, he could probably throw the box a good few meters in the air if he had to distract a giant rabid lizard.

"I'm really hoping you're joking, because if not, you're completely missing the whole concept of 'relaxing' you're supposed to—" Mark had picked a spot in the sand and was stabbing the umbrella into the ground, with limited success.

"I'm joking. I just like cargo pants. Are you *sure* I'm not missing

anything back at the Site?" Riven grimaced as the sun peeked through the clouds and into his eyes. He ran a hand through his shaggy hair (normally it was kind of spiky, according to Mark, but it seemed like today even his *hair* was tired). Squaring his shoulders, Riven started dragging the box across the sand. The wheels were useless.

"Yes, I'm sure." Mark scuttled around the umbrella, kicking up sand into a mountain at the base to hold the umbrella up. "Maintenance is taking advantage of our absence to move all your files and stuff into your new office." He scuttled some more, picking up a wayward rock and tossing it into the tide. "Now that you've finished your veterinary doctorate with the Foundation, you're entitled to your own office, your own hoard of snacks, and your own army of filing cabinets. Remember I told you to pack up your paperweights last week?"

Riven paused in his box-lugging. "Actually, no."

"This is why you need a beach day, Rivs."

"Look at this majestic seagull. I dub him the King of Seagulls. Observe his regal crown of feathery authority." Mark pointed. He was, at the same time, also hogging three lawn chairs: one for himself, one for his propped-up feet, one for his plate of snacks.

"I think he's just scruffy-looking." Riven had elected to sit in the sand.

"You're not very good at the whole 'beach day' thing, are you, Rivs."

"You have a pterodactyl costume and a ninja suit in your office storage. Can you blame me for wondering if there's some ulterior motive involved?" Riven grabbed Mark's plate of kettle chips from the lawn chair and made waving motions when the King of Seagulls came within foodstuff-theft range.

"I'm going to walk on the beach. Be courteous with the King of Seagulls." Mark abandoned his three lawn chairs, kicked off his sneakers and socks, and padded towards the darker sand of the shoreline.

Riven watched his supervisor leave, a retort on the tip of his tongue, but decided against calling out a reply. So he settled into one of the vacated lawn chairs, stretched out his legs in the sunny sand, felt the salty sea breeze waft over his face. It was nice, he concluded. It may have been routine, or protocol, or even a requirement based on HR reasons, but for a moment it was nice to be away from the piles of paperwork and the ever-present unknown, untrustworthiness of the anomalous. It was nice to remember what "normal" felt like… or at least was *supposed* to feel like. The researcher let that train of thought pass by and closed his eyes. This was peaceful.

The umbrella stuck in the sand promptly teetered two inches in the wind and collapsed into Riven's lap, sending the plate, kettle chips and all, into the path of the King of Seagulls and his royal entourage.

"Beach day. Right." Riven scrambled up from the wreckage of his food, cursing gravity and the wind in all their many forms.

Mark laughed discreetly from the shoreline. He'd been tracking footprints in the soft water-brushed sand, and watching the ocean wash them away when the tide came in.

"Are there ever times when the absence of anomaly is scarier than the presence of it? When we've spent so much time studying the paranormal, the normal is what becomes uncommon for us?" Riven was sprawled out in the sand again (this time with beach towel on Mark's insistence), the umbrella having being righted and held down by the lawn chairs, the box, and the extra-large bag of kettle chips (for what little support it could give).

"It's a risk all Foundation personnel run into," Mark replied evenly, moving some seashell fragments around on the pages of an open book. He snapped a picture of the arrangement with his phone. "That's one reason we have such a large Psych department." He tilted the book, slid the seashells into his hand. The fragments clinked pleasantly as he cradled them in his palm.

Mark stood up, walked a few steps, and tossed the seashells into the approaching tide. He turned and walked back to the umbrella. Riven raised an eyebrow.

“‘Take only pictures, leave only footprints’.” Mark shrugged, sitting cross-legged in the sand next to his assistant. “If this place *was* anomalous, and I’m not saying it is, what would you hope the effects would be?”

“Benign, of course.” Riven stuck an elbow in the sand to prop himself up, for a better view of the ocean.

“More than five words, please.”

“Something to do with the aesthetics.” Riven flopped back down. “Something with the flowers on the cliffsides, or those shells that get tossed in by the tides…” Riven stuck an arm out of the shade cast by the umbrella and picked up a flattened stone, well-worn at the edges and fitting nicely in the palm of his hand. “Or, hell, if the effect was that every stone I tossed into the waves would skip three times exactly, I’d be happy with that.”

“Didn’t skip stones often, when you were in England?”

“Lived in the city. No place *to* skip.” Riven grumbled, not particularly keen on revisiting memories of his childhood. He’d been such a dork.

“Well. Let’s test your hypothesis.” Mark picked up a stone.

Twenty-seven stones and five collective total water-skips later, with no conclusive results, Drs. Kiryu and Mercer looked for another anomaly.

“Isn’t it a little out of date, the violin?” Riven had taken down the umbrella, which, after being pointed in various directions respective to the wind, was declared not affected by a potential beach anomaly. The sun dipped on the horizon, casting shadows that hadn’t been there an hour before.

“Oh, never. Every box office hit needs a killer soundtrack. Musicals need pit orchestras. People like sensitive flesh-and-blood musicians. You can tell a computer to play like someone’s crying, but it won’t have a clue what to do unless it’s directed by a human who fucking

knows how to cry." Mark was lying on his chest on the box of beach essentials, arms draped over the sides, stomach cushioned with several towels.

Riven gaped.

"…yes, I swear here."

Riven shut his mouth. Mark barreled on.

"Ever played a duet with anyone? Ever seen two musicians sing or play together, totally in sync? There's something transcendent about that sort of moment." Mark scooted himself off the box he'd been lying on, did a quick about-face in the sand (it came off as more of an acrobatic twirl) and stretched out his arms, as if to embrace the sea winds blowing in from the waves. "It's as meaningful as a secret handshake between two old friends, or two lovers sharing a waltz. I played the flute. Lots of lovely duets for the flute." Mark, silhouetted against the fiery oranges and pinks of the setting sun, let the sound of the tides wash away his words. The night's approaching darkness painted the sky in muted rainbow hues, melting to the eventual dark blues and blacks in the distance.

Riven snorted. Mark turned around. "Hey, manly men play the flute. Shen and I can crank out a mean Mozart duet, I'll have you know." Riven sighed, and held up his hands in surrender.

"I'm not judging. I studied piano for several years, back in England," he admitted.

Mark grinned widely. "I'm forcing you to learn some chamber music. We're going to sweep the Site-19 talent show this year."

Riven shrugged and agreed, and the sun went down. The transport arrived just as they finished packing up the kettle chips.

It was dark outside when lab director and assistant arrived back at Site-19. No one in the facility's laboratory wings would know the color of the sky outside; the halls on this floor were always lit with the same standardized, clinical white lights.

“So was there actually anything anomalous about that place?” Riven put the dinosaur mug in the Kiryu Labs’ sitting room sink, along with his plethora of other backup tea mugs. He’d wash them all tomorrow.

“Nah, unless there’s something the first sweep team, the second exploration team, and the successive test teams didn’t pick up on. You’re not the only paranoid one, Rivs.” Mark stuffed the remains of the kettle chip bag into the food cabinet.

“Oh.”

“It’s nice to have a sanctioned beach close to the site, huh?”

“Yeah, it seems like something Site-19’s staff would make good use of.”

“It’s good to get out of the Site from time to time. Remember that there’s an outside.”

“Mark, if Crellan started rampaging around the lab, what would you do?”

“Speed-dial you. Your fat lizard, your responsibility. What are you going to do when you get back to your office?”

“Find out when someone fed Crellan today. He’s not fat.”

Mark sent his assistant a textbook-quality withering look.

“I’m kidding. I’m going to transfer all the beach pictures to my laptop. Probably print one out and stick it to my office door, to remind me to take a break when I can’t feel my eyes.”

A week later, Mark walked by Riven’s new office. He spotted something on the wall behind his assistant’s new desk and smiled.

Taped to the wall, next to Dr. Mercer’s official veterinary program completion certifications and small collection of framed Foundation accolades, was a glossy picture of the King of Seagulls.

Dr. Kiryu went back to his own office, and replied to the memo he had received that morning. It had contained an attached file, his assistant's quarterly psychological evaluation report: "everything looking okay", "some evidence of research-based stress", "subject has a a well-adjusted mindset", "best of luck with new duties, request vacation time as needed".

Kiryu breathed out as he signed the documentation confirming he had read and reviewed the file. One more year, four more psyc evals to sign off, and he'd no longer have an assistant, but a co-director.

Remember to take care of yourself, he thought.

Learning The Alphabet Hub

This series has been discontinued. Abandoned. It's dead in the water.

Apologies to anyone disappointed, but I just don't care anymore.

Apathy is a hell of a thing.

+ If you'd like to see what did make it in, click here.

"Finn, do you think our lives would make for an interesting story?"

"Um. Probably not. I mean, I spend most of my time staring at a computer screen. Or eating. Or sleeping."

"Oh, come on. We have adventures."

"Getting groceries is not an adventure, Allie."

"It could be."

"That was *one time*."

"Right, but like, how many times did we do something *one* time?"

"Okay, that, uh. That's actually a decent point."

"So if we did have a story- like a series, I guess? What do you think it would be called?"

"Probably something dumb. Like a joke based on some gimmick within the tales."

"Like what?"

"Like…"

Learning the Alphabet with Aldon & Finnegan

"Damn straight my name's first."

"Oh, shut up."

- **Prologue**
  - "A" is for Anart Antics
- **Are We Consecrated Yet?**
  - "B" is for Boron Blisters
  - "C" is for Covert Cursing
  - "D" is for Dúnḵin D̰o͂ñuţś́
  - "E" is for Exasperated Efforts
  - "F" is for Facetious Fanatics
  - "G" is for Gray God
- **INTERLUDE 1** (By **djkaktus**)
  - "H" is for Hugo Hijinks
- **Finnegan Has Nobody to Hang Out With**
  - "I" is for Involuntary Isolation
  - "J" is for Jam Jars
  - "K" is for Killing Knowledge
  - "L" is for Library Lifeline
  - "M" is for Mental Mazes
- **INTERLUDE 2** (By **Kalinin**)
  - "N" is for Nazi Nonsense

■ "N" is also for Naughty Necrophiles

- **ACT 3**
  - ○ COMING IN A VERY LONG TIME
  - ○ COMING AT SOME POINT IN THE FUTURE
  - ○ COMING AT A TIME THAT IS NOT THE PAST
  - ○ COMING WHEN THE FUTURE IS THE PAST
- **INTERLUDE 3**
  - ○ COMING AT THE SPEED OF SOUND
- **ACT 4**
  - ○ COMING WHEN BREAK'S OVER
  - ○ COMING AT SOME POINT
  - ○ COMING IN TOO LONG A TIME TO GET HYPED ABOUT IT
  - ○ COMING WHEN I FIGURE OUT HOW TO FINISH IT
  - ○ COMING WHILE I WONDER WHY I DECIDED TO MAKE A 26-PART SERIES
  - ○ COMING THE MOMENT I SLAY THIS THING
- **EPILOGUE**
  - ○ COMING AND GOING

...Like Clockwork Hub

Year 452,382

And here it is; the revelation. Just as there's no real differences between myself and I, there's truly no differences between acceptance and denial. The only two things defining each are semantics and level of emotions. Maybe that's why I had trouble understanding the differences, how to apply them to myself; it's all a matter of shifting perspective.

Maybe there's an end in sight. A goalpost where I can break free of the consistent years spent in nothingness, feeling my atoms turn to wet, and resisting. All I have to do is step forward, remember that "yes" is "yes", and hold on. Eventually, the answer will come for why things are the way they are.

Answers always come.

+ Content warnings for:

- Body horror/gore/vomit
- Abuse
- Self-harm
- Suicide

The Story As It Is:

1. I See a Darkness
2. Castles 2 (Dying Out West)
3. Only God Can Judge Me and More (Let Us Get Murdered)
4. The Moon Is a Dead World (Golden Dawn)
5. Only Once Away My Son
6. Th Vmpr f Tm nd Mmr
7. I'll Try Living Like This (Somebody Home)
8. ...Like Clockwork

Further Reading:

- **SCP-3999** by LordStonefish
- **SCP-3817** by Mendelssohn
- **SCP-765** by TroyL
- In His Own Image: Part 6 from In His Own Image by TroyL
- **Portraits Of Your Father** by thefriendlyvandal

Tangentially-Related Reference Materials:

- **SCP-2740** by djkaktus
- **Leeway** by Decibelles
- .::Only |n Drea{{m}}s-- by tunedtoadeadchannel
- **Parable of the Wayward Prince** by Eskobar
- **Routine Psychological Evaluations By Dr Glass** by Pair Of Ducks (and other articles **Doctor Glass** appears in)
- **The writer's author page and her works contained therein**, by Decibelles

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Fanart:

Researcher Talloran and The Being by **Sir Baubius**

+ Fanart

…Like Clockwork by `SunnyClockwork`

+ Fanart

I See a Darkness

Year 23,981

The **`Parasite`** deemed Death wraps itself around **`my neck`**. It doesn't hesitate to do the same Itself.

"Do you understand yet, the pleasures of drowning oneself in ichor?" It whispers into my right ear.

"Do you understand yet, the troubles that feast upon life?" Death coos into the other.

"I just want to live in peace. Live a normal life, with the concept of friendship. Why does it have to be like this?" I grasp the rug made of eyelids below me, watching as the world shakes in awe. I know that my decision would ultimately boil away the impurities that was cowardice, and soon reveal a hidden strength in me. I withstand the humiliation, knowing it would take time. I see Its mouths stretch in delight, as my nerves shut down. "Is this what I wanted?"; I see It signal in the affirmative. It was the first year where my spirit had sapped and had gone for suicide.

I gasped.

I verb. I verb.

I. I. I.

I.

I?

The background breaks, and my body goes limp.

Year 23,982

My new form is of my youngest self, the developing fetus of a woman who struggled between being a guardian and being a mother. The world starts out as dark and unassuming; usually does. The longer I wait, the quicker It comes. I squirm my way into the light, barely able to feel the air around me, and immediately burn. The background breaks, and my ashes fly away.

Year 23,983

My new form is myself of indeterminate age. I am in a dark room, the sweet, unfamiliar sounds of blackened wasps buzzing in-between the gaps. Across the table is a Woman, Her identity I am unable to discern.

"Hello?" She walks towards me, and I immediately recognize her gait. "Wait, why are you here too, I thought it was —" The first physical sensation I feel in this place is wet steel entering my liver. She twists right, and I collapse on the floor in a heap.

"How could you do such a thing, my inspiration…" She kneels in front of me and turns my body over. She makes sure to position my

head under her knee, so I can only look up at Her face. "How could you abandon me? How could you abandon your mother as well, for the sake of peace…"

"You aren't her after all. Please… please just stop. I want to breathe!"

"You should have thought about that before unleashing your creations upon us." It shook Its head. "Is this the feeling you have felt your whole life made physical? Forming facts into fiction, fiction into facts. Do you understand yet, the knowledge of thoughts?" The room turns stark yellow into as She brings down the blade.

Right pinky. The blood shows an image of a young girl, at the age of 10, being told by her classmates, that she would never amount to anything. Her principal pities her. bright red

Left ring. The skin unravels and shows a portrait, of a child at the age of 12 who once thought he knew what the word "fear" meant. neon pink

Left middle. Veins crawl its way out to write a story. putrid, pale green

When time had a defined construct, two adults separated from each other, leaving their children lost and confused. The children had no idea who to turn to next, and made a promise to each other; this promise would bind the two of them together for the rest of their lives, built upon the solidarity of building new, stable lives as adults. All of this is what they wished for. Instead, their parents remained married, and there would be no semblance of a functional family or close relationship with one another.

All feeling is lost in my left arm now; salt and glucose do not bring sensation back.

Left index. I vomit. "Do you remember your first day working for the Foundation?" the vomit asks. I don't, I reply, strained for the ability to talk, but I assume this means I don't wish to know.. "You looked into the cell of an anomaly, , and wish it would have broken free as you walked by it. I remember. Do you remember the anomaly?"

Some of , wasn't it? "Yes! It's good that you remembered it, because you vomited right after that! They had to transfer you to another site the very next day. Funny how life works." muddy brown

Right ring. The nail breaks into an image. I had bought a gun I have no memory of. There is no memory of me ever using it, or how long I had it. dull grey

Left wrist. I deactivate all my social media accounts, and am demoted to only working on three different projects at the singular site where I had expertise with. a cold and empty white

Right thumb. The bone detaches and pulls itself into my left eye; It spits its rusted blood into the wound. Wasps start to make a nest with my cornea as my socket empties its colors. my research lab

"You should have held on longer, you know. For us, for them." It, who was my sister, now becomes my niece and grins.

"I understand —"

"Do you really?" It shouts at me, in a language I only barely could comprehend. "Do you understand, that which is controlling you? Do you believe I am also the creation of some far-away deity? Do you understand, the one constant tenant of our world?" There were none. "Wrong."

"If there is one, then it is that —"

"Not everything that goes around comes —"

Back around. Shea Stadium, 15 August 1965

The uncertainty of floor and ceiling is now the bowl of a baseball venue I have no knowledge of and no memory of what it looks like, surrounded by men and women of a vintage, peculiar look. I glance around, despite my horrendous sight; my body is fucked, but no one notices or cares in any remote capacity. Four men are in the middle of the stadium with various instruments. Every person's screams are deafening, their volume increasing with each person's yell of ecstasy. There is no end to people.

No end to people.

So many bodies around me forever.

I puke on the kid in front of me, who doesn't seem to notice. My left shoulder is tapped and I turn to look. It's my mother. My right shoulder is tapped, and it is my father.

"Well hello there, gorgeous! Do you recognize us? Truth be told, this is where we first met each other!" my mom shouts. Despite everyone else's voices becoming infinite, her words still take concrete form and meaning, and I am able to hear somehow.

"Yes it is! I don't remember how we managed to get a hold of these tickets, but it sure was a blessing. Without the Fab Four, you would have never been born!" My father nods, looking proud of himself.

"Indeed so! Here's a fun little secret." She leans in to whisper to me. "I almost didn't notice your father because I was so enamored with the music."

"Hah, wasn't everyone, beautiful?" They cackle. I fall to my knees and cry, humors pouring out at a steady rate. "You may also not know this kiddo, but after the show was the first time I introduced your mom to alcohol and cigarettes, thus enabling her addiction and co-dependency for life. It's the little things, you know?"

"Oh sweetie, don't say that! How can our kids even know that's true?" She leans over my body and kisses him on the cheek. "It's not like we stuck together for actual love, you know?"

"At least we made a genuine effort to try."

"Oh hey, they're going to be playing our favorite song next!"

"Now let's carry on with the song," Paul McCartney shouts into the mic for everyone to hear, "that will be the title song from our new film!" He says something I am unable to discern. "This song is called, 'Help!'" The crowd shouts, wild with excitement. The moment Lennon-McCartney strum their guitars, the notes become wires and I feel my lungs empty.

"Aw, don't feel too bad sweetie. We'll see you again at some point! It's not like you're losing anything of value. Your favorite Beatles song was from Magical Mystery Tour anyway, wasn't it?" They cackle as the background shatters, and my essence soars beneath the blue suburban skies.

Year 23,984

Nothing.

« The Beginning, As Much of One as There Could Be | I See a Darkness | Castles 2 »
Hub

Castles 2

A Year of Reprieve

An Amateur Play in (Two) Acts
by
Researcher Talloran

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« I See a Darkness | **Castles 2** | Only God Can Judge Me and More »
Hub

Cast of Characters

Researcher Talloran:	Foundation Researcher of indeterminate age eternally punished.
The Being: Doctor Hikari Yamada:	The one who is correct. Medical professional at Site-??. Hates being called "nurse".
Doctor Simon Glass:	Head of Psychology. Had two appointments with Talloran.
Paul McGann:	The Eighth Doctor.

Scene

Beach-side resort.

Time

Data not found.

ACT I

Scene 1

SETTING:	We are on the balcony of the second-floor of a lovely, expensive beach-side resort. The weather is perfect for relaxing outside; at 35°C (or 95°F), there is no reason not to get some fresh air. The wind is, at worst, incredibly light. Seagulls are out on the sand, and the ocean is still. We see our main star, RESEARCHER TALLORAN, lying in a soft

	chair underneath a parasol. Meanwhile, DOCTOR HIKARI YAMADA has opted directly for sunbathing. Despite the weather, both are in their professional work clothes. If one didn't know better, they'd think that it was colder than it actually is. PAUL MCGANN is on the beach, lying down on the sand and tanning.
AT RISE:	RESEARCHER TALLORAN awakens with a startle, with it being the first time in 452,380 years that a new cycle began in a place not born of darkness. The area is unfamiliar; when was the last time TALLORAN ever been to anything like a hotel, let alone a beach? To the right is someone real familiar; DOCTOR HIKARI YAMADA. It doesn't take YAMADA long to notice TALLORAN, now shuffling around the balcony in a nervous sweat. She looks up from her Wired June 2017 issue and chuckles.

YAMADA

You're finally up and about. You've been conked out for such a while, I thought maybe you'd have

Sleeping Beauty Syndrome.

(TALLORAN continues to pace around, looking frantically over the area.)

TALLORAN

Hey, hey hey hey hey hey, w-where are we exactly? This is different. It's way, way different from before. Are… are, crap, are you —

YAMADA

Relax. The Being can't follow you here. You managed to get some breathing room.

(TALLORAN continues to pace around, looking frantically over the area.)

TALLORAN

B-but I don't understand. What's —

YAMADA

If I knew the answers here, so would you.

(YAMADA takes out a lantern from underneath her chair and starts to light it. TALLORAN continues to pace around, looking frantically over the area.)

Right now, I'm just an extension of your memories and emotions. I guess you always thought highly of me, huh? Calm under pressure, even when shit hits the fan, the Foundation ideal. You definitely wanted that. Maybe that's why I'm here?

TALLORAN

But, but… I just don't understand. It's… it's bright out here, and happy, it's gonna get fucked isn't it?

(YAMADA smiles, finishing the process of lighting the lantern. She gets up and gestures to the door of the resort.)

YAMADA

Try and relax. It gets dark in there, so you'll need to just trust me and follow closely so you don't get lost. We have to move fast in there.

(TALLORAN halts, looking towards the inside of the resort. Now that it was mentioned, it is incredibly dark in there. Before TALLORAN can get more confused, YAMADA grabs TALLORAN's arm and walks over to the door. With that forceful determination, even if the world isn't making sense, an obvious, if small, look of relief spreads over TALLORAN's face.)

TALLORAN

I… sure. Only as long as you explain to me what is happening with all of this.

YAMADA

I will. Just do us a favor. The moment I open the door, close your eyes and imagine this is Site-118. And if you must open your eyes, don't look up at me.

(Before TALLORAN can say anything, YAMADA opens the door. Immediately, an overwhelming sense of darkness and fluidity floods the area, and

TALLORAN is forced not to look. Site-118 starts to come to mind. TALLORAN remembers; that was where last worked. Shit, THE BEING'S claws are scratching the eyelids. Site-118. It was a small enough site that it was easy to map out the area. That's right… down the stairs. Then take two lefts. Go down another flight of stairs. Claws have reached the cornea. Circle around behind the stairs, then open the door in front. You take one more right, and that's how you get to…)

YAMADA

We're outside again. Open your eyes now.

(TALLORAN'S eyes open. It's a starry night.)

(BLACKOUT)
(END OF SCENE)

ACT I

Scene 2

SETTING:	It's a clear, starry night. The resort is behind RESEARCHER TALLORAN and DOCTOR HIKARI YAMADA, and a path in a sparse forest stretches outwards.
AT RISE:	TALLORAN is in awe of the surroundings. It's been ages since there was such a peaceful moment as this one. Back when reality still existed, if one

were to be generous. YAMADA waits a few seconds for TALLORAN to get a bearing for the setting before walking forward, dragging TALLORAN along with her with the lantern in the other hand.

YAMADA

See, isn't it fine?

TALLORAN

Yeah… I guess it was. It's uh. Wow. Shit. It's really nice out here, isn't it. Is this still a trap?

YAMADA

No. If it was a trap, you'd have been caught in it already. We have a bit of a walk to get to what I want to show you, so let's talk some.

TALLORAN

I guess. You're not The Being, but what are you? Why is everything here all safe and cozy? How come —

TALLORAN I still remember you?	YAMADA You still remember me?

YAMADA

Hah! Thought you'd say that. I mean, you do have to keep in mind, I am only an extension of you in here. You must remember enough about me though, if I'm here now.

TALLORAN

So you… aren't actually Dr. Yamada then. For certain.

YAMADA

Yeah, though I can't say that's a bad thing. I'm sure the real real Yamada would hate to be in the position we're in right now.

TALLORAN

But wait!

(TALLORAN slips out of YAMADA's grasp and looks at her quizzically.)

You don't… you don't fully act like her. She was… shit. I can't remember that well. She wasn't as dry though.

(YAMADA pauses to think of an answer. Only the sound of crickets float by the two, before all she is able to do is shrug.)

YAMADA

Not sure! I guess it's because you can't remember me well enough to fully capture my personality. How do you think I acted then?

TALLORAN

More uh… playful? Sparkly? Yeah. I think so anyway.

YAMADA

Alright then. Just —

(Immediately, YAMADA spins once on her heels.)

— like —

(After spinning, she lands on her feet and points her finger in TALLORAN'S face.)

— that?

(TALLORAN snorts.)

TALLORAN

A little bit too peppy, but in the right ballpark.

(The two share some laughs as they continue to walk on, conversation having died down a substantial degree. It's only a full minute before TALLORAN speaks up again.)

Why is it that I'm safe here? What makes this different from all the other times The Being got to me?

YAMADA

You'll have to think about what was different from usual in the past couple years then! Surely you must have an idea, O Grand Researcher Talloran.

TALLORAN

That's just it though. You obviously don't remember because I can't remember. I don't know why The Being would let up on me now when it never has. At least, I don't think it ever has. Maybe this thing has happened before, and I can't

remember that! Fuck, why does any of this happen?

(There is a short pause as they approach a grand, scenic gate by the end of the path.)

YAMADA

Maybe it's because you came to an understanding about something. You didn't just spend the last few hundred thousand years in vain. I'm not sure what you finally understood, but it had to have been something, right? That's the only thing I can think of. And maybe that's why we're coming here. Do you remember now, where we are?

(YAMADA sets the lantern down and opens the gate with both of her hands, motioning for TALLORAN to go in.)

TALLORAN

I definitely would have remembered this giant gate. I guess the forest and its path are familiar… shouldn't it be ladies first?

(YAMADA smiles and continues to motion. TALLORAN breathes in deeply, exhaling with as much force. TALLORAN sighs, tenses up, and heads through the gate.)

(The dirt path quickly transitions into one made of stone. As TALLORAN continues on it, a look of familiarity and shock starts to appear, eyes opening wide. YAMADA follows behind, quickly keeping pace. The two eventually reach their destination, and TALLORAN quickly runs over to it; **a calm, quiet pond**.)

Oh… oh wow. How serene. It's still here…

YAMADA

Mmhmm! Spick and span, isn't it? No ducks out here, unfortunately. I really wish they came by more often. Once in a while was never enough.

I-2-8

TALLORAN

That's right. Yeah. Yeah! The one time I was here, we both came together on assignment. And, and we stayed here for the full week. This place was… real nice. Why didn't we get assigned to it more often?

YAMADA

I don't know. You were always so stressed, why didn't you come here more often? Also, I'm not exactly —

TALLORAN

Please don't remind me of that. I just need this bit of joy right now.

(TALLORAN splashes the pond, sighing.)

That also explains the gate; I remember you showing me that once.

(YAMADA sits down by TALLORAN, dipping her feet in the water.)

YAMADA

Ah, how nice. You remember working with me, right? You got to hear my patients express gratitude for

my work… heh, they even called me something real particular around you. You remember, right?

TALLORAN

Yeah. "My ray of light." How endearing. You were some people's reason for living. That's an amazing quality in and of itself.

I-2-9

Somehow, I forgot about this… I didn't think I'd be finding the pond here of all places. But wait… I remember. When we were here, we got interviewed by… uh, by…

YAMADA

Dr. Glass, wasn't it?

TALLORAN

Yeah, but I didn't see him when we walked in. I don't even know if I can see more than one of my own manifestations of people I know.

(TALLORAN looks up at YAMADA before realizing someone is sitting on the bench behind her. The figure's back is to everyone. He waves his hand and calls out.)

GLASS

Hey! Long time no see, Talloran.

(BLACKOUT)
(CURTAIN)
(END OF SCENE)
(END OF ACT)

ACT II

Scene 1

SETTING:	The duck pond.
AT RISE:	TALLORAN, YAMADA, and GLASS are all on a bench overlooking the pond. The perspective has shifted now, as everything but the bench have moved around to accommodate the three overlooking the pond. While GLASS and TALLORAN are in full-focus, YAMADA starts to loose transparency and clarity.

GLASS

Funny that you remember me better than Yamada. If she were here, that'd be real insulting to her, wouldn't it?

(GLASS takes a bite of an apple. Despite the apple and GLASS appearing solid, GLASS phases through the apple. Crunching noises can be heard as GLASS continues to chew, throwing the apple in the pond for the ducks.)

YAMADA

I still feel insulted, you know! Hmmph. I guess I get it though.

TALLORAN

Huh?

GLASS

Well, people tend to remember the negatives much better than the positives. That's just how our brains adapted to survive. You may have been great friends with Dr. Yamada, but the two times you've spent with me is easier to remember specifics for. We didn't exactly talk about the happiest of stuff, right?

TALLORAN

I guess not? I guess if I'm seeing the Head of Psychology himself, then it's very much not a happy case.

YAMADA

What did you two talk about anyhow? That's not something the calm and steadfast side of you would be dealing with.

TALLORAN

I remember the first session for sure. It was about the uh… the roughness I've had dealing with anomalies. No one tells you this when you first join, but you're just so likely to end up traumatized and messed up. I thought I got through my first couple years fine before they found me having a meltdown by some humanoid's cell.

GLASS

Do you remember the anomaly?

TALLORAN

Would that even matter, really?

GLASS

No wonder I couldn't figure out which one that was just now. And the second session?

TALLORAN

Hey, wait… if I remember it, that means you would, so why don't you say it?

(TALLORAN stares down at the ground, frustrated, as GLASS gets up to pick another apple off of a nearby tree.)

GLASS

For patients undergoing psychotherapy, it helps them process stuff a lot easier when they explain what they are feeling or remember of events. A manifestation is still just a manifestation, but you are you yourself. So you should say it.

TALLORAN

You're no fun.

GLASS

I'm only fun on my off-days.

(GLASS bites into the apple.)

TALLORAN

It was… about my teenage years and young adulthood. I had a real rough time surviving before I got picked up by the Foundation. It's tough. But it's hard to remember that many details

about it. I just know quite a bit of it was my own fuck-ups.

GLASS

Like?

TALLORAN

Again, hard to remember, but… not taking the chance to move houses when I had the finances, or not sticking up for myself when it would have saved me jobs. Shit like that.

GLASS

Maybe The Being is eating up your negative emotions. That could be likely, especially if you're at the point now where you're unstressed enough that you can spend time here and enjoy it. I mean, relative to everything else.

TALLORAN

Fuck, I don't like that. That'd mean that being hurt for all this time is supposed to be a positive!

GLASS

And to you, that'd be wholly negative, ri —

TALLORAN

Yeah actually, it would be! Hey, Yamada, aren't you still there?

(TALLORAN looks up, only to see YAMADA completely gone.)

GLASS

Oof. Unfortunate.

TALLORAN

W… what? But I can still remember her. Why isn't she here?

GLASS

I think our subject of discussion's finding you.

(The two remain silent for minutes. THE AUDIENCE grows impatient. The world gradually shifts itself again. GLASS looks up at the sky.)

GLASS

Hey… our session is almost up. But I just want to ask you about something. Earlier, you talked about the Foundation being traumatizing, and having a rough young adulthood. But you didn't say anything about it being wholly your fault when it wasn't, and vice versa, right?

(TALLORAN remains silent for twenty seconds.)

GLASS

Do you think you've accepted that oftentimes, the bad shit that happens to you isn't your fault? And that when it is your fault, you know it and can accept it?

(TALLORAN remains silent for another minute. THE AUDIENCE starts to riot.)

GLASS

Sometimes, if you shift your point of view, you can reach new levels of understanding with yourself, and with your actions. I didn't have time to teach you that out there in reality, but here I think you understand.

TALLORAN

I…

(As TALLORAN stands up, the physical form that is taken begins to gradually break off and disintegrate. Bits detach, and TALLORAN shakes, staring at GLASS surprised.)

GLASS

Who knows when our next chance at calm is? But when you get it, remember what you learned on your way there.

(THE AUDIENCE floods the stage, taking the form of THE BEING now, and the world shatters. TALLORAN hesitantly nods and reaches out to GLASS, before the body completely breaks and there is no remaining light.)

(BLACKOUT)
(CURTAIN)
(END OF ACT)
(FIN)

Only God Can Judge Me and More

Year 14,999,999

Here's a joke I remembered liking at some point.

A Foundation employee goes to ask the Records Department to change their name and gender. After filling out many forms and having to carefully explain to the staff what they are doing and why they are doing it for hours on end, the process is finished.

'See, that wasn't so bad!' And the clerk was right! It was a lot easier than expected, even if bureaucracy will still make the paperwork take ages to go through. 'There's just one last part of the process on your end, however. Please put on these laboratory gloves.'

'Anything to get this done and over with, sir,' the Foundation employee states. After they put on the gloves, they then are handed ***SCP-113****.*

'Once you get back to your living quarters, you are instructed to use this once every other week for two months until your forms are processed and approved. Then you may bring it back, and you are

officially all done.'

*As reluctant as the employee is, they know they just need to get through it. So they comply. For four months, they use 113, "switching" between genders constantly, undergoing what is now classified as a "**Class-Diogenes**" phenomenon, appearing visibly more androgynous. After four months, they are notified that all their forms have been approved! Now they can bring 113 back to the Records Department. With haste, they make their way back and approach the clerk!*

'Thank you very much for your patience, your name and gender changes have all gone through. One final question we need to ask before you are free to leave; have you noticed any changes with using SCP-113?'

'No sir, I can't say I have,' the employee replies. 'Why is this mandatory to use, again?'

'So you can see what living as both a male and female is like,' the clerk replies in a stuffy, bored voice. The employee is stunned!

'With all due respect, that sounds crazy. I've already spent my life trying to live as both; it's a real garbage fire.'

Cue my nervous laugh, my stomach sinking.

I'm pinned on the conveyor belt of a grand machine, overlooking the entirety of my existence. Its mouth is a howling beast with the skull of a human, full of insecurities and paranoia. "I'm struggling, I don't know what comes next, I'm doing my best, please like it, please like me," it cries out in a tinny gasp. Still it churns on, and still I get ever closer to it. Any second now, it'll pierce me, and that will be it.

When its jaws come hurtling into my body, I don't end up dead. Instead, it stops at my neck, slowly dragging its way down my body. Breathing becomes harder. Its jaws stop at my torso, snapping it off; I feel no pain.

"Talloran, why do you feel no pain?" the **Voyeur** questions. "Have

you gotten used to your pain? Do you look forward to it now?"

"I thought you were the one inflicting the pain on me!" The Voyeur circled around, burrowing itself into my corneas.

"No, I'm merely the arbiter. I only bring what was already there. Hmm… there's just no physical pain here to bring." The jaws' claws work its way up to my head now. "In much the same way as a writer is the one bringing out its' characters present in the story, so am I for your hatred to yourself. It's simply…" The jaws break off the front portion of my head. "…simply just the messenger."

The machine scoops up my brain, and though my body is limp, I still feel and sense everything around me. With its hand, it splits me apart, gently guiding both halves into its skeletal form; one for its head, and one for its crotch.

'Talloran, do you understand now, who you are?'

I am… Researcher Talloran.

'Do you know what you are?'

Human, in the loose sense of that word.

'How would you describe yourself?'

I can't.

'Why do you avoid referring to yourself in here as anything other than yourself, or Talloran?'

I guess… it's because…

'Are you a guy?'

I'm unsure. I don't know.

'Are you a girl?'

I'm unsure. I don't know.

'Do you remember how you were before you sentenced yourself?'

Yes.

Then why the lack of responses?

I'm unsure. I don't know.

I've never known, I suppose.

Have I always never really known? Or is this just a recent thing? What if it's all fake and in my head?

Wouldn't be the first thing to doubt in here, that's for sure.

"Gender's that much of a worry for me, huh." The words came out from somewhere I could recognize as being me, but I wasn't sure. They transformed into neon colors resembling **a Rorschach test**.

[[span style="color:#000000;"]]"What's my biggest fear?" The fear of not knowing. "What's my biggest concern?" That I am simply faking. "Is it so important to entrust myself and my safety to everyone around me?" Yes. "Even in a place like the **Foundation**?" Yes. Especially in the Foundation. "To be neither a man nor woman, huh, nor truly either or." Yes. "Do you think not being yourself any moment of the day is an actual problem?" Yes, because I am the root of this problem. "And not your environment?"[[/span]]

I don't think so… it's just easier to blame myself and be a sad-sack, isn't it?

But if that were true… it'd be a sad story. There's more for me out there than a sad story, isn't there?

"The machine isn't interested with feasting on you… what do you feel right now, that you can truly feel nothing in your situation here, but contemplation?" the Voyeur asked. Irritation seeped in for the first time.

"I feel… like I want to be alone and think." And so It left me alone. I spent every second contemplating, feeling myself out.

I got stronger.

2016

Talloran heads to the Records Department.

Year 15,000,000

I'm one step closer to surviving.

« Castles 2 | `Only God Can Judge Me and More` | The Moon Is a Dead World »
Hub

The Moon Is a Dead World

« Only God Can Judge Me and More | `The Moon Is a Dead World` | Only Once Away My Son »
Hub

Year 1,600,000

Talloran immolates. For every month they burn, they get to watch two loved ones die.

Year 1,659,455

Talloran drowns. The ocean brittles their body, the sea-life spits them out, and they become part of the life cycle.

Year 1,736,442

Talloran crashes. Their heart races a hundred beats in a month, then a week, then a day, then an hour, then 30 minutes, then one minute, then 30 seconds, then one, then a half, then a quarter, then an eighth, then —

Year 1,777,777

Talloran experiences divination. *Awaken, my love,* **`he`** cried out.

Year 1,786,108

Talloran snaps. They lose their will again.

Year 1,786,109

Talloran revives. They regain their will again.

Year 1,831,537

Talloran suffers. It starts to get boring.

Year 1,840,622

Real boring.

Year 1,892,777

That’s the problem with suffering. There are only so many bastard-filled ways to die, so many righteous punishments to undergo, so much limit to abuse, that it soon becomes nothing more than a fleeting blip. Only the one in charge of Hell can keep up with that kind of track record, and the **One** overseeing it now has lost Its touch.

Because the only one who can keep that luster alive is the self, and Talloran has better ways to spend their time.

January 3, 2017

Two people curled up to each other in bed. They were more than lovers; they were cosmological bastions of safety for each other. Researcher James Talloran and Agent **Draven Kondraki** have a moment's worth of peace in between their hectic schedules. Half-asleep, and the only things of interest are the snow outside illuminated by the balcony lights, and each other.

Talloran feels Draven's heart rise and fall. It's obvious what this means, having been together for this long now.

"The transition to Site-118 won't be that bad for me. I'll be focusing almost exclusively on Keter objects, but staff know what they'll be assigning me to. I won't be at risk."

"You just won't be around here any longer." Draven kisses Talloran's neck, a reaffirmation of grounding.

"Yeah. I'll video call every day."

"What if your schedule is too different?"

"Site-17 isn't that far away from where I'm going, you know. Even if it is, it's not like either of us sleep much anymore."

"It's only been a month since we moved into this apartment anyway. It'll miss you."

"I'll miss it too, Draven, hon."

"Mmhmm. Who's going with you?" He was curious to know; he knew there were some reassignments, but to Site-118 in particular was odd. It seemed well-staffed enough.

"You remember Dr. Yamada, right? She's coming with me… I guess to look over me. Glass won't see me anymore, but I'll be seeing someone there. I can stay sane enough."

"Sure." Neck kiss.

They stayed quiet for another half-hour. The songs snow made when it fell rivaled that of any musician, and its existence made the season more colorful for them. Lingering silence never bothered either one of them in each other's presence, nor any of their characteristics and mental traits that made others such a pain in the ass to deal with. They weren't pure, but all they needed to be was transparent.

Talloran turned around, facing Draven now. The both of them were exhausted, but Talloran… they were borderline asleep. Even through half-opened eyes, Draven… he was cute. There's so much love to give and so much space for that love and so little time to love and it kind of hurt to not be able to keep giving that love as much as they wanted to. In the grand scheme of things though, 95km would ultimately not be as devastating as it otherwise could be. The Foundation, as draining as it was, at least made sure to give some consideration to Draven's family.

"I'm still not sure about a first name, hon. James doesn't quite fit me, I think." Mumble mumble.

"Too attached to your old self, or something or other." Mumble.

"What do you think about Jasper?" they questioned.

"Joyce."

"Jaden."

"James. No wait, that's already your name." In response to Draven's mistake, Talloran tried opening their eyes and exaggerating a disappointed look. *giggle*, then they both shared in the laughter. "Jules? Why stick to J anyhow. Go big, go bold. Avery."

"Alex."

"Erin, with an E."

"Jules, Aiden, Blake, Ari, Devin, E… Eli, Kai. Gr…ey… S… ky…… lar…… J……." Talloran drifted off to sleep.

snore

Draven smiled and got out of bed. Tired as he was, there was still some stuff he had to take care of before his boyfriend transferred sites in a couple days. He could no longer afford to be put off by the minutiae of day-to-day work. There was business to take care of.

He wandered the apartment, one inherited from his deceased father, stumbling in the dark. Being tired and still unfamiliar with a new place wasn't the best option. When every step forward was also for confronting a trauma still being processed, things were even harder. Luckily for him, he had the tenacity of an angry, hungry dog, so minor issues like "adjusting to dark rooms" and "avoiding bumping into objects" were no problem in any capacity.

That is, until he stubbed his toe with full force onto a metal plate.

"G-gah, fu—" He slapped his hand over his mouth, trying not to yell and wake up Talloran. It hurt like a motherfucker. Though once he turned the corner in an attempt to find the bathroom, he managed to stumble across it. The door had a single nameplate on it.

Doctor Benjamin Kondraki

Calling him a doctor was always overstating it, and maybe he didn't fully deserve the honor of being a Foundation employee at times. But he did. He absolutely did. He was as good of a father as any, and more importantly, he was *his* father.

Draven entered the room, and his heart stopped for a brief second. In a way, it almost resembled his father's old office. It was still being unpacked, and shit was strewn all over the floor. That was fine. The desk was positioned in front of the window, the way his father typically liked working. The moonlight was potent tonight, and shone right onto the dilapidated chair. For a brief moment, he could have sworn he saw his father there, looking down at some documents with bourbon on the desk, before looking back up at his son and smiling.

He blinked.

His father left. Only the bourbon remained.

Draven knew where he could find the thing he needed to give to Talloran the most in the mess of a room. He needed to keep it a secret, after all. His father's desk had a drawer, which contained a manila envelope. And there it was, same location as he put it in. No tampering either. At least his boyfriend didn't find it.

It was still weird to Draven that his father left this behind for them. It wasn't even found until the move to the new apartment. His father was mysterious in ways that don't befit the adjective, but this was maybe the most strange. Talloran thought a lot of his dad despite his issues, because the two of them got along together well (or rather, well enough), because Ben was his dad and even because there was some level of understanding underneath it all. But the fact that he thought of Talloran in the same way at all, enough to leave this behind, was odd. At least he was considerate.

Closing the door and choking down sobs again, Draven made his way back to the bedroom with one less toe stub this time. It'd be sort of pathetic to wake his boyfriend up crying over recent events again, but they would understand, surely.

"Night, bun." Draven kisses their forehead and holds onto him,

falling into sleep soon after.

At least they'll always have each other.

Year 1,996,437

"Why is it that you keep pushing on?"

I'm still not sure myself.

"Tell me. Do you fear being paranoid?"

I think so.

"Do you fear being pursued?"

I… yeah.

"Do you fear what life brings to crush you?"

…yes.

I step away from the sharp claws of Its hatred, and see the gallery of lives that once could have been. Were it another time, another place, another universe, I could have once lived another life. Whether they're just my desires and imaginations, or actual realities, I'm no longer sure, but to someone, they are real.

- *I see a girl and her grandfather, existing in happiness as he defies Heaven.*
- *I see a family stick together, as tight-knight as they'll ever be.*
- *I see a writer, attempting to fill their stories with love.*
- *I see a girl escaping from the abuse her father*

continues to bring.

- *I see technology becoming critical, becoming knowledgeable about minor topics.*
- *I see a robotics company stake their claim on their products.*
- *I see disillusionment, self-doubt, and frustration take hold in a personal world where online has just as much frustration as offline.*
- *I see someone transcending body and spirit to become happy and affable.*
- *I see a teenager, wishing to be a princess, stuck in her own head.*
- *I see aliens as pets.*
- *I see the Foundation turn to nothing from head cannons.*

- *I see reality distorting itself, until it's simply fiction.*
- *I see a woman taken by fear and hatred to exist only in dreams from the in-between.*
- *I see an artist striving to prove himself.*
- *I see meandering born from a broken relationship.*
- *I see those forgotten becoming remembered in other ways.*
- *I see many deaths at the hands of anomalies, were they not in the hands of the Foundation.*
- *I see Nero burn Rome to the ground.*
- *I see people, the world turned against them, unsure of how to deal with it all, try to cheer each other up.*
- *I see an evil man kill for his own gratification.*
- *I see artists as activists.*
- *I see Nobody looking for her lineage.*

- *I see a writer struggle with holding onto the world in more than one way, her resolve challenged in many aspects.*
- *I see a news editor, compiling last month's latest for those interested.*
- *And many more.*

My situation is absurd. I'll accept that. I smile, and let myself go. The background shatters.

Year 2,500,000

Court is in session.

« Only God Can Judge Me and More | The Moon Is a Dead World | Only Once Away My Son »
Hub

Only Once Away My Son

« The Moon Is a Dead World | Only Once Away My Son | Th Vmpr f Tm nd Mmr »
Hub

Year 2,500,000

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen and folks identifying otherwise, we are live at the William James Courthouse, where we are bringing you live, that's right, LIVE coverage of the trial of one Researcher Talloran and the charges levied against them. I'm James Talloran, and joining me today, as always, is the lovely Jessie Talloran."

"You know it James! Yes, this is a very special case today, as the charges levied against Talloran are of a very serious nature, and it's been, what, some million years since the last trial held here hasn't it? So the fact that we're having a session today is absolutely astonishing, and frankly after everything that has happened, unprecedented even. We'll be following along closely as developments happen."

"That's right. Throughout the trial, we'll be switching back to Jessie primarily and getting her on-the-ground updates. I'll be joining periodically to give my thoughts. Trial is in pre-session and expected to start in a few minutes. Stay tuned for the latest on JTTV News 45."

Talloran sat at their bench, surrounded by busybodies, staff, and news journalists setting up cameras all over the courtroom. The entire world felt suffocating, moreso than usual. If you give the illusion of a media presence, it'll end up feeling a lot more real.

"H-Hey, excuse me, can I get a lawyer?" No one answered Talloran's question. "I'm uh, I'm pretty sure courts are supposed to provide a lawyer to people who are unable to afford one?" An old janitor cleaning the aisles next to Talloran looked up at them and grimaced.

"Don't you remember the predicament you're in, sonny? You won't get any lawyers here. Hrmmmm…" His voice trailed off as Talloran stumbled for responses.

"Hey, wait, hey hold on! I still deserve some sort of legal presence even in this bullshit nonsense! Can't you like, tell them to give me a lawyer? It'll, i-it'll help at least," Talloran spat out frustrated at the absurdity of the scene around him.

"I guess I can bring it up with the Judge, see if we can find you a quick guy to fill in for your legal defense, but don't expect anything." The janitor grumbled as he continued to clean the aisles, stepping over the spectators rushing to their seats.

The court had started to amass more people, none of whom would even accidentally glance Talloran's way. One by one, the room started to fill in to any open space they could stand or conceivably sit on or in. The claustrophobia Talloran felt was starting to creep up on them. Unfamiliar empty face upon unfamiliar empty face. It felt hopeless to rebel against the situation as it was right now.

"All rise!" a voice yells. All 694 beings stood up as **the Judge** enters the courtroom, making Its way to the bench. With bated breath, all waited for It to go through the motions. **The defendant** in particular glared at It, watching, waiting. Soon, they'd be able to make their break. They just knew it.

The Judge sat down. It occurred to them at this moment that they've actually never attended a trial proper, been on jury duty, or actually

knew how court proceedings worked outside of fictional media.

"You may be seated." Everyone but the defendant sat.

"Researcher Talloran," the Judge boomed, "as requested, you have been given a lawyer by the court. We will institute a new and unusual two-minute pause as you discuss with your lawyer your current situation and proceedings." Wait, wha —

"Hello there, [insert name here]." The defendant turned to look at their right, and spotted, in a court full of horrendous figures, bizarre anomalies, and hordes of empty canvasses, the most upsetting sight yet; their lawyer. "Name required for continued use. pal."

The lawyer, a robotic husk of parts, wires and AI, was dressed rather sharp and fancy. A tight suit adorned with fancy nonsensical seams and a collar entirely unsuited for non-humans. A red-and-brown hat garnished with gloss. Grey leather gloves. Despite the appearance of a digital smile on its face, it spoke in an utterly monotone voice; as bored as a robot could possibly sound. To say that the defendant was taken aback would have been an understatement.

"U-Uh… um…"

"Name not valid. Name required for continued use, pal."

"Talloran."

"Hello there, Tall-lor-ran." Every syllable was mispronounced and dragged out painfully. "I will be providing your legal counsel in court today. I have been informed and up-to-date on the charges against you. If there is a course of action you would like to pursue, please let me know and I will do my best to assist you." What could possibly be a good way to respond to something so utterly useless? What would be the point?

"Uh, I guess, let me just. Handle the stuff I am able to handle on my own, and you can handle the rest?" the defendant hesitantly answered.

"Affirmative, Tall-lor-ran. Plan of action noted. Thank you for

choosing Designated Extraordinary Case Interpreter, Version 23." Unbelievable.

"Talloran, you have been initially charged with the following crimes: Working for the Foundation Instead of Pursuing a Better Career, Anhedonia, Mental Illness in General, Inability to Cope, and . How does the defendant plead?" The Judge's voice boomed throughout the entirety of the world; it was hard not to wonder how it couldn't have reached the outside by this point.

"I don't see how any of these could be considered crimes, Your —"

"Not guilty then. In addition, you have also been charged with the following crimes: Non-Conforming Gender, Non-Conforming Sexuality, Taking Shit Too Seriously, Unable to Care About Others Adequately, and Frustration With Hobbies. How does the defendant plead?"

"Wait, how are any of these crimes? What are you doing with thi —"

"Not guilty then. The trial is now in session." The Judge bangs Its Gavel, and the scene shifts entirely to the same court room.. The defendant can feel the atmosphere shifting them onto another plane entirely, finding themself on the stand with a splitting migraine.

"The prosecution may now begin."

For the Charge of "Unable to Care About Others Adequately"

The prosecutor, Talloran, Esq., approached the stand with a manila envelope in hand.

"Now, Mx. Talloran, do you recognize this envelope?" The defendant stared at the envelope, mystified. It wasn't labelled. It didn't have any special marks on it. How were they supposed to know what was in it?

"No."

"It is an envelope containing a letter addressed to you a long while ago. It is from…" The prosecutor lifts the paper from the envelope and nods, showing it to the defendant. The words are in writing they are unable to read or comprehend, but it's immediately clear what it is supposed to be. "…Benjamin Kondraki. Do you understand now?" Their eyes go wide. "Excellent. People of the court, this is a letter written to Researcher Talloran in 2016, approximately a few days before the suicide of Benjamin Kondraki. Its significance is lost on you right now, but when I read it, it shall be clear. Ahem." The prosecutor opened his mouth.

The sound of large metal screeching against metal sounded, blasting itself onto the defendant. They were too dumbfounded to move, to cover their ears, as blood started trickling down the side of their head. Yet they knew what was said, what was written. And regret filled their body.

"Now, Talloran, have you gone on to honor this letter since you first read it?"

It was impossible to answer. Maybe? How could they have remembered? It was hard to keep track of the memories from reality and from here. But… they had a nagging feeling in the pit of their stomach that…

"No, I have not." Murmurs in the crowd. The Judge bangs the Gavel. "At least, I don't remember doing so? It's been hard to tell, with the few million years or whatever that I've been in here by this point."

"So you don't even remember its contents?"

"Not really…" The defendant trailed off. "But that means nothing! I could have done something in relation to it!"

"What matters here is whether you did or not. To the best of your recollection, did you honor the letter and its contents, or did you not, Talloran? Please remember that you took an oath under penalty of perjury. I'll repeat the questions. Have you gone on to, or did you in any way, honor this letter written by Benjamin Kondraki and

addressed to you and the contents therein?" All eyes on them.

"Not to my recollection." Talloran, Esq. nods, jotting down the statement.

"Thank you."

For the Charge of "Mental Illness in General"

"Now, if the court will look to this table here, we can see the medical records of one Dr. Manwell Cutler of the Ethics Committee, who for the months of March 2017 to July 2017, had biweekly appointments with Talloran for assessing their mental health and ability to work on various Keter-class projects, both standard and those handled under different moral codes." Talloran, Esq. flipped through the pages.

"Here, we can see Talloran's records. These will be important later. However, going back to the page before it, we can see that —" The prosecutor struggled to flip the page back. "Shit, excuse me, sorry, uh, crap. Here we go. This is a record of how often Talloran showed up to appointments. You can see that starting in May, attendance started to slip, with —"

The defendant zoned out, unable to hone in on the proceedings. All this reminded them about was the nightmares, night in, night out. This turned into full-on dissociation. Everyone was mannequins.

For the Charge of [REDACTED]

[DATA EXPUNGED][1]

"I rest my case, Your Honor," Talloran, Esq. said with smug satisfaction.

"I've heard enough. I've reached my verdict," the Judge proclaimed, and with a bang of the Gavel, the defendant was back to their bench and they immediately snapped back into their body. It was the same scene as the start, but this time with only cameras, the Judge, the defendant and their lawyer (who had not once helped in any capacity). D.E.C.I. v23 nudged its client for the singular moment it did anything but stand still since the trial's beginning. So much for it coming in handy. The defendant looked over.

"If everything goes according to plan, Tall-lor-ran, you shall be found Not Guilty by the court and free to go. However, if you are found Guilty and you do not believe such a verdict to apply to you," D.E.C.I. v23 droned on (what fucking nerve on this shitty robot, programmed in such a stupid way to talk like this to its clients, even if this is all still somehow just a bad dream it was a joke of a dream), "then please take this Complimentary Apple, pull the stem, throw it on the ground nearby, and run forward." The defendant was then handed a Red Delicious.

"Uh, oh geez, I guess thank y —"

"I find the defendant guilty of all charges. Sentencing shall begin." *Bang*, and the scene shifted again.

This time, Talloran was alone in the room, surrounded only by cameras.

"I sentence you to more continued self-assessment and prolonged imprisonment. Court is adjourned." *Bang*, and Talloran was dragged away by sheriffs to leave the court room. The paparazzi swarmed upon them.

> "Talloran, is it true that you've committed unthinkable crimes against —"
> "Talloran, did you really —"
> "What went through your head as you pursued psychotherapy —"
> "Are your plans for the future compromised by this ruling

in any —"
"Did you really think this was winnable?"
Just trust yourself here.
"Will the next million years be any different for you?"
"What do you think Draven thinks about this?"
How can you ever rebel if you'll believe your own lies?
"Talloran, do you believe you're innocent?"
"Is this going to affect your projects from Site-118 any more than usual?"
"When will we find out about the destructive biases of the court system that handled your case?"
Run.
There's still a path to take.
Still a way to escape.
"Do you believe in free will, Talloran?"
There always is.
There's always a way through.

"And there always will be…"

Talloran took the apple, pulled the pin and threw it at the ground. As the crowd backed away, they managed to break free of the sheriffs and run. Someone screamed.

Then Talloran's vision went white, and they could no longer hear.

It took a minute for it to wear off before they realized it was a stun grenade, and they realized where they were now; nowhere, surrounded by nothing.

…

Talloran ran.

Footnotes
1.When Talloran was a kid (five years old), they remembered walking on the shores of a beach — some beach, the name isn't as important — when they stumbled across a crab. It was a peculiar sight. Crabs at the beach were normal; wounded, fragile crabs

weren't. It was in trouble and only a kid with big hopes and aspirations as someone who wanted to help the world could save this crab. But it wouldn't hurt to observe it.For the better part of an hour, Talloran watched this crab limp along the shore of the beach, struggling to find shelter, to survive. It didn't attempt to head back into the water even once. After a while, the crab spotted them and made its way to them when a seagull came and picked it up. This didn't distress them, nor was it even too memorable. It was just their first experience with death. All they remembered from the incident was thinking something along the lines of (if they were to use adult vocabulary in place of a five-year-old's)"I guess so".Between the ages of 17 to 24, they tried to find stable housing. For the first few years, they just wantedanything, and once a cramped studio apartment wasn't working, it was onto more cramped studio apartments, but with less mold, more air, less pollution, less claustrophobia. Even once (relatively) stable, every day felt like an ordeal. At least when they were briefly homeless as a kid, their mom could protect them. It was harder when you were on your own.The day Talloran turned 25, they got a call from an old high-school friend. According to her, someone in their graduating class killed himself the week before. He loaded up his car with smoke bombs, drove the car into the ocean, and detonated the bombs. Despite eyewitness testimony, it took a full day to find the vehicle and its passenger, who had passed out before his unconscious body was carried down the current. She figured that everyone who knew him even a bit should know. Talloran thanked her, said his condolences, and hung up. All they could think was"I guess so".Hikari Yamada later pointed out to them, after the transfer to Site-118 and hearing this story, that this wasn't a particularly normal reaction to death. Not unusual, she surmised, but certainly not normal. Talloran asked why."After all, we have to at least pretend to care about other people, right? At the very least, it's our so-cial con-tract!""But I did." They then told the crab story."Well… you were a kid. Kids react in uncertain ways. That's not that unusual!""I still have nightmares about it. It's the exact situation, but it always feels worse and worse each time I dream it.""Hmm.I guess so."The two then went back to working on containment procedures for a humanoid SCP that later had to be neutralized with great force.That's all that Talloran could really think about death as. Something that just is. Even for loved ones, even for friends, even for the self (but not by the hands of

others).I guess so.

The Vampyre of Time and Memory

« Only Once Away My Son | `Does anybody ever get this right?` | I'll Try Living Like This »
Hub

This is an incomplete excerpt from the life of the author of this tale series. All of the following has been pulled from her diary, and edited and kept to relevant excerpts for readability and entertainment purposes. We'll call her Sunset.

> *Hello!*

By all accounts, writing this story was nothing less than a miracle.

November 23, 2017

American Thanksgiving. At least no one is talking politics. The nieces are loud and bubbly, the food is pretty good (her oldest niece, 12, ended up making the best dish anyway), and because it was at her Vovó[1]'s apartment, it was a good way to get away from home. The less loneliness, the better.

"All done." Sunset clapped her hands together. "Can I go to the bathroom?" Although Vovó was busy talking with her daughter and other granddaughters, she smiled and nodded at Sunset.

The bathroom in the community dining hall was locked for minor renovations, so a trip had to be made to Vovó's place. It wouldn't be long anyway; about a minute to and back, with about 30 seconds to wash her hands. Still, even a 20-second delay was enough to get consumed in her own thoughts and worries.

As she continued walking into the atmosphere, thoughts came to a head. A decision had to be made sooner or later. Whether to continue forcing on at Thanksgiving, or run away, or lie down and accept fate, or try and pretend those shapes are more than just aggravating squares and circles and rectangles, or retreat in the corner and poke away at the phone, or…

Or…

Hmm.

Sunset washed her hands, recognizing the lady in the mirror as someone else from this time, a being unfortunate enough to have to return to her family. Not her though. She is well-off, able to make choices, while her choices are… hmm. Train of thought?

As she dragged herself towards somewhere, she passed by her grandparents' room, where she saw it. An axe murderer standing on the other side of the bed, no face visible. She tilted her head to the side. No response.

She waved.

It waved back.

She shrugged and left. And before she knew it —

"**EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEK!**"

Down Sunset came immediately. Her hand was on the exit of the complex. This was no time for whatever she was doing right then and there, she *had* to check on her nieces because it sounded like

them, like they were in trouble. Off she ran and went back to the dining hall.

They were just chasing each other. Ah, youth.

Later that night, she called her grandparents to see if they were okay. They were.

November 24, 2017

psul had gotten back to Sunset about critique for the first tale. Now she could be able to use it for a future one. At least everything was going smoothly as far as the series was concerned.

> *I still felt weird about it though. "Hey, how can I specifically tailor my work to best suit your specific tastes and needs?" was a thing I almost literally sent. I had to couch it instead. As if it was no biggie.*
>
> > *"i post new tales in the series every monday and thursday, hopefully the others are more suited to your personal inclinations!"*
>
> *It didn't even occur to me otherwise; why write if no one likes it? I mean, so what if this was my saving grace and my own personal Hail Mary; watering it down isn't that big of a deal right? So I waited, anxious to hear back. What else is self-worth but based on the esteem of others?*
>
> *I remember at some point passing out at the computer*

and waking up to a new Wikidot message from him.

> *"No need to hope for that! Much better to have them suited to *your* inclinations and your purpose, rather than worrying about what one person on the internet thinks."*

Admittedly pretty simple advice, but simple advice is enough in this kind of time.

November 25, 2017

Sunset went outside to smoke cigarettes and contemplate her next moves in the windy, nighttime weather of New England. It was pretty recent that she finally ran out of the weed she had been saving, and with no real date to get some next^2, she felt like she had to smoke something. It's been years since she had a cigarette, it couldn't have been as gross and garbage as she remembered, right?

After frustration and no cooperation from the wind, she finally got light up the cig and take a drag on —

cough cough

"FUCK, this sucks." It was exactly as bad as she remembered. So much for that plan. "Whatever. Let's see." She took out a notepad she had with her, listing the details of all the money she had recently, and locations with which to move to. There wasn't any real hope; lots of guessing and Maybes, plenty of chances for 'No, sorry'. Oh, how that story and song always went.

Every day, the list of places shrank hopelessly shorter and shorter,

and the number of people that can be reached out to feels like it slips away even faster. She started biting

---

November 26, 2017

into her fingernails, then her fingers, and there she went.

The next thing she remembered was lying on her bed. Well, it was her, but she saw herself do so. Oh, how she wished she could reach out and touch her arm, tell her "It'll be okay, please persevere."

"It'll be fine. Please calm down!" The stuffed animal to the right of her, the pink-and-white dog, laid a paw on her and nodded. "Just get yourself through the night. It's okay."

"isitreally" she mumbled into her chewed nails.

"You can only do so much. Why try to take on more than you can handle, you silly thing?"

"i guess"

She curled inwards and closed her eyes.

“Do you want anything to eat? Any water?”

“no imgood”

Sleep arrived surprisingly easy.

Afternoon came. It was at the moment where Sunset stumbled out of bed, trawling the refrigerator for lunch leftovers, that she came to

a decision; these excerpts from the diary of hers would be the part you are reading right now.

> *I guess it's important to note that by this point, 95% of my free time was now being spent working on this series. What defines free time? An excellent question, reader.*
>
> *Several of the things I do are… well, hobbies, but I hone my craft on them to try and make myself able to use said craft for cash. A lot of my time is spent doing that, if I'm not actually too depressed by my situation, that is. Aside from that, I try to fill out at least one to two job applications a week for various places to take me on. It'll have been almost three years since I've done this process, but hey, something's gotta give eventually.*
>
> *5% of my free time is spent playing video games and watching various shows and movies that seem the least bit interesting. Entertainment is important, after all. All work and no play, etc.*
>
> *As for the rest, it's a constant stream of writing and editing. Agonizing over whether the story is too personal, not personal enough, too surreal, not surreal enough, if the meanings of all the bits and pieces stuck in there make sense and if the purposefully nonsensical is just fine enough flavor otherwise. I hear it's a tough job to edit stories.*

Refresh.

Refresh.

Refresh.

Refresh?

Well, someone's surely gotta read it at some point.

November 28, 2017

On IRC, friends were discussing producing art and content. Sunset didn't remember much about it *(I think I zoned out a lot)*, but someone[3] brought up how they felt that maybe the suffering would be worth the art being put out.

> *I didn't know how to tell them otherwise. But I'm sure they already knew that.*

November 29, 2017

A funny thing about passport changes; if you want to change your name and gender on it, the process absolutely feels a lot more involved and a burden than just changing the name, or even just renewing it. Her mom had to help her out through the process, and yet it would still involve weeks waiting for a new passport to come so Sunset could finally feel like a real person in the eyes of the government again. At least being gay and trans in her part of the United States wasn't as bad as other parts; just only moderately unbearable.

November 30, 2017

Sunset and her therapist got to talk about a number of subjects in only an hour, a rare accomplishment. Her past relationships, future relationship prospects, mental health, suicidal ideation, manga, the works of Hirohiko Araki, and new possible new medicine. There's only so much you can cover in an hour, but there was something that stuck out most to her. It was hard to keep track of the dialogue exactly as it happened, but it echoed previous sessions.

"Do you believe you feel justified in your paranoia all the time?"

It was tricky. Intellectually, paranoia isn't always or even most often justified. People can believe so just because of past betrayals, or delusions, etc.. But then again… isn't it better to trust your instincts? What if you're wrong to not trust in it, and the one time you don't, you really will get murdered? The government really will try to silence you in the mid of night.

Sunset didn't know how to respond, so it was something to sit on for the next week or two and see if there was a way to answer.

"But try to answer honestly, or else you'll just be feeding into the same feedback cycle." Her therapist didn't say that, but it was certainly implied.

On the way back home, she revised a scene from the tale to be posted that night. After Draven got the manila envelope from his father's desk, he would have then gone to call Dr. Simon Glass, asked if he thought Talloran would be okay. He'd then call Hikari Yamada to have her promise him that Talloran would be taken care of if he wasn't around.

But it felt condescending; it echoed doubts and feelings of previous friendships and relationships, the distrust of friends and partners, the paranoia of what will happen to you and your loved one… it just wasn't fair to write something so happy and nice in that moment as

something to be filled with doubt and sadness, as all gay relationships are inevitably supposed to be in the eyes of media. Why can't they just be happy? Even with the oxymoron of a series of Talloran facing the worst and [REDACTED][4], it was still possible for them to be content with Draven and in love.

So the scene was changed. Draven would just simply climb back into bed with Talloran and fall asleep with them, feeling nice and content. At the very least, safe in that moment. To trust and to feel safe in the arms of someone you care of, in any sense, is perhaps one of the best feelings in the world. This would do.

Dinner was Mac and Cheese. Gross. It'd do.

The word processing program was open, and Sunset stared at it for a couple hours, watching the cursor blink in and out. Some voice nagged in her head, and she only became aware of it after it continued to nag and nag. Ah well. Sleeping might be more productive.

December 1, 2017

Tomorrow's a brand new day, after all.

There's no good way to end this story. No matter which excerpt I end with, how long I go (even up to today), there's nothing satisfying. Of course there isn't; life doesn't have story arcs that end on a satisfying note. This won't end on a satisfying note. But if my life feels

enough like fiction, I may as well give the illusion of something, right?

(And as for whether or not this is an intentional allusion/ mirror of the note at the end of 3999? Yes. Thank you.)

One of the discussions I had with people before about storytelling and presenting narratives led me to be cautious of how much you can bare your heart. I always write from the heart. It's a weakness of mine. For me, it's incredibly difficult to write a story from something with which I have no personal experience because I feel there's nothing for me to put my own personal stake in, nothing to draw inspiration from. And if the writing doesn't contain any semblance of my own emotion and underlying expression, then who am I writing for? A distilled, focus-tested audience, certainly.

When I first started this series, it was completely on a whim. The day I posted the first tale, I could not sleep. Bad memories, bad thoughts, and bad trauma plagued my head, and I was convinced I was being watched purely for amusement. Camera in the carpets, sensors on the walls, all showing exactly how miserable I felt. Unable to sleep, not even for me to be able to slip into nightmares. If you've read between the lines in this series and understand its relation to the metaphors and personal expression brought forth, then I don't need to go further. You already get it.

Luckily, I had some semblance of self left to exert will over, with what little energy I had as I laid on the floor in a daze. What was I going to do? I was lost and confused. I needed some way to express how I felt. So I went to my computer and wrote. I wrote and I wrote and I wrote, spewing out the story beats that came to my head, and realized Talloran spoke through me. It's my belief that characters aren't something authors write; they already exist, and we just bring them out through writing and through creative endeavors. So when I wrote, Talloran told me their story. And then I realized there was more to

the story than I could tell in that moment. So I quickly edited previous details, and slapped navigation links in the bottom, not knowing what would come next.

I had to keep writing, after all. There had to be something to work towards, or else I'd keep feeling lost and directionless, and Talloran's story wouldn't have been able to be fully told to its completion. I sat on it for a day, not knowing what to do next. And during a nap that day, in my dream, Talloran came to me and I heard it all. Every single story detail that I could remember after waking up, I sat down to write and I planned ahead. Oh, there was so much to learn how to do.

I experienced Wikidot coding. I learned how playwriting worked. I hungered for the science behind dreams. I browsed through Wikipedia articles on heart conditions. I endeavored to better myself by absorbing literature and understanding how others wrote. I practiced. I verb. I verb. I verb.

I.

There were two things I did not know how to approach. It was impossible to tell what would have happened to Talloran in the fifth part of the story, for them to become stuck in an endless falling void. And I didn't know what to do for the sixth part. My original idea was more flashbacks, but flashbacks can only tell so much and advance the story in so many ways before they become trite, just like how you can only suffer so much before it becomes one more thing to suffer through. I thought through a lot of this, after all. I verb.

Eventually, this was settled on, after another IRC discussion about being emotional and barehearted in stories. And even writing this went through about twenty revisions. ***SCP-3999*** *has impacted the site and chat in so many ways, many of them positive. A lot of people have connected with it, but it's more than a story about* ***LordStonefish*** *and Researcher James Talloran[5]. It's*

about… well. I can't tell you what it's about for you. All that matters is what it means for me. Really, if this wasn't about me in some sense, why even bother? Writing should be for the self, and my writing is for me alone. I just share this privilege with others when I feel proud of myself for it.

Detractors could make a case for this being a call for help, but it's not. Right now, I feel pretty stabilized and okay with my current psyche. Or that I'm doing this for attention. Well yeah. If I wasn't writing for attention, I wouldn't be posting it on the site. Maybe I'm too emotional. Sure. Or being too personal.

You thought a sidebar in an SCP about the author was too meta? I'm smashing the walls between the author and reader, because when it comes to form, sometimes you have to test how far you can break lines before progress can be made. So I'm paving the way for myself, because that's all that matters; my progress. Here's a whole tale about me, because you can't understand Talloran (in this setting anyway) without understanding the author, and you can't understand the narrative without understanding the influence behind it. It's the only correct way to do it, and I don't half-ass anything I put my heart into.

I guess so, anyway.

December 6, 2017

She feels like she can pull through.

Now that we're all caught up on the important and relevant information, why don't we check in on Researcher Talloran and see how they're doing. I think we've earned some reprieve from ourselves for now, don't you?

« Only Once Away My Son | You think the worst of all is left behind. | I'll Try Living Like This »
Hub

Footnotes
1. Portuguese word for "grandmother", this variant is used to more clearly indicate affection.
2. Yes, legally.
3. Name removed to not out someone else's personal feelings like that.
4. Can't give away our ending here, now.
5. Who was always going to be non-binary; hence one of a few reasons why I referred to Talloran as myself especially in the first part, and why Talloran had no pronouns in the second part.

I'll Try Living Like This

« The Vampyre of Time and Memory | `I'll Try Living Like This` | Like Clockwork (Finale) »
Hub

Year 2,999,763

"Ah, if only it were that simple though." *I heard that voice again, speak into the nothingness where I floated. It came when there was nothing else to harm me, just like the time before that.*

Oh, it's you again. What do you want?

"So I guess you've put two and two together yourself."

Yeah. I uh, I got it when I saw you. Why are you doing this to me?

"I'm not trying to do anything to intentionally hurt you." *She lied.* "I just had something to tell people. And you were the —"

I don't have any actual right now. How do I know that what I'm saying is what I want to say? For all I know, I'm just [REDACTED].

"Like I said, you came to me. I'm just relaying what information you shared to me."

Did that include this?

"Yes."

Fuck. *I floated away from the voice, trying to find a way out. There weren't too many options I had.* Well, do I even bother doing anything? You'll just drag me along for the ride. How does this end?

"What do you mean?"

Will I just die a cruel and deserving death? Do you want me to hold onto insanity? Will it just be one of us jacking off about life's cruel machinations for us, you goddamned… fucking… fuck. *I floated even faster, searching for an end to this void. I so desperately wanted to cry, but that wouldn't do good in a place with no one to latch onto.*

"Truth be told, I don't know. I have an idea but never any solid plans."

Right.

"…"

…

"It's been hours on my end."

Time flies, huh.

"Yeah."

…

"…"

At least give me some good news.

"I don't know what will happen to you." *Her voice softened.*

How is this a good thing?

"When you came to me… you told me what you wanted the world to know. I didn't know a lot of the details. Even now, I feel foggy on it. Up to now, all I've shared was stuff I knew exactly. And recently with this one, and the next one, I'm not so sure anymore."

…

So you lost control of what's going on, huh.

"I never had control to begin with. You're just as real as I am, as far as I'm concerned."

But you [REDACTED].

"Technically, no. And even then, who cares? Anything that affects is just as true." *She sighed. It sounded a little bit annoyed at me, even.*

I…. I guess? Not that I even want to think of it in those terms. What does that mean for me then?

"You get to make your own ending. I won't have a clue what you want to do."

…

What do you mean?

"…I'm saying it's out of my hands now. I think it always was out of my hands. I just always felt like the messenger. Using you as my vessel, my way to feel out what I want to do and handle. But now you can decide, fully and completely on your own."

Uh… maybe. Won't it just be the same as usual though?

“Hey, I’m just letting you speak through me. I have way less to do with this than you think.”

There were walls at what seemed to be the edge of the void. The moment it got touched, it started to float away from me. There was no way I'd let it slip by me, not at that moment. I had to chase it.

Can't we at least walk through this slower, more naturally? We're not being rushed here. I'd love ten minutes to at least just… process this shit.

"I've already been here for hours trying to continue the conversation. Plus, —"

Yeah, I get it. I don't know though…

"…"

Did you ever struggle with mental illness?

"…"

…

"Yeah, all the time. Life's a bitch with that." *It was oddly comforting, at least. My God, my , nothing more than a similarly confused and lost soul.* "How did you deal with it?"

Hah, how funny. I guess herself doesn't know my life. The answer is; I didn't. Help helps, but it only does so much, you know. Draven helped, Dr. Yamada helped, Dr. Glass helped, Mr. Kondraki helped in his… own weird way. But help is just help. I think I needed more than help but like, actual long-lasting uh… what's the word.

"Treatment."

Yeah, that one.

"Yeah. I've been getting treatment in the past couple years for my shit. Mental illness is like… it's death's dynamic shroud." *She giggled. I didn't get the joke; I didn't bother to ask.* "It's something to try and conquer a step at a time, you know?"

Yeah.

During a break in the conversation, I caught up to the walls. When I touched them, they stood still. It was finally a way for me to escape; the end of something had to mean the beginning of a new thing, right?

Is this the way out then, O [REDACTED]?

"I genuinely don't know by this point. I think you'll have to find out."

I guess. *There was a moment's hesitation.* What do I do if I manage to escape this prison then? I'll still be thrown back into a world with all my baggage, and I'm just gonna be suffering in smaller, more meaningful ways.

"I think that's up to you. If I gave any advice, I'd be a hypocrite for sure. Just do your best to cope and wish for the best while working towards a manageable goal. Strengthen your will. That's how I've been dealing with shit."

Yeah. I'll do my best.

"Good luck. Go impress me."

I guess so? Thanks. I just want to know if it's still worth trying though. Right?

…

Hello?

I think she left me to my own will after that moment. We'd only talked twice, and I think both times were more helpful for her than they were for me. But it didn't matter, I think. God. I wonder what Draven would have thought of this. He might have actually had an existential crisis.

There was no time to waste though. Admittedly, I was still scared of what was waiting for me. I just hoped it was a way out. I really needed a way out by this point. It was so long. All I needed was a

single reward for this absurd bullshit. I was gonna get out. I was gonna win this fucking nightmare of a trial. So I pushed the wall.

And my body shattered.

Year 2,999,764

Talloran woke up, bound in quicksand. They were drowning very slowly (a rate of 0.05 mm per hour). All the while, **the Despised** cut off their cartilage. It looked more bored than Talloran ever did.

"Hey, wait, I thought I was finally —" Sand was poured into their mouth as It kept slicing away, cut by cut, as their body.

"This is the first time in… eternities. You've finally shown fear again. Do you understand yet, what I am? Why is it do you fight me then? Why not simply concede to the truth? Why keep fighting for something greater and better?" The Despised's voice was softer and more accepting in tone, but still shook with malice for every breath it took, and still bled vulgarities with every syllable spoken.

Talloran tried to respond, but the sand slithered down their throat. They'd eternally choke on sand as they took their time to drown. Exsanguination, if they ever did die, would be the last thing to kill them.

"Talloran, if I could, I would not be content to simply torture you forever. I would make sure you knew death in its permanency, in every single worst way. When you tried to end your life the handful of times… you figured you could escape. When you tried to leave

my rule by your own hand… it was as if you thought you knew the answers. The Foundation learns from what it contains, but its weak-willed employees… those clinging onto the abnormal and the fantastical as their identity… that was your way out of reality, wasn't it?"

They could feel the air pocketing in their blood now, as images swirled over their head, taunting them with relief. It was all-consuming in their vision, and it stung. They swung their arms to the side, attempting to crawl out, but the energy simply left them.

"I hate you. Of all those I hate, none have made me feel as vile as you. You are the reason why I exist to do this… and it is abhorrent. Talloran, do you understand yet, why I do what I do? It's not simply because of your personality, or your will. Do you understand yet? When your will sinks again…" The Despised slowly creates a shallow cut on Talloran's neck and slithers onto their chest. "That is when I truly delight in all of this."

Talloran drowned, but not without cause for celebration. It reminded them of how they felt eternities ago. To hear an actual corporeal thing tell them, instead of it just rattling around in their brain? It created a whole new meaning to what was happening. All that had to be done, as a wise psychologist once told them, was simply shift perspective.

It was a scary thing, but nothing was more scary than the fact that this had been the normal once. And now? When you make it all physical… it was pretty wild. Nothing more than that, nothing less. It almost made them feel like a badass, even. How proud would Draven be if he saw them struggle back, resisting against some brutish force? Maybe that was the key. Get out of here, become a Mobile Task Force agent? That'd be a refreshing walk in the park.

It came together. Ahh. How nice. Maybe that Goddess wasn't so wrong after all.

They'll try living like this.

Talloran concentrated all their energy into one thought:

"Fuck you."

Everything was smashed.

And everything crumbled.

« The Vampyre of Time and Memory | I'll Try Living Like This | Like Clockwork (Finale) »
Hub

...Like Clockwork

« I'll Try Living Like This | Not everything that goes around comes back around, you know. »
Hub

This is a story with no endings. There is no closure, nor resolution. It is only a story of evolution and expectations. As the author grows, as the characters grow, as the readership grows, so too does the story and its lasting meaning.

In every conceivable way, that is the best ending possible.

Year 2,999,765

Talloran dragged their dissected body across the world, finding bits and pieces that were torn off after they had broken everything. Once again, it was a deafening nothing, with only the parts of them in this space. It was to be expected. By this point, nothing was worse than something. At least here, they had some company; a burnt left pinky here, a loose nose there, a fragile rib somewhere else… really, each of the body parts more of an actual being than Talloran could claim to be now. Nah. They earned the right to be a human being by this point.

Limb by limb and bone by bone, James Ari Talloran clumsily sewed it all back together, with nothing more to work with than cloth and nails. They were a hideous, revolting mess, but they were at least taking form.

In the vast none, they found the final body part they needed lying a few hundred meters away from the right eye; their tongue. Of course.

It had taken days to work up the mental fortitude to put their tongue back in, and practice not to gag to death every time an attempt was made. After months, it was able to be accomplished. It was a skill that they had hoped was only applicable in this fucked up Hell, and not in the real world. As if anything like this could even work in the real world. That was one point in favor of the real world.

Exhausted, the shambling body that is Talloran collapsed, and dreamed. They dreamed of nothing, a different kind of nothing, one full of brightness and possibilities. It was a nice reprieve. There was just… so little to do, and yet it was a new form of torture. If they didn't do something, anything, this would be their true eternity. Damned to be bored to death. Isolated from everyone, even themself. That may be the worst of it all. Action had to be taken. So they decided to do the thing they were best at doing.

They waited. They waited and planned out every possibility, hoping they wouldn't need to keep being recollected. It was the only thing to hope for, now.

Year 2,999,766

But it had happened again.

Year 3,000,002

And again.

Year 3,000,044

And again.

Year 3,002,093

The joke was on That **`Fucker`**, though. Talloran could wait as long as needed be.

March 5, 2017

1:20 P.M.

Talloran and Yamada lounged outside, free from the frantic monotony of the day. Considering the hour-long break given to them, it was put to surprisingly effective use.

As the coin tumbled in the air, ascending to the peak of its arc, Talloran picked up an end of the tablecloth, Yamada watching with keen interest. The plates and mugs moved a minuscule amount, and Talloran caught their breath; it was off by a single millimeter. Yamada caught on and applied the pressure.

"If you mess this up, I won't pay for it." Talloran nodded in response. They knew exactly what to do. No sweat. As the coin reached its peak, they pulled the cloth out from underneath all the tableware, and everything shifted a few more millimeters. "Ooh."

The coin fell. They both held their breath now.

It bounced off of the edge of her mug.

"Oooooh."

It landed cleanly in her cool coffee.

"Ooooooooh! You did it!"

"Hah, I sure did. What side did the coin land on?" Yamada looked in the mug at their request, and frowned. They grinned. "Lemme see that ten." She sighed, moving to rummage through her purse, looking for enough ones to hand them.

"It's nice that you were this stoked about doing your trick! But I have to know; how did you do it?" She dramatically pulled the dollar bills out of her purse and waved them in Talloran's face, faux-hypnotizing him. "The audience must know how you pulled it off!" They snapped the money out of her hands and put it in their pockets, setting the cloth back up. It would be bad to just be lazy after all.

"A magician never reveals her secrets." The way they said it, it was clear how much they were enjoying spouting bullshit. "But yeah, like. It was a thing I was looking forward to all day so I'm glad I got to actually pull that one off. You don't mind if I —"

"Nah." She bit into the burger and stuck her other hand out. "What's your plans for the rest of the day? I want to organize a group dinner for the end of the month with our colleagues to start forming tighter relationships. Also to suck up a bit." Talloran gave her a cigarette and lighter. She put down the burger and nimbly twirled around her fingers and over her hands, her art form coming to life. It amused both of them, and for a simple parlor trick, she pulled it off with enough flair, even when doing it real casually.

"Well, I uh, am interviewing some new anomaly they just brought to our site. They haven't even given me the details yet. I just know it's Keter, they wouldn't have told me otherwise."

"Above your level, or they just didn't tell you?"

"Maybe both, who knows."

"So that's going to be your whole night? At least tell me you have tomorrow!" Yamada stops twirling the lighter around, opens the cap and lights it, letting the cigarette come to a halt as it dangles over the flame. "I really want to get this to happen, you know." The cigarette is lit, and Talloran takes it.

"Thanks."

"Of course." She goes back to eating her burger.

"I'll see if I can get tomorrow to work, but I can't promise that. If this project is as secret as it is, then I probably might be busy for a bit. Maybe tomorrow over lunch, as opposed to after work. Who do you wanna get dinner with anyhow?" They started to take a drag.

"There's Professor Hannah, as well as Researchers Gomez, Walker, and Kirby." Yamada sounded excited, but Talloran felt a bit more apprehensive. Senior staff always came off as intimidating, and they heard stories about Walker.

"I'll. Yeah. I'll see what I can do."

"Thank you! Can you do me a favor as well, when we finish?"

"Huh?"

"Can you head over to the Shark Punching Center and buy me more pillow cases? I won't have the time to go get some, since I work right after this until night." She did work some of the longest shifts of anyone at Site-118; to have the energy to plan group dinners was unreal.

"Sure, sure. I'll have time to do so after my interviews with the uh, whatever anomaly they want me to talk to. I'll get it done!"

"What a relief! Any extra you buy you can keep, girl." They both smiled. The wind flew softly above.

Year 3,002,111

All Talloran had to do now was simply will their body into their own control, and it'd come back. Simple as that. They finally were able to wrest control, be the master of their own limited domain. Still it was dark, and there was nothing but themself, so they did the only thing that could be done.

Lie and wait.

The first step to self-control was to reclaim their surroundings for their own. Most of the time in the nothing was spent in fear, a rotting mind slowly doubting itself. Now, with the limiter off, they could use the space to their advantage.

Their body healed.

They broke the floor below, glass embedded into their skin.

Perfect.

Talloran closed their eyes and waited, dreaming again. This is how

their years would be spent; practicing and drifting into the dreams within the dreams.

January 5, 2017

9:30 A.M.

"DRAVEN, SLOW DOWN!" The car was doing donuts in the parking lot at a ridiculous speed, and though Talloran found an intense thrill in it, Draven's antics involving thrills could get worrying, especially when they involved cars. "IT'S BEEN ALMOST TEN MINUTES AND I'M FEELING SICK!" Draven immediately slammed his foot on the brakes and almost sent the both of them flying.

"Shit. Sorry bun. I got uh, lost in the moment there."

"It's fine. You really do have to be more careful about that, but your face when you get excited is just —" *head kiss* "the —" *cheek kiss* "best!" *lip kiss* Draven returned the favor.

It was nice to get some time like this before Talloran had to move. Touch conveyed so much more to the both of them than words or even looks ever could.

"We have to go to the airport to drop you off in a few minutes don't we."

"Yeah."

"I just want you to stay. Maybe we can both move, even." Draven said it, knowing full well that it'd never be the case. Rarely does the Foundation relocate couples to the same site unless they work in the same fields. And Talloran always understood that they'd never be able to keep up with Draven's task force work.

Silence passed between them. They sat in the car for 20 minutes, a whole ten minutes longer than they should have stayed in the lot.

"Hey, bun."

"Yeah?"

"My father… he wrote this before he died. And he, he wanted me to give this to you in case we ever moved sites. I don't know what possessed him but. Yeah." Draven took out a manila envelope and placed it in Talloran's lap. "So, whenever you get on the plane, read it. I don't even know what's in it."

"An oddly specific thing for your dad to do. Alright hun, I will."

"I just don't want you to like, think he was weird for —"

"It's okay, I get it."

"I don't want you to think *I'm* weird for him being —"

"No, I understand. Tell me more on the way to the airport, we're almost 25 minutes past when we should have gone."

"Oh fuck!" Draven immediately yelled as he took his head off of Talloran's shoulders, turned on the car, and immediately rushed to the airport, going as fast as he (legally) could.

2:30 P.M.

Talloran allows themself to cry for the first time that day.

December 4, 2017

Sunset: quick question
Friend: ?
Sunset: unrelated to hearthstone
Sunset: if i write characters thats trans and gay is it bad form to kill one off
Friend: mmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm
Sunset: i understand the social context and issues behind it but
Friend: i dont think it counts as a bury your gays trope if like literally all of the other gays stay alive
Sunset: i mean i am writin a series about someone who will inevitably die, or at least seem to
Sunset: and theyre trans
Sunset: but i write a lot of other trans characters
Sunset: i feel guilty, i guess, but also it should be fine right
Sunset: did i fuck up though by even goin down this path
Friend: "Additionally, the problem isn't merely that gay characters are killed off: the problem is the tendency that gay characters are killed off in a story full of mostly straight characters, or when the characters are killed off because they are gay."
Friend: from tvtropes, the bible of trope
Sunset: i dont wanna be part of the problem
Friend: i don't think you're being part of the problem
Sunset: is it weirder if the character is an allegory for myself
Sunset: (i mean im a little fine now im just asking)
Friend: no, in fact its even more acceptable then imo
Friend: exploring thoughts n shit
Friend: im not sure if i can even explain it that well tbh.

Year 3,003,998

Talloran opens their eyes. The perfect sight has revealed itself to them.

It didn't even have time to speak before Talloran rose and brought a cord around the both of their necks. Intense pain shot up through Talloran; enough for twelve people. And it was worth every bit.

"Y-You, do you know what you are trying to —" The cord got pulled tighter, and they both gagged.

"S… F-Fuck you. I… shit. I'm, gah, I'm gonna end m-my life and erase you with me, you — ugh, you Fucker. T-The first time I tried, I only thought to end myself. But now I have you."

"Talloran, do you understand what you are doing?" It screamed in agony, attempting to wrest itself free from the grip.

"Yes, I absolutely do." Talloran pulled harder, and It stepped through the cord, its form sliced almost wholly and cleanly open. "You're just some… shitty part of me. I'm fueling your shit. Might as well kill two shits with one cord."

The scene shifted drastically, and The Being shambled over to them, pus and brain matter draining by the gallons. They were in Draven's Site-17 apartment, rotting and growing unidentifiable organisms. All the photographs on the wall were replaced with pictures of Talloran's parents, seagulls, and guns.

"I have had no intent to let myself die along with you… let alone you kill me. Your attempt didn't work. Do you understand yet, the position —"

"Do you understand this, that, fuck." Talloran leaned back against the moss and worked their way to the refrigerator, arriving after a minute of adrenaline keeping them up. When their legs gave way, they collapsed inside of the fridge which had long since stopped working. Food and drinks spilled everywhere, and their blood got on everything.

"I don't understand shit, my guy. If I did, I wouldn't have been in this position. Fuck. Dumbass." They rummaged through the fridge, or what was remaining of it, before finding years-old milk. "I'm not an action hero. I'm not that impressive. What am I, however many kilograms overweight? Who remembers anymore. I can barely think or see right now. The only thing I understand right now is how bad of a spot we both are right now."

Talloran chugged the carton, trying not to give into its taste. Rancid. Vile. Another thing they hoped not to have to worry about in the real world. The milk crawled its way down their throat, as a variety of sensations overtook every sense they had. It was wretched; it was a state they truly had never felt before in any point in time. Gradually, they could feel their body shutting down to protect itself. It was a new era.

“I — gggh,” they couldn’t even finish the sentence before turning over, clutching their body and crying. Oh, how they wish they could puke right now. They had nothing left to puke up. All they could do now was speak at a snail’s pace. “I — I, I can’t hear you. You self-absorbed Fucker. N-N-Nothing you have done or could do matches the… the shit I put myself through. Don’t you.. don’t you understand?” Talloran could only laugh and dry-heave as they reached for a disintegrated apple, taking the least tangible bite of it that one possibly still could by that point. They swallowed. Filthy.

"I can't, can't physically see it, but I know. I know what look you have on your face now. Yeah. That's right. The rules of this place shifted. I… I don't have to kill you. I just have to make my will stronger than yours." Talloran cackled, hacking up phlegm and blood. The body was continuing to shut down, and they never felt more powerful or more in control.

"W-What was the plan? To poison my mind of my boyfriend? O-Of my family? My dad was abusive b-but not as much as other parents my friends had. Of seagulls?" They coughed up a laugh. "Death was never something I was scared of. Not as long as it was by my own hands." The grin on their face expressed far beyond what a normal person's grin does, as they took the cord in their hands.

"See you in Hell." And they pulled and pulled and pulled. There was

mild resistance, but it didn't take long before the world shattered around them.

December 9, 2017

One of every 100 or more nights have dreams that aren't nightmares. Tonight was one of those nights.

Sunset awoke in a place of nothingness. Only stairs leading up or down. She headed down. Down is traditionally more scary, but up was always a more frightening prospect to her. You leave the Earth's safety, and unlike down, there's not even a theoretical limit to up. You have to trust that whatever is up won't hurt you. So she walked. She descended flight after flight, with no end in sight; only down to go.

Eventually, down started to become up, and she froze on a platform in the cardinal middle of it all when a dream guardian called to her.

"Jump."

You don't defy the dream guardians. So she jumped straight up, and fell down.

She landed on an escalator moving right and the same guardian spoke behind her again.

"I won't show you my face. You have problems looking at the guardians. Why do you feel lost?"

She didn't know how to respond.

"Is it your writing? Here, let's look." In a flash, she reached out and touched a screen parallel to where the escalator moved. She saw her characters, lined up on a conveyor belt to be tossed into their own special incinerator. "Is this what you expect to be? Don't worry. Things will work out if you simply let them. When you daydream again and forget about time around you, help will arrive if you're in need of it. I can assure you when you wake up, this nightmare of yours will cease to be one."

The guardian spoke more about… something. She didn't remember what it was. About her writing, it had to be. Guardians existed in and out of the dreamspace's internal logic; they simply kept it in order.

"Are you actually a guardian?"

"Do you doubt me?"

She looked back. Her eyes went blurry and she threw up.

Now she woke up. No puke on the bed (as usual).

It was the best sleep she had gotten in a long time.

March 5, 2017

9:43 P.M.

Talloran arrived at Cell-902 in the Keter wing. Four armed guards stood outside of it. Talloran swallowed. There weren't normally this many guards surrounding a cell, especially for Site-118, one of the more relaxed sites for containing Euclid and Keter objects.

"U-Uh, anything I can do for you? I was told that Researcher Walker would be informing me of —"

"Change of plans. We're here to provide you with backup." What a loaded statement. At least this guard was willing to speak. The

others remained stone-faced.

"Me?"

"These are the questions you'll be asking SCP-3999. You are only to introduce yourself on-record with your last name. Any deviations from these questions must be both minor and related to the other questions on said list. If at any point the anomaly acts, you will most likely not know. We will be on hand to provide extraction and question you about its abilities." The same guard handed Talloran the list of questions. "Mr. Walker and his crew will be watching from a close distance, but the anomaly will not answer questions unless directly interviewed." One of the other guards pressed a button, and the cell door unlocked. "You may step inside and begin the interview."

"W-Wait, what does it even look like?" No one responded. "I. Okay, fine. I'll do it. At least tell me how prompt you'll be able to respond if shit goes south."

"19 seconds in the most optimal circumstances, 47 in the worst."

That didn't help soothe their mind.

Interviewed: SCP-3999

Interviewer: Researcher James Ari Talloran

<Begin Log, 21.46.32>

Researcher Talloran: This is Researcher Talloran. I am here to do an introductory interview with SCP-3999. Hello, 3999.

SCP-3999: [SYSTEM ERROR: DATA CORRUPTED. PLEASE SEE A NETWORK ADMINISTRATOR FOR MORE DETAILS]

Talloran: When you were captured by Mobile Task Force Omega-8, you had just finished depositing the bodies of **[SYSTEM ERROR: DATA CORRUPTED.**

PLEASE SEE A NETWORK ADMINISTRATOR FOR MORE DETAILS]

SCP-3999: [SYSTEM ERROR: DATA CORRUPTED. PLEASE SEE A NETWORK ADMINISTRATOR FOR MORE DETAILS]

Talloran: Right. Is it also correct to state that you took the form of his mother as well?

SCP-3999: [SYSTEM ERROR: DATA CORRUPTED. PLEASE SEE A NETWORK ADMINISTRATOR FOR MORE DETAILS]

Talloran: …where did you come from again?

SCP-3999: [SYSTEM ERROR: DATA CORRUPTED. PLEASE SEE A NETWORK ADMINISTRATOR FOR MORE DETAILS]

SCP-3999: [SYSTEM ERROR: DATA CORRUPTED. PLEASE SEE A NETWORK ADMINISTRATOR FOR MORE DETAILS]

Talloran: But when you were found, what you had stated to the task force that you originated off the shore of California. Yet the location you give indicates Queens, New York. What accounts for this discrepancy?

SCP-3999: [SYSTEM ERROR: DATA CORRUPTED. PLEASE SEE A NETWORK ADMINISTRATOR FOR MORE DETAILS]

Talloran: Excuse me?

SCP-3999: [SYSTEM ERROR: DATA CORRUPTED. PLEASE SEE A NETWORK ADMINISTRATOR FOR MORE DETAILS]

Talloran: I know that it used to have concerts, yes, but —

SCP-3999: [SYSTEM ERROR: DATA CORRUPTED. PLEASE SEE A NETWORK ADMINISTRATOR FOR MORE DETAILS]

Talloran: Security, you're needed right —

SCP-3999: That won't be nessecary.

Talloran: What?

SCP-3999: Welcome.

Talloran: Oh, I see. I saw then and now at once. Your uh, your mindgames.

SCP-3999: You don't remember, do you? Anything I said in that interview.

Talloran: No, but I can guess enough of it. Why bring that up now anyway?

SCP-3999: I've been keeping track. It's the year 3,003,999. You put me here. I don't know why, but this is your world. You created your own space in mine. I'm done. All I wanted was to understand a bit more of you. But I couldn't.

Talloran: Right… right. This is, I guess… it. I will kill us both, and this terror ends. There's no more of any of it. No more me, no more you, and the Foundation and the world moves on. I just don't know why you wanted this to happen to me. All of this. You… you goddamned asshole. Why?

SCP-3999: Of all I have become a parasite to, you have… the most.

Talloran: The most what?

SCP-3999: Yourself.

Talloran: Please. Stop with this cryptic riddle shit. I'm so tired of this. We both know what will happen. That's why I brought us back to this cell. So just tell me. What do I have the most of?

SCP-3999: I already told you. It is the truth. You have the most of yourself. That was what I needed.

Talloran: …oh. So it's just like that voice said.

SCP-3999: You had enough to make yourself more… more of a thing than anyone else in the time I've roamed existence.

Talloran: Were you XK then? ZK?

SCP-3999: The Foundation's classifications don't mean much to me. All that matters to you is that I wanted to keep you around for a long time. Clearly, I underestimated you and you overestimated me.

Talloran: Yeah. I guess so.

SCP-3999: Do you understand now, Talloran? Where the end of this road lies? There's only one way to end this. I'd keep this going, but your will is stronger than anything I have.

Foreword: Researcher Talloran gets up from their chair and pushes the table aside, proceeding to wrap their hands around SCP-3999 and "choke" it. Talloran indicates signs of asphyxiation as well, indicating that they are able to feel the effects of the choking as well. After 50 seconds of struggling, well past the point where passing out would occur, Talloran closes their eyes and walks into the cell's wall, where Talloran and SCP-3999 exit and fall into the world's abyss. After another two minutes of this occurring, with neither party moving or changing, everything breaks.

James,

First you take up the heart of my boy, and now you move sites? Just like that!? Hah! Give me a break kid. Not even my friend, **the Devil himself**, could do such a cruel thing to his flings.

But no, you're too good. Too fucking good. Draven… he's been happier than I can remember ever since you showed up in his life. This Foundation shit was worth it if I got to see my boy love you. But if you're getting this, then you're clearly moving, and I don't know why but if it's your fault and you broke his heart, I'll possess 682 and get you in its stomach.

I'm too drunk to write much, and yet I'm writing this so carefully. Just know how much of a shit I give about you for me to do that. It's a little bit. When I'm dead, you should have been taking care of him, but now that you're moving, it's your responsibility more than ever. Don't let him fucking take care of you. Don't be a pussy, James. Sorry, and happy whatever day it is.

BK

December 15, 2017

10:19 P.M.

Alarms rang at 10:20 P.M. when a hole as wide as a containment cell and twice as deep as the height of one appeared out of nowhere at Site-118, with a barely-breathing body found at the bottom of it, clutching several pages of SCP Foundation documentation. It took medical staff seven minutes to get to them and hook them up to medical equipment; any longer and the body would have most likely been dead moments later.

One of the doctors on the scene was Hikari Yamada, the first responder. Pulling the body out of the hole with the help of staff members on the scene, it wasn't immediately evident who it was. Dirt and debris covered the face and body, and the amount of blood and wounds made them look like garbage. It wasn't until she put them on a stretcher, ran them to the Medical Wing, wiping the assorted mess off of their face, and further cleaned the body in preparation for emergency treatment that she came to the nauseating realization that it was Researcher James Ari Talloran, who had gone missing 285 days ago out of thin air.

10:47 P.M.

Draven Kondraki took an emergency flight to Site-118.

11:58 P.M.

> To: Wei Zhong (pcs.811s|gnohzw#pcs.811s|gnohzw)
> From: Maria Jones (pcs.asiar|60senojm#pcs.asiar|60senojm)
> Subject: RE: 3999

Greetings Director Zhong,

There has been no SCP assigned to the 3999 slot since RAISA formed, and it is 99.998% likely for this to also be true in the history of the Foundation. With a margin of error of "too insignificant to matter". Send copies of those documents over to RAISA as soon as you can. Thank you.

Maria Jones

Director, Recordkeeping And Information Security Administration

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December 17, 2017

8:37 P.M.

Draven Kondraki and the rest of Talloran's friends received confirmation that they were stable.

December 22, 2017

4:13 P.M.

"It's fine hun, I promise." Talloran visibly ached and winced even slightly moving in the hospital bed, but they were alive. They were alive and that was all that mattered.

"Do you remember anything that happened? You were gone for so long, for G-d's sake, we were going to declare you legally dead in a couple months, and, and —"

"No, I don't uh. Remember. I was gone and then I was just. Here again." Talloran had to lie. What was happening now… it wasn't trustworthy anyway. No, it'd be a very long time for it to be trustworthy to any degree. Maybe it'd take a whole eleven months before their spine snapped in half and the façade was broken. Maybe Draven's empathy was fake. Draven could be fake.

Talloran looked to the right, and saw Yamada talking to other doctors outside the room. Maybe they were all fake. What else could explain this? Millions of years being gutted, and then peace? There's no such thing as peace. There possibly couldn't have —

"That's a relief. I'm so glad you're back bun, fuck. I don't even care about what happened for now. Maybe not ever. I don't know. You're mine again, and if you leave, I'm going to neutralize the son of a bitch stealing you."

Their heart fluttered as Draven gently draped his arms around their body. It hurt, but it was a relief. To feel this specific kind of hurt at the gentle touch of another… if it was all made up, if this was just another delusion, why not enjoy it? At least Talloran can claim to have won the battle of the minds at one point.

"I just have to make sure. You're… y-you're still Draven, right? Draven Kondraki, son of Benjamin Kondraki? Jewish, bisexual, snores horridly?" Draven looked at them curiously, as if the very notion of questioning was absurd.

"The snoring's improved. You're right otherwise. Are you o—"

"Yeah… I guess so. Just shaken up is all. Please hug me and keep telling me about what I missed in the last number of months. Tell me the world's gotten better."

James Ari Talloran continued to cling onto life. For now, they won. And that was all that mattered.

December 15, 2017

Sunset got to talk with her therapist about almost nothing in particular for an entire hour. But the "almost nothing" was pretty productive at least.

It was about writing. Lots of it. How writing helped; how it soothed

the soul; how it got her through tough times. She even thought to mention the SCP Foundation, and got her therapist to read the Wikipedia article on it.

Why did writing help so much? After all, simply getting out your emotions isn't enough to fully help, or address the core problems. So why was it so important?

It's… it's a way to put succinctly emotions and experiences that can't be described in a straight manner. How can she describe the way in which a waterfall makes her feel, except to say that 'As Jaine fell from the waterfall towards Earth, she became the ruler of the world'? Or, when trying to describe the way trauma impacted her, wouldn't it be easier to say 'Every time Derek tip-toed out into the world, he was living the lives of three different, incomplete people at once'?

It's not so much the process of writing itself as how it can be conveyed and interpreted. That's part of the fun after all. You write for yourself and see how you yourself takes it, and if you so dare, share it with the world and see how they take it. It's the ultimate form of self-expression, in her opinion, arguably more than even music-making itself.

When Talloran first came into her life after all, it was just a character in a very long and confusing narrative about the mental toll an author was facing. And soon, that shifted, and Talloran now became the ever-present star of her immediate life, a way to accurately nail the troubles she herself had burdened. For her, it was unanimously easier than simply talking about it. Fiction is more true than reality in many ways.

"I'll find the time to read some pages on this site before we have our next appointment together."

Maybe she was accomplishing something, if only one step at a time. Though it all should have came together the day before… ah well. No one would mind a late delivery if the product was high-quality. *At least, I guess so*, she thought.

December 17, 2017

She hit save.

« I'll Try Living Like This | I'll see you all down the road. Until next time. »
Hub

lolFoundation Hub Page

NEW KID ON THE BLOCK

By Anaxagoras, Illustration by SunnyClockwork

> Once, there was a time where we thought mankind would never go back to living in fear. Not anymore. That was a time in the past, where a total containment failure was a matter of concern beyond office cooler talk, and when the deaths of thousands was a tragedy rather than an achievement. This is a world where one statement displeasing an egotistical few can get your ass booted out of reality.
>
> Welcome to a world without logic. A place of much pain, torment, with an extra helping of shock and awe. This is a Foundation that has failed without knowing, where inmates run the asylum and the last man has flown over the cuckoo's nest.
>
> This is the land of lolfoundation.

What the hell happened? Once upon a time, there was a man named Fritz. Good ol' Fritz was a reality bender, and one who knew what he was doing. The Foundation, being the folks they are, made a good effort to catch and contain him. But, as the story goes, either somebody made a mistake, or made a deal. Maybe a little of both. Either way, armed with Level 4 knowledge, Fritz scooped up everything we thought we knew, twisted, wormed, and cracked the very fabric of reality over his knee. Most of his jailers died in an instant, but some were to survive… in a way.

A few men and women became reality benders, without the awareness coming with the power. Their will folded an apocalyptic event into a VK-Class reality restructuring event, where the anomalous became normal, and everything right is wrong again.

Now, the world is a product of their minds. They control the Foundation, and in fact the rest of the known universe, by pure force of ego. This is lolfoundation with consequences, but of course they'll never be felt by the staff themselves. Maybe a couple hundred researchers get killed, or you bomb the Statue of Liberty, but that's life. You just deal with it.

Laws of this canon:

1. The Foundation is run by the senior staff author avatars, who are reality benders suffering from a cognition altering effect. They cannot see the terrible consequences of their actions. While to them, it's silly fun stuff everyone loves, in reality the world is in anarchy.

2. Reality has been folded to the point where the anomalous is normal. People can be living an ordinary life one moment and be smote by the vengeance of Clef the next. Almost nobody in the world remembers the way things were before, and they can't see what's really happening either. The world hasn't been destroyed, but society is more or less just acting out the motions. This isn't to say you should write random shit, but don't be afraid to break the rules for how some characters usually act. On the flip side, don't mischaracterize the shit out of characters for no good reason.

3. The Foundation is a captive audience for the reality avatars. Some might remember the way things used to be, but most are blindly led by the senior staff and instilled with the old Foundations talking points.

Locations:

Site-19: The main site for the Foundation. This is the headquarters of all the senior staff, and the hub of all their activity. Its location shifts with their will, and basically functions like the site in Eberstrom's proposal with fewer anomalies and more shenanigans. However you might imagine a site where Kondraki would be allowed to have a 682 rodeo, this'd be it.

The Outland: What you could call "flyover country." While the major SS members are having their shenanigans around the major sites

and populated areas, those who aren't in favor with the main Senior Staff regime are roaming the countryside, minding their business and trying not to incur the wrath of the Clefs and Kondrakis of the world… with varying success. You might find some ordinary people working in bombed out office buildings and living in the crumbling ruins of a place they called home.

Feel free to write up any additional locations you make in your stories!

People:

The Senior Staff: The author avatar characters, now turned into reality benders. They passively change the world around them to be what they want it to be: Praising them, and encouraging their exploits. They spend their days interacting with various skips and each other, in the coolest way that they can imagine.

Groups Of Interest: Most of the classic groups of interest will be going by their original motivations:

- **Global Occult Coalition:** Destroy! Destroy! KILL! Also used as cannon fodder, similar to the Chaos Insurgency.
- **Serpent's Hand:** Spies who infiltrate the Foundation and steal humanoids, destroy stuff sometimes.
- **Chaos Insurgency:** Their agents more or less apparate out of nowhere whenever the senior staff feel a need to have any sort of antagonist.
- **Church of the Broken God:** Heretics that have spies that infiltrate the Foundation to get their "pieces of God" back. Can also be used as cannon fodder.
- **Are We Cool Yet?:** Skips with this phrase tend to be artsy and destroy stuff a lot.
- **Unusual Incidents Unit:** Bumbling buffoons.

Other groups of interest don't have obvious ways to act for lolfoundation… maybe somebody could write a story about them? ;)

SCPs: The senior staff weren't the only ones to be given reality bending powers. The well known SCP articles, like 076 and 682, can also reinforce their badassery in the real world through perception. Of course, this means we encourage the articles more well known to be used in this canon, but this doesn't mean you can't use newer stuff if you think of a good way to use it.

WHO CAN ADD THINGS TO THIS CANON?

Anybody!

Canon Stories

- **Long Live The King** *by Roget*
- **My Brother The Ape** *by Roget*
- **Send in the Clowns** *by ihpkmn*
- **In God's Name** *by TroyL*
- **Through the Out-Land and What David and Tim Found There** *by Eskobar*
- **No One Else Will Protect Us** *by Roget*
- **Free Reality Check!: Press Button** *by FortuneFavorsBold*
- **Overview of MTF Psi-7 "Home Improvement"** *by Roget*
- **The Czar Cometh** *by Gargus*
- **Private Hell** *by Clef*
- **Sparkle Spectacular** *by ksaid*
- **Waffling About** *by Blaroth*
- **In Case You've Ever Wondered** *by pooryoric*
- **New Kid on the Block** *by Anaxagoras*
- **Funfiction** *by TobiasTheTapir*
- **Date Night** *by Hercules Rockefeller*
- **The Most Dangerous Game** *by DrMagnus*
    - **Happy Birthday From Nobody** *A prequel by*

DrMagnus
    - **When All You Have is a Hammer** *A sequel by DrMagnus*
    - **Legends Never Die** *A sequel by DrMagnus*
    - **Directive Legends** *The conclusion by DrMagnus*

- **Bad Dreams** *by Thefriendlyvandal*
- **SCP-3621** Best Intentions *by DrMagnus*
- **(The Engine of A Film)/(The Fine Game of Nil)** *by djkaktus and LordStonefish*
- **Descent** *by Bryx*
- **Interviews with Prospective Groups of Interest** *by MrWrong*

Please add tales in order of posting, unless it's a sequel or prequel to an existing story, in which case it should be listed as:

- Tale
    - Sequel/Prequel

New Kid on the Block

One day, Jacob realized that the Foundation was the place for him. It was the day the pretty girl from his high school's Alto Clef Fan Club died in his arms, telling him how wonderful his long, raven-black locks of hair looked as they framed his perfectly symmetrical face. Jacob smiled a flawless smile, as he was especially proud of those long, raven-black locks of hair. It had taken him hours in front of a mirror to make them look convincingly like hair.

As she died, Jacob screamed in anguish, pain, and grief and vowed revenge against the robotic servants of the Church of the Broken God that had killed her. Channeling the full might of his incredible power over vegetation, Jacob enshrouded his school in a blanket of vines, and commanded them to collapse inwards, destroying the building and all the cybernetic cultists inside, sparing only the pretty girl.

Her body was borne aloft above the devastation on a bower of vines, which burst into flower as they brought her to rest in front of Jacob. On reviewing the corpse, he opted to make a few minor cosmetic improvements, to honor her memory.

With everything he had ever cared about lying in ruins around him, Jake Son-of-Gaia set off on the journey to Site 19, where he knew he would find people able to aid him in his vendetta against the foul Broken God.

Oh, and his parents were probably dead too.

At the gate to Site 19, Jacob encountered a man in the shape of a dog.

"Hello there," Dr. Crow said. "I saw you were coming. Welcome to Site 19."

Jacob stared up at the towering glass and marble building in front of him. It had twenty-nine stories, just as he had imagined it, topped with three huge letters, maybe 9.144 meters tall. It was heaven. As soon as he could contain his excitement, Jacob launched into his introduction.

“I am Jake Son-of-Gaia. Sinister cybernetic servants of the Church of the Broken God killed my family and my one true love, though I was able to best them in combat with the help of my brothers, the trees and vines. But the cultists I destroyed were only a fragment of the might of the foul Broken God. Only the SCP Foundation knows where I can find the rest of the unnatural Broken God to destroy it. I promised over the dead bodies of my family to avenge their loss, so I came here.”

Kain chuckled. “You’ll fit right in, Jake Son-of-Gaia. I’m Dr. Kain Pathos Crow. Pleased to meet you.” The two shook hands.

“Can I be a doctor too? I’ve heard so much about you. I want an Egg Walker too, but it would be able to heal itself if it got damaged because it would be made of living plants and vines.”

“Ah, I don’t think so. Controlling plants sounds awfully paranormal to me. That’s the kind of thing we need to test and make sure the rest of the world doesn’t know about. I think you’d do better as an SCP than as Senior Staff.”

“What about Clef and Bright and Gerald? They’re anomalous too.”

Dr. Crow shook his head. “They’ve been doing this a lot longer than you have, Jake. They’ve always been staff. There never was a time when they weren’t Senior Staff. We can’t just make them SCPs now. Don’t worry. Being an SCP is a lot of fun too. Come on, let’s go inside.”

Jake Son-of-Gaia and Dr. Kain Pathos Crow walked up to the looming gate to Site 19. Dr. Crow paused. “You’ll have to get it for me,” he said. “I don’t have any hands. I’m a dog.”

The third floor stretched before Jacob, a final gallery of marvels

before he reached the hall he'd be staying in. He was to be SCP-422, because April 22 was Earth Day. Keter class, of course.

Dr. Crow led him through, pointing out SCPs of particular interest, such as SCP-307, the carnivorous ivy (Kondraki had five plantings in the waiting room for his office. They claimed a secretary a week). Jacob stepped forward, keeping pace with Dr. Crow, and —

Jacob opened his eyes. He was in a dingy room of weathered walls that had perhaps once been white. In one corner of the room, motes of light swam in a bell jar. A thick plexiglass window looked out onto a gray wasteland crossed by scattered cracked roads. An aging man sat on a wooden chair at a desk in front of him, and his eyes matched the room.

"Hello there," SCP-343 said. "I saw you were coming. Welcome to Site 19."

Jacob looked around him. The cell he was in bore no resemblance to the wonderland that was going to be his new home. What was the meaning of this? "This isn't Site 19," he said, "And I, Jake Son-of-Gaia, demand you return me there now!" Jacob commanded vines to sprout forth from the ailing walls to ensnare his foe.

No such vines emerged. The man shook his head and said, "None of that. You're Jacob Glaser, playing a demigod. In my room, I'll have things the way they really are."

"Who are you? Why are you doing this?"

"These days, I'm SCP-343. I've brought you here to warn you, and to tell you what Dr. Carrow — Kain — won't. I'd bet you're used to things going your way, right? And how long has it been since you've worn your own hair rather than that black stuff? The plant command too. Guess you're a literal type green, then.

"Here, there's a lot of people like you. The staff, the major SCPs, they can all do what you can. They're used to things going their way, just like you are. If things don't work out between you and them, you could be in danger. I can keep an eye out for you, but —"

“What are you talking about? The staff all like me. This is the safest place in the world, because the Foundation stands for ‘Secure Contain Protect’, not ‘Destroy Destroy Destroy’.”

SCP-343 sighed. “Well, we’ll see. Unfortunately, you might well fit right in. Which is the other thing I wanted to talk to you about. You need to stop killing people. Your family, your school… I know you didn’t realize, but you have to understand what you do to people around you.”

A surge of indignation and sheepishness? went through Jake. “I save people! That’s what I do. From the foul servants of the Broken God, who are the ones who killed everyone I hold dear.”

“Jacob, they died to give you a tragic backstory. Where do you think those poor cyborgs came from? Around you, everyone’s just a puppet, a prop, an extra. But leave them alone and they’re as real as you are.”

“That’s not true. I just don’t want anyone else to have to go through the harrowing and awful trials I have suffered.”

“Anyone else! Let me tell you something, Jacob. Oh, you’ll have more chances here to save people from cultists. But those cultists will be just whatever unfortunates were near when you and your new friends decide to play a game. You’re just going to be another 076, another Kondraki.” SCP-343 rose from its chair, a look of revulsion on its face. It was no more a man than Kain was a dog.

“You’ve never seen anybody but extras,” it continued. “But you’ve met Kain, you’ve met me, and you’ll meet more. You’ll have your fun, and people will die for it when they’re cast in the story of your life. We’re all the same.

“Go, Jacob Glaser. Go and play as Jake Son-of-Gaia. Die a solipsist.”

— then he continued down the hallway towards the elevator to the next level, shaking.

When they reached room 422, Kain stopped. “Here we are then. The chamber’s outfitted with standard accommodations. Well, sans the wine cooler, since you’re under 21. If there’s anything else you want, just add it to your containment procedures. It’s good to have you with us, Jake.” Dr. Crow barked once, and the egg walker came tromping down the hallway, holding some ungainly creature that gave Jacob a doleful look through mismatched eyes. Dr. Crow rode off, and Jacob entered the containment chamber and sealed the door.

In the middle of the culmination of all his dreams, the words of SCP-343 lingered. Could he trust the opulence surrounding him? Jacob focused, and for a second the room became a small, barren cell with a cot and a chair and a table, but it was too much, so Jacob fell back on the feather bed and let the sound system lull him to sleep.

Incident 422-01: On 10/31/ , while transporting objects associated with the Church of the Broken God past SCP-422’s containment cell, D-2663 and D-7529 were heard to remark that “It should be perfectly safe to leave these Broken God artifacts in the server room while we go get pizza, right D-2663?”, and “Absolutely!”. On hearing this, SCP-422 used pumpkin seeds he’d been storing since Thanksgiving to burst open the door to his cell, and attempted to take the Church artifacts. Dr. Bright was also in the hall, however, and ordered the D-class personnel to stop SCP-422.

In the ensuing struggle, Dr. Bright and D-2663 were injured. Dr. Bright then transferred himself to D-7529 and called for security personnel as he launched pursuit of SCP-422. SCP-422 summoned vines to entangle security, and approached the Site 19 entrance, with Bright still in pursuit. He threw the remaining pumpkin seeds behind him, and within seconds the corridor filled with a wall of pumpkins.

As SCP-422 fled the facility, Dr. Bright is observed to be slowly dismantling the wall of pumpkins, then rolling

them outside. Security footage captures Bright tying approximately eight (8) pumpkins together by the stems into a roughly humanoid figure. He then removed SCP-963 and dropped it onto the assembled pumpkins. The mass animated and the head pumpkin spontaneously carved itself into a jack-o-lantern. Dr. Bright then ran after SCP-422 in his new body.

Seeing Dr. Bright approach, SCP-422 tried to use his powers, but succeeded only in growing Dr. Bright even larger. SCP-422 recaptured and returned to his containment chamber. Dr. Bright agreed to return to a human body when pointed out that the pumpkins were too big to eat from SCP-458.

Jake Son-of-Gaia is a very dangerous SCP. It's fortunate for us that he was motivated to prevent the dangerous handling of the Church of the Broken God items. Who knows what horrors from the forge of the Broken God would be unleashed on Site 19 had he not acted so early?
~Dr. Bright

Jacob couldn't recall ever having had so much fun. He couldn't believe he had waited almost a month to breach containment. It was probably the caviar and television, he mused, far sturdier than any walls or locks. Nothing to do with his chat with 343.

Incident 422-20: On 3/29/ SCP-422 was provided with meat loaf for his dinner, in contravention of his preferences outlined in his containment procedures. SCP-422 protested to the guards, and vowed to go on a hunger strike until he was given a natural, vegan diet like humans are supposed to eat. When given a metal block the next day, SCP-422 entered a rage state and attempted to breach containment.

[DATA EXPUNGED] but Kondraki was able to outfence and destroy each of the four (4) remaining plantings

before they consumed him and his prized [DATA EXPUNGED]

Dr. Crow and Kondraki then confronted SCP-422 in Site 19 Subbasement-Omega, where SCP-422 announces that he plans to throw the final cutting of SCP-307 onto the geothermal vents and use that energy combined with his power to [DATA EXPUNGED] four hundred feet (400 m.) tall and [REDACTED] the entire Foundation. The rapidly growing [DATA EXPUNGED] seized the shards of SCP-143 in its tendrils, and lowered them into the geothermal vent, forging them together into [REDACTED] (7) swords. It and Jake Son-of-Gaia fought with Kondraki while Dr. Crow attempted to disrupt the energy flow to the [DATA EXPUNGED].

The [DATA EXPUNGED] made a lunge with all (7) swords at Kondraki, who artfully parried, sending the swords tearing through the wall like tissue paper. This proved a mistake, however, as the wall was part of the containment cell for SCP-506, the instant growing plants. Chuckling at Kondraki's mistake, Jacob used his powers to breach containment on SCP-506, causing them to ensnare Kondraki.

Jake Son-of-Gaia then asked Kondraki if he had any last words before the [DATA EXPUNGED] ran him through [REDACTED] times, to which Kondraki replied "Yeah. What's red, green, and blue, and read by you?", to which Jacob replied "A newspaper?". 5 (5) enlarged instances of SCP-504 then flew at him in speeds in excess of 2175 mph, blowing the [DATA EXPUNGED] to pieces and stunning Jake Son-of-Gaia. Kondraki remarked that, "No, my butterflies making a 4 look like a 6. Shouldn't a plant guy know the difference between zucchini and tomato?" Meanwhile, Dr. Crow succeeded in deactivating the geothermal vents, causing a loss of power to 15 Keter class containment cells (see Incident 682/076/106/1370-8 for further details), and also causing Jake Son-of-Gaia to plummet into the shafts below Site

19, where he was easily recovered and returned to his containment cell. Dr. Crow apologized for breaching containment, but was not subject to disciplinary action due to the overwhelming benefit to the Foundation this caused. SCP-422 hunger strike ends after three (3) days.

I had never considered how good fencers plants might be. Inferior in skill to myself, of course, but I won't underestimate their ability to wield one sword in each branch again. Still, they seem more vulnerable to fire than most people I've faced.
~Dr. Kondraki

As awesome as fighting Kondraki and Crow was, and as totally sweet as watching the chaos unleashed when Crow let loose half the Keters in Site 19, Jacob was troubled. While the others were chasing Jake Son-of-Gaia down into the bowels of the Foundation, he had stayed behind, and tried to strip the veils of unreality from the corpse of one of the D-class consumed by SCP-307. The D-class was no less dead without them. Rather more so, actually. When his classmates all died, they were just dead. None of the messy inside bits. When his parents were killed (Were they his parents? Was it really the Broken God's servants that had done it?), they too had looked at peace. That wasn't right. That wasn't how things were supposed to be.

That was how they were *made* to be.

Incident 422-25: On [DATE EXPUNGED], 50 (fifty) Church of the Broken God cultists entered Site-19 and attempted to steal SCP-882. Seeing site security being mobilized to stop them, SCP-422 used a small stash of SCP-843 to grow a herd of vegetable buffalo, and commanded them to stampede down the door to his containment cell. Following the terrible grinding of gears, he came upon Gerald, Kondraki and site security fighting the cultists on the eighth floor.

SCP-422 grew the fibers in the uniforms of the security agents into impenetrable armor to protect them from the cog pistols wielded by the followers of the Broken God. Just as Gerald reached the cultist working to access SCP-882, the last lock fell and the great machine within let out an earsplitting scream of greeting.

A cultist leapt into the grinding maw of SCP-882, but rather than be crushed by it, he somehow fused with it. SCP-882 (eight hundred eighty two) collapsed inwards around him, taking on a semblance of human form, guided by human will. A Gearlord of the Church of the Broken God had arisen within the walls of Site 19 itself!

Dr. Gerald is reported as having said “This calls for desperate measures” and then security footage shows him putting on a pair of roller blades and skating towards the Gearlord. The resulting explosion destroyed SCP-882’s containment chamber, blasted the Gearlord through the wall and out of the building, and also damaged the pipelines delivering acid to SCP-682’s tank.

Curiously, no members of security were injured in the explosion.
It was a tremendous explosion. Of course they died. ~Dr. Gerald
Go with Jake on this one, Gerald. I’ll need some of them for later. ~SCP-682

Kondraki and SCP-422 took the emergency hang glider from the SCP-803’s containment chamber (it was there in case it became necessary to fight the Parasols in all three dimensions; see Incidents 803-40 and 803-49) and leapt out the hole in the wall of Site 19 to where the Gearlord gathered itself — literally — below. Out of concern for safety, Dr. Gerald volunteered to take the stairs.

Once outside, Kondraki drew SCP-1871 and engaged the Gearlord in combat, while Jake Son-of-Gaia grew

entangling roots around the whirling metal of its feet to slow it down. The surviving cultists shot at Kondraki, but he was too fast, deflecting an estimated 493 SCP-217-tainted gears with his sword.

[DATA EXPUNGED]

Just as Kondraki landed a killing blow on the Gearlord and turned his attention to the servants of the Broken God, the gate to Site 19 (nineteen) burst open, and Dr. Gerald came out, running, followed by ten remaining members of site security. A 300 decibel roar behind them told everyone that SCP-682 was loose!

Jacob watched as the bulk of SCP-682 leapt through the air in a probably impossible trajectory towards Dr. Gerald, who wasn't there when it landed. It bellowed and swiped at a guard, but at Jacob's thought, the blow went wide. None of the corpses really went away, he'd found; without the vibrant liveness of the Senior Staff, the hallways of Site 19 were scattered with bones.

"Jake!" Kondraki shouted, bisecting another cultist, "Come help. These are the monsters who killed your family!"

It was true. This was the eighth time servants of the Broken God had attacked in the months since Jacob had arrived at Site 19 — nearly as frequently as Chaos Insurgency agents (ten times). He wasn't sure where they came from or where they went. If they were killed, he couldn't tell their bodies apart from those of guards or D-class. Or even those of the junior researchers from the SCP-050 Prankpocalypse, now that he thought about it. The dramatic, black and red cloaks of the Insurgency agents seemed to only be there when the Staff were near.

What if the sinister cybernetic servants of the Church of the Broken God were also like that?

What if *all* people were people?

Jacob turned to one cultist running towards him and peeled away

everything but the bare truth. The villain stumbled, the ground beneath him drained of life and color, and where the half-machine fanatic had fallen was now a frightened, half-starved man who tottered away. Jacob grinned; he had been right. “You see, guys?” he said, “We don’t need to kill them after all!”.

“What did you just do?” Kondraki said, suddenly very still.

“Well, like any other sort of corruption, my plants can cleanse the machine plague, so I grew some and they siphoned all the SCP-217 right out of him!”

“Oh, bull !” yelled Kondraki. Then he paused, focused, and said again, much more quietly, “I said bullshit. You think you can do that? Don’t you ever uck with me. Fuck!”

Jacob stepped back, but Kondraki continued.

“I’m the one everyone wants. If I say the O5s orally osculate odiferous offensive… Shit, I know there’s more words that start with ‘O’. The point is they’ll give me a medal anyhow for saving their asses in the last site-wide containment breach! Know your place, Jake. You’re the dandelion guy we’ve got locked up, and I’m the everlasting badass the fucking devil’s scared of.”

Though the record would later claim that SCP-422 entered a rage state at this point, Jacob in fact felt quite calm. “But I’m an SCP, not a doctor. You’re not the boss of me,” he said, and restored reality around Kondraki.

Dr. Alan Condack was not as tall as Kondraki had been, and neither did he possess the everlasting badasses’s rugged handsomeness or lust-stirring musculature. He wore a tattered lab coat and his nails were gnawed to the quick. In Dr. Condack's right hand, he held a short, rusted metal bar that slipped from now-slack fingers. From his sunken chest came a low wail of loss.

Jacob stared, Dr. Condack sobbed. The tableau held for nearly a minute, then a crushing mental force sent Jacob staggering to the ground and broke his concentration. He looked up to see SCP-682 and Dr. Gerald standing over him, ashen-faced.

Dr. Condack was gone, hidden away again under swaths of consensus reality, and the Kondraki that raised himself to his feet — not uneasily, because Kondraki was never uneasy — looked almost the same as before. “You little shit,” he snarled at the prostrate Jake, “What a fucking piece of shit SCP you are.” Jacob struggled to keep his form from obeying Kondraki’s imprecation.

“Just what will we do with you, Jake?” said SCP-682, planting a claw on his back.

“I think a decommissioning is in order,” said Dr. Gerald.

“And has he fucking earned it!” said Kondraki, a grim smile spreading across his face.

Against the three of them, Jacob could do nothing; he could barely even maintain the separation between Jake Son-of-Gaia and himself. He felt both parts of himself shackled, beaten, and dragged towards Site 19.

As he passed through the gates, a soft voice spoke in his ear, “I don’t think there’s much more for you here worth experiencing. Let me in, and I can take you away.” With the last of his strength, Jacob signaled acquiescence, then SCP-343 was all around him, then he was gone, sinking into blackness.

Decommissioning Log 422:

SCPs requisitioned: SCP-272, SCP-891, SCP-1417, SCP-2800

Procedure: [DATA EXPUNGED]

Addendum: *Seriously,* fuck *that guy. ~Kondraki*

Jacob opened his eyes. He was in a large meadow, dotted with flowers and dappled with shade. A ways away, some figures were playing, joyously. Through the brilliant sky, if he looked closely, he could half make out a scarred room and a weary figure, and he knew that another mote now danced in SCP-343’s bell jar.

A couple figures from the group ahead split off and approached him, a dog and a vampire. “Hi there!” said the dog, “We were told you might be coming. Come, join us. Rest, relax until we’re finally needed. I’m Joseph Simpson, and this is my friend Sid Duquesne. What’s your name?”

Jacob paused. He felt the plants listen to him, knew they would still obey the command of Jake Son-of-Gaia. But then he broke into a broad grin and said, “Nice to meet you! I’m Jacob Glaser.”

« | **HUB** | »

Long Live The King

My name is Dr. King, and you know what I hate more than anything ever invented by mankind? Apple seeds. They have always been the bane of my miserable existence. God damn, piece of shit apple seeds. Never whole apples, or maybe even sliced apples. Just the seeds, going everywhere I go and ruining all my plans. Finally get a chance to test a big SCP? Apple seeds. Working in my office? Seeds in the drawers. No matter where I go, apple seeds.

But I'm going to change all that. For the past six weeks, I have locked myself alone in my office. The apple seeds have been slowly filling it up, and they're up to my neck now. Tonight is the night I let those demon seeds win. Those hell-spawned capsules of hatred have finally broken me, because I cannot deal with one more goddamn apple seed.

I hope they don't have apples in hell.

Dr. King groaned, as he was prone to do when waking up, and scrunched his eyes. Was he dead? Was this… after? Didn't feel very after. In fact, his face felt like it was resting upon a familiarly textured surface.

Apple seeds.

Dr. King's legs scrambled for ground as he sprung from a prone state, sending apple seeds scattering across the seedy ground.

Absolute despair and anguish washed over him in waves, sending him tumbling back to the seeded earth. "No! Fuck! It's not supposed to- goddammit why won't you leave me?"

Preoccupied as he was with lament and despair, Dr. King failed to notice the celestial figure approaching him from on high. It was an apple, a whole one, with leaves as green as the sea and a shimmer surpassed by none. It had one sticker, affixed to a side, which shone a golden "A" shimmering across the landscape.

"Rise, King."

Dr. King flipping around, and his jaw would have dropped had it not already been hanging agape, swinging like a pinata in the wind. "You… but…"

"MY SON… YOUR FINAL TIME HAS COME," boomed the giant flying apple.

Dr. King blinked. "My time? What… the hell are you talking about?"

A shimmer of bright red liberated itself from the apple and spread over the land, blasting everything that had once subscribed to other colors on the spectrum into a brilliant, vibrant red.

"THERE IS NO TIME TO WASTE. YOU WERE BORN TO CREATE APPLES. NOW, YOUR TIME HAS COME. THE WORLD IS IN CRISIS, AND THE ONLY SOLUTION IS APPLES."

"… What."

Suddenly, King's mind was filled with images. He was riding an apple chariot into Site-19, and all the senior staff were apples. They bowed down to him, and readied the apple throne for him to sit in. Panning out, the site was apples. Slices made up every wall, and the head of every researcher was replaced with rotund, healthy apples. There was no danger, because skips were apples.

The whole world was apple.

"SO, YOU SEE, IT IS- WHERE ARE YOU GOING."

King was already gone. "NO! I am not going to be the king of the FUCKING APPLES."

"BUT IT IS YOUR DEST-"

King turned to the floating apple which called itself his father. His face was even redder than the world that surrounded him. "FUCK DESTINY."

And then, Dr. King was apples no more.

How's he holding up, doc?

Well, we've recovered about 765 apple seeds from his trachea, in addition to the couple thousand we got from the rest of his orifices.

Are they still cleaning out his office?

Yeah, we'll be digging seeds out of there for a month. Poor guy.

Man, he looked so pissed when they brought him in there… but now, heck, he looks happier than I've seen in awhile.

Makes you wonder what he's thinking, doesn't it?

Whatever it is, at least it's making him happy…

« | **HUB** | »

My Brother The Ape

Scene: A messy office, home to to one of the Foundation's best and brightest men. Not a big, or a fancy office, but one that gets the job done. We aren't talking about the name on the door. That guy's story will be told another day. Today, we talk monkey business.

The monkey statue saw it all. The organization it created was at once disrupted by the lawless spirit of reality. Sighing, it picked up the papers in the office and set them upright again. Standardizing the spelling, and removing any reference that wasn't Alto Clef. The ones addressed to Agent Ukulele, aka Adam ben Yahweh, aka Lucifer, First of the Fallen, aka That Bastard were thrown in the trash.

It wished it could return to any of the old masters of the universe. They didn't have to deal with this bullshit. Bright was a comrade, even if it had the sneaking suspicion he hated him. Kondraki was a ridiculous man, but at least he was usually out doing some crazy shenanigan and not trying to do his work.

Of all of them though, the best to work for was Dr. Gears. For Cog had seen the reality shift for what it was, and it left him so traumatized that he took no part in these new world antics. Usually, he sat in an empty office and stared at the well. When someone came to speak to him, then the role of the emotionless would begin, and he would humor them with a walk.

050 sighed, and returned to its master's work.

There was a knock at the office door. A curious occurrence. Usually, people were too frightened to even walk past the door, for fear that a shotgun-toting demon would leap out and end their miserable existence. Perhaps it was a mistaken knock, from a new researcher or somesuch thing. A one time-thing, quickly rectified to the horrors around him.

There was a pause, and the door began to open. The floorboards creaked as the figure slowly stepped closer and closer to the now-anxious clever statue. Stopping before it, the figure seemed to draw all light in the room to his person, making him a titanic figure in 050's mind. The figure's lips parted, and he spoke.

"I'm here to talk to you about the banana business initiative."

Swinging from vine to vine in her enclosure, SCP-397 was reminded of just how boring her life really was. She knew every inch of the enclosure by heart, and could swing from these vines with her eyes shut. Nobody really came to see her, most of the time, so that was at least some form of improvement. But there were other things to do besides sit in a cage and wait for death.

With a huff, she shimmied down the vine and to the cage floor, where for the hundredth time she felt around for any structural imperfection which may aid in an escape attempt. Every rivet was pried at, and every floorboard was tested, and the result was the same as always. Smooth and unbroken.

"Hello, 397."

All the hair on her back perked up, and froze, like a glacier of monkey-fear. Someone was in her enclosure, and they were talking to her. Enemy, or friend? Fight, or flee?

Before a conclusion to these issues so suddenly raised could be reached, the voice spoke again, with a commanding tone.

"I think I have something you may be interested in."

A lavish party was underway in Site 19's cafeteria. There were streamers emblazoned with every potential birthday message that could ever be uttered. Candies and cakes lined up and down tables, shining under the bright fluorescent lighting and seeming to be calling out for consumption. Party hats adorned every head, and every hand held some other merriment device.

A small circus was in the center of the room, with elephants and lions and all other sorts of jolly animals. There were cannons, and trapeze, and maybe even some magicians. All of them stood below one massive banner wrought of velvet and friendship: "HAPPY BIRTHDAY DOCTOR RIGHTS!"

In the midst of all this, a single gentleman stepped to the cafeteria's threshold.

The man smiled as the crowd parted before him. While the party was a nice diversion from the usual drudgery of work, there was only one thing this party held which could be of interest to him. At a central table, surrounded by candies and clapping researchers, was a small monkey toy, bringing birthday cheer to all who wanted it.

"Birthday monkey. Long time, no see."

The monkey clapped, flipped, and continued with its song and dance routine.

"It's been a long time… but we need your organizational skills. Not many monkeys can put a party like this together."

With one final clap, the birthday monkey looked up to the man. It clapped its hands together twice.

"No… it isn't the Manhattan thing. We have a new job for you."

"Ook?"

"Yeah, ook."

One could hear the proboscis engineer containment area before they could see it. Shortly after they heard it and before they saw it, the smell of hot metal, burning monkey fur, and slag would invade the smell-holes with vigor. After all other senses had been overwhelmed, the awe-struck visitor would be met with the gaze of machinery and magic.

An assembly line of faceless monkeys, all acting in union on a conveyer belt that could only fit the fattest conveyer man, were it a

real belt. Each monkey knew its job, and did it with gusto. At the end of the belt, seven monkeys with goggles over their non-existent eyes were busily pounding parts into whatever the newest contraption was.

Production didn't cease as several men entered the containment unit. One man looked around at every wondrous device beheld within this room, and grinned. He'd come to the right place.

"Ask them if they'd be interested in a work proposition."

The young, acne-riddled boy on his left nodded, and spoke in the language of hand-signs.

"Well? What do they say?"

The acne-man looked up to him. "They're willing to work if you give them something fun to do."

"Tell them" he said, turning to walk out the door. "That's exactly what they're gonna get."

Dr. Jack Bright carefully watched the face of his newest visitor.

"I really, really don't want to do this."

The man leaned forward in his seat, idly playing with Bright's desk decorations. "You owe me, Bright. We both know that."

Bright grimaced as best he could with simian features. "You drive a hard bargain, don't you?"

"Always. Do we have a deal?"

"… Deal."

Two days later, five monkeys sat together inside a largely empty podium area. Two statues, one Proboscis engineer, one resentful Chimpanzee, and a slightly bored and irritated Orangutan. The man who had called them together strode briskly to the podium, and

pulled out some well-worn note cards.

"Gentlemonkeys. My name is Doctor Blast, and I am here to tell you about one of the greatest monkey-related investments the SCP Foundation will ever make."

He paused for dramatic effect. Nobody appreciated it.

"Introducing… Junior Omega-7 Task Force Five: Monkey Business."

Bright facepalmed.

Send in the Clowns

Agent Whitaker woke up, groaning. He felt like he had one hell of a hangover; there was a noise in his head that sounded like that annoying National Weather Service "braaaaaak" noise, and his face felt… oily. He blinked, and suddenly realized that he was standing up in the middle of a street, and not lying down in bed. What the hell was happening?

He looked at a nearby window, and saw his reflection: his face was painted like a clown, and he was wearing a cowboy hat for some reason. And… was that a sports commentary he could hear? What the hell was going on? Last thing he remembered, he and his team were trying to get into… somewhere…

"Hey, buddy. You're up." He was pushed out of the alleyway by an unseen force, and stepped before a… the best word to describe it was a "dragon" but surely a dragon wouldn't have looked this wrong. Its skin was a combination of scales and rotting flesh, it had at least six eyes, and an opening in its stomach that looked almost like a second mouth. And the stench… It looked angry, and he could see why. On top of it, there was someone that appeared to be trying to ride it, holding on to bits of rotting flesh like a set of reins.

Whitaker ran for it. He was in a city, all right, but… the city didn't make sense. Streets dead-ended into diagonal brick walls. A skyscraper stood right next to a warehouse. Part of what he thought was a school jutted out into the middle of the street. He ran into this last one, hoping for cover from… whatever it was.

A horrible, inhuman voice bellowed "DISGUSTING!" The entire building shook as Whitaker cowered under a desk. He nearly let out a squeak of fear… but no sound escaped his lips. He tried saying the word "apple". Nothing. "barley". Nothing. He couldn't talk.

That was inconsequential. He heard a loud crashing noise; the lizard-thing had broken through the school. He ran out the back. He

heard another voice, booming and loud, the same sports commentary he had heard before; something about "rodeo clowns"? Was this some kind of sick joke? And that damn noise in his head wouldn't stop. What the fuck was going on?

The lizard broke through the school, but Whitaker was a block away by then. He looked up, and stopped in his tracks suddenly. There he was, on a jumbotron bigger than entire buildings, showing him running away from the lizard. Below that were spectators, several thousand of them, sitting in a giant grandstand. The jumbotron briefly displayed the words:

682 RODEO
BROUGHT TO YOU BY
PEPSI

Whitaker didn't have time to even think *what the actual shit* before the jumbotron switched back to him, showing the lizard, presumably 682, right behind him. Its jaws were open… and then they snapped shut on his leg.

The last experience Whitaker felt in his life was indescribable pain.

"So then my dad shot her," intoned Kain. "It was weird."

"What an amazing story, Professor Crow! Let's see how Kondraki is doing!" Clef checked the timer. "Holy 343! Konny's been riding 682 for 3 hours now! 3 hours riding the magic dragon! Someone give this man a Foundation star!"

"It's a pity about the rodeo clowns, though, don't you think?"

"They're just GOC agents, Crow. Nobody will care."

"…remind me what the official purpose of this test is?"

"To test how 682 reacts to urban environments. Didn't you read the brief?"

"Did we have to use an actual city, though?"

"It'll be fine, Kain. Don't be such a worrywart."

Just then, 682 started climbing the Empire State Building. Kondraki still clung on to it as it dove in and out of the building, trying to buck him off. All the while, the two of them could be heard cursing. 682's speech went something along the lines of "Get off me you filthy human!", while Kondraki simply laughed from exhilaration and cursed as he tried to dodge flying glass.

Finally, 682 reached the top of the building, and with a swing of its head, shook Kondraki off. Within 2 minutes, the man was a puddle of red mist on the pavement below.

"And Kondraki clocks in at 3 hours, 10 minutes! Not bad!" Clef looked at Kain. "Have someone scrape him off the pavement, will you?"

Kain grumbled a bit, before speaking into the mic, "The 682 Rodeo is brought to you by Taco Bell. Live Mas. Coming up: the tie-down, and more bareback 682 riding! But first, these messages."

« | **HUB** | »

In God's Name

The mischievous trickster and master plotter Icarus Sharpe walked in and shot Alto Clef right in his stupid face. He—deciding to be Matthew now—grinned broadly as the blood spattered from the exit wound, spraying over the wall behind Clef. Matthew laughed with glee just before he heard the voice to his left.

“Sucker.”

He turned just in time to see the sneer on Clef’s face, and then, the shotgun exploded and took his head off.

The mischievous trickster and master plotter Icarus Sharpe walked in—ignoring the decoy duplicate this time—twisting and firing to the left, putting a set up bullets right up the wall. His eyes went wide as the butt of the shotgun came over his temple, sending him sprawling down.

He looked up, rolling over and staring upward. Clef was on the right this time.

“Sucker.”

The shotgun took his head clean off again.

The mischievous trickster and master plotter Icarus Sharpe kicked the door open, hurling the grenade in and then ducking to the left. The explosion ripped through the office, and the sound of cursing came from inside instantly. Matthew gathered his feet under him, lurching forward and quickly checking the entrance and exit points, ignoring the charred corpse at the desk. Obviously a decoy.

Suddenly, the corpse’s hand popped up, putting a bullet into his knee. A moment later, the corpse fell to the side, and Clef stood up,

aiming the shotgun.

Matthew sighed. “God damni—“ The shotgun. His head. Simple math now, really.

Sharpe got the machine gun ready. He pulled the pin out of the grenade, kicking the door open, then throwing it in. The explosion hit, followed by the cursing. He nodded. It felt like it was coming together, finally.

He spun into the room, spraying the bullets everywhere, peppering the walls, desk, charred corpse, filing cabinet—fucking filing cabinet—and the large, stained glass window.

Stained glass window?

He looked more carefully into the room. This… This wasn’t Clef’s office. This wasn’t Clef’s office at all.

“Sucker,” said the voice.

He turned, managing to raise his hand and half-extend his middle finger before the shotgun went off.

He made sure that it was the right office, verifying it a half dozen ways. He placed the explosives carefully, then headed back down the hall. He quietly slipped into the side room, then moved into the air ducts, working his way up into them.

Once he got to the vent directly down the hall from Clef’s office, he pulled his rifle into position, then pressed the button, detonating the explosives.

A few minutes later, Clef stumbled from his office, hacking loudly. He looked like his arm was bleeding. Sharpe zeroed in on his head, then pulled the trigger.

Clef’s head exploded. Matthew grinned broadly.

There. There we go. This one.

He ran it three or four more times. Each time, success. He felt… giddy.

The mischievous trickster and master plotter Icarus Sharpe slipped into the world, putting on Matthew's face and setting the explosives, walking down the hall and into the side room. Matthew shuffled into position, then got his rifle shouldered. He took a deep breath, then pressed the button.

Matthew was taken in a ball of fire as the explosives detonated right below him, burning his flesh and hurling him through the top of the duct.

He flew up through the next floor, then crashed into the ceiling, at which point, he started falling again. He fell through the hole, down the next two floors, through the space where the duct had been, and onto a conveyor belt.

The belt started as he leaned up, looking around in time for the separator bar to clock him in the head, knocking him backwards and laying him out just as the boiling hot oil managed to scorch his back, bringing a scream to his lips that was quickly quelled as the chocolate sauce poured over him. A moment later, the sprinkles were scattered over his body. Then the quick blast of hot air to dry it.

He winced and groaned as the conveyor came to a stop. He leaned up, rolling off of it and looking around as the click of hundreds of guns suddenly echoed through the room.

"That was fucking stupid, man," said Clef, walking through the assembled security staff of Site19. "Did you really think the doughnut dispensary was the best way to enter the site undetected?"

His last thought, before the tragically non-bullet proof frosting and sprinkles was riddled with lead, was to wonder exactly how Clef had managed to plant the explosives immediately under him. How he managed to set up that explosion. The doughnut machine. All these people here.

How. How in God’s name?

But before the irony could hit him, the bullets did, and he was dead.

« | **HUB** | »

Through the Out-Land, and What David and Tim Found There

It was always these moments in the car that David hated so much. These last few moments. They drove around so much, him and Tim, getting what work they could get, hiding as often as they needed to, and it was hard for David to pinpoint exactly what part of this life he hated the most. There were so many shitty strip clubs, so many bedbug-ridden hotel rooms. David didn't give a shit about the helping people, not anymore, and he sure as hell didn't give a shit about Tim anymore. The only thing he lived for anymore was the beer. Same as Tim gave a shit about the meals. In a world with literal gods, the little pleasures were the only ones either of them could give a shit about.

"Okay, Dave, are we gonna do this, or what?"

Tim's voice jarred David back to reality. *God dammit, how much I wish I could kill him,* he thought. *Or that anything could kill any of us.*

"Yeah. Listen, Tim, I really don't wanna fucking do this, but I feel I need to," David started. "The same way I feel I need to do this every time."

Tim rolled his eyes. "Oh, for fuck's sake. Again with this shit? Worse than my fucking mom." He reached into what would appear to an outsider to be a jacket breast pocket and pulled out what would appear to an outsider to be a Marlboro Special Blend. "Every goddamn time. 'Tim, we made a deal with 'em.' 'Tim, they said no, let's get out of here.' 'Tim, stop cutting her.' Every goddamn time." Tim held his hand as though there were a lighter in it and flicked his thumb down; a flame emerged and lit the cigarette. "Don't even know why you fuckin' care. Never heard of a halfassed demigod before. If you're so fuckin'…so fuckin' *noble*, why do you even ask for payment?"

David could not possibly hate Tim more than at *these* moments, the

Confrontation Moments which are specific experiences that serve as distinct subsets of the general experience of the Car Moments. "Yes, Tim, you're right. I am a filthy, disgusting hypocrite, and a nagging bitch, and why do I even bother running the fucking Outland with you, and why shouldn't I just take this piece of shit right up to the doorstep of 19 and let Clef and Bright turn me into dust or feed me to the lizard or stick me on a relativistic treadmill or whatever those psychos will dream up that will make humble hardworking sociopaths such as ourselves look like the rankest of amateurs."

David took a deep breath. "Now, with all of these particulars established, allow me to repeat myself. We are going to have a conversation with the Hochschild family today. This conversation is going to include a request on their part that we grant them a very particular variety of assistance, one which we are uniquely positioned to provide. This conversation will subsequently include each of us explaining the price which this assistance will cost the Hochschild family. I can accept the horrific ethical ramifications of this because of the vagarious nature of free market economics; the family may accept or reject our terms freely, and the choice of what happens is entirely theirs. You can accept them because you wouldn't know a horrific ethical ramification from a fucking Shiba Inu. But it would make me *remarkably* more comfortable if you would be so kind as to pretend that you do. Just for the next half-hour or so. And, if all goes well, you get a little bit more of the last creature comfort that means anything to you at all, as do I."

Tim had finished his cigarette. "Is that all?"

David sighed and reached for his seat belt. "I hope that's all I need."

Tim opened the car door. "Whatever."

The house was nice enough, David supposed; ranch-style, situated on a few acres of land, well-stocked fishing pond out front, sporadic landscaping throughout the property. Upper-middle class. Not as nice as some of the celestial mansions that you found occasionally near the area of Site 19, the ones the staff occasionally made for themselves or some of the civilians they were smiling on that day. But these houses, this property? It was *real*. It wasn't some capricious illusion made reality at the hands of a fake "doctor" who

won the anomalous magic lottery one day. David could respect that. Tim, as usual, could give a shit less.

In one corner of the lot next to the road, David saw a very specific sort of hole. Just a few feet wide at most. But David could feel the tear in reality, its physical manifestation, went a lot deeper than that. The family had planted some cherry trees around it and called it a day.

David knocked on the back door and smoothed his hair back. Tim finished another illusory cigarette (he thought the smoking looked cool), standing parallel to the door a few feet behind David in what he thought was a classic tough-guy apathetic stance. An older woman came to the door. "Hello? Can I help you?"

"Mrs. Hochschild? I'm David Eskobar. We spoke on the phone? This is my associate, Timothy Hyne. We're here about your daughter?"

Just for the briefest moment, the look of sheer relief and joy that came over the Hochschild matriarch made David flash back to when this job was enjoyable on its own merits. Back when it had all the genuine pleasure of helping people, combined with the little thrill of knowing he was helping to clean up the side effects that the Clefs and Kondrakis back at 19 didn't know they were leaving behind. Mrs. Hochschild stepped back and let David and Tim in.

Mr. Hochschild was unconscious in the living room, half-empty bottle of Bacardi Gold rising and falling along with his chest. The top was screwed back on it, presumably the handiwork of his wife. Presumably not the first time in the last few months. They walked past him to a bedroom near the back of the house. A bizarre, vaguely speech-like sound grew louder as they approached. David knew the basics of what he was about to see.

The girl was ten, maybe eleven years old. Bookish sort, judging from the glasses and the shelves on two walls. The third wall had — *goddammit, of course it did* — three Foundation posters on the wall. One a manga-artwork version of Kondraki riding the lizard, one a poster from Shenanigans '09, one from the TV show. Tim got the shit-taste look on his face and was about to say something; David gave him a look and Tim just crossed his eyes.

The girl was next to her bed. She turned and walked past the edge of the bed, turned toward the door, and took a step. She said "Mom, I told you, he's just a —" and disappeared. Right as the words began to come out of her mouth, she was gone. She was standing back by her bed, walking to the edge, turning toward the door, speaking, and disappearing.

"She's…" her mother said, "she's been like this for two months now." Mrs. Hochschild broke down in tears.

"It's to be expected, ma'am," David said. "Tim and I, this is a problem we run into pretty commonly. Temporal loop, small scale, affixed to her personally. If we had the exact date and time, I bet it would correlate with a major shift at one of the big Foundation sites."

"Oh, Sarah loved the Foundation stories so much!" Mrs. Hochschild said. "I mean, we all did, of course, we took her to see Senior Staff Shenanigans back a few years ago, we all had such a great time —"

"Oh, fucking enough, goddammit," Tim said. "Suck Strelnikov dick on your own time, when I don't have to hear it."

Mrs. Hochschild gasped. "I would deeply prefer it, sir, if you avoided that sort of filthy language in this household."

David slapped Tim on the chest. "Sorry, whatever," Tim said.

"This is very fixable," David said. "Tim and I, we're, uh, we're actually former employees of the Foundation. We're very familiar with these sorts of things. They happen when Senior Staff conduct large-scale reality shifts. Sort of a blowback, a recoil type of thing. The fabric of reality can only handle so much."

"But…that can't be *right*," Mrs. Hochschild said. "They're…they're all so smart! So wise! They have God locked in a cell, for goodness' sake! Why would they let this happen?"

"They ain't that bright," Tim snarled. "They…we lucked out, that's it."

"The Senior Staff do what they do for their own sake," David said. "You can't…you can't really feel it, exactly? But there's a, a sort of spell on you. On everyone. It makes you all love them, love what

they do, see it as glamorous. It's called a memetic felicification agent, and they're broadcasting it from Site 19. As part of our service, we'll need to inoculate your family against it. It's part of getting your daughter free."

David had made that part up a few years earlier. The family's belief in the Senior Staff's pseudo-divinity had nothing to do with their ability to be wrecked by them. But one of the few things David and Tim could agree on was that anything that took those people down a peg was good for the world. And most of that rationale was bullshit too, just words from the old Foundation that helped to explain the inexplicable.

Stunned, Mrs. Hochschild tried to speak. "Are…are you sure about all this?"

"Quite sure, Mrs. Hochschild," David said. "It's for the best."

"Let's get to those payment negotiations you mentioned, shall we?" Tim said.

"Oh, we have money," Mrs. Hochschild said. "That certainly won't be a problem. We'll pay anything to save our daughter."

Tim's mouth spread in a predator's grin. "That's what we're very much hoping."

"Ah…about payment," David said. "We don't actually accept cash. No real use for it for our types. There are only a few things that we can't make for ourselves. Certain…well, let's just say we need volunteers."

"Well, technically —" Tim began.

"We *need* volunteers to, erm, source our materials in an ethical fashion. A process that some of us —" David glared at Tim at that " — consider important."

"I…I'm very confused, I'm afraid. What is it exactly you want?"

"Well, I actually happen to be something of an amateur brewer," David said. "Beer fan. I try to find what I can, experiment with new

stuff."

"We don't have anything like that around here," Mrs. Hochschild said. "We're a religious family. Senior Staff has told us that 343 frowns on the consumption of spirits."

Tim snickered. David said, "Oh, you don't have any actual alcohol I'm interested in. I'm more looking for ingredients. Do you have anything consecrated?"

Mrs. Hochschild took a step back. "Eh—ex*cuse* me?"

"Relics? Artifacts? Old Bibles, maybe? Any religion will do. They have a certain symbolic power that embeds itself in the beer. Very unique, very subtle. Can't be replicated with anything artificial. It has to be something that others have believed in, put faith in. You can taste it."

"You're…" Mrs. Hochschild took a step back. "You're insane! And you!" she said, pointing at Tim. "What…what horrible thing do *you* want?"

"Ah, yes," Tim said. "About that."

A few more sprinkles of oregano floated into the pot. "Mmmm," Tim said. "Do you even *fucking* smell that shit? This is beautiful, man. This is *art.* How's your thing?"

David took a sip of the wort. "Eh. Not bad." He took another sip. "Wish they'd had something other than just Christian shit. I mean, the Bible was at least, hm," he said, sniffing closely, "at least eighty years old. Just wish I could get something different."

"I feel that. You wanna go someplace overseas? Get some weird shit? Gypsies? Maybe some African shaman shit? I'm up for going global with this." He stirred the stew a bit more, brought the spoon up to his lips. "God *damn*, man. You sure you don't wanna try this?"

"I'm good, man," he said. "And listen, sorry about the thing before. I can't judge your shit too much, I guess. And at least you gave her the prosthesis this time."

"Aw shit," Tim said. "And the mama still kept bitching. I'm like, 'bitch, we're gonna save your daughter's shit, and you're getting almost all of her back, whaddya want?' and she's all crying and shit. And I was just like "fine, how about one of those metal blade things they give cripples that makes them all fast and shit', and she just nodded and kept crying or whatever, and that's consent, right?"

David shrugged. "Sounded good to me." He turned back and looked at his brewing equipment. "It'll take a couple of weeks to get this properly aged. That ought to take another half hour or so, hard as I'm dilating time around it." David gave it some thought. He looked at Tim.

A broad smile broke over Tim's face. "Aw, shit, man. I can hook you up." He ladled some of the stew into a bowl. "I put some Italian spices in it this time. It's all kinds of special." He slid the bowl over to where David was.

"Is there an occasion I don't know about?"

"Shit, dude. Who knows how many years ago today? Think back, man. This is Der Tag."

David took a sip of the broth and thought back. "Holy *shit*, this seriously is amazing. Um. February 11th. Lemme th —" David stopped. "Ohhhhh. The day all…all *this* happened. Bender's Day."

"You're the only one who doesn't think that's a cartoon reference, dude," Tim said, taking another bite of the stew. "Get some of that meat, dude. I think it'll make you smarter. She came off as pretty smart, except for the bullshit Clef fetish."

"Eh. All the kids have that nowadays. Anyway, as much shit as I gotta see out there," David said, "I dunno if I wanna be smarter." He shrugged, looked back at the bowl, and took a bite.

No One Else Will Protect Us

My name is The Administrator. I don't know who I was before all this… happened? Or changed? Or whichever adjective you want to use, it all means the same thing. History itself has been changed, if that's possible. We tried to go back, edit this whole mess out of history, but it didn't work. Maybe that's how it spread back there, there's no way to be sure. Hell, how could we be sure?

It all started with… him. I don't know what we would call it, although at one point it was a human being. We brought him into Site-19 and classified him with all that pomp. A Keter, if I recall correctly. There was a lot of concern about the research team heading it up, that they weren't ready for the project… I was one of them. But, we were pacified and reassured. They were being supervised, everything was going to be peachy and lovely.

Two weeks after he came into the site, things… changed. It started small at first, like they all do. A small chink in the armor, and then you pick and pick and pick so you end up with a gaping hole. All it takes is one touch to shatter our world, after that. In the end it was the butterfly kid who broke things. Snapped the spine of reality neatly over his knee.

It was a big bang, then a big shush. You'd look out a window, and not a soul was out there. They were out cold, then, and didn't remember a thing about what was out there. Wiped the chalkboard of our world clean, with all of its gambits and strategies. I don't know why I can still see the lines, when nobody else can. Maybe I deserve it?

I can't leave the office anymore. My body… well, it's not what it used to be. I'm a shriveled infantile husk, with deep pits that occasionally bubble up some goo. My ears are twisted and broke off, but I still have my limbs. Crossed over my black, flaking chest, they hold my shoulders together, while my legs have curled into a spiral. I'm held aloft by my coat, with smooth metal and soft green. Sometimes, it

lets me crawl, but most days I just wait. The staff run this place now.

When they leave Site-19, some rules of reality return to its vacant halls. The lockers droop and sag, while the tiles slowly crack and disintegrate. Occasionally, Dr. Gears walks through the hallway that faces me with his servant, Iceberg, and the halls suddenly leap back to virility and strength. Their discussion always passes through to another hall, though, and when their voices drift, so does the condition of the site.

Everywhere, corridors corrode and ceilings collapse. But, as these pantheons of reality pass through, they will be swept back into place as had been remembered, by them. Not always the same, but as long as the vague shape of their memory was preserved, it satisfied most tastes. The non-senior staffers, too, were chained to this ruse. As they were remembered, they popped back into existence, busying around the staffers and going to half-recalled research projects.

When they left, few remained to populate the halls. Decrepit and crammed with rot, some sections might lay in utter decay for decades while decadence and disarray destroyed the already disrupted universe. So it went, so it would always be.

Outside, Clef and Kondraki endlessly drove some anomalous car, the road collecting itself in their path, the pavement happy to be seen and given a reason to exist, before sighing and settling back into ashes. It was content, its purpose fulfilled, before it remembered it was not supposed to think and slumped once more into nothingness.

Going further, out in the city. Another wondrous city day. God, how long has it been? How long has the world been broken? I've probably lived more lifetimes than anyone could ever deserve, even for someone who helped the Foundation. But we all help the Foundation. Those lovable scamps.

They took the fear out of people. The shadows have mixed with the light, and created a shifting mix of grey. A universal twilight without beginning or end. It's so much better than before, we can have both without having to think about it.

We still see them, sometimes. When they walk down a street, we the pavement rise to greet them, and the people try to adore them. They love constant praise and attention to keep their worldview intact, and boy do we give it to them in spades!

The lights dim when they leave the towns. Street signs, once saying something like REDACTEDville, now blank out and fade away. People cease their fawning, and return to their daily routines. Maybe their office was now a demolished pile of rubble from the six-eight-two breach back in '76, and their local factory had been bombed in case it was The Factory, but the local business still went on as usual.

Some things were a little different. Without the staff in town, the sky grew a little darker, and the streets cracked a little deeper. Maybe Site-19 didn't always look like the grey building it had once been. Sometimes it might be a castle, or a tower, or a broken down rubble that may have once been a building. But that was daily business for them.

Mothers sent their children to roofless schools, where they learned in rain, snow, or shine, and often all three at once. The bubble of reality around Konny and Clef finally shrunk away for good, and all was right, all was just.

Sometimes… they change me too. I remember things the way they did. I can't remember how they used to be, and I know they can't remember either. It's all a big flaky crust slowly collapsing, as more memories homogenize and are dismembered, then becoming fact. But, we keep it up. So that others may live in an insane, abnormal world.

We secure. We contain. We protect.

Free Reality Check!: Press Button

It was a generally gloomy day, such as was normally the case when Dr. Jack Bright had a mild hangover and was also a chimpanzee for one reason or another. Outside his window the rain pattered lightly as his clumsy fingers reached for the coffee pot aside of his bed and flipped it on. He scratched his head. He took a piss. He waddled back into his room just in time for his first morning Joe.

It was about that time, he would recall later, that he noticed the delivery truck. Which was strange, mostly because it was Tuesday, and deliveries arrived every other Wednesday. Having thoughtfully determined that this would be a scheduled-in-advance hangover, Dr. Bright had little else to do for the time being, and so rode the elevator out to the front gate to see what he could see about the box which had been left outside. Five security men were already looking over it, poking it with sticks, scratching their heads and looking around for someone smarter than them to handle the problem. Dr. Bright considered making a wise remark about evolution, but thought better of it. Mostly due to the throbbing pain in his dome.

"I just don't know what to make of it, Dr. Bright!" one of the security guards said, shrugging like those damn rookies always do. Bright grunted in such a way that told the others to back off, and took a clumsy sip of his coffee as the rain stopped falling.

Before him was a pine plywood box with a button on it. It looked pristine and perfect and clean, and notably not very wet at all. On the box was a sign.

Free Candy!: Press Button

Maybe it was the sun starting to beat on his forehead. Maybe he just wasn't banging on all cylinders this morning. Maybe it was the brain of the chimp clouding his judgment. Whatever the reason, Dr. Bright

scratched the stubbly beard slowly growing on his apeish chin and proclaimed aloud: "I like candy."

There was a snapping sound. Then nothing.

"You really think this will work?" Agent Harold Simpson of RCT-Δt asked as he helped hoist the heavy box into the back of the truck. "I mean…I've read about String 093 and these guys are… Well they're *us*, in a manner of speaking. I've worked with Dr. Bright extensively, and the thought of him just pushing a button like that…"

Agent Burt Tomlin shook his head and pulled the door to the truck closed tight. "No, you're right. The Jack Bright we all know—and some of us even like—would never do something so stupid; but this is not the Jack Bright you know."

"How do you mean?" Harold punched a few numbers in the keypad by the door and listened to the capacitors beneath the floor begin to whine.

"The Jack Bright you know isn't a god," Tomlin chuckled. "Never underestimate the stupidity of gods."

The capacitors discharged, and the garage door opened onto a barren waste where a single speck of green shined cleanly in the distance.

"And if it works, then this is resolved?" Harold asked, doing his best to fill his mind with happy thoughts and praise.

"Nah," Tomlin said as the engine turned over. "It's just one anchor after all. Just enough to make a splash. Still… it ought to be funny as hell."

The Silver Creek Parcels van shakily lurched forward over the ash-covered ground. The unreal desert wrapped around them, silently welcoming its first taste of normalcy in many, many years.

Item #: SCP-3882

Object Class: Safe Keter

Special Containment Procedures: The Object is suspended by a beryllium bronze chain in the center of a 55 x 55 x 55 m steel container with access at floor level, and via catwalk at 25 m up the northern wall. A holographic projection at 25 m radius around SCP-3882 designates the active radius. Only D-Class personnel may attempt to deactivate the device with permission of Dr. Kondraki and at least one more Level 5 Senior Staffer. Other experiments may only be performed with direct supervision from Dr. Kondraki.

Description: SCP-3882 is a small plywood box containing machinery of unknown origin, all of which is constructed of a Beryllium Bronze alloy. Although samples may be taken of this material, it always instantly regenerates no matter what. The device seems to be powered by six standard 12v car batteries which have resisted all attempts to remove them. SCP-3882 causes a defect in all reality in a 25 m radius. All man made structures, most plants and animals, and most humans undergo rapid decay and disintegration within the active radius until reaching a level consistent with 43-62 years of disrepair and neglect. Trace amounts of [REDACTED] radiation are also present in the effected area, consistent with some time in [DATA EXPUNGED].

SCP-3882 was recovered on the front steps of Site-19 by Dr. Bright with a sign attached to it advertising "Free Candy: Press Button." Due to his insatiable sweet tooth, Dr. Bright pressed the indicated button and activated SCP-3882 causing [DATA EXPUNGED] fifteen attempts, the device was deactivated and Dr. Bright has made a full recovery.

Due to the effect, researchers entering the active radius suffer extreme emaciation and rapid unconsciousness, and D-Class personnel so far show only a 1% survival rate, although after deactivation, about 20% of those killed by SCP-3882 are recovered in time for monthly

termination.

> **Note:** There wasn't even any candy in it…
> what kind of a monster would do this?!
> -Dr. Bright

Overview of MTF Psi-7 "Home Improvement"

Mobile Task Force Psi-7 specializes in the undercover investigation, containment, and/or demolition of anomalous buildings or buildings affected by anomalies, particularly residential homes in populated areas. Primarily working with initial containment or demolition, some members are also involved in assisting with observation of longer-term containment efforts for persistent building-based anomalies. MTF Psi-7 is involved in the ongoing containment of **SCP-1452** and **SCP-1684**.

Psi-7 was formed in 1998, after Foundation administrators recognized a need to base a task force specifically around knocking down houses. This was due to an outbreak of SCP-1452 affecting the homes of several administrators, including Dr. Gillespie. It has been assured that the creation of this task force along with the anomalous infection of an administrator's home was completely coincidental.

Since then, Psi-7 has had a distinguished career with explosive demolition. Although their methods have been deemed somewhat unorthodox, the use of explosive charges to level anomalous homesteads has proven to be 100% effective, and is believed to contribute to the unbelievably high morale found among Psi-7 agents.

Included in this report is an interview with Agent Ekblad, one of Psi-7's numerous incendiary experts.

> **Dr. Gillespie:** So, in your own words, what about working with Psi-7 makes it a worthwhile experience? Is it the ability to serve humanity, or the pride in being able to creep in unnoticed and remove anomal-
>
> **Agent Ekblad:** Probably the four or five times a week we get to blow the hell out of something. That's pretty fuckin' fun right there.

Dr. Gillespie: Beg your pardon?

Agent Ekblad: Other task forces, they're all like 'ugh my best friend got taken out by a mutant fish squirrel last week' or 'uhhh man there's a giant bird thing killing my friends.' But when people ask me about my job, all's I gotta do is go into some stationary, anomalous house, rig it up to blow sky high, and then *I fuckin' get to push a button that blows it sky high.* I get to use my expert training in blowing shit up to *actually blow shit up!*

Dr. Gillespie: … I'm not sure what to-

Agent Ekblad: *Makes jazz hand motions* KABOOM!

The Czar Cometh

A sizable group of people milled about a large, featureless room. If one looked very closely in the corners, they could find blood stains and minor remnants of charred bone, but without a great deal of perception, the place looked as if it had just been built. The various folks within the room knew otherwise, of course; they had seen some pretty heavy shit go down in that room, and were currently preparing themselves for yet another round. Even though each day brought new surprises, everything usually went according to schedule.

Today, though, something different happened, something nobody had seen in a very long time. According to the schedule, everyone was to be in the room at nine in the morning precisely, and prepare for their arrival. No late entries would be tolerated. However, at 9:05, two large, burly men without faces tossed in a frightened young man, and slammed the door behind him. The young man lay motionless for a short time, as those already in the room gathered around him, wondering what to do. Some proposed trying to hide him, while others were tempted to treat him as *they* treated them.

At length, the young man stirred, groaning as he slowly lifted himself to his feet. His face was almost perfectly generic, as were all of the individuals gathered around him. Some specific features could almost be made out, but most had been wiped out by the unique atmosphere of the room. The young man's lips flapped and his throat undulated, but no sound came out. Panicking, he glanced wildly at the individuals around him, trying to figure out just what was happening.

One person who may have been a woman reached out her hands in front of her, and made a series of motions with her fingers. She tapped downwards with her right pinkie finger, and a robotic voice emanated from her general region. "You new, kid?" He glanced up, a look of confusion crossing over his face. Moving her fingers again,

the woman's odd robotic voice came out again. "You have to use these weird invisible keyboard things in front of you. They make us use them."

The young man hesitated for a moment and, with shaking hands, typed out, "Who… who are… they?"

"The senior staff, of course," said another individual close to her.

The young man, upon hearing the phrase, flung himself against the back wall, clearly panicking. Slapping the man who had spoken, the woman typed out, "You fear them?" Watching him nod, the woman said, "I wasn't aware there was anyone on the outside who still did."

"They made my life a living hell," the young man said, slowly getting a hang of the strange method of communication. "Two of them took a special interest in me. I don't know why, but they turned my entire family into jelly."

"Sounds like Konny and Clef," chimed in another person, their brow furrowing slightly. "Must have done it for a laugh." The young man twitched slightly.

"He's not as used to this as we are," typed the woman, snapping her head to the right. "Stop being so callous with him!"

"Why bother? They ban something new each day. They get rid of fun, names, talking… who's to say that they won't ban some random shit like compassion one day?"

"They… they can ban things?" asked the young man, shrinking away from the others.

"They weren't able to in the old days, they could only keep you from coming in this room. They only joked about that sort of thing. But now… I don't know what sort of limits they have on this sort of thing. Thank *** they haven't banned anyone yet."

She grimaced, then typed, "They do stuff like that asterisk things all the time too."

"You mean," typed out the young man, fear filling his eyes, "that it

isn't safe here?"

"HA! Who told you it would be?" asked the callous man.

"I was on the run from those two for so long. They wouldn't let me go until they'd done the same thing to me as they did to my family. I was looking for any way out. And somebody in… I think it was North Dakota… told me that I could find sanctuary here. So I joined up with the Foundation until those men brought me in here. But… it's not safe?"

Walking over to the young man, the woman placed a hand on his shoulder, and then typed, "Son, they killed everyone in North Dakota months ago. Whatever told you to hide here was probably one of their constructs." As he sank to his knees, the woman added, "But it isn't all bad here. They may torture us, but we still have our minds. That's more than you can say for most folks on the outside. They haven't banned individuality."

"Yet."

"Be quiet." Turning back to the young man, the woman typed, "Look, you can't ever escape them, especially in here, but there are some simple rules to follow if you want to stay safe. Don't do anything that could make you a target. Do what they tell you. Follow all the rules - and yes, we'll give you the rules later," she added, seeing the look on his face. "Don't tread on any toes. And, most importantly, don't say his name."

The young man looked up at the woman. "His?"

"We've got it written down somewhere. Hey, you!" she typed, pointing a finger at a random individual afterwards. "Find where we've got the Czar's name written down." Making a sighing motion, she continued. "Yeah. Him. He used to be the guy who had the key to the break room and made sure we all behaved when we hung out in here. It was a good arrangement, even if he was a bit odd. But he also happened to be among the ranks of the senior staff, so when everything went down, he got the same powers they did. Only he was a bi"

The woman's robotic voice suddenly stopped, even though her fingers continued moving. She paused for a moment, and then typed out, "Sorry. Character limit." Another pause, followed by more typing. "A bit odd. The others are completely blind to their actions, but he knows what really happens to everyone he uses those powers on. Near as we can tell, he doesn't care. We don't know what caused him to get like that, but…"

"I still say he was a nutter before it happened," chimed in one of the men now standing in the corner.

"Whatever the reason," the woman continued, ignoring the remark, "he's completely mad with power now. Put a single toe out of his ever changing definition of the line, and he will come down on you hard. Normally, though, we don't have to worry about that. He only comes in when we say his name, and unless he's gone and changed it, we should be safe from him."

"So what's his name?" asked the young man. "I really, really don't want to accidentally say… type… use it."

"I've got it over here!" typed another person, waving a piece of paper above his head. "Just lemme run over there and… ***, kid, your back!"

Glancing over his shoulder, the young man saw a small candle sprouting out of his spine. Jumping and screaming silently, he desperately beat his hands up and down, trying to swat the burning thing away. Within seconds, the woman was on him, and successfully pulled it out, leaving the young man hunched over, panting. He put his hands before him and typed, " candle wax…"

A silence fell over the room as everyone took in the words the young man had typed. Before anyone could inform him of his faux pas, a high-pitched giggling came from within the walls. Whirling about, the woman saw several members of the senior staff emerging from them, two of whom were clutching onto each other's shoulders for support. "Clef! Konny!" she typed out, forgetting her own advice "Do you realize what you just did?

"Made things a whole lot more interesting, that's what," said Clef, a

huge shit-eating grin on his face.

From out of nowhere, dark storm clouds gathered around the ceiling of the room, demonic faces rolling through them. A moment of silence passed before a blast of lighting, hotter than any naturally occurring bolt, blasted down from the clouds, striking the center of the room and smiting anyone standing too close to it. The beam of pure electricity continued to dance for several seconds, thunder roaring all the while, before slowly lifting up to reveal the object it had dropped from a million miles away.

A grand, elaborate throne sat there, majestic and terrible at the same time. It seemed to be made of a fusion of pure gold, fine cut diamond, and mangled human corpses, their faces twisted into horrified screams. The backing and cushion was made of alchemized blood, while the armrests had real arms built into them, encrusted with emeralds. Capping the whole grisly affair were the piked heads of Adolph Hitler and Joseph Stalin, their eyes and mouths filled with an ever burning fire. A scepter made of a human spine and an enormous ruby containing a thousand human souls floated by the side of the throne, which was quickly grasped by the hand of its occupant.

He was the most terrifying man any person in the room could ever imagine. His skin gave off a sickly white glow from within, tense muscles running throughout the body. His height was well in excess of twelve feet, and his hands looked as if they could crush a man's skull in a second. The clothes covering his divine form were a strange mixture of Nazi officer regalia, Communist Russia high fashion, and a typical 1980s businessman's suit, all in pitch black. Tinted glasses covered his eyes, and his mouth was twisted into a permanent snarl. In his other hand, a long, multi-pronged, barbed lash was gripped tightly.

Opening his terrible mouth, the huge man boomed, "WHICH ONE OF YOU CHUCKLEFUCKS SAID MY NAME? I'VE GOT THE ENTIRE RUSSIAN FRONT OF WORLD WAR II TO REENACT, AND YOU FUCKERS ARE KEEPING ME FROM IT. THIS HAD BETTER BE PRETTY FUCKING IMPORTANT!"

"Hey, Dmitri," piped up Konny, raising his hand, "how can you call it

a reenactment when you've armed everyone with laser-based weaponry?

"IF I SAY IT'S A REENACTMENT, IT'S A GODDAMN REENACTMENT!" snapped the imposing man, not even looking at Kondraki. "NOW WHICH ONE OF YOU BASTARDS SUMMONED ME?" Looking around from behind his cold tinted glasses, Dmitri examined the whole room, his gaze passing over ever cowering individual, until he zeroed in on the shaking young man, and the woman standing in front of him.

"MUST'VE BEEN THIS MOTHERFUCKER," he said, floating over on his throne to the pair. "MOVE OUT OF MY WAY, WOMAN. I NEED TO DEAL WITH THIS SHITHEAD." The woman moved her fingers to type something out, but before she could get a chance, Dmitri flicked his foot, and the woman went flying out the door without any physical contact. "NOW WHY DID YOU SAY MY GODDAMN NAME?"

The young man, shaking in fear of the monster of a man before him, slowly typed out, "I… I didn't know that was your name… they were about to tell me…"

"THIS HERE ROOM IS PROPERTY OF DMITRI ARKADEYEVICH STRELNIKOV, CZAR OF THE SCP FOUNDATION, LORD OF THE BREAKROOM, AND RESURRECTOR OF THE BEST DAMN WAR IN HISTORY. I ALSO GO BY WAXX. YOU GOT THAT, YOU LITTLE SHITHEAD?" Nodding rapidly, the young man tried to type, but found himself unable to move his fingers. "NOW, YOU LOT TAKE CARE OF THE NEW GUY."

As the man called Waxx moved to leave, someone else in the room spoke up. "So… so we should ask him some questions…"

Waxx stopped suddenly, turned about, and flung off his glasses, revealing pitch black eyes. "YOU HAVEN'T EVEN ASKED HIM THE QUESTIONS? DO I HAVE TO DO FUCKING EVERYTHING AROUND HERE?"

"You… you banned those questions last…" The man was unable to finish his sentence before he found himself flying out the door with a

flick of Waxx's ankle.

"WELL THEY'RE UNBANNED NOW. ARE WE GONNA ASK HIM THE QUESTIONS, OR DO I HAVE TO WASTE MORE TIME AWAY FROM THE FRONT?"

The young man, who was now at Waxx's feet, had fallen to his knees, and was desperately gasping for air. His body couldn't stand being so close to such a powerful being, and he was desperate to get away. "Sir…" he begged, clutching at the edges of the throne with one hand and typing with another, "sir, please, I'm only twenty, and I need sanctuary from these monsters… sir… have mercy…"

"WHAT THE FLYING FUCK!" Waxx bellowed, rising from his seat and towering over the young man. "YOU KNOW THE AGE LIMIT IN HERE IS TWENTY-FIVE. WE ONLY CHANGED IT THREE HOURS AGO. DIDN'T YOU READ THE FUCKING GUIDES?"

"I… didn't even know there were guides…"

"UNDERAGE *AND* YOU HAVEN'T READ THE GUIDES? THAT'S IT, CHUCKLEFUCK, YOU JUST GOT YOUR ASS BANNED." Reaching out before himself, Waxx pulled out a blood red hammer, spiked on both ends. He swung, and the young man felt excruciating pain, before finding himself gone. He had been banned from reality.

"NOW," roared Waxx, tossing the hammer back into the ether, "IF NOBODY ELSE HAS ANYTHING IMPORTANT FOR ME TO DEAL WITH, I'VE GOT A FRONT TO ATTEND TO." With that, the thunderclouds once again formed above him, and the lightning sucked the Czar and his throne back up from whence they came. All that was left in the room to evidence they had been there were the small black spots on the floor where the lightning had struck. The people who had been in the room were milling about, and waited for the woman to be tossed back in.

One of the senior staff members stepped forwards, cracking his knuckles, and said, "Well, that was fun. Shall we get to work?"

Private Hell

It's about the time that Kondraki blows up a bus full of nuns to capture the flying fire-breathing walruses that Dr. Alto Clef has the first suspicion that things are not going as they should be.

It should be awesome, he realizes. And it is awesome. Riding the adrenaline rush of explosions as the fire-breathing flying walruses scorch the earth around them, causing bystanders to flee in terror from the pyroclastic pinnipeds. Diving behind the counter of a Starbucks and opening fire with his shotgun (loaded with FRAG rounds) and seeing the fat flying walrus (with the flames jetting out from under its massive mustache) explode in a shower of meat and blood. And it definitely should be awesome when he and Kondraki fist-bump on top of the stack of bodies as the city of Des Moines burns around them both.

But as he rode his black convertible back to Site-19, with a beautiful blonde woman giving him head from the front passenger seat, Dr. Alto Clef could not help but feel a small voice in the back of his head whispering something to him (like the Roman soldiers who would stand next to conquering generals, telling them that they, too, were human).

This is wrong.

He was rappelling down the side of a building, with the office windows exploding outward all around him, a beautiful redhead at his side and Dmitri Strelnikov providing covering fire from a hovering Little Bird helicopter, when Dr. Clef suddenly realized that he might not be the hero.

It was the expression on the girl's face that did it. She was frightened, yes… of course she was. And she was exhilarated, and aroused, and ready to make love to him…

… just like every single woman he had met in the past few years.

Why was it that every beautiful woman in the world wanted to share his bed? That was statistically improbable. There was no way that even the sexiest man in the world could shag every single beautiful woman he came across… and Clef was not sexy.

After they had destroyed the Skyscraper's Spontaneous Combuster, as he was leaning in for a kiss with the redhead, Clef paused with his lips bare millimeters from hers, then leaned back and gestured to the door.

"You can leave if you want," he said.

He wasn't surprised when the girl bolted.

Something was wrong.

"Crow?"

"Yes, Clef?"

"… how many civilian casualties were there?"

"None. They evacuated the place before we went in."

"They evacuated ten city blocks in thirty seconds?"

"Of course. The cops are very efficient."

"… six cops can't even knock on ten city blocks worth of doors in thirty seconds. Much less evacuate everyone within."

"Well, maybe they just weren't around. Maybe we just got a lucky break."

"Are we sure there were no civilian casualties?"

"Of course there aren't any. Do you see any?"

"No, I don't. But… I just have this feeling that something is wrong."

It was during the middle of his ninth swordfight against SCP-076 that Clef realized what the problem was.

Life was… too exciting.

There was no way that life could ever be this exciting, he realized. The life of an SCP Foundation agent could be interesting… but a firefight and a life or death struggle every day? Not a single day passing during which he did not battle for the sake of the world? Not a single day in which all he did was paperwork and file reports?

He was a researcher who spent more time bashing in people's heads with a crowbar than he did doing any actual research.

After he kicked Able over the edge of the Grand Canyon. Dr. Clef took a moment to think back to the last day he could remember ever being bored…

… oh.

Oh.

OH.

That's what went wrong…

And if that were true…

"… Gears?"

"Yes, Clef?"

"… I'm thinking that maybe we shouldn't deploy against SCP-953 this time."

"… why?"

"Because… in the end. With all the collateral damage we'll deal bringing her in… it would be less destructive just to let her eat a liver or two."

"Are you saying that you're giving up?"

"No! I'm just… look. Is this the only way?"

"We are the Foundation. We secure. We contain. We protect. But if you're tired, I can send in Kondraki instead."

"NO! No… I'll do it. I just… needed a moment to think."

"Take all the time you need, Doctor Clef. You've done enough work. After all, the Foundation would fall apart without you."

It is after he has thrown SCP-953 into the intake of the Boeing 747 that Clef finally allows himself to grieve.

He grieves for the dead bystanders he will never see. For the pain and chaos he knows he is causing, but cannot perceive. He grieves for the Foundation, fallen from grace, and for his friends, who know not what they do.

He grieves for Dr. Alto Clef, trapped in a hell of his own creation.

Damned to be badass for the rest of his life.

« | **HUB** | »

Sparkle Spectacular

Bender's Day!

The SCP Foundation's greatest (and only) holiday! It only comes once a year — except for last year when Bright slept through the first one and wanted a do-over.

Bender's Day!

A day when everyone smiles — in fact, it's the same smile! A big, shiny grin, complete with steaming hot identical teeth.

Bender's Day!

Parades through the corridors! Mass consumption of Class-A amnesiacs, which records seem to indicate is tradition! And, of course, the annual Site-19 SCP Sparkle Spectacular, broadcast live to Foundation staff and family worldwide through closed-circuit television.

What a show!

Children beg their parents for an extra hour before bedtime. D-Class beg their handlers for an extra day before termination. Tickets sell for millions — or, more commonly, are received free of charge with minor bloodstains.

Bender's Day was special, alright, even if no-one on Earth could remember exactly why. There was no mystery about what made the Sparkle Spectacular special, though. It was the one time of the year when security classifications didn't matter, where even the lowliest of level-one workers got a chance to see into the world of the Foundation and witness the incredible beauty and wonder of the SCP items. One brief display, before they were once again locked away, safe and secure, to protect the world from the unimaginable power of the anomalous.

"Heads up, dickweed!" Agent DeLaurier yelled.

He booted an instance of SCP-131 in Dr Patil's general direction. The Eye Pod sailed through an open window and splattered on the pavement below.

"DeLaurier!" Patil yelped, "What in hell is wrong with you? You have got to stop kicking Euclids around the office. Management counts those, you know."

"Calm down, Patil," said DeLaurier, "It's a Safe. Besides, if something goes wrong, I can always just clone another one."

The agent stepped into Dr Patil's office. He held two drinks in his hands. He took a sip from his own, which was in the standard paper cup, and set a luminescent white thermos down on Patil's desk.

Dr Patil sighed, "Still, though. People are trying to work. I have like two hundred and fifty containment breach incident reports to fill out from this month alone." He gestured to the stack of forms on the desk beside him.

"Patil, it's Bender's Day," said DeLaurier, "Nobody works on Bender's Day. The laws of physics take a break on Bender's Day. Relax. I brought you your coffee, just the way you like it: 'Doctor Patil's Favorite Drink', Very Fine."

Patil picked up the thermos, frowning. He could hear banging noises coming from the inside.

"DeLaurier, I take my coffee Fine, not Very Fine," he said. DeLaurier shrugged. Patil held the thermos away from his face and cautiously unscrewed the lid. A tiny brown hand reached up over the rim.

Patil slammed the lid back down, "Dammit, DeLaurier! It's another Coffee Man."

"Oops. Sorry."

"Apologising isn't going to erase my drink's consciousness, Agent."

"You can run him through again on Rough," DeLaurier suggested. Patil rolled his eyes and started shaking the thermos violently. After about thirty seconds the banging noises were replaced by the slosh of hot dead Coffee Man, and Patil took a sip. He wrinkled his nose. The coffee was good — in fact, it was perfect, as specified — but the casual murder had left a bad taste in his mouth. He set the thermos down on the table and returned to the stack of forms.

"Oh, for Clef's sake…." he said. His pen scribbled uselessly against the paper, leaving only a series of creases. "Bloody pen's run out of ink."

"There's one," said DeLaurier, pointing to a white retractable pen lying on Patil's desk.

Patil shook his head, "Better not. I think that kills family members. You couldn't loan me one, could you?"

DeLaurier's face brightened.

"Matter of fact, Retrieval brought this thing in today!" he said. He reached into a jacket pocket, and tossed out a pale green fountain pen. Patil caught it, and immediately felt ghostly shivers down the length of his arm as some unseen demonic force took control over his body.

"Oh dear." he said.

"What's wrong?"

"The pen's moving all by itself," said Patil, "Using my body as a vessel. Scrawling out some eldritch message from the shadowlands that lie beneath the world of men."

"Is it still filling out the form?"

Patil looked down.

> **Initial cause of breach**
> Agent Oum was recklessly cavorting with a Keter class it*THERE IS A MALEVOLENT FORCE THAT HAS TORN THE WORLD ALL WILL PERISH ALL WILL SUFFER*

ESPECIALLY YOU PATIL AND YOUR TIE LOOKS SHIT AND YOU SM

"More or less," he said.

"Then I don't see the issue," DeLaurier shrugged, "Hey, I managed to get a ticket to the Sparkle Spectacular this year."

"What? Are you serious?" spluttered Patil, "How the hell did you manage that?"

"I was standing right next Agent See when he died. Grabbed the ticket out of his pocket!" grinned DeLaurier, "Full discount!"

"That's very …. thrifty."

"But here's the even better news, dude. I swung by 038 on the way here, and…" DeLaurier reached into his pocket and pulled out two tickets.

"Whaaaaaat!"

"I know, right?"

"Holy shit, DeLaurier!" Patil jumped up out of his seat and punched the air, "We're going to the Site 19 SCP Sparkle Spectacular!"

"We're going to eat magic food!" said DeLaurier.

"And see the senior staff!"

"And watch skips blow shit up!"

"And eat magic food!"

"And see the senior staff!"

"I've realised now that there's not actually a lot of variety at this event, but I'm still excited anyway!" Patil whooped. He grabbed the stack of forms off his desk, and flung them out the window along with the possessed pen.

Suggested containment procedure reform

A SHIFT IN REALITY HAS OCCURRED THAT WILL TARNISH THE VERY NATURE OF HEY WHAT AAAAAAA PATIL YOU FUCK AAAAAAAAAAAAAA HELP ME OH SHIT SHIT SHITSHITSHITSHITHSHIT

Patil and DeLaurier watched for a moment as the forms folded themselves into paper airplanes and swooped down to divebomb the splattered Eye Pod. Patil turned to DeLaurier.

"Let's roll," he said. DeLaurier grinned and opened the door. The two stepped out into corridor, where they were met with the sprawled out corpse of a man covered with ears, blood oozing from his mouth and bulging eyes. DeLaurier snapped his fingers.

"Oh, right!" he said, "Forgot to mention. Teddy Bear's turned evil now."

They made it through the corridors without encountering any demonic teddy bears, and DeLaurier had decided that 1048 had probably stumbled into the teleportation pool or choked to death on a peanut or something. It had happened before.

The security guard running admissions had barely even looked at their tickets, and had shown no suspicion at the fact that they were not only registered to a different agent, but also completely identical.

"That was almost too easy," muttered Patil.

"Well, we're not the Secure, Secure, Secure Foundation," DeLaurier whispered back, "And it *is* Bender's Day."

They reached the entrance to the Sparkle Spectacular Grand Ballroom, which this year was located inside an anomalously enlarged broom closet. Patil put one hand on the doorhandle.

"Have you ever been to one of these before?" he asked.

"Never," said DeLaurier, "You?"

"I dreamt about it once," Patil said, "But it was just a regular dream, not an anomalous dream, so it was likely inaccurate."

"Lucky," said DeLaurier, "I only ever dream about a weird dude in a business suit telling me that the world is being twisted into a terrible caricature of reality. Now come on, let's do this thing!"

Patil took a deep breath and opened the door. His jaw dropped, and beside him he heard DeLaurier gasp.

The room was huge, cavernous, unbelievably, almost grotesquely massive. Patil knew the standard unit of measurement in these situations was football fields, but he had never been much of sportsman. Suffice it to say that you could have flown a helicopter around the ceiling without risk of disturbing any of the hundreds of people milling about on the floor.

They had entered into the dining area of the room. Smaller tables were scattered around, surrounding a circular buffet area that seemed to contain mostly cakes. On the far side of the room, however many minutes walk away, there was a large stage, at the moment obscured by what appeared to be a projector screen, displaying festive images of some of the more amenable SCP items. As he watched, the image on the screen shifted from an orange blob bouncing gently up and down, to the front half of a white cat chasing an Eye Pod around and around in circles. As he looked closer, Patil could see that the edges of the screen were ragged, and pieces seemed to be moving away and reattaching somewhat randomly. The image shifted again, rippling outwards from the centre of the screen, and Patil realised what was going on.

"It's the butterflies!" he said, "Kondraki's butterflies! Which means…"

"Fuck yo' butterflies," DeLaurier said. He had noticed the buffet table, "They have infinite pizza here! Yes!"

DeLaurier shoved Patil aside as he dashed off across the banquet hall. Patil looked around the room for a sight of the notorious doctor and legendary action hero, but Kondraki didn't seem to be present. In the approximate centre of the room, however, between the dining area and the stage, there was a strange white structure that didn't match the rest of the décor. It seemed to be made all of one contiguous piece, grown out of the floor. A spiralling stalk lead up to a round pod the size of a small room, towering high above the rest

of the festivities. The sides and ceiling of the pod looked to be made of glass, or at least something transparent, but the angle made it impossible to see inside. In there, Patil was sure, was Kondraki, and probably the rest of the Senior Staff.

People passing by the base of the stalk gave it a wide berth. Although it was rarely stated, there was a definite rule to working in Site 19: You don't fuck with the Senior Staff.

You *don't* fuck with the Senior Staff.

Patil followed DeLaurier over to the buffet table, where he had already amassed three plates of his own favourite pizza. He was explaining his strategy to the server, a surly German with freakishly long arms, who seemed entirely disinterested.

"… and the candy's good, but if you can only take two, that's just going to confuse your appetite," said DeLaurier, "Better to be consistent, let your stomach know what the plan is. Keter Cakes are fools gold, obviously—"

"*Obviously*," said the German.

"— because there's an infinite supply. You can have Keter Cakes any day of the year, hell, the Foundation'll pay you overtime for it. You know how hard it is to book testing time with the infinite pizza? It's hard. Now, noodles are good usually, but I never really liked the special ones because my dad walked out when I was ten—"

"*Can't imagine why*."

"— and they usually have a good spread from the vending machine but you can't guarantee that they won't melt your tongue or turn you to ash or something," DeLaurier said. Somehow, he had gone through five slices of pizza without ever having stopped talking. Patil was a little amazed. DeLaurier noticed him, "Hey Patil! I was just telling Mr Chirurg about my patented Bender's Day Banquet Buffet Battle Plan."

Patil smiled uneasily. Mr Chirurg had a look in his eye that suggested DeLaurier was about to need an actual battle plan if he

kept talking much longer.

"Tell you what, Agent, maybe we should go try some of the other food," Patil said. He spotted a blue La Choy box on the table and picked it up, "You tried one of these fortune cookies yet?"

They each took one and cracked it open eagerly. A scream came from the chocolate fountain around the other side of the table, and Chirurg scuttled off to investigate. Patil looked at his fortune.

> You will find reality is not as it should be.

He rolled his eyes.

"These things never come true," he said, "What fortune did you get, DeLaurier?"

DeLaurier looked up. He was holding the box of cookies up to his face, and was covered in crumbs.

"Fortune? I've just been running a train on these cookies, man." he said. Realisation struck, "Oh, right, fortunes! Yeah, the slips of paper. Sure, check 'em out."

He reached into his pocket and pulled out a small sheaf of paper slips, handing them to Patil. Patil started reading through them as the agent went back to gorging himself on empty carbs.

> Bad luck lies around the corner.

> Enjoy the night to its fullest, you will not live to regret it.

> Make hay while the sun shines, it may not shine much longer.

> Keep eating cookies, diabetes isn't going to be a problem.

> Ugh. You're not even going to read this fortune, are you? Or any other fortune, for that matter. Or anything else, ever.

> Your lucky numbers are:
> UG . ON . DI . EB . IT . CH

> Say goodbye to your legs, asshole.

"Eh, they're all pretty vague," said Patil.

The sound of trumpets blared out from the speakers that lined the room. The butterflies on the stage shifted into an image of red curtains, embossed with the words 'The Site 19 SCP Sparkle Spectacular'. A hush went over the room, and the hundreds of Foundation personnel stopped eating and talking and avoiding bloodthirsty chocolate ants and moved towards the stage, shuffling into their seats. Patil and DeLaurier, with their forged ticket, stood behind the back row. As the trumpets died down, the butterfly curtains parted, and the hosts of the evening stepped out onto the stage.

She was a young woman in a red evening gown. He was a small, hairy man in a custom fit tuxedo. Patil recognised the man from his wanderings about the site, as he imagined most of the other personnel did, and a wave of good vibes filled the room. The hosts stepped up to a podium at the side of the stage, the woman helping the man climb atop a stepladder so that he could be visible. The butterflies closed behind them.

"Good evening, everyone!" he said, "And welcome to the Site 19 SCP Sparkle Spectacular! My Item Number is SCP-208, but most of you around the site probably know me as that little fellow who makes you feel good! Tonight, you can just call me Bes!"

The crowd cheered.

"I fuckin' love Bes," whispered DeLaurier. A few people around them overheard and nodded in agreement, "He's such a good guy."

Patil smiled back, "He's so friendly. He reminds me of the Teddy Bear, before it started performing abortions."

"My Item Number is SCP-105, and my name is Iris!" said his co-host. There was a mixed reception.

Bes took the microphone again and began to recite his opening speech.

"It's been a big year for the SCP Foundation," he said, "Since our last Bender's Day celebration, we've captured eight new SCP items, lost sixteen, and accidentally destroyed twenty-five. I guess you can't make an omelette without breaking a few eldritch abominations! We've also been responsible for fourteen thousand civilian casualties, which is well within the limits of acceptable collateral damage. Well done, everyone!"

Iris began talking again, "Before we get started on the real show, we have a few awards to give out. Our first presenter tonight is a lovely young humanoid called SCP-187!"

The butterfly curtains parted again, and a young woman stepped out onto the stage. The crowd applauded, but as she moved beyond the range of the dazzling lights, she froze, and screamed, and covered her eyes. The crowd went silent, and Patil could just barely hear her shrieking voice.

"They're all dead!" the girl screamed, "They're all fucking dead!"

She ran off stage, clawing at her eyes and shrieking. Bes and Iris looked at each other.

"This is a disaster," DeLaurier muttered. Patil nodded his head in agreement. "This is a BK-Class 'Total Buzzkill' Scenario."

"Let's skip ahead!" said Bes, "The Site 19 SCP Sparkle Spectacular… starts right now!"

"How do they get all the skips to behave?" asked DeLaurier. Men made of fire swooped through the air above their heads, spinning and looping and firing jets of flame that nearly singed the crowd. A giant mechanical spider crawled along the wall, occasionally shooting sprays of gasoline out of a squirt cannon, which the fiery creatures would dive into, bursting into brilliant explosions and emerging at twice their original size, before splitting in two and spiralling away again.

Up on the stage was a tank of water. One of the flaming creatures circled above it, creating a ring of fire which an invisible shark was apparently jumping through. The crowd had gotten tired of that pretty quick.

"They have a skip who can control minds," said Patil, "All he has to do is say 'You want not to hurt us,' or 'You want to do a bunch of crazy loops in the air,' and they'll do it."

"We probably should've gotten him in with the Teddy Bear," mused DeLaurier.

"Do you reckon they've caught that thing yet?"

"Shh, I'm watching the show."

The flaming men retreated into tanks on the ceiling, and the giant spider crawled over to the stage to drag the shark away. The butterflies began to swarm around again, creating jagged, menacing shapes and twisted patterns. A single spotlight focused on the stage, and the floor began to bubble. An oozing, sick black slime dribbled up from the ground, and a rotting corpse dripping with blood and bile rose slowly through out of it. In its hand it held a human skull, half shorn of flesh and compacted into a dense rod of splintered bone and brain. The spinal cord trailed from it, wrapped in a winding string of barbed wire that intertwined with a sparking electrical cable leading down under the stage.

The Old Man raised his hellish microphone to his crooked mouth and began to sing.

"*Myyyyy bonny lies over the ocean…*"

He lifted a hand imploringly. The crowd chanted back.

"MY BONNY LIES OVER THE OCEAN!"

The Old Man's smile widened and he moved on to the next line.

"*… my bonny lies oooooooover the oceeeean!*"

This continued for at least ten minutes, before the Old Man dropped

the mic, clapped his hands with a single wet, thick splattering noise, and sank back below the stage.

Bes and Iris returned to the podium, carefully avoiding the cancerous sludge. A large metal cage, the contents completely covered, was wheeled in from offstage.

"Well, it's the moment you've all been waiting for!" said Iris, "One our most popular SCP items of all time!"

"The guy you love to hate!" said Bes.

"He may find us disgusting, but we find him delightful!" said Iris, "Everybody, put your hands together for the king of Keter…"

"The sultan of sapient non-humanoids…"

"The ombudsman of overly-long termination logs…"

"The bestest lizerd ever…"

"The Hard-to-Destroy Reptile himself…

"SCP-682!"

"Who will be performing an interpretive dance routine!"

The crowd cheered. Patil and DeLaurier jumped in the air and bumped chests. There was so much whooping that it sounded like an alarm had gone off. The Senior Staff box was dead silent, but Patil tried not to pay attention to that. You *don't* fuck with the Senior Staff.

On stage, Iris and Bes each took hold of a lever on the side of 682's cage, nodded to each other, and pulled down. The door swung open, falling forwards to clatter onto the floor. The whole crowd held their breath, pressing forwards to see the contents of the stage.

SCP-682 lay motionless, its back torn apart. leaving a gaping hollow of blood and tattered organs that were ever-so-slowly beginning to heal together.

"What the fuck?" said DeLaurier. On stage, Bes tilted his head to the side, confused. He stepped into the cage to investigate, and a gleaming, bloody metal teddy bear burst through 682's face, slicing Bes in half with a single slash of its steel claws.

Patil's breath caught in his throat. The world seemed to freeze, seemed to change colour, seemed to go completely cold. He heard someone scream, and wasn't sure if it was DeLaurier, or Iris up on the stage, or someone in the crowd, or the whole crowd, or the whole world. The metal bear galloped off the stage, diving into the crowd as if it was a pool of water. A spray of blood and flying body parts moved through the audience like a non-invisible shark's fin, belying the motions of the speeding, slashing, murderous bear. From SCP-682's bloodied body more bears began to emerge, bears made of bone, or nerves, or clotted blood. The next few seconds were pure panic, terror. Patil and DeLaurier ran for the exit, leaving the crowd behind them, trapped between the rows of chairs.

Patil could feel the sound behind him, pressing against him like a solid wall of screams and roars. Blood splattered against his neck. He and DeLaurier parted to go around the stalk of the Senior Staff box, because regardless of circumstances, you *don't* fuck with the Senior Staff. Patil emerged from the other side of the stalk, and so did DeLaurier's legs.

Patil swore, and heard a metallic shriek from right behind him.

"Who's that guy down there?" asked Dr Bright.

"The bear?" asked Clef.

"The Indian in the labcoat," Bright said. He pointed him out, "The running man. The one who's still alive."

Dr Crow pressed his snout up against the glass and squinted, "You know, I think I've seen that fellow around the place. He works in containment, I believe. Something Patil."

"I hope he doesn't try and fuck with us," muttered Clef.

"Well, he's dead now," said Kondraki. The metal bear held up Patil's severed head in its shining crimson claw and howled, a distorted mechanical screech of bloodlust and victory. The doctors leaned back in their seats and sighed.

"You know what?" said Dr Clef, "That was pretty fucking spectacular."

« | **HUB** | »

Waffling About

Clef's dreams were shattered when his alarm decided to scream in his face. His eyes cracked open as a lazy hand fumbled to turn off the alarm. Another day, another 5AM start, and another struggle to get out of the comfort of his bed.

"Shut up," he grumbled, his hand still trying to find the snooze button for the alarm. In the end, he knocked the clock to the floor. It beeped its last beep, coaxing a pleased grunt from its owner. Although the funny-eyed man was comfy in his bed, he knew that he had to get up.

It was a special day.

It was waffle day and there was not a chance in hell that he'd miss his favorite breakfast, not again.

Clef slowly sat up in his bed, stretching his arms out and cracking his back before he got up. Across his room lay strewn various clothing items and useless papers. It was normal, but he could never help but feel slightly guilty about the state of his room.

The thought quickly passed as he made his way out of his room and to his little kitchen. It was waffle time, and there was no point pouting over something like the mess on the floors right now. Even though it was getting really bad…

Clef opened a kitchen cupboard. A Cheshire smile crawled across his face at the sight of at least 5 packets of waffles laying on the shelves. He pulled out a pack and opened it, causing one to fall on the floor. "Oop— 5 second rule," he chirped, bending down slowly to pick up the fallen waffle comrade to wipe it off on his blue pajamas.

Into the toaster they went. The entire packet of 4 waffles, including the floor waffle. Clef pushed down the little lever on the side of the toaster and in they went to cook. He didn't bother going anywhere

whilst they cooked. He loved the smell that came out of the toaster as they got warmer and warmer.

A few moments later and POP! went the toaster. Clef jolted a little but laughed it off. "Silly ass toaster," he mumbled, still not fully awake. The waffles were finally ready!

He grabbed a plate from another cupboard and pulled the waffles from the toaster, not caring how much he burned his fingers in the process.

Plop!

On to the plate they went, one by one, and piled on top of each other in a proud waffle tower.

The old man near threw himself on to his couch. There was a maple syrup bottle on the coffee table that he'd gotten ready the night before. He grabbed the bottle and squirted syrup all over his waffles.

At last, Clef could eat his waffles. The beginning of a good, productive day, started with golden brown waffles. He didn't bother with a knife or a fork; most of them were dirty and in the sink (or on the floor). He just picked up a syrup-covered waffle in his hand and started to chow down. Any syrup that dripped on his PJs was quickly scooped up with a bit of waffle.

"And then of course, I started getting too much syrup on my PJs, so I had to take them off slooooowly—"

O5-8 interrupted. "As fascinating as it would be to listen to you try to turn that soft, sagging body into an object of erotic fixation, I think we're going to get back to the matter at hand. I'll ask you again, and no tales about "Waffle Time". What have you been doing since you left the site on the 8th, over 60 hours ago?"

Sensing that his ability to bullshit might not carry him through this, Clef tried again. "Well, that's an incredible tale of mystery and wonder I call 'Lord Shittington Drops The Kids At The Pool'—"

Clef winced as his superior's lips thinned significantly.

"And why are significant portions of Atlantic City, New Jersey, including the casino that happens to be the site of the last recorded activity on your credit card, on fire?"

Clef swallowed deeply. "I can promise this was vaguely work-related."

"Is that 'work' in any way related to a document on your desk labeled 'My Master Gambling plan'?" O5-8 held up a forestalling hand as Dr. Clef opened his mouth. "No, enough. It's my finding that you are in gross dereliction of your duties as Director of Site 66, and the following restrictions are to be placed upon you—"

The O5 was cut off as Clef produced a waffle out of one of his lab coat pockets. It was already half eaten and still covered in dry syrup, which had stained his pocket and picked up god only knows what. A crunching sound broke the silence between the O5 and Clef as he started to eat it.

O5-8 finally piped up. "The following restrictions are—"

He was cut off again by Clef making eye contact whilst slowly eating the stale waffle. O5-8 did not have the time nor patience for this. "Out," he said firmly, pinching the bridge of his nose. "Just get out, Clef."

Clef grinned with a large amount of waffle still in his mouth and stuck to his teeth. He placed what remained of the waffle on O5-8's desk as if it was some sort of parting gift and left the office with a small skip in his step…

… And another waffle from another pocket.

In Case You've Ever Wondered...

At exactly 9:00 in the morning, Research Assistant Grace Renfield's eyes snap open. She tilts her head left, then right, with an audible pop, and yanks the tubes out of her mouth with her left hand. At 9:01, the glass door slides open with a soft whoosh and she steps out of her tank.

She stretches elaborately, a series of half-yoga poses designed to unkink muscles not used to motion, joints cracking audibly. When the popping stops, so does she. She walks to a metal sink and spits, then drinks deeply, gasping. A toothbrush waits for her in a porcelain holder; brand new, still wrapped. She cleanses the taste of rubber from her mouth and grins experimentally into a small metal mirror mounted to the wall.

Clothing has been left for her, folded on a bench on the opposite wall exactly according to her specifications. White pants, black shirt. No tags, no labels. A lab coat, cut with a strange high collar, Foundation ID badge already clipped to the front pocket. A pair of glasses, one lens squared off, with a slider on the temple piece to adjust magnification. A pair of heavy combat boots cut in white leather. She gets dressed.

A speaker mounted in the corner plays something ambient with a pulsing beat that could be equally at home in a nightclub or an upscale restaurant. There is nothing else in Renfield's room- the austerity suits her just fine. She nods to herself and steps out, smile hidden behind her collar.

The hallway beyond is lined on one side with identical doors, and on the other with identical photographs- the same as the one that adorns her ID badge. Below each is a small plaque made of stiff cardstock, the same sort you see below paintings in upscale galleries. Each plaque contains a pair of dates and a short paragraph. An obituary. She doesn't read them, but her fingertips trace the wall below them as she passes.

At 10:00, she presents herself to Research Director Anderson. His reaction to her presence is as terse as ever. No greeting, just a directive. The name of the Researcher she'll be working under, and number of the SCP object they'll be working with. She does not ask questions. He looks relieved when she walks away.

At 10:15, after a short walk to the containment wing, she presents herself to the Researcher. He does not ask her name- everyone in the Foundation knows Renfield. He thanks her for her work, and seems pleased she's been assigned to him. He asks her to step into a containment unit. She nods, licks her teeth, and steps in.

At 10:19, she dies. Her evisceration is as swift as it is horrible. Something unfathomable like a shadow on a malfunctioning CRT monitor reaches into her with a claw made out of noise and shucks her like an oyster. On the other side of the observation window, the Researcher frantically takes notes as she is consumed. He does not look surprised.

At exactly 11:00 in the morning, Research Assistant Grace Renfield's eyes snap open. She tilts her head left, then right, with an audible pop, and yanks the tubes out of her mouth with her left hand. At 11:01, the glass door slides open with a soft whoosh and she steps out of her tank.

Funfiction

O5-7 arrived to the breached containment unit at the lowest underground level of Site-19. Director Bright waited for her along with a Containment Specialist.

“It’s good to see you again, Jack,” said the overseer. “Sorry for the wait, I had to come here all the way from the HQ as per protocols. Let’s see what we are dealing with here.”

The man standing next to Bright handed over a dossier to her. “Thank you, Dr. Blackbox,” she said after looking at his ID badge. “If I understand correctly you were the Containment Specialist assigned to this item.”

“Yes, Madam. The containment was breached yesterday. We evacuated all personnel not involved in the recovery operation.”

“I see. Let us start the investigation with the containment unit.”

They entered the grandiose cubical room. It was discreetly embraced by a 3 inch thick layer of pure titanium. The overseer looked into the dossier, and started skimming its contents.

“Scp-7448: Blood Ogre … Keter … virgins to be sacrificed … unparalleled aptitude for martial arts … Scantron Anchors … may freely roam the facility,” she said then stopped for a moment. “I think I got all the necessary information now.”

How could that happen in the Foundation’s largest Site? she wondered, unconsciously looking at the upper right corner of the nearest wall as if it could show anything about the validity of her concerns. An empty wall, polished and made from the king of the metals, stared back at her.

“We have to recover it as quickly as possible. Are you in, Jack?”

“Oook,” replied Dr. Bright who was occupying a primate body.

“You might want to arm yourself if you are up against that otherworldly demon,” said a man stepping into the room. He was wearing an orange overall with a 6-digit number on it. “Here, take this gun. They gave me two anyway.”

“I don’t think firearms would be useful against it, but thank you nonetheless,” said the overseer showing her smuggest grin to Blackbox. Then she pulled the trigger.

Dr. Bright and O5-7 arrived to the cafeteria following the path of destruction. The monstrous ogre stood at the center of the hall, laughing with arms crossed. The floor was covered in broken tables and chairs, kitchenware and the scattered ashes of MTF Kappa-13 (“Red Shirts”). A screen at the cafeteria’s wall was miraculously left unharmed.

Safety First

23 hours, 57 minutes and 45 seconds
have passed since the last containment breach.
Keep Site-19 secure together!

O5-7 noticed a familiar figure lying under some debris. “Alto, swallow this, quick!” she said as she ran to him and handed over a pill from a plastic can labeled ‘500’. The next moment the shirtless Clef was standing in front of the ogre with replenished energy in his muscles and renewed determination in his eyes. O5-7 fainted as she couldn’t handle the raw manliness radiated by him.

“Oh, you are up again, just when I thought we were finished. Show me what you got then, human!”

“That’s what your mother said too.”

“How dare you mock me, you lowly scum!” shouted SCP-7448. “I shall destroy you with my ultimate technique.”

“What kind of ultimate technique could that be?” asked Clef. “You

don’t look like you have one.”

“Foolish mortal! This attack is the most powerful of all. You know the guy who can summon any blade he wants? Well, I can wield him!” he said. Able appeared out of thin air, wearing his sharpest suit. The ogre grabbed him by the legs and swung towards Clef.

“You think I wasn’t prepared for that?” said Clef and pulled out a Middle Eastern man with metal limbs from … well, no one was really sure from where. He used him as a human shield to reflect the strike back at the attacker. As the fierce battle reached its climax, the banana Dr. Bright was eating started to turn brown.

SCP-7448 pulled out Able’s head from his nasal cavity, preparing for another strike. Clef glanced to his right as the screen changed colors.

Safety First

24 hours, 0 minutes and 2 seconds
have passed since the last containment breach.
Keep Site-19 secure together!

“Fourth!” he shouted at the top of his lungs. SCP-7448 was deleted at -50 and four staff votes.

Date Night

Alvarez knocked on the open door and stepped into the office.

“You asked for me, sir?”

Dr. Gears looked up from the files on his desk, fixing his gaze on the young security guard. “Yes, I’ve been trying to contact Dr. Clef all evening, but he’s not answering his phone. I’d like you to locate him to make sure he’s all right, and tell him I have something urgent to discuss with him.”

“But sir, it’s Friday night,” Alvarez said, suddenly uncomfortable. “If you’ll recall…”

“Oh, I see. It’s his…”

“…yes.”

“And he can’t…”

“He’s left instructions that he’s not to be disturbed under any circumstances, that’s right, sir.”

“Well, I suppose things can wait until tomorrow morning, then.”

“Very well, sir.”

Alvarez left the office.

Dr. Alto Clef sat in the dining room of his Site-19 suite. The place was lavish, by any standards – gold-embossed wallpaper, ornate oak paneling, 18th century furniture, the table set with priceless china and the finest silver. An antique Ming vase sat on a pedestal nearby, gleaming in the warm glow of the crystal chandelier; an original Caravaggio hung on one wall, a Vermeer on the other. Barry White played softly in the background.

“Mmmh!” Clef exclaimed, setting down his spoon and wiping his mouth with his napkin. “The fennel soup was exquisite. D-12130 really outdid himself tonight.” He gestured to one of the several D-class personnel in attendance. “More wine, D-23897.”

“Right away, Dr. Clef,” the man in the orange jumpsuit said, nervously stepping up to the table and refilling his glass with a particularly crisp Chardonnay.

Clef lifted the glass to his mouth, took a sip, and sighed with satisfaction. “This is nice,” he said, smiling at his guest. “We should do this more often, don’t you agree?”

Across the table, SCP-173 stared back at him, unmoving, silent.

Five D-class personnel were positioned around the living statue, their eyes fixed on it, cold sweat dripping down their faces as they struggled not to blink, not to break eye contact, not even for a second; a sixth man stood directly next to 173, trembling with terror as he lifted spoonfuls of fennel soup up to its face, smearing the contents where its mouth should have been.

“May I just say how lovely you look tonight, darling,” Clef said, his eyes moving appreciatively over the black evening dress covering the statue’s curves, the blonde, lustrous hair of the wig on its head, its rouged stone cheeks… “I was going to wait until later, but seeing you like this, I just, I… Heh, look at me, you have me babbling like a schoolboy. I don’t know what it is about you. You’ve always had that effect on me.”

SCP-173 looked on, its stone features blank, impassive.

“Anyway,” Clef said, “I got you a little something to show you how much I appreciate you being here, sharing this evening with me.” Clef reached into his pocket and took out a small flat box, handing it to D-23897, who was standing nearby; the man took the box and went around to the other side of the table, his heart rate rising as he approached 173.

“Open it, darling,” Clef said. D-23897 opened the box, revealing a gold necklace inlaid with dozens of small diamonds. “It should be the

right size, I had it made especially for you. Go ahead, put it on," Clef smiled. D-23897 removed the necklace from the box and reluctantly tied it around 173's neck, wincing as his fingers brushed against the cold, hard cement surface. Clef was momentarily at a loss for words. "It suits you to perfection," he said at last. "God, you're beautiful. I feel like I never want to take my eyes off you."

At that precise moment, *Can't Get Enough of Your Love, Babe* began to play; Clef felt his heart flutter. *"It's our song,"* he breathed. As Barry White's rumbling voice filled the air, Clef found himself staring into 173's alien, painted-on eyes, losing himself in their depths. "You know," he said after a moment, his voice now little more than a husky whisper, "I'm suddenly not hungry anymore. What do you say we…*retire*…for the night?"

Clef was lying in his ample bed, 173 at his side, the lush satin sheets in disarray around them. The D-class personnel were standing in a circle around the bed, ten pairs of eyes that had not left the statue for the last two hours.

"I can't tell you how much these little trysts of ours mean to me," Clef was murmuring in 173's ear. "Running Site-19, all that responsibility, all those lives depending on me, it gets so exhausting. You're a miracle worker, you know. You really–" His train of thought was interrupted by a series of hushed whispers – two of the D-class personnel seemed to be having an argument. Clef cleared his throat loudly. "Do you *mind*?"

D-23897 snapped to attention. "I'm sorry, sir. It's D-45931, he hasn't slept in a couple of days, and he was starting to nod off. I told him he had to keep his eyes open."

"Oh, I see. Well, actually, that's not necessary."

D-23897 frowned, confused. "But, sir, the statue…"

"I won't deny she can be a feisty one, what with those *fiesta states* of hers, but as long as I'm around she won't try anything."

"So…there's no danger?" D-23897 asked.

“That’s right, no need to worry.”

“…”

“Now, if that’s all,” Clef said, “I’d like to get back t–”

“Then why are we here?” D-23897 nearly shouted in disbelief. *“Why did you make us stay?”*

Clef gave the man a strange look, the hint of an unhinged smile playing on his features.

“I just like it when people watch.”

« | **HUB** | »

The Most Dangerous Game

Site 19

The containment alarm blared in the background, as Dr. Magnus sat in front of an elaborately colored board, across from a confident-looking man.

He narrowed his eyes, and tightened his mouth, attempting to stare down his opponent. He hesitated for a moment, before reaching forward, slowly, trying not to show his intention as his hand slipped up towards the board.

His opponent and he had done this dance many times today already. He could feel the ghost of a five o'clock shadow coming in, having sat at this table for far too long. His opponent was smugly confident. The last few conflicts had ended in defeat, and this time the stakes were too high to keep losing.

"You're not going to win," Magnus stated, his voice tight with pressure. His fingers blurred, and a clack of the pieces the only sound other than the warnings about the dangerous creature roaming the halls.

A smirk played across his opponents face and he tried not to grimace, as they reached forward and moved a piece with an ominous clack. Their eyes darted to the door, where they heard running footsteps, and saw the shadows of a dozen pairs of boots running by the door. "They look like they're in a hurry."

Magnus' eyes stayed locked with the figure across from him, for a few more moments, before darting up to the flashing alarm, then down to the board, examining his moves. He couldn't afford to lose this game, far too much was on the line. He hesitated.

"We've done this too many times," He ventured, attempting to brook peace. "We should end this."

"We have, but it always ends the same," the sinister voice of his opponent intoned. They made an impatient gesture, "I believe it's your move, Michael. You should probably hurry, if you'd like this to end." The sound of distant yelling could be heard.

Magnus swallowed hard, knowing he was being backed in to a corner. His fingers lifted, and slid the piece home, blinking involuntarily.

"Michael. I swear, we've done this four times already today, and yet you never learn." His opponent lifted the piece, and slammed it on to the board with violent finality. "As I said. You haven't learned."

Dr. Magnus' mind raced. How could he not see it. It was so obvious, the hole in his defense, and now he had lost again. He didn't know if he could pay the price , and he dreaded the words from his opponents mouth.

His opponent leaned forward, smiled, and tilted his head. "I'm sorry Michael, but it's over."

Dr. Magnus hung his head, and sighed, "Just say it. You know how this ends."

His opponent smiled wider, and his teeth started to show. Those stupid perfect teeth of his opponent, so mocking in their regularity.

"Of course. I wouldn't want to drag this out any more than it has to. How many defeats is this, to my hand?"

Under the table, Magnus' hand clenched in frustration, and he ground his teeth. "Five, today."

His opponent leaned back and smirked his smug little smile again, closing his lips over his annoyingly straight teeth. "Five. That must be embarrassing, losing to me, five times. How can you afford to keep losing?"

Magnus tried to smile, his own thoughts turning dark. The truth was,

he couldn't. He'd already lost too much, gone too far. At this rate, he would lose everything, his eyes darting over to his terminal, where incoming emails were coming in fast enough to scroll his window. "Just say it. I'm tired of this shit, just fucking say it."

His opponent smiled, and folded his hands. "Fine. Since you're such a spoil sport."

He reached forward, and touched the small, colored pieces, pointing out the flaw in his defense with obvious glee. "Connect four. That's five games, you owe me a slice of pie." Outside, someone shouted for a medic.

Magnus cursed, and reached in to his drawer, pulling out the last of the bills he kept in there for coffee. "You're a dick, Kens."

Researcher Kensington smiled, and took the three dollars and two quarters off of the desk, shaking out the pieces from the connect four set. "And yet, you keep losing. That's like, six slices of pie so far."

In the far distant background, something shook the foundations of the Site. Dr. Magnus looked up at Kensington and raised an eyebrow, "Should we…be there?" Magnus' eyes slid over to the door, where heavily armed MTF members were streaming by.

Kensington shrugged, standing up, "Why? So you can catch another terminal case of knife-in-the-sternum?"

Magnus flipped him off, and stood with him. "Oh fuck off. Let's go, I've got enough for like…half an espresso. Assuming the cafeteria hasn't been eaten by anomalies or something."

Kensington stood, and started towards the door, "So, same time tomorrow?"

Magnus smirked this time, his secret weapon ready to be unveiled. He twirled around, facing Kensington . "No Kens. No more connect four. It's child's play. Tomorrow, we start a new game." He steepled his hands.

Kensington took a step back, looking hesitant, "What game,

Magnus?"

Magnus laughed quietly, the space between them building to a thunderhead. The tension was palpable, Kensington's mind racing, imagining the horrors that Magnus could have in store for him.

Magnus threw his hands up in a victorious gesture, exclaiming "Twister! You'll never defeat my flexible joints!"

The door rocked a bit, as someone was slammed bodily in to it, both of the Researcher's heads whipped around, before slowly turning back to face each other.

Kensington blinked a few times, and his mouth formed a tight line, incredulous. "Don't you have some ancient sumerian st—"

Magnus raised his hands above his head as he stomped out of their shared office, "Oh fuck off with that, I swear I'll never live it down! Christ! Let's go already." Magnus opened the door, and stepped over the unconscious MTF member outside his office.

Kensington grinned as they walked towards the cafeteria, Site security rushing past them to some unnamed horror not in the direction of delicious pie.

« | **HUB** | **Happy Birthday From Nobody** »

Happy Birthday From Nobody

Site-19

There was a package on her desk. Dr. Rights sat down curiously, slipping the letter opener out of its little holder, and sliding it through the tape on the seams of the cardboard. Some of the tape had peeled away slightly, and the ink from the stamps of “NOT A BOMB” and “MEMETIC HAZARD NOT DETECTED” had faded.

Inside was a letter, a picture frame, and a box of chocolates. A thin layer of dust had settled on the contents. She cocked her head to one side, confused by who or what this was from.

She opened the letter with a flick of a finger, and sat back in her chair, slipping her reading glasses on from the chain she kept around her neck. She hated the things, but it was a consequence of getting older. The letter was handwritten on expensive stationary, and was dated from a few years ago.

“Hello, Doctor Rights. If you’re reading this, I’m probably dead, or just forgot to drop in. One of those. Either way, I wanted to say happy birthday,” she glanced over at her calendar, and gave a slight sigh of surprise. It was her birthday, not that she kept track any more. The frequent XK scenarios made keeping track of the date a bit challenging.

“I know you said that if I remembered your birthday, you’d kill me, but hey, I’m either dead, or going senile, so who cares. I hope you enjoy the chocolates, and have a decent day. Take it easy on the damn kids for once.” It wasn’t signed, but she felt as if she should know who wrote it. The name was on the tip of her tongue, but she couldn’t quite grasp who it was.

She lifted the picture frame from the box, and looked at it. It was a group photo of the foundation Researchers from Site 19, in the early

days before all the staffing had been finished. There were only a few people present in the photograph.

The command level staff were present, and a few other lower level staff that Doctor Rights had befriended over the years, but there was a curious blank spot near the middle. One of the other doctors was hanging off of what seemed to be thin air, before it hit her: She couldn't see who was there.

She grabbed the letter again, and looked down near the bottom. Sure enough, there was a script that said, "Sincerely," but was blank after that. She picked up the box of chocolates, and the sender was blank as well.

The realization hit her like a train. Her pulse started to pound in her temples, and her jaw clenched, as anger washed over her. The little reading glasses slipped off the bridge of her nose, jangling from their fine chain.

Who the hell did they think they were, erasing someone from her past without her authorization? A strict deletion memetic was nearly unthinkable to use on someone with her Level.

Dr. Rights shook with rage, standing up, and storming out of her office. Someone was going to catch hell for this.

Dimensional Site-4

In her office, O5-2 sat surrounded by a mountain of paperwork. Aides flowed in and out of the cramped office, passing through an oddly colored door which hurt to look at.

A tall man in a blue suit passed in to the office, shaking off the momentary disorientation. "Overseer, you called for me?"

O5-2 nodded her head, "Has the memetic been distributed?

The aide nodded, and said quietly, "Yes ma'am, all known records, and instances of the name Doctor-" his voice went eerily silent, and his mouth blurred as he spoke the name, "have been deleted."

O5-2 nodded once more, and looked back down at the report in front of her. "Good. Begin Directive Legends at once."

The aide turned sharply, and exited back through to Site-4.

« **The Most Dangerous Game** | **HUB** | **When All You Have is a Hammer**»

When All You Have is a Hammer

Site-19

Dr. Magnus sat in his office, leaning back in the office chair. Across from him sat Dr. Kensington, flipping through some comic he'd picked up on his last run to town.

"So what should I get her?" he asked, frowning down at his desktop calendar, his eyes alighting on the date.

"What, you mean you haven't gotten her anything yet?" Kensington looked up, eyebrow raising. He'd listened to Magnus circle on and on about this girl he'd been dating, and had grown tired of his constant chattering about it.

"Nope." Magnus' eyes drifted to a couple of magazines in front of him, advertising all kinds of sparkly, heart-themed brick-a-brack. He was bad with gifts. Something just never quite clicked with what people want, and getting it for them. It was an incredible frustration, especially considering who it was supposed to be for.

"Well, why not? You like this girl, right?" Kensington put the comic down, and propped his feet up on the desk. The brightly colored pages landed on the desk, as Kensington settled in for the conversation.

Magnus shifted, his body language agitated. "Love her. We've been dating for a couple years almost." He didn't like talking about her, especially at work. The Foundation had a way of ruining any romantic involvements outside of staff.

Kensington squinted his eyes, "Wait, didn't you just…I thought you came back like seven months ago."

Magnus grunted, "Did."

Silence hung between them, until it was obvious Magnus wasn't going to volunteer anything more. Kensington raised an eyebrow further, "So she's…from wherever the hell you were all this time? Where was that, by the way?" He tried to disguise his interest. Wherever Magnus had gone, he wasn't telling anyone, and for some reason the higher ups were alright with it.

Magnus shifted uncomfortably, and twirled the pen in his right hand a few times, "I've already told you how that went. I was kidnapped by—"

Kensington slashed his hand across the intervening space, "I know you've fed me half a dozen bullshit stories about what happened, but none of it adds up. Goddammit Magnus, I'm your friend, and the only fucking one you've got if your social calendar, and my inbox are any indication. You owe me the truth."

Magnus leaned back, his eyes closing. He pushed the pen idly across his calendar, as he removed his glasses with his free hand. "I know, Kens. And I do owe it to you, I really do. I've told you twice now, and I shouldn't have even told you this much, that it's classified. I shouldn't even acknowledge anything, the only thing I can tell you is that Legends Never—"

Kens threw his hands up, frustrated with the deflection, "Whatever! Jesus Christ, you can quote the Big Bambino all day, doesn't explain how you're not dead. Or the lack of scarring. Or who this girl is—"

Magnus' eyes snapped open, "Hey. She's important to me, and she's not a threat to the Foundation. That's all that matters!" His voice had escalated until by the end it left the office ringing.

Kensington's jaw clenched for a moment. Magnus wasn't usually this tense. Sure, he'd scream at Kensington for various bits of dickery, but this was real anger. This gift thing must be important to him. Kensington tensed further for a minute, considering snapping back, before relaxing. "Alright. Fine. Sorry I asked. So why haven't you gotten anything?"

Magnus sighed heavily, the anger and emotion leaking out him like a balloon, "I'm broke."

Kensington blinked a few times, incredulously. "Wait, that's it? You're broke?"

Magnus turned away, staring out the window of his office, the concrete still drying after last week's containment breach. "I spent all my money."

"Well, no shit, jackass. What did you spend it all on?" His eyes shifted around the office, looking for any obvious nonsense that he could have splurged on. It was still the same, relatively spartan office. A couple of terminals for research, some random rock samples that he claimed were for "Metaphysics Experiments" which obviously hadn't been touched since he put them there.

"Normal stuff. It's not like I went on some crazy Amazon spree." He turned to face Kensington again, his eyes weary. "Sometimes, people just make bad decisions. Rent, insurance, whatever…I'm still on level 2 Researcher pay grade, I'm not exactly raking it in. And there's other expenses I never expected. I don't make the best financial decisions sometimes."

Kensington's mouth quirked up at the corner, "I thought your seventy or whatever years of life would have prepared you for this."

Magnus' eyes rolled, and he waved a hand dismissively, "Oh please, we both know that story was nonsense. I'm turning 29 this year, and you know it. Not that you'll remember the day."

Kensington grinned, turning to face the desk, "I only remember important days. So what are you gonna do, do you have any money at all?"

Magnus grimaced, "Nothing worth mentioning. We get paid the day after."

"So you're going to be the literal worst boyfriend ever on Valentine's Day?"

Magnus stood, shaking his head. "Apparently. At least I'm paid up for lunch on my cafeteria card till Wednesday. Maybe they'll have something decent to eat. Maybe we can think of something together.

Or they've got some dried macaroni I can glue to a piece of construction paper."

Kensington stood with him, his eyes locked with Magnus', "Magnus. Michael. Forget gifts. They're just things. What proves you care is what you do. So do something for her, not for the holiday."

Magnus stood transfixed. Kensington rarely used his given name, and never in a context like this, "What's that supposed to mean?"

Kensington snapped his fingers, "Remember that letter you wrote Dr. Rights?"

Magnus' eyes went a bit distant, the maelstrom of pain and destruction surrounding the days just after his apparent death flashing before his eyes. His voice croaked out, strained, "Yes."

Kensington pointed at him, shaking a finger. "Rights slapped an O5 for that letter, and spent the next year getting us all the memetic counter agent. So write something. You're decent at that. Or at least decent at pissing off women with it. That or your existence pisses them off, which is more likely." He started to slip out the door as Magnus processed what he said.

"I…she what? I didn't realize—" His eyes went distant once more, remembering the days before everything happened. He hadn't seen Rights in a long time. He began to reminisce, before Kensington's last statement finally passed through his brain,"Hey, wait, you fucker, I do NOT PISS WOMEN OFF BY EXISTING," He charged after Kensington, stomping in to the hallway after a quickly fleeing Kensington, "GET BACK HERE YOU LITTLE SHIT."

« **Happy Birthday From Nobody** | **HUB** | **Legends Never Die** »

Legends Never Die

Site-19 Ancillary Research Wing

Agent Donnarson hadn't really expected to have to do a debriefing of this particular sort. As an information retrieval specialist, his job was to figure out the difference between report briefs, and the truth. However, "Dr." Magnus' file was several hundred pages long, and had started to become a little excessive, not to mention the content. A level 4 had made a request to figure out what the hell was going on, and the task fell to Rex.

As he walked through the halls of the Ancillary Research Wing at Site 19, he flipped through the case file, each entry more stupid than the last. This was going to take forever, and he could already imagine the headache this would cause.

The door to Magnus' office was open, and two men were sitting at chairs across from each other, making idle chatter. He hadn't met either of them before, and knocked softly on the wood of the office door. "Hello? I'm looking for Viktor Magnus?"

The shorter man stood up, and gestured to the blond man sitting on the drawer side of the desk. "Well, you found him. Here to finally terminate the idiot?"

Rex hesitated for a moment, caught off-guard by the joke. "I- What? No. Debrief."

The man grinned, and took a couple of steps, reaching across the distance. "I'm kidding. Sorry, I'm Researcher Kensington. Level 3. May I observe the interview?"

Rex shook the man's hand, and looked down at the directive sheet. "Anyone level 3 or higher could observe, technically, but this isn't

being recorded. It's just a debrief I'm supposed to report on."

The other man, in the chair raised an eyebrow, and smiled. "I don't mind if he observes. I'm Dr. *Michael* Viktor Magnus."

Rex frowned for a second, then looked down at the personnel file. "It says here it's Researcher Magnus, as you don't have a—"

Magnus threw his hands up. "My degree is real dammit! Just because the subject isn't, doesn't mean anything! Doctor. Magnus."

Rex could already feel his pulse in his neck now, a surefire sign a headache was coming. When it rains, it pours. "Alright. May I sit down?"

Kensington moved out-of-the-way, and grabbed a third chair from the corner, pulling it up to the desk on the short side, leaning back. "Just pretend I'm not here. I'd love to hear this."

Rex sat down. "Right. My name is Agent Rex Donnarson, and I'm—" An upraised hand interrupted his speech, and Magnus leaned forward, his face incredulous.

"Rex. Rex Donnarson. Seriously? That's your actual name?" The look on his face was one he was intimately familiar with.

"Yes. That's my actual legal name. No I did not change it." Rex tried to smile, but ended up grinding his teeth instead.

Magnus leaned back in his chair and shrugged. "Right, sorry. I just couldn't not say something. I'm sure your parents thought it was a lovely name."

Rex counted back from five in his head, then opened the case file in front of him. "Right. Let's get started. I'm here to clear up some… unusual reports that have come through as after-action reports. From what this says, you've taken part in an unusually high number of combat missions for a non-combatant, and several circumstances of your… reports, have been suspect. I've been ordered to find out what actually happened."

Magnus leaned back, shifting downwards in his chair. "Alrighty then.

Shoot."

Rex flipped open the first envelope, breaking the wax seal. "Right. Okay, 20 April 2017. There was a mission flying over Kansas, delivering SCP-3000. The plane reported distress, and we lost communication with it. You arrived at Site-27 sixteen hours later."

Magnus nodded. "Yes, that's right."

Rex pinched the bridge of his nose. "Could you recount how you survived this plane crash, as you did in your report?"

Magnus looked at the ceiling, and then nodded speaking with his eyes on the paper tile to the right of the overhead light. "Right. Plane was going down, but luckily for me, there was an alligator in the back."

"An alligator. In the depressurized section of a cargo plane? Seriously, you expect me to believe this?"

Magnus nodded again. "Yeah, and good thing too, it was a pretty good pilot."

Rex looked down at the sheet, with notes about the plane crash. *SCP Flight 2557 was found twenty miles from Site-27, having gone through an apparent guided emergency landing on to a small uninhabited island. Most of the plane had deteriorated. One Nile Crocodile was found in the co-pilots seat. There were elevated hume levels in the area for six hours following the investigation.*

Rex's mouth became a thin line. "You do realize how insane that sounds, right?"

Magnus tilted his head to the side eyes blank for a moment, before smirking. "That's a relative term, considering about two hundred yards away is an entity capable of reshaping reality at will. Assuming 343 is still kept in the same section this week."

Kensington snorted across from the two of them. "Seriously though, alligator, Magnus?"

He shrugged. "It might have been a crocodile. I can never tell them

apart, I really should memorize the teeth thing."

Rex flipped the documents back in to the packet, then broke the seal on the next report. "Okay, that's… I'll note it down that your story is consistent with presented events. This one is from April 22, 2014."

Kensington held up a hand. "Wasn't that the rocket over Antarctica?"

Magnus nodded. "Yep. Six Russians, and an airlock. Man, that sucked."

Rex scanned the file, and looked up, annoyed. "Okay, come the hell on. You survived re-entry from orbit?"

Magnus nodded, taking off his glasses, and cleaning a lens, his eyes focused anywhere except on the Agent. "Yep! I mean, it was painful, but I was pretty okay. Burnt my eyebrows off though."

Rex let the file fall to the table, and sat up. "Eyebrows? It would have burned you to death!"

Magnus pointed at the file. "Snowstorm. We were in Antarctica, and there was a whole fuckton of snow that day."

Rex held his hands up in exasperation. "That… that isn't how convection works! You should have died on reentry, and slammed in to paste on the ground!"

Magnus shrugged. "Look, I'm a meta-physicist, not a physicist—"

Kensington cut in, "No you're not."

Magnus glared over at Kensington . "It's on my degree."

"Yes. Your fake degree. From the 'University of Deleware'. Delaware has two a's in it."

Magnus rolled his eyes, "As I've said, just because the subject is false doesn't mean the degree is. The University of Deleware is a perfectly accredit institution in the reality I got the degree in."

Kensington waggled his fingers. "I think that's literally the definition,

'cause—"

Rex's voice rang out: "Gentlemen! Either way, you can't survive an orbital re-entry." The pounding had spread up to his temples now.

Magnus spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness, his eyes roaming the room. "What can I tell you, it was really windy, and there was this big snowdrift, and—"

Rex slammed the file down. "You're not taking this seriously at all! You expect me to believe these ridiculous lies about how you apparently keep dodging death?"

Magnus' face grew serious, and he looked Agent Donnarson clear in the eye. "All I can say is that Legends Never Die." His expression softened, and he winked.

Kensington sighed heavily, and reached over to a side table where a stale cup of coffee was sitting. He took a sip, and shook his head slightly. "That's all he ever says. Annoying isn't it."

Rex took a moment to compose himself, and set the file on the stack of finished files. "Whatever. Let's continue, if that's alright with you." He pulled out the last of the sealed files. "Okay, this one you're going to have to give me more than just some nonsense explanation. You were in Louisiana during a hurricane and got washed in to the sewer system by a storm surge."

Magnus' eyes grew distant for a moment, before remembering the incident. "Ahh. Right. Yes, we'd been tracking SCP-4733, and discovered it had holed up in Golden Meadow. I was there with an MTF, I can't remember the name."

Rex nodded, and continued, "Zeta-22. Clockbots or something like that. So the hurricane hit, and you were swept in to the sewers."

Magnus grimaces for a moment, then continued. "Right. I was swept in to the sewer system. I got a melon barb stuck in my throat which —"

Rex dropped the pen he was holding. "I'm sorry, repeat that for me?"

Magnus shrugged. "Melon barb. It's a fish. Got it stuck right in my throat. Thankfully it kept taking in water, so I could use the gills to not drown."

Kensington leaned forward. "Hold on a second. The melon barb is native to India, not Louisiana. What the hell are you on about?"

Magnus turned to face Kensington. "Hell if I know. It was definitely a melon barb though. Someone might have had it as a pet or something?"

Rex couldn't help but just stare at the two of them. "That. That is what's incredulous about his story?! The SPECIES OF FISH!?"

Rex slammed the file shut. "Fine! Jesus fucking christ, enough! I can't believe you're wasting my time!"

He shoved all of the papers in to the overstuffed case file. "The only other question I have, that I've been specifically instructed to ask, is after the… 'plane crash', you claimed a pair of 'sea turtles' carried you to Hawaii. How did you get to the shore, smart guy? You reportedly crashed near the south pole."

Magnus shrugged again, as if the answer was obvious. "Well, I'd worn my Heelies that mission, so moving long distance wasn't really an iss—"

Rex slammed his hands on the table, and stood, grabbing up all the case file. "Fuck it! Fuck you!" He pointed to Kensington. "Fuck me! Fuck you all, and fuck your shit!" He stomped out of the room, slamming the door.

Kensington sat blinking. He looked at Magnus, confused. "What the hell did I do…?"

Magnus looked up from his phone, and shrugged. "Whatever. I told him everything I could about every single event. Not my fault he didn't believe me."

Kensington shrugged, and stood. "True. I'll catch you later Magnus."

Magnus waved vaguely. "Later bro."

Dr Kensington adjusted his glasses and walked out of the office, passing through the Ancillary wing in to the main facility grounds. He pulled out his phone, swiping a few times, looking up the map of the facility, idly pressing here and there.

He dipped his hand in to his pocket, and pulled out a tiny bottle labeled "Hand Sanitizer", squirting a bit on his right hand, rubbing it into his palm, and forearm.

Kensington followed the map to the wing labeled 'Intelligence'. He walked in to the main reception area, and called out: "'Scuse me? I'm looking for Agent Donnarson?"

An older balding man scooted his chair back out of the nearest cubicle. "Third office on the back wall. Name's on the door."

Kensington nodded, with a smile. "Thankya." He took a dozen steps to end up in front of the door to Rex's office. He hesitated a moment, and knocked.

"Come in," the agent's voice called out.

Kensington braced himself, and walked in. Agent Donnarson sat at his desk, typing away at a laptop, several stacks of documents on his desk, as well as the case file he and Magnus had fought over. He put on a sunny smile, and tried to sound cheerful, "Hey, Rex. I just wanted to say sorry about Magnus before. He's… flippant, but he's good at what he does."

Rex narrowed his eyes and sighed. "Oh. Doctor Kensington, wasn't it? It's fine. I'll report this, and my boss will probably order a full investigation. We'll get to the bottom of this." Kensington's neck involuntarily tightened, and he sighed internally.

He held out his right hand. "Just call me Kens. No hard feelings?"

Rex stood after a moment, and walked over. "No hard feelings." He took Kensington's hand in a firm grip.

Kensington's left hand moved to the bracelet on his right, touching the small stud. A barely perceptible swoosh of air escaped the heavy clasp. Rex's eyes fluttered for a moment as the Class B

amnestic took hold through the topical.

"Hey, it's no biggie. This is all classified anyway, right? Don't worry about it. There's no need for a formal investigation. It's all just as Magnus said."

Rex's eyes fluttered for a moment more, before mumbling out: "But… who classified it?"

Kensington looked him dead in the eye. "O5-2." He released his hand, casually peeling away the flesh tone polymer covering his palm, and forearm, dropping it in to Rex's trashcan where it turned into less than fifty grams of unidentifiable gray dust. He turned, leaving the office, and out to the main research wing, his face an inscrutable mask.

Dimensional Site 4, April 20, 2017

The small transparent case in front of O5-2 crackled with whorls of light, which she knew her brain interpreted as colored purple, for lack of a way to really interpret the sixth dimensional distortions.

"When?"

The technician beside her lifted a squarish device. "Soon."

O5-2 glanced down at her watch. 11:59 PM. The plane had gone down less than 20 minutes ago, and he should be emerging any moment.

The technician looked at the Overseer. "Hume readings increasing."

The bones in front of her in the clear plastic case vibrated slightly, moving forward, a purplish after image emerging out from the case. A series of unpleasant flashes depicted the after image slowly coating in fibrous muscles, nerves, eventually skin, tissues, hair… even clothing.

Dr. Michael Magnus fell to the ground in front of O5-2, the last of his screams fading into the chamber.

O5-2 took a step forward. "Welcome back again, Michael."

Dr. Magnus' bloodshot eyes lifted from the floor to hers, terror filling them, the pain slowly receding.

O5-2 smiled, and handed him a typewritten report. On it was more insanity and gibberish about sea turtles. "Why? Why do you keep making me do this?"

She tilted her head slightly. "Simple, Michael. You were a liar when you were just a Foundation employee, and everyone thinks you're just a liar now. And, frankly, you were the only personnel at the right time, who was expendable enough to qualify. What do you say if anyone presses you for what happened, and won't take that for an answer?"

Magnus skimmed the sheet a few more times, before rising to his feet. With a heavy sigh, he repeated the words that had been drilled in to his head death after death after death, "Legends never die. Where are you putting me back this time?"

O5-2 nodded to the door. "Just outside of Site-27. A little over twelve hours from the current chronographic time. You know the routine, Michael. The evidence has already been back-filled in to reality."

Magnus' head hung down. "Fine. What happened to the anomaly?"

O5-2 smiled slightly, "We're not sure. You've never died so close to a reality bending object before. We're still investigating what happened."

Magnus took a shaky step towards the door on the far wall, opening it, to reveal a peaceful island scene. Hawaii, home of Site-27. "Answer me this. Is it worth it?"

O5-2 thought for a moment, then nodded. "Yes. Completely. You've seen the combat reports from the Senior Research staff, yourself."

Magnus grimaced. "So be it." Then he stepped through the door, out of his own personal hell, and into the salt air of paradise.

My best friend bled out in my arms. I wish I was a strong enough person to have let that just be the end of it. To just…let him die that one time. If wishes were horses, we'd all ride. -From the personal journal of Dr. Jacob Kensington

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Dimensional Site-04, September 27, 20

The office was significantly more plain that Dr. Kensington had expected. He had figured an O5 would have all well appointed oak, felt desk covers, drinks cabinet, the whole shebang. O5-2's office was, at best, a spartan space. Six large filing cabinets. Several computers. A reality anchor localized to this room. It was a place of work. O5-2 lounged back in her chair. "So tell me again. What exactly are you proposing here?"

Dr. Kensington shifted uncomfortably. He'd stolen the files in front of him, and all of the related materials from Michael's files. They hadn't been disturbed in months, but still, it irked him to steal from his friend, "I think we can use this to enact some kind of permanent change in reality. Something to give us an edge against the benders, and the anomalies. Lord knows they've been escalating."

O5-2 sat up, and steepeled her fingers, resting her chin on the intertwined digits. "And how, exactly, is this going to help us?" She reached across the desk, and rifled through the papers. Several mentions of 'reality anchorage' and 'Sumerian hex-cross-referencing' were scrawled across pages of graph paper. None of it made any sense according to the experts who'd read it. "This is all gibberish, and you know it."

Dr. Kensington hesitated a moment then nodded, "That's correct. In our reality, Dr. Magnus' 'research' is nothing but bunk. But in another reality it doesn't have to be. The entire theory of reality transference,

and ego-spacial deference matrices isn't bullshit. It's just bullshit *here*." He could see the look in her eye. The same look Magnus must have gotten every time he ever tried to explain this.

Kens shifted the chair forward, and pointed to a diagram of a device, made of some black stone, which cradled a bismuth case. "Look, in our local space-time and hume levels, this is just a ludicrously expensive paperweight. But if we could…well, for lack of a better term, 'bend reality', we could make it function for a few seconds. Enough to jumpstart the transference. Whoever or whatever we needed could be…enhanced."

O5-2 looked across the table with her unnerving stare, and smiled a very slight smile, "Enhanced how? We've tried to do this in the past, and all of our attempts were…temporary at best. Or better left as footnotes in a file."

Dr. Kensington nodded, reaching down to his briefcase, and pulling out several level 4 clearance files. "Yes. The duke incident, I'm aware. While the damage was catastrophic the results where undeniable. If you could have all of your senior staff, every single one, as unkillable and, well, for lack of a better word 'lucky' as Dr. Kondraki all the time, would you?"

Her reply came without hesitation, "Of course I would. So what do we do?"

"We'll need some kind of object. Something to imprint this whole shebang on. Personally, I'd go with something living. It would have to be something relatively unimportant though, because there's no telling what this would do to the subject. Not something I'd like to think about honestly, reality takes exception with people screwing with it." Dr. Kensington adjusted his glasses, his fingers flexing nervously, several candidate files ready.

O5-2 nodded, and pressed a button on her phone, "Sal, can you bring us some coffee? It's going to be a long one." She looked up with an eyebrow cocked, "You drink coffee, right Jacob?"

Dr. Kensington swallowed. It was unnerving that an overseer knew his first name without having to look it up. "Of course." He reached

down, checking his phone reflexively as he pulled out a few plans and designs. "We'll probably need the help of SCP-343, and a few others to begin the initial reaction…"

O5-2 nodded, "Not a problem. Let's talk about specifics, you let me worry about logistics."

Site-19, July 17, 20

The site was under attack, and there was little to nothing that Michael could do about it. He ran through the halls trying to find a safe zone, but all of the lock down points had already been, well, locked down. It was his own stupid fault for waiting so long. He had to make sure that Jacob was alright before looking for cover.

An explosion rocked the corridor ahead of him and he fell to the ground, his glasses splaying out across the floor. Everything blurred, rocking back and forth as the tinny ringing in his ears slowly quieted to a roar. He scrambled for a moment before finding his glasses. In the distance he could see armed men in black uniforms rushing through the hole in the wall that had been created by the explosion.

Oh god. It's really happening. They're here, and I'm going to die.

He pulled himself to his feet, turning to run in the other direction. The loud report of gunfire filled the corridor behind him accompanied by raised voices.

It wasn't supposed to be like this. It's supposed to just…oh god, the guns are so loud!

He turned down a side corridor, and rushed past the medical wing. He tore through the door, and came to a halt in front of the reception desk, "Hello!? Is there anyone here?"

His eyes swept across the area behind the desk, and met with the eyes of a junior medical officer he'd met last week. Her glassy orbs stared in to the blank distance of oblivion. Magnus stood frozen, his blood running cold. Kayley. Her name was Kayley, and she loved falafel and salsa music. Now she was dead, and he was transfixed.

The neat bloody holes in her neck stood out in a mockery of the vibrant life she'd had just this morning.

"N-no. Jesus christ no!"

He spun on the ball of his foot, running out the door. A jog turned in to a dead sprint, looking around to find signs of any foundation personnel. He caught a flash of a pair of lab coats down a distant hallway, and tore off after them, retreating from the gunfire. He turned the corner, green light emanating from an adjacent corridor.

An open shelter! Jesus Christ, I'm the luckiest son of a b— He turned the corner towards salvation, and came face to face with a tall man wearing black body armor, and a set of black fatigues. At his feet were two foundation scientists, and he was smacking some kind of gun in his hands. He caught a glimpse of Magnus, and stared hard at him.

Magnus fumbled at his side, looking for the absurd revolver he carried for a while, to try and impress the combat agents. The ridiculous leather holster was empty. *Of course. I left it in the dormitory wing. I haven't carried that thing in months.* All he could find was his little folder pocket knife. He pulled it out of his pocket, and flipped it out with sure motions, his hand settling around it as he had done a million times. To open boxes. To pry open a soda. He didn't know the first thing about defending himself with it.

The man in front of him cocked his head to the side, and smiled, reaching up to the shoulder of his body armor for the handle of what looked like the biggest knife Magnus had ever seen, dropping the gun in his hands to let it hang from its strap. The knife's blade had to be at least ten inches long.

"S-security teams are on their way! You'll never get out in time, before they get here! You should just go!" He tried to look confident, changing his stance to something he thought was approaching threatening. His legs felt so awkward. His fingers gripped the G10 handle of the little folding knife like a vice. He remembered buying the thing on Amazon, and bragging about how awesome it was. How it was basically razor sharp forever. It felt absolutely useless in his stiff fingers.

"No they're not. Yes I will, and I don't think I should." The man in front of him said. He walked forward with casual motions, his knife held upright from his fist. It was so goddamned big. Magnus tried to shift his knife backwards, like he saw on TV. The little knife blade sticking out of the bottom of his fist. "Defensive grip" his brain told him, but he didn't have the first clue.

At two paces away, the enemy agent flicked out his free hand, towards Magnus' face. Without even thinking about it, he sliced out with the knife, which maybe brushed the heavy gloves of the agent's hand. A sharp, and sudden pain hit his knee. A lashing boot had caught him in the knee cap, and he fell to the ground, supported only on his other knee.

A hand closed around the wrist of the arm holding the little knife, and a quick hot sensation filled his senses as he heard the bones of his wrist crack. The agent reached forward with his other hand gripping Magnus' hair, his head forcibly tilted to look him in the eyes. The giant, black-bladed knife looming about ten miles long above his face. "Should have stuck to the lab, pencil neck."

Magnus tried to say something in reply but the sudden bright flash of pain in his chest stopped him. The hand released his hair and fell away as several other hot sensations bloomed in his chest. The man turned and started walking away, as Magnus realized the truth. *Oh fuck. He stabbed me. He stabbed me a lot.*

It all happened so fast. The whole confrontation couldn't have taken more than a pair of seconds. It wasn't like that in the movies. For some reason, all he could think about was, *Why wasn't it more like in the movies?* Magnus' body hit the floor, blood rapidly pooling under him, his eyes staring up at the ceiling.

The last few moments of his life, he felt someone scooping his shoulders off the ground. Someone yelling in his face. But everything was so numb, so hard to make out. "K-Kens? I don't—"

Kensington screamed his rage to the ceiling as his best friend died in his arms. The security team behind him swept the area as the impotent rage washed over him.

Dimensional Site-04, July 18, 20

O5-2 sat at a desk with the open file in front of her. Across from her desk sat another member of the O5 council, and Dr. Kensington. He hadn't yet washed the blood off his hands from the attack on Site-19 last night. "Gentlemen. We've accomplished the goal we set out to do last fall. Now all we needed was a willing subject to—"

"I have one." Kensington looked up at O5-2, his eyes clear, and bright with the pain and anger of the past 24 hours. "I have a body you can use. And an event, too. Something strong, and clear to latch on to."

O5-2 steepled her fingers again, leaning forward, "Do tell, Jacob." O5-6 turned his head, the vague black haze around his head from the persona obscurer tracking the movement and compensating.

"Michael Magnus. He was killed in the Site-19 incident last night. It gives us causality, a traumatic event, and a sufficient causal link to shift causality away from the Senior Staff." Dr. Kensington tried not to let his voice shake. Medical science was a hell of a thing, but it had been far, far too late to save Michael's life.

If they hurried, they could redirect the entire fact that he died away from reality, though. If they timed it right, they could give him a second chance. O5-6's voice came out a warbly mix of several voices, "So, if I'm reading this all right, we're going to knowingly bend reality so that we can turn our research staff in to anomalies? Is that about right? And we would use this…Dr. Magnus' body and death to do so?"

O5-2 nodded. "We would have. Why, did you have issue with the council's vote?" She looked across at the man in the chair, directly through the haze. They held eyes for several seconds, before he looked away, and stood.

"No. You know how I voted. Sorry about it, 2. But that's how it goes." O5-6 walked to the door out of O5-2's office, and punched in a six digit code, opening the door, and stepping through in the reality anchored location in Site-26.

"Alright then, Dr. Kensington. Have the remains brought here. We'll proceed at midnight tomorrow, if that's amenable to you?" Kensington hesitated for a moment, then nodded, and followed the same exit as O5-6, his eyes set and determined. Fuck the council. He was getting his best friend back.

She paused for a moment, her chin resting on interlaced fingers then smiled. She opened her desk drawer, and reached forward pressing the button on her phone, "Sal, come in for a moment?"

The door in front of her opened, and her assistant walked in, reading off of a ledger, "The memetic has been distributed. All mentions of Dr." His mouth moved, but no sound came out " have been removed from this reality. Are we sure that using this memetic agent is a good id—"

She held up a hand to silence him. "Begin Directive: Legends at once. We need to get this done before the other council members catch wind of this." She looked back down and started to jot notes on the file. The large block red letters of "**REJECTED BY O5 COUNCIL VOTE**" stood out starkly from the case file.

Dimensional Site-04, July 19, 20 , 11:50 PM

The blacksite depths of Dimension Site 4 were hardly a pleasant place. Cold concrete surrounded the assembled group, flickering purple fractals manifesting in the corners of the room, aftereffects of the process holding Site 4 in dimensional suspension.

The only way to access the deeper levels of the site were with the direct accompaniment of an overseer. Kensginton's access card stopped working after the third basement. Six levels, and four elevators later, the concrete rectangle that contained the work of the past day stood starkly illuminated by floor lamps and industrial lighting.

A rough hewn altar, with chiseled bismuth crystals in the crude shape of a bowl, the lattice of crystals barely supporting the weight of the black bodybag inside it stood in the center of the room. Around it stood O5-2, Dr. Kensington, Sal, several medical

assistants, and a man of indeterminate race, and very tired eyes. "Want me to shore up the altar a bit?"

She shook her head, "No. This is exactly how it was supposed to be according to the design." She took a step forward, and placed a hand on the bodybag in front of her. "You know what you're going to do right?"

He shifted uncomfortably, and the room heated up a fraction of a degree. The tie of his suit changed color from red to blue. "Yes. We're going to bend the area around this…thing, until it functions, right?" He took a step forward, and placed his hand on the body bag as well. "This is…an ugly ugly thing you're asking Mel—"

She looked over with a severe glare, "Don't you dare. And I know what I'm asking of you. You owe me."

Dr. Kensington's eyes were locked on the bag in front of him. This would work. He'd have his idiot friend back, and O5-2 would get her reality deference matrix. He clicked the pen in his hand a few times out of nerves, and looked up at O5-2. "Can we get on with this."

"Get out, Kensington. I'll let you know what happens" He started to protest, and she cut him off with a gesture, "I wasn't asking." Dr. Kensington looked at her with smoldering eyes, and stalked out of the room. She nodded, and looked over at the man next to her, "Whenever you're ready Ch—" He held up a hand, closing his eyes.

"Since you're insisting on titles, at least call me 343. And after this, we're even. This is…wrong. You don't even know what this might—" She turned away from him, and nodded her head. "Alright. Fine."

He held his hands out, concentrating on whatever enigmatic turn of fate allowed him to do what he did, and the temperature of the room rose. Several minutes passed, as sweat beaded on the rapidly reddening face of the nondescript man, the air taking on a faint metallic tang. His fingernails cracked as several minutes more passed, before the crude altar in front of them started to shake, and rattle. His voice croaked out, strained, "Now's the time, if you—"

O5-2 took a step forward, and slapped the body bag, and in a

confident voice intoned, "Death was too good for you, idiot. It never happened." Everything around O5-2 slowed down, and a faint crackling sound could be heard, followed by a roaring. Her senses were overwhelmed, as her vision faded to white…then black…then slowly back to normal.

As the screams faded away, Michael Magnus lay on the floor gasping, the skeletal remains in the bowl of the altar glowing a faint purple.

"Where…what…I don't….?" Magnus' words were slurred. "I don't…I was dead, how am I here?! I didn't…oh my fucking god—" he ripped open his shirt, looking down at his chest. The stab wounds were just…not there. No scar, no line, nothing. "I don't understand."

O5-2 took two long steps to stand in front of Magnus, "Oh Michael. Don't you know, legends never die?" He looked up at her with wary eyes, as she gestured to several medical staff present. "Get him cleaned up, and back to Site-19. He has work to do."

Sal took a step forward, standing next to O5-2, "The design specifies that the effect will get stronger with subsequent breaches of the causality. Are we going to—"

She smirked, and turned to head back to her office, "Don't worry Sal. Michael has quite a few "fieldwork" missions planned for the future."

Dimensional Site-04-a (provisional designation), July 19, 20 , 11:59 Pm

Dr. Kensington's eyes were locked on the bag in front of him. This would work. He'd have his idiot friend back, and O5-2 would get her reality deference matrix. He clicked the pen in his hand a few times out of nerves, and looked up at O5-2. "Can we get on with this."

"Get out, Kensington. I'll let you know what happens" He took two steps forward, and squared his jaw. "With all due respect, ma'am, fuck off."

She smiled faintly, then nodded, and looked over at the man next to

her, "Whenever you're ready Ch—" He held up a hand, closing his eyes.

"Since you're insisting on titles, at least call me 343. And after this, we're even. This is…wrong. You don't even know what this might—" She turned away from him, and nodded her head. "Alright. Fine."

He held his hands out, concentrating on whatever enigmatic turn of fate allowed him to do what he did, and the temperature of the room rose. Several minutes passed, as sweat beaded on the face of the reality bending man, the air taking on a faint metallic tang. His lips cracked as several minutes more passed, before the crude altar in front of them started to shake, and rattle. His voice croaked out, strained, "Now's the moment, if you—"

O5-2 took a step forward, and slapped the body bag, and in a confident voice intoned, "I've worked too hard to put this much faith in this idiot, now get the hell up!." Everything around O5-2 slowed down, and a faint crackling sound could be heard, followed by a shattering sound. Her senses were overwhelmed, as her vision faded to white…then black…then slowly back to normal.

SCP-343 looked over at O5-2, "I'm sorry, I don't know what you were expecting, but that's all." He had returned to his usual appearance, all traces of strain gone from his features. "I'm heading back to containment now." With no warning, he simply vanished without ceremony.

She looked over at Kensington, and frowned. "Well, that's all?"

His eyes fell to the floor, gritting his teeth. God dammit. It was supposed to work, everything in the notes indicated… *Fuck it. At least I tried. Rest in peace you old asshole.* "I guess that's all." He turned, and stalked out of the room, heading back towards the dimensional entrance to Site-19.

A few minutes of strained silence passed. *At least there's no one to deal with from the council this way…* She thought to herself. From the corner, Sal's tablet started to beep. "Ma'am, we have reports of Hume levels are spiking off the charts. Something's happening." His phone rang in his pocket, and he lifted it to his ear. Several tense

moments passed in silence. "We've got a confirmed anomaly in Montana. The agents responding report…dogs. Lots, and lots of dogs, and some kind of entity leading them."

O5-2 chewed her lip for a moment, eyes darting from the altar in front of her to Sal. "That's just a coincidence."

Sal looked at her sideline. "Yes. Because there's so many coincidences in this world, right?" She made a vague dismissive motion, and turned to walk towards her office. "Get me the head of the containment team." She took one final look at the burnt body bag and the skeletal remains that were all that was left of Michael Magnus. "Keep a survey team around the remains. If there is a correlation…we…" She paused. "Sal, I don't even know. Just keep a team in place."

He watched her leave the barely lit basement room, and looked down at the tablet in his hand. The steady stream of messages was coming in regarding Montana. He shrugged, and called in for the containment team, his back turned towards the altar, and the faint purple light present on the flickering nick in the third rib.

« **Legends Never Die** | **HUB** | »

Bad Dreams

Agent Adams walked down the hall of the Lanthanide Hills Task Force dorms, swiped her card on the lock, readied her parka around her face, and stepped into the cold, Siberian night, manila envelope in hand.

Tonight was not a snowy night, but the cold wind still whipped up around the mess hall to her left and blew snow in gusts across the pavilion; she saw lights bobbing in the distance, and dogs barking, the night patrol wandering in snowshoes and parkas down the road to the main facility a mile down the road with a Humvee rattling along behind them. The watch lights circled lazily in a long, cold circle, waiting for sun that wouldn't come for another two months.

She started off, hand on the rope guiding them through the dark, carefully watching her step. Snowshoes were tricky; her worst fear was having to fight in them one day. High heels she could do. Not snowshoes.

The rope led past the mess to the training facility, the armory, the other dorms for the poor saps that were stuck on winter Lanthanide training assignment against their will. Finally, she came to the old log cabin she was looking for, and trudged up the three steps to the door with "FUCK OFF" written in permanent marker on the window, both in English and shaky Russian.

In the few years that Adams had spent at Lanthanide, she had never visited Clef's small house on the edge of the training facility's grounds. Part of her hesitated a moment on the doorstep, like she was doing something profoundly wrong; her mentor was not necessarily a private man, but also wasn't one to invite others into his life at all. There was no backstory to it; no reasoning or sad reason why. It just didn't happen.

Because Alto Clef was a fucking repulsive little man.

She looked at the envelope, wondered if it could wait until morning. Maybe it could; she could just leave it here-

Suddenly, Clef started screaming.

Clef screamed a lot. One could argue that Adams had heard, actually, nearly every possible sound that Alto Clef could make. But this one started at a low-pitched whine, and grew into a slow, unearthly howl, like a car starting, and increased in pitch and volume until she found herself frozen in place on the doorstep, clutching the envelope tighter.

What the fuck?

She caught herself about thirty seconds into the unholy roar of the damned, and pounded on the door.

“Clef! Are you okay?”

The house dropped silent. She waited. A few minutes passed. Adams considered knocking again, or doing away with chivalry altogether and just busting in the door, in case he had hurt himself or something-

CLUNK.

The sound of a lock unlocking.

SHHIIICK.

CLUNK.

THOCK.

The sound started at the top of the door, and worked its way down, the sound of about ten heavy-duty locks being pulled away

CLICK

THOCK

THOCK

CLICK

CLUNK

The door opened an inch, and Adams found herself with the tip of a shotgun in her face.

“Leave. Don’t tell anyone what you heard.” His voice was cold, and broke near the end.

“Hey, are you oka-“

“I’m fine. Go away.”

“Look, I brought these files-“

“It. Can wait. Don’t tell anyone what you heard.”

“Clef, what was that? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. It happens.”

“What happens?”

“Dreaming. I've seen a lot, Adams. Please give me privacy on this."

There was a pause. The barrel stayed where it was.

“Okay. I won't tell anyone. Um…I’ll…I’ll see you tomorrow.”

In a moment, the gun was gone, the door was slammed closed, the locks relocked, and Agent Adams was left on the porch, alone.

Clef watched her go from the window in the other room. Waited until she was down the road, back to the main facility and the dorms.

He grinned, pretty damn proud of himself. That was quite a show! God damn. Good cover. Alto Clef, a fucking repulsive little man who had been, in fact, enjoying himself immensely for the past few hours, took his underwear back off, took a Viagra, and put another waffle in the toaster for round number 14.

(The Engine of A Film)/(The Fine Game of Nil)

Once Upon A Time In Site 19…

"Man, another day, another 096 breach," Researcher Chad Benson said, kicking a paperclip across the room. "At least this time it was just some dude. Can you imagine how bad it would get if it was like, a bunch of dudes?"

"Dude," Researcher Kyle Sachs raised an eyebrow, "that's already happened like… twice."

"Whoa."

"Right?"

The two of them sat at their post, just outside of SCP-096's containment cell. It was a slow day, so Kyle had snuck in a six-pack and some darts and they had spent their time ineffectively acupuncturing the drywall. After a while, and after another case of suds had been absconded with from the staff lounge, Chad poached an inquiry.

"Dude," he said, leaning forward precipitously, "what if like, the Shy Guy just has like, image issues, you know?"

Researcher Kyle looked up, one eye casually maintaining its focus on the ground. "What?"

Researcher Chad squinted, racking his brain for intelligent thought. "Like, what if the Shy Guy is actually a real bro, but he's just got some shit going on, you know? Like he's got some issues with acne or some shit."

Kyle nodded slowly. "Bro, I get that. I knew this guy once who had real bad acne issues, messed him up for a long time. Maybe Shy Guy just needs some Clearasil or some shit, dawg."

"Dude, check it," Chad said, stumbling to his feet, "what if we went and like, got a mask or, or some shit like that, and gave it to the Shy Guy? You know, like… like a peace offering. Maybe he would come out of his shell."

Kyle slapped his leg. "Bro! That's totally what we're gonna do! We're gonna chill with the Shy Guy!" His face contorted suddenly, as the Mousetrap setup of plastic pieces in his mind suddenly ground to a halt in the face of a most unfortunate reality. "Where are we gonna get a mask though? We can't, like… leave the site."

They sat together again for some time, considering their options. Finally, in unison, they both hobbled to their feet and went scampering down the hall.

Concurrently Elsewhere…

Mary Sachs stood painfully in front of the man who pretended to be her teacher, the man who had educated her for twelve years in the bombed out ruins that served as the school for the nearest hundred miles, and watched as he told her that college was simply an impossibility.

"Miss Sachs, surely a bright young thing like yourself considers herself suitable of attending Aktus University, but unfortunately I don't think that you are qualified. The university only accepts a handful of students this year, and never more than that cap while The Foundation occupies there." he said, simply, as if it were the most logical thing in the world. "Frankly, I'm not even sure that a person of your womanly type is suited for a college. After all, Dr. Bright has decreed that girls belong in the home, serving and pleasuring their husbands."

She could feel every eye in the room staring painfully at her and she gulped, miserably. "But sir, that's horrifically sexist and retrograde. You've been encouraging us to think progressively here, and then you just say something so horrible how could you-"

He cut her off, tutting. "You must think for yourself if you want to

become a Foundation D-Class or Researcher, you understand. But you are not capable of doing those things. Even then that is difficult. I think it's vulgar myself but I can't help it if Bright is awful and vulgar. Rules are rules, I'm sorry."

She sat down sadly.

Chad and Kyle arrived at another containment cell a while later, where they met Researcher Todd Bloch. Researcher Todd heard their appeal, and after thoughtful consideration, met them with a reply.

"Bro, this is totally what we're gonna do!"

The three of them then checked themselves into the room labeled SCP-035, where they snatched the contents therein with some special graspers and took off back down the hall. On the way there, the mask could be heard muttering to itself about "fucking douchebags" and "what the fuck guys srsly omg" and also "jesus christ didn't even spare me a second to pack what knobs".

Finally they reached 096's containment cell again, and after making sure they were clear that this is the one you *can't* look at, and not the one you *have* to look at, they opened the door slightly and kicked the mask in. It muttered to itself ("those lunatics I swear on me mum"), before they slammed it shut. They grabbed yet another pack of beer, and then waited.

Ten minutes passed, and then twenty. After nearly half an hour, they heard a knock on the containment cell door. Quietly and carefully, they moved over towards the door, and with a single outstretched hand, Researcher Chad slid the door open. On the other side was 096, facially equipped with 035.

"What up, bros!" 096 said, flashing out some dope gestures. "Sorry for all of that shit from pretty much the entire time I've been chillin here, you know. Got some real deep set issues I haven't really dealt with yet, but it's all good now that I got this dope ass mask yo!"

"Doooooooooooope!" the other three said in unison.

"Fuckin twats I'll break yer necks," spat 035.

"So what do you guys want to do now?" said 096, donning some sick shades.

The four of them paused to consider, and then Researcher Todd snapped. "I got it! Why don't we go prank the senior staff?"

"Brooooooooooooo!" the other three said in unison.

"Christ on a cracker," said 035.

Mary Sachs stood, about twenty pounds heavier and a child in arm. Her new husband, formerly a boyfriend deemed too intellectual for the university, had insisted on plastering the walls in Clef posters.

"Glad they're back to being rockstars now! That was a terrible time for us when they were our presidents, eh?" He looked back at her, shirt down, the baby grabbing her nipples and squalling.

"I suppose." she said simply. "But I don't really think of them as musicians either. I mean, they don't play, they just make the guitars float."

He looked dangerously down his nose at her.

"That's a sure sign of a cognitohazard, Mary. Sure of it. I read it in the paper. Only people infected by a particular cognitohazard say that about instruments." He intoned, very slowly and low.

"Ben, I've never seen a cognitohazard before, ever." The baby began to cry.

But he was looking at her with a glint of fear in his eyes now, and ran across their small shack to the cell phone, a direct hotline to any Mobile Taskforce of your request. Mary no longer paid attention to Ben, now screaming down the phone to somebody to hurry down from Site 19 with some amnestics, and tried to comfort her baby. It evidently couldn't hear her or couldn't care. It only screamed louder and louder.

It drowned out his frantic dialogue with the operator until he came over and smacked her until she shut it up. She just stared blankly, unable to move. It continued to scream.

Doctor Bright sat quietly in his office, muttering over some paper work. He bent his head down to adjust a pile, but his long horsy snout only proved to knock the papers off of the desk.

"*Horse body my ass,*" he muttered, trotting around and shitting against the wall, "*see how they like to clean up all this mess.*"

It was about that time when a pack of rabble rousers appeared just outside the doorway. Bright's keen sense of horse smell alerted him to their presence, as did his keen sense of horse hearing when they knocked on the door.

"Come in," he neighed.

In burst Researcher Kyle, himself donned with a pair of dope shades. "Yo Dr. Bright, you had a rough day?"

Bright raised a horse eyebrow. "A rough day? I mean, not particularly. I didn't die today, and I got some meetings take care of, so I guess overall it's been fin—"

Then in came 096. "Then why the long face!"

"FUCKIN HORSE," shouted 035.

The four of them burst out laughing, and continued their antics down the hall. Bright, flabbergasted, took a moment to compose himself and then called down the hall after them. "You whippersnappers wait until I get a real simian body. Then we'll see who has the long—I mean, who has shit on their faces! Because it will be you!"

He stamped back into his office, kicking a hole in the wall and knocking off a valuable monkey statue. After a moment of quiet contemplation, he was suddenly struck with a thought.

"Wait," he said, peering back outside. But they were already gone.

Mary Sachs couldn't sleep at night anymore. The taskforce had doped her up on so many different kinds of amnestics that it destroyed half her brain chemistry, it had seemed. She turned to Ben, still asleep himself, and nudged him awake. Some nights, she wished her brother Kyle would pulls some strings and fix her life. Tonight her brain couldn't manage that.

"Ben?"

He grunted and rolled over.

"What is it, it's goddamn midnight, Mary!"

She stared into his hard, piggy little eyes. The thick brow was still furrowed from sleep and his mouth was pursed.

"Ben, do you still love me? I mean, it's been a while since we first married and now with my headache and insomnia I can't tend the crops anymore. Does it bother you, at all? I mean, are we still happy."

He stared into her dulled chocolate eyes. Her face was soft and open, her mouth just exposing her incisors.

They stared at each other for a long time. faces meeting.

"Go to sleep, Mary."

Next up was Dr. Crow, whose office was situated in a large warehouse wing of the site. They snuck in through the back, careful not to bump into any of the dangerous and probably volatile and unpredictable robots. They had it planned out, exactly how it was going to be. The punchline was set up, the mood was right. They came up to Dr. Crow's office door, and Researcher Todd slowly turned the handle, to find—

Kain Pathos Crow watching a recording of them pranking Bright on a monitor. The canine doctor turned around as they entered, himself nearly doubled over in doggy delight. "Guys, christ, that was gold." He wiped a tear from his eye with a trembling paw before bursting into hysterical laughter again. "Look, I want in on this. You guys look

like a bunch of cool bros, and I can be your #1 dog, dawg. What do you say?"

The four amigos gave each other a look, and nodded in unison (as was their way).

Researcher Kyle raised an eyebrow. "Do you have a pair of sick shades, bro?"

096 nodded. "Gotta have those sick shades, bro."

035 spat on the ground. "Fuck me mate a fuckin dog too."

Kain nodded slyly. "I can do you one better." He did a quick spin, and when he turned back around he was decked to the 9s with dope fucking shades, a sick beach tank, and some killer flops.

Thoroughly impressed, his now comrades invited him to join them, and they struck out for further shenanigans.

Mary Sachs buried her husband five weeks after the baby died, beneath a dead elm at the back of the zucchini farm. There was a brief funeral, his parents were there, as well as the landlord and their schoolteacher, seemingly unchanged."So, I was right it seems about your career! You two have made a lot for yourself. He's left you most, I suppose?"

"Fuck off," she muttered.

It was quick funeral, and that was good, for no sooner after the tidying up had finished that Mary noticed one of the disembodied spotlights passing over the eastern gardens, and soon to the farmhouse on the hill. Anxious of the consequences, Mary made haste up there with the pistol she carried, anxiously hoping the cell phone would still get service or otherwise be undamaged.

To her initial sweep of the room, everything seemed to be in order and she breathed a sigh of relief. But the cat that sometimes wandered around the grounds had followed her from the elm, and it began to hiss venomously at something underneath the bureau. Mary ducked down and peered under there with an excess of

caution.

Her instincts proved to be correct, for this is where the anomaly manifested. From a previously undetected hole in the siding there came a strangled coo, some sort of baby-shriek drowning in liquid. Mary groaned, stood up, and shoved the bureau aside. The hole was a rough semicircle in the wainscotting, about six inches in radius. She winced, then shoved her hand inside the new crevice to touch something slimy and moving. It was quickly yanked out. and dropped on the floor

A fetus, barely a foot long, crying out with a born child's voice for its mother, a mother who never existed. Around it, the amniotic fluid dripping from it seemed to warp the space around the floorboards.

Horrified, she began to wallop the thing with a broom, smacking it over and over and over until its increasingly horrified cries began to stop. It took a while to kill the abortion in the hole in the floor, but eventually she was able to turn it to a red stain on the wood. The cat rushed in and began to eat it. She stood over the grisly scene, panting, hand dripping with amniotic fluid. There would be no need to call the Foundation, it seemed.

For the first time in three weeks, the cat ate its fill that day.

Agent Lament sat on the firing range, slowly cleaning out his favorite long range bowel excavating device, when he noticed a ruckus on the horizon. At first, his keen eyes thought he saw three rambunctious researchers and an escaped 096 wearing 035, but then he realized he was *actually* seeing three rambunctious researchers, and escaped 096 wearing 035 and that *fucking dog*.

"God help us," Lament said, shouldering his rifle.

Not only was it the aforementioned sextupleset of anomalies, researchers and canine, but behind them was a flock of drunken and disorderly co-eds, and beyond that, a large semi-trailer with the words "Spring Break 2015" painted on the side in bright colors. Lament reached for his radio, but it was too late. Seconds later, he was swarmed by the mass of intoxicated youth and swallowed up by

its insatiable lust for the twerk.

As he suffocated under the gyrating mass, his final thought was that he should have snipped that fucking dog when he had the chance, and also that he only hoped they had gotten Clef this good, too.

Mary Sachs wanted to die, had wanted to die for the past one hundred years. Fire had claimed the zucchini farm, but the fluid on her hand had forced her skin to heal. Every so often, she could see the Site 19 building zipping around the salt desert, an endless slow motion party proceeding forever. It had been so long since there was clean water, so long since tasty food, so long since she had felt some human contact.

She sat down heavily on a rock. The flats stretched away to a volcano in the distance, one that seemed on the verge of eruption for a long time. Her shawl fluttered in the chill wind.

From its burrow, a thing that was something like a toad and something like a leather boot crawled towards her threadbare shoes. In the wake of it's spindly feet, there were tiny ridges and valleys in the dust, quickly inhabited by swarming mites of various size. It rotated its eyes pitifully in their malformed sockets and began, slowly, to mount her shoes. It let out a pitiful ribbit.

Upon hearing it, she looked down, and was now consciously aware that something was having sex with her feet. The toad-boot thing curled the side of its rubber lips into a grotesque approximation of a smile. She returned the favor.

"Do yourself a favor, would you, thing?" she croaked out. "Don't waste your breath. Its not worth it. There's no point to those urges in this world anymore. Or at least, not for folks like us." She glanced over her shoulder at the Site 19 building, which had teleported about a hundred yards away. A bunch of college kids in Clef University shirts partied alongside some doctors and other odd characters. Tropical house music blasted from every floor of the building. She thought Kyle was among them. Then, without warning, it popped into nothingness, zipped off to some other corner of the planet.

"Thing, I'm just about sure time is worthless now. It's been about sixty years since I lost my mother's watch." The toad-boot-thing continued to hump Mary's shoes, eagerly. "I wonder if they understand the meaning of life anymore in their ivory tower. I wonder if they still have souls." She laughed a bitter laugh. "You know, if Kondraki or Bright wanted, they could rebuild civilization and give me my death now. But I think they've forgotton Bright's little sex-crazed phase. That's all this is, thing. A man inside a horse had a phase where he couldn't be like you and he got mad at everybody."

"I'm sure they've forgotten it. Nothing more than a joke to them. Nothing more than a joke."

She picked the toad-boot-thing off her foot, and, hearing it squeal, brought it to her mouth. It's tough, rubbery skin made a satisfying crunch in her teeth. "Nothing more than a joke." she said through a full mouth.

Then, still chewing, laid back on the rock and looked up at the shifting, effervescent stars.

There was a knock on the door of Dr. Gears. Gears looked up just in time to see the group and their flock burst into his office.

"What's up, br—" they began.

"No," he said.

"Well FUCK YOU TOO." said 035.

Mary Sachs walked on through the wastes for a good long while. The harsh wind dried the fluid sustaining her, and gradually the wind began to seep into her skull and dry her mind.

As the party began to die down, the co-eds returned to their homes, the zoo animals to their cages, and the Loch Ness Party Monster to the sea. At the days end, all that remained were the Researchers

Chad, Kyle and Todd, and SCP-096 (with SCP-035 in tow). Dr. Crow had already turned into the night, as he was a dog.

Researcher Kyle wiped a single tear from his eye. "Are we ever going to see you again, Shy Bro?"

Shy Bro reached out its hand and patted the three of them on the back. "Don't worry, fellow bros. All you need to do is bring me this magic mask, and I'll be able to visit you whenever you want!"

Researcher Chad sniffled. "Really? Is it really true, Shy Bro?"

Shy Bro smiled. "Really, champ."

"What a bunch of bitches," said 035.

And with that, SCP-096 returned to its containment cell to sleep off the long weekend's hangover. Before it closed the door, it threw out the mask, which responded with mixed feelings (*"Well bugger."*) but was generally cooperative.

When it was all said and done, they had laughed, they had cried. Kain Pathos Crow had to leave the country for a little bit, but it blew over rather quickly. Agent Lament was found to have not died, but just been overcome with the power of the party. Bright was still old and curmudgeonly. The researchers grew up and moved on with their careers, each achieving great and glorious things.

But legend has it that once a year, they would return to that site with the mask, and would once again bro out for one fantastic weekend with Shy Bro.

The Thing That Was Mary Sachs was uncovered during an archeological dig by Researchers Kyle and Chad a few weeks later. It was desiccated, and alien now. Unknown to men's eyes.

"Bro, what is that thing?" Kyle said

"Fuck if I know, dude. Just some monster, y'know? Slap in, like, the bone place with a number and keep digging." replied Chad.

"Duuuude." they said together, and hi-fived.

THE END

« | **HUB** | »

Interviews with Prospective Groups of Interest

WANTED: GROUP OF INTEREST

A hero is only as good as the villain.

The SCP Foundation is looking for prospective Groups of Interest, which can attempt to oppose the SCP Foundation and emphasise the obvious superiority of the SCP Foundation.

Interviews will be conducted on / / at Dr. Clef's office. Interview date is protected by a memetic seal that can only be bypassed by specific beings. If the interview date is visible to you, you really should participate in the interview.

There will be free drinks.

Dr. Clef: Who are you again?

ASCI Director: The American Secure Containment Initiative.

Dr. Clef: You can't just take two out of our three slogans like that.

ASCI Director: You're the ones who took our title. We're your predecessor, one of them at least.

Dr. Clef: If you're gonna become us, why are you here?

ASCI Director: Apparently, predecessors are still classified as minor GoIs.

Dr. Clef: Buddy, didn't you see the job ad? We're looking

for villains. If you will become us in the future, you can't be the villains. That will make us, the heroes, look bad.

ASCI Director: I can at least join the winning side, right?

Dr. Clef: … I'm afraid you're mistaken, friend. You will never join the winning side. You're just a stale reductionist representative. Folks like me are forever the winning side, but we always find use for lackeys and cannon fodder. [smiles]

An interdimensional portal openes and an ancient daevite beast steps out.

Dr. Clef: Take a seat.

Daevite: *Eldritch screeching*

Dr. Clef: Fuck this.

Robo-Dude: I AM ROBO-DUDE, A INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY OF DR. WONDERTAINMENT. I AM HERE TO COLLECT THE FREE DRINKS, ROBO-PAL.

Dr. Clef: Why? You are a robot.

Robo-Dude: NOT FOR ME BUT DR. WONDERTAINMENT. I AM HERE TO COLLECT THE FREE DRINKS FOR DR. WONDERTAINMENT.

Dr. Clef: Why don't he come and get them himself?

Robo-Dude: DO NOT INTIMIDATE ROBO-DUDE. DR. WONDERTAINMENT IS A BUSY TOY MAKER AND THIS VERSION OF ROBO-DUDE COMES EQUIPPED WITH AN ATOMIC GRENADE IN THE EVENT YOU FAIL TO FOLLOW UP WITH THE PROMISED FREE DRINKS.

Dr. Clef: Kinda extreme for a toy… Kids these days are

so lucky. Anyway, the drinks are at that table next to the bowl of chips, which is mine so no touching that.

Robo-Dude: THANK YOU, ROBO-PAL.

Dr. Clef: You know Dr. Wondertainment should pay an actual visit next time. They could make-

[Robo-Dude grabs all the drinks and vanishes in a bright blue light]

Dr. Clef: Did he really just take *all* the damn soda?

Dr. Clef: So, bottom line, you're a circus?

Herman Fuller: Not just any circus, my good man. Herman Fuller's Circus of the Disquieting is *The* Circus, the Greatest Show in all the Worlds! Surely you've heard of us.

Dr. Clef: …

Herman Fuller: You're joking.

Dr. Clef: Well, I remember there were a few good scips about you a few years ago, then there was almost nothing until last year when we started getting all these weird stories coming in for some reason.

Herman Fuller: That's right, we've got a cannon now!

Dr. Clef: A canon?

Herman Fuller: That's right, Alty, a 90-foot-long cannon: solid cast iron, fires balls three feet wide, and is accurate to within 3 miles. Don't tell me that doesn't make us a formidable enemy!

Dr. Clef: Look, Mr. Fuller, every time we try to raid your Circus you just vanish into thin air. We're looking for an enemy that's a little more… menacing.

Herman Fuller: More menacing? More menacing? Sir, you show me one six-year-old in the world who isn't afraid of Clowns and then say we're not menacing!

Dr. Clef: We don't employ six-year-olds, so that's a moot point. Hey, come to think of it, last I read you weren't even still in charge of the Circus of the Disquieting.

Herman Fuller: I assure you, sir, I have no idea what you're talking about.

Dr. Clef: In fact, you're supposed to be in containment. You're a mediocrely rated **SCP** now.

Herman Fuller: I have had enough of these preposterous accusations! Good day sir!

Dr. Clef: Don't get your strings caught in the door on your way out, Pinocchio.

Dr. Clef: General, weren't you guys defeated in the Pacific War?

Kakure Shogun: Yes, that happened. Circumstances beyond IJAMEA's control, to be precise. But we have survived the war, and infiltrated almost all segments of society.

Dr. Clef: Standard secret organisation, eh?

Kakure Shogun: We have factions like the Kakure Shogun and Jirai. In English, they are 'hidden generals' and 'landmine' respectively.

Dr. Clef: General, look. We already have ORIA and GRU-P for our obligatory foreign organisation GoI. Three's a crowd. And yellow peril's so dead. Your group has absolutely no appeal at all.

Kakure Shogun: Doctor, I will not tolerate Orientalism. This is about the sacrifices of many people who died at

war. Can you just let people die for nothing?

Dr. Clef: Speaking of dying, we beat your entire group. And that's your place, buddy. [snaps finger]

[Kakure Shogun is replaced with a human skeleton, which quickly crumbles to dust.]

[Dr. Clef stares blankly at the empty chair in his office, nodding his head.]

Dr. Clef: I see you are truly Nobody. I think we can fit you in whenever we feel like it. Next!

Dr Clef: And… you represent?

Generic Waffen-SS Commander: I am here on behalf of ze Obskurakorps of ze Third Reich. Hei- [He is cut short by a bullet to the head.]

Dr Clef: Yeah, no. Fuck Nazis.

Grand Karcist Ion: Pleasure to meet you, Clef.

Dr. Clef: Indeed, Grand Karcist. Please tell me more about this Sarkicism.

Grand Karcist Ion: [visibly irritated] Firstly, I would prefer if you do not use the s-word. This is 2017. We should not be subject to such language.

Dr. Clef: I'm sorry, 'hon. Keep on talking.

Grand Karcist Ion: I represent the Nälkä, an ancient religion dated back to what you would call the Bronze Age. Our faith's tenets include the shepherding of the flesh-

Dr. Clef: Ah, that's your schtick! You can be the

obligatory antagonists if we need some body horror and unspeakably ancient religion! Thank you for coming down today, Grand Karcist.

Grand Karcist Ion: Wait! I haven't told you our deity's UST with the Broken God and our equally ancient war with the Church of the Broken God!

Dr Clef: That's a bit unnecessarily complicated. Besides, the focus should be the Foundation. If you're so fixated with the Church of the Broken God, why don't you go to their interview site?

[Grand Karcist Ion disappears from Dr. Clef's office.]

Dr. Clef: Our original proposition still stands, if you're still interested!

[The representative from the Shark Punching Centre opens the door to the interview room and walks in. However, he is blocked by a solid brick wall. On the wall, the following is inscribed: "No. We may be lolFoundation, but we have standards too."]

Acknowledgments and Attributions

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